

WE MUST HAVE UNITY IN THE CHURCH (1 Peter 3:8-15)

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

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St. Peter wrote what we now call the First Epistle of St. Peter in Rome about the year 64 for Christians living in Asia Minor. In this letter he wanted to tell them that through Baptism they share in the redemption that Christ won for us by dying on the Cross. And although they once lived the life of vices like the pagans, their Baptism called them to now live a life of holiness and to be prepared for the trials and persecutions that everyone, who imitates Christ must endure. He told them to reject sin, practice the virtues and live in unity through fraternal charity.

St. Peter was actually echoing Christ's teachings in the Beatitudes by telling these new Christians that they had to go beyond the letter of the Law and strive for something greater, for Christian perfection through the transformation of their hearts. He was telling them that by their Baptism they were called to lives of exemplary holiness by practice of the virtues. His statement, "do not repay evil with evil, or insult with insult"¹ echoes Christ's exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil ... love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father."² The Old Testament mandate of "an eye for an eye" wasn't a sentence for a wrongdoing, but only an attempt to moderate vengeance so that the punishment would not exceed the injury done. But Jesus forbade even this, demanding of us a much higher standard.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His listeners: Blessed are the meek, ... Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, ... Blessed are the merciful, ... Blessed are the peacemakers, ... Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.³ Echoing His Master St. Peter wrote: "be humble;" "the eyes of the Lord are upon the just;" "show compassion;" "seek peace and go in search of it;" "And who can do you harm, if your heart is set on doing good? Even if you have to suffer in the cause of right, it is a blessing to you."⁴

And St. Peter is calling us, just as he called the Christians of Asia Minor, to a new life of Christian holiness, which demands more of us but which will also bring us greater reward and glory in heaven. He exhorts us to be kind to one another, compassionate and humble. We must refrain from speaking ill of others and from lying. The world heaps insults upon insults, taking an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But we are called to "repay insults with blessings"⁵ for which we will then inherit a blessing from God and He will listen to our prayers because "the eyes of the Lord are upon the just."⁶

St. Peter asks us to practice a life of heroic Christian virtue but he asks us to do so in a specific manner, beginning this passage with: "All of you must share the same thoughts and feelings." In another translation this is rendered as, "Be of one mind."⁷ In other words, he is asking for unity among Christians: one in prayer, one in love, one in grace. Because we have all become brothers and sisters in Christ through Baptism, we

should be a community united through the bond of the divine life of grace in Christ and through love of neighbor.

This call for unity is very clear to us in this age when we have a Christianity, which is so splintered: Catholics, Orthodox and tens of thousands of Protestant denominations. But when St. Peter wrote his first letter to the Christians in Asia Minor, there weren't any Orthodox or Protestants. There was still only one Church and all of its members were Catholics. And that's the context in which we should read it today. We need unity with all of the separated Christians but we need unity just as much within the Catholic Church, which is so internally fragmented: traditional Catholics, progressive Catholics, charismatic Catholics, cafeteria Catholics, orthodox Catholics, dissident Catholics. The list could go on and on.

The unity of the Church has been shattered by the mentality that a person can, on his own authority, decide what is right and what is wrong and in effect set himself up as his own pope and his own magisterium. We know all too well expressions of this radical independence and individualism among progressive and dissenting Catholics on the left. It is found among those we call cafeteria Catholics. And it is also found on the right among traditional Catholics, who single-handedly take it upon themselves to decide who is pope, which Masses are valid and how to interpret Church documents.

No matter which end of the spectrum one finds it on, it is nothing more than what Protestants have been doing for centuries. And in the end, it is just a form of relativism, a perspective in which each person sees himself as an autonomous, isolated individual. He is his own god, who alone decides what he wills to believe or do. And whatever he chooses is, for him, the right thing to do. Many of them would be shocked to find out that this mentality has the same origin as the "pro-choice" mentality.⁸ Pope Benedict XVI says that this dictatorship of relativism "recognizes nothing as absolute and ... leaves only the 'I' and its whims as the ultimate measure."⁹

In order to have the proper perspective, we have to first realize that "the Catholic faith is not a set of doctrines. Rather, it is a lived encounter with Christ, who lives in, and teaches through, the Church. The Magisterium, or teaching authority of the Church, is a great gift¹⁰ and at its head is the Supreme Pontiff. Without him, there is no Magisterium! And if the forces of evil concentrate their assaults on the Vicar of Christ, who is the authoritative interpreter of the moral law, then where does this, for instance, put so-called "traditional Catholics," who claim to hold the true faith in its purity but who at the same time incessantly criticize the Holy Father. Christ left Peter and his successors as a special source of unity within the Church and we must loyally defend him or the Church's unity will be shattered, as it is now.

"It is the will of Christ that we work out our salvation not as isolated individuals but rather in communion with the great family of the Church. Virtue is perfected by contacts with others. We form one Body, and as members of this Body we mutually aid one another."¹¹ Sometimes, we may have to suffer through things that are unpleasant but remember—there have always been such things in the Church and the Church has survived. Those, who in the end remained Catholic were those, who stood steadfast alongside the Vicar of Christ. Always remember the appeal of St. Peter: "be of one mind, sympathetic, loving toward one another, compassionate, humble. Do not return evil for evil, or insult for insult; but, on the contrary, a blessing, because to this you were called,

that you might inherit a blessing.”¹² You will inherit a blessing because you have, in all humility, preserved the unity that Christ desired.

¹ 1 Peter 3:9.

² Matthew 5:38-39, 44-45.

³ Matthew 5:5, 6, 7, 9, 11-12.

⁴ 1 Peter 3:8, 11, 12, 13-14.

⁵ 1 Peter 3:9.

⁶ 1 Peter 3:12.

⁷ 1 Peter 3:8.

⁸ Rice, Charles, “God is not dead. He isn't even tired,” Commencement address at Christendom College 15 May 2010. (http://ignatiusinsight.com/features2010/crice_christendomcomm_may2010.asp)

⁹ Benedict XVI, Homily, April 18, 2005.

¹⁰ Rice, “God.”

¹¹ Parsch, Pius, *The Church's Year of Grace*, vol. 4 (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minn., 1958), 64-65.

¹² 1 Peter 3:8-9.