

3d SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (January 23, 2011)
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Every year the Church observes the week of January 18-25 as the week of Prayer for Christian Unity so that all who are one in Christ may be fully one and in communion with one another as Jesus calls us to be. The Catholic Church has been very much involved in the ecumenical movement since the Second Vatican Council, praying and dialoguing with our Protestant brothers and sisters in Christ. We do this to determine what we hold in common and where differences of doctrine and belief still exist.

And so it is a rather happy coincidence that, in the midst of this week dedicated to Christian unity, we hear St. Paul in the second reading exhort the Christians in Corinth to be one, to avoid divisions among them, and to “be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.” The divisions experienced among the Corinthians were not so much about doctrine; in those very early days of the Church there did not exist formal and separate denominations as they do today. Rather, as St. Paul indicates, they were divided because they claimed primary loyalty to different individuals—for example, to Apollos, or Cephas (Peter) or Paul himself. They were not centered on the person of Christ himself and the gospel he proclaimed—the first and foremost foundation for Christian unity, and so they instead fell into rivalries based on personality and other relative trivialities.

We certainly find it easy to classify or divide ourselves in a variety of ways, and that is not usually a problem. To paraphrase St. Paul, some may say “I belong to the Republicans” or “I belong to the Democrats”; “I belong to St. Ed’s” or “I belong to Sacred Heart/Blessed Sacrament/Queen of Peace/St. Patrick” or any other parish. Or, given where we are in the NFL playoffs, “I belong to the Packers/Bears/Steelers/Jets”. There are others, of course, who belong elsewhere, but we find ourselves on the sidelines...once again...we’re getting all too used to it...

But back to St. Paul: he challenged the Corinthians to remember how they were called not only to holiness (as we talked about last Sunday), but they were called to unity as well—a unity based on Jesus Christ and on the truth and the gospel he preached. That truth he entrusted to the apostles and to the Church he built on the foundation of the apostles. Again, it is obvious that the followers of Christ are not fully one. We all may believe in Jesus as Son of God and Savior of all, and in the special and inspired quality of the Sacred Scriptures. But there remain significant differences between Catholic and Protestant understandings of such issues as the sacraments, the nature and structure of the Church and her teaching authority, and the role of Mary and the saints. And those differences become even more obvious when we have to face various contemporary issues of justice and morality. How do we apply the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Christ to the hot-button topics that attract so much attention and lead to so much and often heated debate?

Jesus prayed at the Last Supper that all who follow him would be fully one as he is one with the Father. St. Paul pleads that we not be divided and that we “be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.” Sadly, that is not our present reality: serious divisions remain among Christians, and even within our own Catholic community. How often we see polls saying that X percent of Catholics reject this or that doctrine or teaching of our faith, or Y percent might not even know what our faith teaches us on any given subject.

So what do we do, what does the Church do in the face of such divisions and conflicts? There are some who say the Church should not insist on those teachings that our non-Catholic friends do not accept. Or maybe the Church should just keep quiet about those especially controversial subjects and should simply accept the current secular thinking and not try to “impose her own morality” on anyone else. In other words, we just need to go with the flow and not insist on holding on to those elements of our faith and moral teaching that cause so much division and disunity.

To put it plainly, that will not happen because it cannot happen. The Church cannot impose anything on anyone against their will—that much is obvious; all you have to do is see how often her teachings are ignored. But the Church can and must teach and echo Jesus' call to conversion and discipleship; that is an essential part of her job description. Consider a couple of all-too-familiar examples. For one, the moral issue of abortion simply will not go away. [Today]/Yesterday [is]/was the 38th anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in Roe v. Wade that created out of thin air a constitutional "right" to take the life of an unborn child. Hundreds of thousands of Americans (including some of our own Columbus students) are going to Washington D.C. this weekend for the annual Right to Life March to reaffirm the undeniable truth that the unborn child is just as much a human being as the rest of us with the God-given right to life. I know that many are tired of the abortion debates and wish the Catholic Church would just be quiet and accept Roe v. Wade as reality. No. I'm sorry if it offends some or causes continued division, but the Gospel of Life—including the right to life for the unborn—is part and parcel of the Catholic faith, it has been from the Church's beginning, and it is not negotiable.

Likewise, the debate about same-sex marriage continues unabated. Some say the Iowa Supreme Court decided that issue once and for all in this state and that those who reject that decision are nothing but hate-mongers. No. I'm sorry if it offends some or causes continued division, but hate has nothing whatsoever to do with it and it's getting more than a little tiring hearing that word thrown at us all the time. Rather, it has to do with the nature of marriage as revealed by the language of the human body as male and female, how human history and culture have always understood that nature, and the audacity of seven individuals on a state court to overturn that completely and arbitrarily on their own. The Church has no choice but to reaffirm the truth about marriage and, in fact, every other element of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yes, Jesus prayed for unity among his followers, but he also made it crystal clear that they were called to live and witness to the gospel way of life—a way that would not always be accepted. Did you catch that one word in today's gospel with which Jesus began his public preaching: "Repent"? In other words, we need to change and turn away from sin. Following the example and mandate of Jesus himself, the Church is certainly all about preaching the mercy and compassion of God, but she is also all about challenging those actions and attitudes that contradict the gospel and that call to repentance and conversion. And if the Church's insistence on being true to her mission leads to continued or even greater disunity in the meantime, then—sad to say—so be it. Jesus never once watered down his message one bit in order to make it more palatable to the movers and shakers of his time or to create some false front or veneer of unity. The Church, true to the word and example of Christ, is likewise unwilling and unable to water down her teaching on the substantive faith and moral issues of our time—no matter how divisive that may be.

In the meantime, we pray for that unity, no matter how elusive or unattainable it may appear. We also do our part by heeding Jesus' call to repentance and discipleship—may we always follow the light of his saving truth and love.