

Picture this!

A number of people have asked me about the origin of my interest in ecumenism. My answer: “You can’t be a Ukrainian Catholic without being an ecumenist! We’re like circus performers riding on two horses at the same time: it’s in our interest to bring the two horses closer together.” Every January, the 18th through the 25th of the month have been designated as the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, a time when we are especially encouraged to pray for the reconciliation of Christians with one another.

You are doubtless familiar with the old saying, “A picture paints a thousand words.” This is certainly true of a picture which has been all over the media – namely the embrace between Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew during their recent meeting in Constantinople ... oops, I mean Istanbul. Better than any words which this wayward ecumenist could grind out, this picture makes believable the words we say before the Creed at every Divine Liturgy: “Let us love one another so that, with one mind, we may confess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...” As I interpret St. Paul, the most important element in salvation is genuine love lived out in human lives; less convincing and thus less helpful in themselves are doctrinal formulations and liturgical performances: without genuine love, which is their sole basis and convincing proof, the most orthodox doctrinal formulations and the most magnificent liturgies are hollow, and those who proffer them are but noisy gongs (1 Cor. 13). Speaking of noisy gongs, some of you may well be heaving a sigh of relief and saying to yourselves, “Oh, thank God! He’s going to cut his article short!” Well, in words familiar to New Star readers, “Maybe, maybe not...”

Perhaps just one quick addendum – and no, unfortunately not Nestle’s Quick hot chocolate with marshmallows, just perfect for those snowy winter days! (Chocolate is, after all, my favorite sin!) The addendum is rather a less satisfying picture inspired by a prayer which the priest says silently before the processional antiphon – you know, the one during which the Gospel book is carried around for everyone to see: “You have given us the grace to pray together in harmony, and have promised to grant the requests of two or three who join their voices in your name...” If only the harmony of which the prayer speaks were truly reflected within our parishes! Alas, it’s often easier to make peace with people of other faiths than with those with whom we rub elbows in the pews – often rubbing one another the wrong way! We get on each other’s nerves, don’t you know? There’s the guy that parades around like a peacock, the tone-deaf lady whose loud singing throws everybody else off, the parents who let their children run wild, the late-comers who are also the first to leave, the cheap skates who don’t put anything into the collection basket, the foreigners who don’t even speak our language (fill in your own blank: Ukrainian? English?). You get the picture - and not a very pretty picture, alas.

“Photoshop” allows us to alter pictures on our computers, changing them to make them conform better to our tastes and ideas. We might gladly “photoshop” many of our fellow parishioners – on either side of the icon screen; perhaps what we need instead is to realize that we ourselves could stand to be “photoshopped”. Once that painful realization sinks in, then comes the hard work of letting our rough edges be smoothed, our closed minds be pried open and our frozen hearts thaw. Pope Francis and Patriarch

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Bartholomew have, by their warmth, shown the way to a thaw in the thousand-year icejam blocking their two Sister Churches from being the answer to Christ's prayer "that all might be one". Holy hair dryer, Batman! Do you think the Holy Spirit "photoshop" us into a Church that welcomes people rather than scaring them away? May we indeed become a convincing icon of Christ by praying with more than merely words: "Let us love one another so that, with one mind, we may confess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit..."

fr. Jim Karepin, op