

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

## 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Holy Cross 2014

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We have just completed the Week of Prayer for Christian unity, a week which is sandwiched between the feast of the Confession of St. Peter and the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, two commemorations that we find on the liturgical calendars of most Christian churches which use liturgical calendars. Having just completed this Week, I would like to reflect a bit today on why ecumenism is or should be important to Christians, regardless of our institution loyalties.

The first thing that I would like to say is that I think ecumenism is really quite difficult. The theory may be easy and even attractive, but the actual concrete living out of an ecumenical vision is actually rather difficult. And the reason why this is, it seems to me, is that we all are prone in one way or another to a “spirit of exclusivity” which creates a kind of “inner circle” for us and which we then tend to identify with the will of God. Instead of seeing ourselves as “belonging to the whole Church” in all its rich variety, we often prefer to see ourselves as “belonging to this or that group which thinks itself different or special”. These ideas, by the way, are not just mine, but come from Pope Francis (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 98). This problem of a spirit of exclusivity, of course, is not new. It has been with us from the beginning. St. Paul had to deal with it in his letter to the Corinthians (which we heard today as the second reading): *“For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by Chloe’s people, that there are rivalries among you. I mean that each of you is saying, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”* Wanting, actually desiring, to be special and so different from “those other people” (whoever they may be) is a constant temptation not only in church life, but in life in general. Perhaps some of you recall Fr. Richard Rohr’s book *Falling*

*Upward*, in which he argues that often we spend the first part of our lives building up the boundaries that create a sense of identity, a sense of our uniqueness, how we are different from others. And then in the second part of life, if we have developed healthily enough, we spend our time breaking down the barriers and the boundaries that we painstakingly erected earlier on.

I'm never quite sure where we Catholics actually are in that scenario. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, it seemed as if the time had come for the dismantling of boundaries to begin. But then, despite a few important ecumenical statements, we seemed rather quickly to enter into an ecumenical deep-freeze and to begin once again the work of recreating our specific Catholic identity over against everybody else, and when that's top of your agenda, ecumenism becomes either irrelevant or down-right dangerous. Offices of ecumenism in dioceses were either downgraded or eliminated almost all together, as happened here in Denver. We created new liturgical texts no longer in conjunction with our Lutheran and Anglican brothers and sisters, such as we had done during the heyday of the ecumenical movement. In this Archdiocese, we revamped the seminary and specifically excluded from attending, with one or two exceptions, any other Christians preparing for ordained ministry; previously the number of Episcopalians who were attending St. Thomas Seminary almost equaled the number of Roman Catholic seminarians. And anybody who has anything to do with seminary education in this country knows how difficult it has been to get young, now seemingly more orthodox seminarians, to become interested in ecumenical things. It just has not been part of the ethos or the agenda of either seminaries or many bishops. The last couple of decades have certainly been rather cold, ecumenically-speaking. Even those who see themselves as progressives have often given up on the ecumenical mission that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council articulated. I just happened to notice, for example, that the number of people at our ecumenical service last Sunday from St. Elizabeth's parish, apart from the choirs, was probably not much higher than the number of seminarians in attendance. That's quite significant.

Certainly all these developments have had their own specific reasons behind them, but they all also seem to express that tendency which Pope Francis has described as a “spirit of exclusivity”. Perhaps Francis can jumpstart the ecumenical movement again as he has said he wants to. If we concentrate on the convictions that we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths (which means quite simply that not all teachings are on the same level or share the same importance), we should be able, Pope Francis says, “to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, p. 184), and our common ecumenical witness and work, the Pope argues, should be seen as a contribution to the unity of the entire human family.

Having said all of this, I would also like to say that a commitment to ecumenism should be a part of our mission not only because the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council has pushed us in that direction, but because ecumenism arises directly out of our baptismal identity that I have been talking about over the past few weeks. Ecumenism is essentially a rediscovery of what might be called the political significance of Baptism, a rediscovery of Baptism as the foundational authoritative act of God by which *all* the baptized are irrevocably committed to one another through the same act by which they are joined to Jesus Christ: “*for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Gal. 3:26-28). We simply cannot neatly separate these two dimensions of what Baptism does- joining us to God in Jesus and joining us to one another. We repudiate our baptismal bonds with one another only at the gravest risk to our bond with Jesus Himself.

The problem has been, however, that this spiritual, ecclesial Baptismal identity has often been replaced in practice by what I would call a secular “culture-war” identity, which has gone hand-

in-hand with that desire to re-create, and this time more sturdily, the barriers of separation and exclusion that have become part of our Church life once again over the past few decades. This “culture-war” identity, which many Catholics seem unwittingly to have embraced, tends to conform the Church to the wrong kind of struggles, to limit our horizon of what is important, and to polarize people as either friends or-foes. If you read George Weigel’s articles, for example, you might well come away with the impression that the *defining* characteristics of Jesus’ community are the stands that we take against contraception, dissent in the Church, and same-sex unions, rather than the revelation of the Trinitarian God of Love, a concern for an economically just world and who we are as the baptized People of God.

The culture-war identity is, I think, rooted in what the French historian, Remi Brague, has called the desire to create “Christianism”. “Christianism” is really an ideology focused on achieving a cultural program. It is not the same thing as *faith in Christ*. What Christianism wants is to do is to promote certain moral norms in society, if possible to see these norms enforced by the State, and thereby to create or to recreate what it sees as a Christian or godly society. The irony, as a friend of mine has written, is that this simply can’t happen; believers can certainly transform culture but only when we *forget* about culture and simply serve the Lord. Our fundamental mission as Church is something far greater than creating a Christian civilization.

Our fundamental mission is rooted in Baptism. As Pope Francis has said, we need to focus on the essentials, on the necessary things, centered in the saving love of God in Jesus Christ. And this means, the Pope says, that all the baptized- and get that, *all* the baptized- not just clergy, not just religious, not just Catholics, but anyone who has walked through the waters of baptism- all of us are called to a personal involvement in the task of speaking and living God’s love into this world which is the work of evangelization. We are all called to be “missionary disciples”. And to do that we need to be ready to go wherever we need to go so that others can hear the

Good News. When Jesus in Luke's Gospel went to visit Zacchaeus in his house, people began to grumble because he went to the house of a sinner, in other words, he went to a place *where he should not have been*. If Jesus was ready and able to do that, so should Jesus' Church! And we should be ready and able to do it together with anybody else who is our brother or sister in Christ, anybody else who bears the name of Jesus, who wants to be His disciple, and who walks through life wet with the waters of Baptism.

Now the last thing that I'll say: If we truly are trying to live out of our Baptismal identity and not out of a culture-war identity or an ideology of "Christianism", we should begin to practice what Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian has called a "*double vision*". A double vision means that when I confront anyone with whom I disagree, but especially when I confront a fellow- believer with whom I disagree, I should try to see and understand things both from where I stand and from where that other person stands. I quite naturally see things from my perspective, from my locatedness, but what I need to try to do is to step outside myself, to move into the world of the other person, and to open my ears and my eyes and my heart to try to understand how that other person perceives reality, perceives God, perceives truth, perceives me, perceives himself. I need to try to move as close as I can to that other person's world, and then to take that other person back into myself, and to let his/her perspective stand next to mine, and to reflect on whether one or the other is right or wrong, or maybe partly right and partly wrong. Only when we Christians begin to do this with one another really and honestly and consistently will ecumenism come alive again and begin to destroy the spirit of exclusivity that has been haunting us once again for the past several decades. Only when we struggle to have a "double vision" will we come close to St. Paul's goal for us- "*that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.*"