

The Unity of Christians

Gospel: John 17:1-13: *"These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word. Now they have known that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are of thee. For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me. I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled. And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves."*

"That they may be one, as we are"

Yesterday, Jesus ascended from among us, and tomorrow, the Holy Spirit will descend on us. Yesterday, we celebrated the crowning of Christ's work, and tomorrow, we will celebrate the beginning of the Holy Spirit's work. Yesterday, Christ finalized his work on earth. His purpose was to gather all together and unite them into Him (Ephesians 2:14). Tomorrow, the Holy Spirit continues the work of Jesus, so that He unites the tongues that were divided of old.

Today, in between these two events we read the farewell prayer of Jesus and His supplication to God for our unity, so that we may become one as the Holy Trinity is one.

A quick reading of history reveals that Christ's prayer was so necessary. Christ's Church was threatened on earth mostly by Her inner divisions. Before leaving His disciples and giving them the Gospel mission to undertake having the support of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was very worried about the unity of His disciples and their followers.

God created human beings having different gifts and various unique talents, but everything God created was to be in complete harmony and unity. After the fall, the result of sin was that the whole universe entered into a state of disharmony and disruption. The relationship between man and God, and between man and the universe, was disrupted. Today's human being lives in the world, trying to protect his life and to struggle for his survival. The relationship between man and his fellow

human being had been disrupted as well. The first disruption of this relationship happened between man and his wife, then between man and his brother, when the older killed his younger brother. Our world became torn apart. All this was the result of sin.

God created everyone unique but united. And God continued His work of uniting everyone who became disunited. Disunity is always a sin. The unity of the Church testifies to Her holiness. The unity of the Church is a sign of Her Orthodoxy, because this unity is a sign of its divine origin and freedom from the sinful human mixture.

We see everything in the world as disuniting, even if it unites small entities. Politics gather many people together, and by doing this it gathers to disunite. Political parties do the same. Sectarianism is a greater sin because it does the reverse of what is exactly needed. All gatherings happening in the world are often related by some unreal links and driven by some opposite and competing goals. The associations, leagues, clubs, companies and same interest groups and gatherings come together for some interests that disunite not only one person from another but a whole society from another...

Religion often turns to become a disuniting factor among people, instead of being an oasis uniting man with his brother. In the Old Testament, the Samaritans in Palestine were disunited from the Jews. In this age, the Body of Christ is torn apart by religiosity among denominations. The Troparion and the Sunday prayers show that divisions are the cause of tearing apart the Body of Christ. Does the Body of Christ become disunited? We are short of fulfilling the Lord's prayer and supplications?

There is much talk about unity. Time has passed and just very little has been achieved. These reconciliatory achievements have happened both on human and on Church levels. In His prayer for the unity of the Church, Christ mentions the formula upon which we should build all our endeavors for unity. What are the characteristics of this unity that Christ prays for, knowing that it is our responsibility to achieve it?

It is clear from the Prayer of Jesus that the unity of the Church is related to the life of God. It is in the likeness of the unity of the Trinity, "So that they be one as we are," that they may be one as Jesus and His Father are one. The unity of the Trinity is based on the bond of love. The Father is the source of this unity. The Word is eternally with the Father, that is the Son and Word move towards (proz) the Father in an eternal way. The Son came to earth to unite people, that is to open for them the way to know God, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." The Son came to move everyone towards the Father.

The unity ought to be in Christ. The words of the Lord are clear. Our unity happens when He becomes in us as the Father is united to Him. Our perfection and growth, our healing from the sinfulness of confusion and disharmony become possible when the Lord Jesus abides in us, so that we become perfected in Him and united to Him.

So our Unity is in Christ. He unites us. Christ unites our purposes and our lives, without annulling the unique personalities and talents of each one of us. Our talents can be used harmoniously in the service of others, becoming a bond and not a competitive difference.

Christ puts in front of us the real purpose, which is to participate in His glory, "And I will give them the glory that thou hast given me, that they may be one..." The glory of the Son is the revelation of God's glory. Christ's glory is His testimony to the Father, obeying Him till the death of the Cross. This participation in this glory means the participation in His suffering and His Gospel mission. Christ gave us the gift of participating in His glory, so that we may also become witnesses to the Father. So we move from being children of this age to children of God. We realize that we are all sharers in the Gospel mission and in Grace. We are the apostles of God in the world and our purposes are one. At the same time we are the children of God and gifted by the same love from the Father, having also the same honor. That's how Christ unites us by giving us His Grace of testimony and adoption. We shout in the Spirit, "Abba Father." The Son reveals to us that the Father is the Father and that we all have the same love from Him.

Christ unites us when He abides in us. He gives us true life. He teaches us life by the Holy Spirit. The unity of life is what creates the unity of Tradition. Faith and life are not just close to each other, but the form of life has as its source the faith. The unity of life means that we have the same experience and the same teaching. Tradition here does not mean just knowledge or customs, but the continuation of sacrifice, our ancestors did, us being chosen vessels and lyres of the Holy Spirit. This is what we received: that the Spirit speaks in us. This is what makes the Orthodox teaching different from the teaching of the heretics. Orthodoxy is a living expression of the Spirit, and it is not copying or imitating a custom. It is not a renewal of some philosophies whose logic is man and not the Spirit.

This is what the Church celebrates today, the Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the First Council. This council has a special place among all councils. Not just because it defended the Divinity of the Son, but also because it drew a line protecting the faith. It pointed to the necessity of having a unity of life and purpose, so that the teachings stay one. The Fathers of the Council are the ones who took upon themselves the Tradition and threw away all strange teaching. They took upon themselves the Tradition, that of the Holy Spirit.

For this, unity is not possible if the Son does not abide in us. He makes us grow into becoming the children of God and perfects us to become one in purpose and mission, in life and Tradition. He leads us all united to the Father.

Amen.