

# This Month in Moravian History

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## And In All Things ...

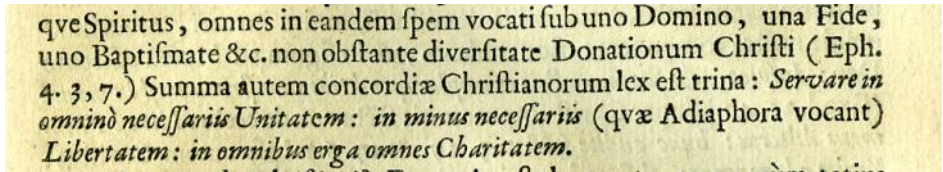
*Moravians are proud of their motto: In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love. It seems to perfectly express Moravian understanding of theology, community, and liberty. But where does the motto come from? And when did the Moravians adopt it as their own?*

The *In Essentials* motto is not exclusively used by the Moravians. We find it used by other religious groups as well, such as the Quakers, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in the USA, or the Remonstrants in the Netherlands. But American Moravians have claimed it as their own for at least a century. In 1902 Augustus Schultze, professor of theology at Moravian Theological Seminary, preached at a Moravian Synod in Emmaus, Pa., about the essentials of the Christian faith: “What in the Christian religion is essential to know and to do, to get and to give? We Moravians, at least, have always proclaimed it as our motto in matters of religion: ‘In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.’” It is interesting that Schultze claims that his has “always” been the Moravian motto. In a previous publication from 1900, *Why I Am a Member of the Moravian Church*, he does not quote the motto at all, although it would have fit perfectly in his argumentation.

Traditionally, the *In Essentials* motto was attributed to Augustine of Hippo, church father from the fifth century. More recently, it was believed that a German Lutheran theologian, Peter Meiderlin (1582-1651) was the source of the phrase. In his *Paraenesis Votiva Pro Pace Ecclesiae* from 1626 Meiderlin called the disputing theologians of his time to unity. In this book we find the words: “in

necessariis unitatem, in non necessariis libertatem, in utrisque caritatem” (unity in necessary things, freedom in non-necessary things, and in both things love).

By coincidence a Dutch scholar discovered another, older source for the motto in 1999. Henk Nellen, while preparing an edition of the correspondence of Hugo Grotius, found a reference in one of the letters received by Grotius that led him on a search for the origin of the *In Essentials* motto. In 1634 the Frenchman Jean de Cordes wrote to Grotius about “these three good words that I found in the works of Dominis: *in necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas et in omnibus caritas*. If we would practice these we would not see so much difference in our religion.” When Nellen tracked the original source de Cordes was quoting, he realized this was an earlier source than Meiderlin. Marc Antonio de Dominis (1560-1624) was a former Roman Catholic archbishop who had left the church of Rome. Grotius had met de Dominis; he even owned a copy the book in which de Dominis used the phrase, *De Republica Ecclesiastica*. After paging



through much of de Dominis’s three-volume book, Nellen found the reference (vol. 1, book 4, chap. 8): *Omnesque mutuam amplecteremur unitatem in necessariis, in non necessariis libertatem, in omnibus caritatem*. This volume was published in London in 1617 and was therefore older than the Meiderlin quote.

The motto soon became popular among irenic theologians, including Jan Amos Comenius. Comenius used the phrase in his *Unum Necessarium* (1668): “However, what is most necessary for the body of believers, the Christian Church? Universal concord, which Christ called love, and he gave this for a watchword to his own or for a sign of his church. The prime law of Christian concord is threefold: in absolutely necessary things to maintain unity, in less necessary things (which they call *adiaphora*) liberty, in all things, toward all, love.” (transl. Vernon Nelson, 1958).

Even though Comenius used the motto in 1668 it did not gain permanent status among Moravians. It seems likely that American Moravians discovered the motto as it became popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As mentioned above, the first known modern reference in Moravian texts is from 1902. The Book of Order of the Northern Province of 1911 included the motto in the historical preface. Since then, the motto has gained great popularity among English-speaking Moravians.

## Sources

Image: from Comenius, *Unum Necessarium* (1668). Sources: Craig Atwood in his blog *The Flaming Heretic*, March 2011 ([theflamingheretic.wordpress.com](http://theflamingheretic.wordpress.com)); H.J.M. Nellen, “De zinspreuk ‘In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in utrisque caritas,’” *Dutch Review for Church History* (1999): 99-106.