

Unity—For Better and Worse

On this day that “we the people” celebrate our nation’s independence (245 years and counting), it is only fitting that we examine what it means to be united; to have unity. *Do you realize how oxymoronic this concept is?* How is one independent from everyone else, while at the same time united with everyone else? Now, I know those of you who remember your Civics lessons in Social Studies class (back when they still taught Social Studies and Civics) will immediately recite “*E Pluribus Unum*,” which means “*From the many, One.*” Believe it or not, but this is the motto of the “United States of America.” It only makes sense, right? Out of the many individuals—the many peoples—we make “one people.” Out of the many individual sovereign states we join together to form “one nation, under God, indivisible.”

Now, unless you’ve just crawled out from some sealed-off 1950’s bomb shelter, you know that “we the people” are not so united nowadays. “*One nation, under God*” is anything but. We are fractured. We are splintered. We are broken. *E Unus Pluribus*. The One has broken apart to become many individual shards and pieces, all intent on destroying anyone who dares to disagree. With all this in mind, it makes perfect sense to hear St. Peter calling for *unity of mind, brotherly love, tender hearts, and humility*. All these things are missing from us nowadays, and that’s the whole problem.

Well... before we get too far down this road (and off track and miss the point), let’s take the brief time we’ve been blessed with to discuss what it means to have *unity from the Christian perspective*. In the simplest way, just consider how all of us individuals, with all our different experiences and joys and sorrows, can all relate to people and events in Holy Scripture. *There really is nothing new under the sun, is there?* Just consider the events recorded for us in the Old Testament lesson appointed for today. How many of you are united with Elijah? How many of you can relate to those *feelings of depression and defeat and despair?* You know... you stand firm in the faith, and all it seems for naught. How many of you can relate to Elijah’s exasperation? “*I’ve been faithful, and all it’s gotten me is more defeat! What gives? Why bother?*”

How many of you are united and can relate to the very things that our Lord *teaches against* by means of a really cool object lesson? The Lord shows Elijah great and mighty signs—whirlwinds, earthquakes, and wildfires—and yet He’s not in any of those powerful and terrifying things, is He? Rather, the Lord shows Elijah that He’s in the *smallest of the tiniest whispers*, and that very whisper coming from inside the cave that Elijah had been in all along. God was showing Elijah that He had been with him (Immanuel) all along! The problem? Elijah was too busy throwing himself a pity party and trying to save his own hide to

recognize/remember the fact that *“I will never leave you or forsake you.”* Sound familiar? Can you relate? How often have you felt all alone, as if God has forgotten about you? How often do you look for God in all the wrong places/things? More importantly, how often do you miss the very presence of Almighty God in your midst, right under your nose, because you’re too busy trying to save yourself from whatever it is that you think is “unprecedented” and the “worst thing ever”? We’re more united than we might want to admit.

What about the Gospel lesson? Consider the strange and miraculous ways of God. We all know the old adage, *“God works in mysterious ways.”* Here’s Jesus, the son of a land-loving carpenter, telling professional fishermen how to do their job! Here’s Jesus telling professional fishermen that they need to do the ***craziest, exact-opposite thing*** that you do to catch fish! *“It’s mid-day. That sun is nice and high. Go out to the cold, deep part of the lake and let down this little casting nets, which are meant to be used close to shore.”* *“Master, we’ve toiled all night long, and we got skunked!”* How many of you can relate? How many of us are united in ***questioning God, His will, and His means?*** Just look around at what passes for “Church” and “worship” nowadays! The simple nets of “Word and Sacrament” ministry, which our Lord uses to catch men unto salvation, are so often disregarded, and they’re disregarded by people who really do love Jesus. They just think they know better than Him. They just want to help. “You don’t understand. We’ve tried all that. It doesn’t work.” It’s not hard to see that American Christianity seems to be united in this arrogant foolishness.

But here’s the kicker: *“But at your Word, Master, I will do it. Thy will be done.”* How many of you can relate? How many of us are united in this reality? ***Notice: I didn’t ask about the sentiment or the intention. I asked about the reality.*** We can all pray “Thy will be done.” It’s a whole other animal, though, to actually put “Thy will” over “My will.” Quite often, if you’re bold to confess, we aren’t united in this reality, are we? ***Quite often we go independent.*** Rather than depend on our Lord; rather than lean on Him and hold fast to His will and wisdom, we break away. We go independent. We go rogue. We go it alone. Worse yet, we go it alone with everyone else who has broken away and decided to go rogue/independent.

That’s something to think about! Consider what our Lord Christ Himself prays for in His High Priestly prayer, mere moments before He departs for the Garden of Gethsemane. *“I don’t ask that You take them out of this world, but that You keep them from the evil one.”* ***In the world, but not of the world.*** Our Lord calls us to be deliberately “counter-cultural.” We are not to be like everyone else. We are to be different. We are to be independent of all that foolishness and wickedness. How often, though, we go independent from God and instead try to unite with the world. We try to appeal to the world. We try to appease the world, rather than please God.

And this leads us to the confession of Peter when he realizes that he is in the presence of Almighty God Himself. He falls on his face and cries out in fear, “*Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man!*” Peter knows that he’s a sinner, and he knows the wage for his sin. He knows that he deserves only death and damnation. He cries out for mercy. ***How many of us are united in this confession?*** I know as a nation we are not, but what about you? Do you recognize your sins? Do you acknowledge the truth of your sinfulness before God? He knows the Truth. Do you disagree with God, as if these things aren’t really sinful in your particular case? ***What about when you come into this little ark of salvation?*** Here you come into the presence of the Almighty. Do you act like it? Do you always honor Christ the Lord as holy, and your standing on His holy ground in His holy presence? Would the fruits you bear confirm or contradict your confession?

You know what? You get the point. At least, I hope you do. Let’s turn the attention to where every single person ever descended from Adam is united. Look to this cross. Here is the wage of sin—all sin. ***All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All means everyone, every man, every woman, and every child.*** We are all, by nature, sinful and unclean. We are all united in death. Look to this cross. Here is where the One—the Holy One—took all that sin into Himself. Here, in the person of Jesus Christ—God in the flesh—is where One suffered and died for the many—for ALL.

Here, at the very same time, united in flesh, bone, and blood, is the mercy, grace, and unconditional love of God for the many; for ALL. Here is where all people for all time are united in total and complete forgiveness, in everlasting life, in peace that surpasses all understanding and transcends all time and space. Yes, God so loved EVERYONE that He gave His only-begotten Son to die for them. This blood-bought forgiveness is for EVERYONE. “It is finished” was spoken for EVERYONE for ALL TIME; for you, for me, and even for the people who reject Him, despise Him, deny Him, and persecute Him. God died for all sinners. What’s so sad is that so many reject this free and unmerited gift. They reject God, and in so doing, they make themselves independent of salvation, which is just another way of saying that they unite themselves with sin, death, and the devil in damnation. Lord, have mercy!

And this is where the whole unity of mind and sympathy and brotherly love and tender heart and humble mind come into play. ***This is all referring to Christ!*** Jesus is united with the Father, who desires the death of no man. “*I and the Father are one. Not My will, but Thy will be done.*” Jesus desires the death of no man. Jesus has sympathy for all, which is why died for all. Jesus is the epitome of a perfect love, a tender and compassionate heart, and a humble mind. “*He did not consider equality with the Father as something to be grasped, but instead lowered*

Himself even to the point of death; death on a cross.” Thy will be done. And it was, and thank God that it was! United with Christ; united in Christ, we too can show forth the same sympathy, love, tenderness and humility that God has first shown to us in Christ, through Christ, and because of Christ.

One last thing before we bring this to a close. When you come to the communion rail today, think about what is going on here. Here is where the Lord of Life comes to you. Here is where angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven—for all time—are gathered. Here is the feast table of the Lord. ***Talk about unity! Here is where the faithful are united—one holy Christian Church—the Church militant at this side of the table, and the Church Triumphant at the heavenly side of the table, all united in and centered around Christ Jesus.*** Here is where the Lord of Life nourishes you with His means of grace, mercy, and peace. Here is where the Lord of Life Himself gives you the means to have a unity of mind and sympathy and brotherly love and compassion and tenderness of heart and humility. Here is where the Lord Himself gives the means to not be united with evil by repaying evil with more evil and reviling others because they reviled you. Here is the blessing and peace of the Lord. United in Christ, here is where we stand, unafraid and untroubled, even as we suffer and bear the crosses that come with living in such a fallen and fractured world. United in Christ, what do we have to fear? United in Christ, how can we not rejoice?

May this unity—the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for you and your salvation and for the salvation of all men—be your joy, your confidence, your assurance, and your peace, now and into all eternity. *E Pluribus Unum? En Christus Unum!* There’s your reason to rejoice! **AMEN.**