

3rd Sunday Ordinary Time *Christ cannot be Divided.*

January 26, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 8:23-9:3; 1 Cor. 1:10-13,17; Matthew 4:12-17

“Are we almost there yet?” On the long drive from St. Paul to Cape Cod, MA to visit my grandparents, I am told that I began asking the question at about the time we crossed the bridge into Hudson, WI. Well, forgive me- I simply mistook that bridge for the one spanning Buzzard’s Bay, 2 1/2 days later! Nothing will test the unity of a family more than a cross- country road trip in a brand new “Astro-blue” 1970 Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser, with vinyl woodgrain!

Saint Paul urged the people of Corinth to be united in the name of the Lord. He prayed that there be no divisions, but that the people would be “united in the same mind and in the same purpose.” Unity begins at home in our families, and this unity can be elusive all too often. If I am travelling or in a restaurant, I admit that at times I find it quite fascinating to observe families interacting.

It reminds me that at the core, we are all trying to stay united in charity with our loved ones- and sometimes we are more successful than others. It takes tremendous work to foster unity; it does not happen automatically. Couples and families alike work hard at maintaining unity, sometimes suffering setbacks that make the unity more challenging. This is part of the human condition after the fall in the Garden. However, the challenges families face can also bring them even closer together. Working with families through the process of funeral planning come to mind as an example where God’s grace can and does bring tremendous healing.

Reflecting back upon my time away on retreat last week, I honestly could not think of a time in my priestly ministry when it was more important to pull together as a local Church. Setting aside even for a moment the many important issues facing our local Church, we

also must look to the changing landscape of our nation and how this too affects us as we try to hold fast to our moral compass.

Some matters may be out of our control, while others require a firm conviction to which we are willing to hold. And still in other cases, we need to be open to compromise, especially as it relates to family issues. While we cannot alter our fundamental convictions, we must bear with one another lovingly as we walk the often bumpy road to unity. Unity will never happen without first being preceded by conversion.

I do not refer primarily to an intellectual or even moral conversion. Saint Augustine experienced both of those prior to finally accepting the inner grace of conversion that led him back to the faith. Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus was primarily one of the inner workings of God's grace. "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain."¹ Conversion of the heart changes us- it changes how we view others, and impels us to seek greater unity whenever possible.

Saint Paul strove to build unity amongst Christians, and when he saw division is pierced his heart. Human weakness often seems to hold the upper hand, and divisions grow. Paul exhorted the Corinthians not to tolerate those who claimed to be "Pauline" Christians- nor should there be any "Apollonian" or "Petrine" Christians.

And yet we also know from the Scriptures that Paul also experienced disunity- after all, he needed to part ways with Barnabas. Both men were zealously committed to the Gospel, but they both realized that it was better that they go their separate ways in the ministry, so that both might flourish and the Gospel spread.

¹ 1 Corinthians, 15:10

Pope Francis spoke yesterday at Saint Paul Outside the Walls during a Vespers Service for Unity, noting that in the Church:

We have all been damaged by these divisions. None of us wishes to become a cause of scandal. And so we are all journeying together, fraternally, on the road towards unity, bringing about unity even as we walk; that unity comes from the Holy Spirit and brings us something unique which only the Holy Spirit can do, that is, reconciling our differences. The Lord waits for us all, accompanies us all, and is with us all on this path of unity.²

Though specifically speaking about unity amongst Christians, the Pope's words can readily be applied to our own situations. God will reward our generosity many times over; He will reward our efforts towards building unity in our families, in our communities, our places of work and in our Church, but He is not going to do our hard work for us. We have a role to play and a duty to fulfill.

“Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.” In one of the most quoted lines in all of Scriptures, the call to discipleship was a solemn invitation to a greater share in the ministry of Christ. It demanded a sure response of faith and trust- “He called them, and *immediately* they left their boat and their father and followed him.”

While prudence sometimes dictates a “wait and see” approach, nevertheless, the Scriptures also call us to “go out into the deep” in a spirit of trust. When the apostles left everything immediately to follow Jesus, it seems at first glance to be radical and perhaps even reckless. But our Lord's message was so compelling that these men dropped their livelihood and families and went into the deep. Their lives were hardly carefree, but they trusted that the Lord who called them would also guide them and that made all the difference in the world. May God guide our steps towards unity and peace.

² Pope Francis, Saint Paul Outside the Walls, 25 January 2014, Vespers