

“Building Up Unity in the Family of God to Spread His Happiness in the World” Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easter, Year “A”

Introduction

We are making our way through the Acts of the Apostles during this Easter season, with this book of the Bible always being the first reading at Mass from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday. Three weeks ago, on the Second Sunday of Easter, we heard the following description of the life of the first Christian community in Jerusalem: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes.”

It seems an idyllic situation, everyone living together in peace and harmony. Fast forward four chapters and three Sundays later, and what do we hear? “As the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.” Yes, dissension!

Spiritual House

Saint Luke, the author of Acts, does not gloss over the dispute that arose in this first Christian community between the “Hellenists” and the “Hebrews.” The Hellenists were Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora – that is, those Jews who were living throughout the ancient world for centuries, having been exiled after their kingdom in the land of Israel was invaded and destroyed – and possibly also Gentile converts to the Christian faith. The ancient world at that time was Greek speaking; Greek was the predominant culture and language of the world then, much like English is in the world today. The Hebrews were those Jews whose lineage had remained in Jerusalem all the time, and spoke the everyday language of that part of the world at that time, Aramaic. The Greek-speaking members of the community apparently were treated as something like second-class citizens, and so the source of the dispute.

We see here how the Apostles are called in to find a solution to this dispute in order to preserve the unity of the community. The result is the selection of the “seven reputable men” to assist in the distribution of temporal goods. Given their names, it would appear that they themselves came from the Greek-speaking faction of the community. This is the role of apostolic ministry in the Church: bishops, who are the successors to the Apostles, have the role of bridging differences, of holding together and reconciling differing factions within the Church, in order to preserve the unity of the Church. As one Scripture scholar put it (and with great insight, I might add, given that, although an ordained cleric, he was not a bishop): “It is no easy task, but it is a truly apostolic one.”

Vocation

The Apostles are the foundation of the Church, but it takes more than a foundation to complete a building. In our second reading, Saint Peter calls on the community of believers to “be built into a spiritual house ... to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.” A house consists of many stones, placed together in an orderly and cohesive fashion. Each one is important in completing the whole, so that the house might be solid and safe, giving shelter from

the elements outside and providing a context in which those who live inside can create a home. And so our Lord speaks in the Gospel of the "many dwelling places" in his Father's house.

These "many dwelling places" are the different vocations in the Church. A vocation is nothing other than the call God gives us to serve Him in this life, to become the person He created us to be, and so attain our common human vocation which is happiness with Him now and forever in heaven. It is not that each vocation is a separate way to heaven. Indeed, we just heard one of the most profound sayings in the Gospels in Jesus' response to Phillip's question about how they can know the way: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He alone is our bridge to God, our great high priest who bridges the chasm between the human race and our Creator. He is the one way, the one path to his heavenly Father. We might say, then, that the vocation is the feet that God gives us to walk this path.

Mother as Unifier

During these days of continued sheltering in place, we focus a lot of attention on the domestic church, the family. It is good to reflect on how we, each of us, live our God-given vocation within the context of the family, as well as in the Church and in the wider society. And as we do so, given the special occasion that today is in the wider society, our attention is especially focused on one very precious vocation, especially in the domestic church: that of motherhood.

In the domestic church, it is the mother more than anyone else who is the force for unity in the family. A mother always wants to see her children united, in harmony; when there is division, dissension, or family members disowning each other, it strikes very deep in the mother's soul, more than anyone else. And her children know this. This is why their mother has a way of easing disputes that siblings may have with each other; a mother's natural tender loving care has the power to instinctually lighten family relationships burdened by historical grudges; she more than anyone can bring peace and reconciliation among quarrelling factions of the family. She is, quite literally, a homemaker.

On this Mother's Day, I am reminded of remarks made by a Pope very many years ago. This was Pope Pius XII. He used to give talks to newlywed couples; these talks are what developed into what is now the Pope's Wednesday General Audiences (and why even to this day newlywed couples are placed in a special front row section at those General Audiences). In one of these talks, he spoke of the woman as the "sun of the family." And despite the poetic style indicative of the age, it contains some timeless wisdom. In his words:

It is often said that a marriage flourishes when both spouses seek not their own happiness, but the happiness of the other; this marvelous intuitive sense and plan of marriage, although pertaining to both spouses, is especially the virtue of the woman; for by her very nature woman is endowed with maternal instincts and a sort of wisdom and prudence of the heart which make this possible for her, and so, if bitterness comes her way, she simply turns it into something agreeable; if she is insulted, in return she displays dignity along with reverence. And so she is like

the sun, which at dawn brings joy to the dreary morning weather, and at its rising brings light to the clouds with its golden rays.

Mother Mary

As in the domestic church, so in the Church that is the Body of Christ. Our Lord took his human nature from Mary of Nazareth. In doing so, he made himself our brother. With that human nature, in his human body, he offered himself in sacrifice on the Cross, bridging the gulf between God and us. God's only-begotten Son from all eternity made us all God's adopted sons and daughters, his brothers and sisters. And so his mother Mary is our mother, too. She is the mother of all Christians.

She, too, has the power to unite all of God's children. In this age of so many divisions, of polarization and bitter rivalries, sometimes even affecting the family of the Church, let us turn to her, our mother, to unite us in her Son. We know from the opening of the Acts of the Apostles that she was a member of that first Christian community in Jerusalem, for she was with the Apostles and the other disciples in the Upper Room on that day of Pentecost. She is with us still, helping us with her maternal instincts to turn bitterness into something agreeable, to bear insult with dignity and reverence, to bring joy to our dreary distress, and to cast the light of her Son to brighten the dark clouds of our sorrow and sadness.

Conclusion

She unites us in her Son. And what is the fruit of that unity? We heard at the end of this passage from the Acts of the Apostles which is the first reading for today's Mass: "The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly." Unity in the faith produces the fruit of evangelization and holiness. Let us persevere in prayer and charity, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God, so that He may build us up into a spiritual house, a family of disciples that is a fitting home for His holiness and a welcoming community for those seeking the happiness for which He created us.