

Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity

This Sunday, the third after Epiphany, falls right between the two feasts that mark the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity: The Confession of St. Peter (Jan. 18,) and the Conversion of St. Paul (Jan. 25). This fact and the second reading for today, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, provide me with a good excuse to write today about Christian Unity, a subject dear to my heart.

Though the ecumenical movement has had its ups and downs over time – it is currently in 'downish-mode' it would seem - the theme of Church Unity remains one I believe, that is of vital importance not only for the Church, but also for the world it is called to serve.

Paul's words – his plaintive question: "Is Christ divided?" - should free us from the illusion that there ever was a "golden age" of Christian Unity. There may have been a couple of golden weeks after Pentecost – but to all intents and purposes the bickering and arguing have been there from the very start! But, then, so was the desire to be united in Christ in the same mind and the same purpose, as Paul puts it. So though Christians have never really been united, we've always known that we were meant to be – that God wants us to be one.

This tension between the unity to which we feel called and the division in which we actually live, is not something experienced only within the Church of course. I would say that it lies at the very heart of human social existence. And that is something that should hardly surprise Christians. God created a unified, harmonious whole; it was our rebellion that shattered that unity. We have been trying to recover it ever since. In fact, I would say this quest for unity is the source of most, if not all conflict in human life.

This may appear contradictory at first glance. If unity is something given to us in creation by God, why should the quest for it produce conflict? Because, I believe, there are two kinds or models of unity, one of them God's, which brings peace and life, the other not of God, but rather a parody of the Unity God intended, that brings conflict and death. (Satan specializes in parody, by the way, so I will refer to this false unity as Satan's unity – you may take it literally or figuratively, as you will).

The two models of unity could not be more unlike. God's unity is characterized by integration, the gathering of parts into a unified and ordered whole that diminishes none of the parts but rather enriches and is enriched by them; Satan's unity is characterized by dissolution, the absorption of the parts into a formless whole that amounts to nothingness. God's unity is grounded on love and freely given; Satan's is grounded in fear of the other and the need to control. God's unity is life; Satan's is death.

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The characteristic mark here of Satan's presence is, as usual, an idol of some sort that serves as the principle of unity: the ego itself, a cause, efficiency, profit an ideology, a crusade. Unfortunately in our fallen world, this type of idolatry is rampant – and inevitably provokes resistance and hence, conflict. You can see it at work in all aspects and on all levels of our common life. You see it in the family, in the possessive parent or spouse who feel they must control to keep the family together. You see it in schools and businesses where efficiency and profit trump all other considerations. You can see it in politics where parties vie with each other to impose their conception of 'the good' and squelch all dissent. And, of course, you can see it in the imperialist crusades of powerful nations down through history that seek to recreate the world in their own image, and so eliminate all that is threateningly different. And, unfortunately, you can see it in the Church, where the followers of whoever is standing in for Paul, Apollos or Cephas at the time (and note, most likely NOT Paul, Apollos or Cephas themselves) try to impose their version of the faith on the Church to the exclusion of all others.

God's way, of course, offers Christ as its principle of unity, and it is part of the Church's mission to offer this unity in Christ to the world by modeling it in her own life. The unity offered by God in Christ reflects the unity of the Holy Trinity and is made effectively present in Eucharistic worship. It is the sort of Unity we were created to enjoy: it is the Unity that will characterize the Kingdom. We must strive for it, since the fate world, in a very real way, depends on the realization of this unity, and for its sake, we cannot afford to fail. For it seems to me that they model of unity that inspires the current move to globalization – world unity – is essentially satanic. The Church must offer the world an alternative. So far, throughout most of its history, the Church has offered anything but a model for the world to follow: we Christians have been at war with each other for centuries. We really can no longer afford that luxury.

As Bishop Brent puts it: "A mutilated Christendom can never have anything better than a mutilated conception of our Lord and an impoverished influx of His power." Or, to use Paul's idiom, a divided Church can only offer a Cross, emptied of its power.

SAINTS:

The Conversion of Paul, 25 January. The conversion of the anti-Christian zealot, Saul, to the apostle of Christ, Paul, is clearly related in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, but it has to be remembered that this was a beginning: Saul took some time to become Paul and some time to begin to understand that his call to preach -- to Jew and to Gentile -- the saving power of Jesus, the Son of God, was something that was a whole life's journey for him. Paul says in his Letter to the Church in Galatia, "God set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace ... Three years after (the Damascus Road conversion), I went up to Jerusalem." The preparation for this moment of his conversion was his whole life. This feast has been celebrated in the Church since the sixth century but became universal in the twelfth century.

Timothy & Titus, Companions of Paul, 26 January. On the day following the Conversion of St Paul, the Church remembers his two companions, 'partners and fellow-workers in God's service'. Timothy, we are told, had a Jewish mother and a Greek father, whilst Titus was wholly Greek. It was because of Titus that Paul stood out against compulsory circumcision but, to avoid suspicion from other Jews, Timothy was circumcised. They are honoured in the Church for their devotion and faithfulness to the gospel.

**NEXT WEEK: ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,
JANUARY 29TH, AFTER THE 9:30 SERVICE.
PLEASE SAVE THE DATE.**