

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – January 22, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
St. Paul’s Cathedral, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,000 words

St. Paul’s speaks to the Corinthians and to us in the second reading about Church unity.¹ “Each of you is saying”, Paul says, “‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos’...”; “Is Christ divided?”, he then asks. “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” There were serious divisions in that early Christian community. There are serious divisions in the Church today. But our efforts to promote true unity will not succeed unless we understand what that concept really means.

We could start with what unity is not. For example, “unity” does not mean “everyone is the same”. Within the Church there is a marvelous diversity: not only of peoples, cultures, and social statuses, but also of gifts, positions, offices, worship, and so forth. The Catechism teaches us, “The great richness of such diversity is not opposed to the Church’s unity”.²

Take the area of worship. You know well that our manner of worship here at St. Paul’s is different in some respects than other local parishes. By selecting the options that we do for the reasons that we do, we are not thereby judging them and saying that they’re doing it wrong, for in most cases they are selecting legitimate options as well. There is diversity in the Church’s worship.

But beyond such particularities, there is diversity among the Church’s rites – r-i-t-e-s – and her forms of liturgy. For example, Mass is celebrated in the Extraordinary Form each Sunday in a few churches in our diocese, according to the books that were in use in 1962; I even celebrated in that form here recently for the Sacred Music Conference. Mass is regularly celebrated in Spanish in some places in the Ordinary Form – and of course, we use that form here also, typically with a blend of English and Latin. Then there is the Anglican “Rite”, so to speak, that was approved in the last few years, not to mention the more ancient Melkite and Maronite Rites here locally as well. And there are many other, besides: they all belong to the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. Within unity there is diversity.

To put forth another example: not everyone has the same role in the life of the Church; within the Church there are different offices and gifts. From the Church’s hierarchy to the traditional structure of the family; from the feminine genius as it is expressed in the consecrated life of nuns and sisters, to the role of lay people in inspiring the secular order: there is a wonderful diversity of offices, positions, and gifts within the Church. We don’t all do the same thing or occupy the same position, but we’re all working for a common purpose – or should be: namely, to build up the Body of Christ.

In what, then, does Church unity consist? The Catechism focuses our attention on two different “spheres” or “levels”: the invisible and the visible.³ On the invisible level, it is charity that binds the Church together. Charity is found wherever the love of Christ dwells in hearts, which it does through sanctifying grace. When we are in the state of grace, we are fully united with the Church on the invisible level. When we fall out of that state through mortal sin, the invisible bond of unity is broken until we repent, usually through the sacrament of Confession.

On the visible level, our unity is assured in three areas: first, through the profession of faith handed down to us from the Apostles by the Church – in other words, through our adherence to Church teaching and discipline; second, through our common celebration of divine worship, which we do when we participate in the sacraments; and third, through apostolic

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 814.

³ Ibid., no. 815.

succession, which is preserved in the sacrament of Holy Orders, and gives us fraternal concord with all peoples of faith down through the ages.⁴

So the Church is united when we have God's charity in our hearts, adhere to the Church's teaching, celebrate the sacraments, and do so around those who participate in the apostolic succession and bring us together as the people of God. Those are the marks of unity. Everything else that the Church recognizes and embraces is part of that legitimate diversity of which I spoke. And we should embrace whatever the Church embraces; we should love whatever the Church loves.

Embracing and loving do not necessarily mean liking. How much it pains me to hear someone speaking badly about some practice that the Church fully approves and embraces. And it happens with surprising frequency. Let it not be so with us. Let us not confuse "what I like" with "what the Church embraces and approves". There are all sorts of things that are not my cup of tea. But far be it from me to make my rather narrow interests the measure of ecclesial life! Most everyone today would claim to be a tolerant person. Yet how much intolerance I encounter when it comes to certain legitimate variations within the unity of the Church! I repeat: Church is not about us. It is about Christ – and all that he embraces.

A few questions, then: Am I striving to live in the state of grace? Do I adhere to all of the Church's teachings, even those that I find more challenging or do not fully understand? Do I participate worthily and fruitfully in the Church's worship, around that visible bond of unity made present by the Church's ministers, who link us back to Christ himself through apostolic succession? Finally, do I strive to have a liberal or generous heart, that tolerates and embraces those things which the Church approves and loves, even when they are not my personal cup of tea?

Dear Jesus: we thank you for calling us to be members of the Church you founded. Help us to be fully united with her to the end, so that we may have eternal union with you and all the saints in heaven. Amen!

⁴ Ibid.