

Homily for the Seventh Sunday of Easter 2021 Year B

Today's Gospel is part of the great farewell discourse of Christ to His disciples before He returned to His father in Heaven. The central theme of that discourse is for Unity among his followers – “that they may be one”.

Now if Christ prayed for Unity, then He must have foreseen disunity as a real possibility, as it indeed turned out to be the case.

In the early Church, arguments soon began about such basic things as to whom was the Gospel to be preached? To the Jews only, or the whole of the Gentile world?

As the Church expanded and spread, because of the differences in cultures and philosophes and the way that men think about various problems, it was not long, about 400 years, before the church had split into the East and the West, with deep doctrinal differences about the person of Christ.

The Church in the West centred upon Rome, and the Church in the East centred upon Constantinople.

By the time of the Reformation, in the 16th century, the Church in the West was further divided by serious doctrinal disputes and differences - and the Protestant churches were formed. Ever since then there has been a steady fragmentation and proliferation of all sorts of groups and sects that would regard themselves as Christian Churches. Each would fiercely defend that particular truth, insight, or doctrine that separates it, marks it off, or differentiates it from the other Churches.

No more so than our own Church. By direct and continuous descent from St Peter and the Apostles, we claimed to be the One, true Church from which all the others had broken away. I suppose it is true to say that we developed a sort of siege mentality. This was expressed as late as 1950 by Pius the XII that, outside of the Church, there was no Salvation.

And by the Church was meant the Roman Catholic Church.

And it was the deepest scandal that zealous Christians slaughtered each other to defend these differences. So, what happened then to Christ's fervent Prayer for Unity - had it all been in vain?

The answer will lie partly in our understanding of Unity.

If by Unity we mean Uniformity, all believing and accepting the same doctrines, then we are hopelessly disunited - I seriously doubt whether full doctrinal uniformity is ever possible again.

But, if on the other hand, our understanding of Unity can still allow for a certain diversity of expression in what we believe, and for distinctiveness of identity, then Christ's Prayer was not in vain.

Vatican II has made enormous strides in that direction and the Catholic Church now addresses some of these other bodies as her "Sister Churches". The siege mentality has all but disappeared. She does not challenge their validity as ecclesial communities in order to defend her own position. She holds that the true Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. That allows room for recognising that many elements of sanctification and fragments of truth can be found outside of its confines.

So it would seem that a Unity that allows and recognises differences of identity, error excluding, seems to be possible.

But can we make it no stronger than that?

Yes we can.

Look at Christ's prayer again – "that they may be one, as we are one".

True unity therefore should be like the relationship between the Father and the Son.

The Father and the Son are one, but the Father remains the Father and the Son remains the Son, both retain their distinct identity.

So, Unity can embrace distinctiveness of identity. But the question poses itself, what then is this element or bond that makes the Father and Son one, that inseparably unites them?

The answer is Love.

The Love that the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father is the heart, the cement of their Unity.

And the Great Saint Augustine, struggling to understand and explain the Trinity, saw the Holy Spirit as that Love which unites and binds them.

So, do you see how it can fit? Christ, about to leave his disciples, promises to send them the Holy Spirit when He returns to the Father. He fervently prays that they may be one, as He and the Father are one.

He is praying that the very bond, the power, the Spirit of Love, which unites the Father and Son, might permeate and direct the lives of His followers, and that that

love ought to be strong enough to somehow overcome or tolerate those divisions, doctrinal differences, those accidents of history that men almost inevitably place between each other, by a passionate concern for thought and truth.

For a long time, the scandal of disunity in Christianity was seen only in terms of doctrinal divisions, and that can be bad enough, but perhaps the real scandal of disunity has been the lack of quality or the absence of Love that we should have towards each other, the Love that guarantees and promotes lasting Unity.

When I stand before Almighty God, my judgement won't be a doctrinal one, what it was that I believed in - I will be fully judged upon love, and that is where I will have to answer.

And sadly, there is ample evidence, despite the fundamental goodness and goodwill of most people, that that quality of love that Christ prayed for is not being practised.

People, even though they bear the name Christians, feel alienated from each other. Families can experience deep divisions. Parishes can be split right down the middle by differences of liturgy and worship, the Church itself can be divided and harmed by both Radicals and Conservatives. Christians of different denominations manufacture hate and even murder each other. There is no simple answer.

But my own responsibility, and for this I will be judged, is whether in my own life and my own sphere of responsibility, I tried to promote unity by exercising and expressing love.

True and lasting Unity is not a passive thing. It must be worked out. Leave the doctrinal differences to the theologians. We at the grassroots level have the responsibility to encourage and express that love in our daily lives that forms the foundation and cement that holds real Unity together.

And if we have not started yet, let us resolve to begin in a small way from today - to be one as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, rooted and grounded in love.