

With One Accord

In the name of our ascended and exalted Lord, dear friends in Christ: In today's reading from the Gospel of St. John, we hear Jesus praying that his disciples – together with all those who will come to faith in him through the word of their witness – would become perfectly one: one in truth, one in doctrine, one in mind, one in will, and one in love for each other—just as God the Father and God the Son are one. As far as prayers go, this one's a *tall* order.

That being said, it's exactly the sort of unity Jesus prayed for that we see being enjoyed by the early Church in the first reading from the Book of Acts. We have the eleven disciples together with the women who accompanied them throughout much of Jesus' ministry, also Mary the mother of Jesus and his half siblings, and also some others who are not identified but who bring the whole group to a number of about 120 – which is symbolically significant because it's twelve times ten: twelve being the number that stands for God's people (think the twelve tribes of Israel) and ten being the number of completion. In other words: the whole church. And what we're told about them is that with one accord they were devoting themselves to the prayers. Not just any prayers; the Greek text has the definite article there. That tells us they were praying specific prayers, likely prayers Jesus himself had taught them. So what we have here is early form of what will eventually become the Divine Service.

And that is what united them. They were worshipping together, hearing the Word of God together, receiving Christ's gifts together. And through these means Jesus came to them, indwelt them, and made them one. It's Jesus who unites his Church. He's who makes us one. Any unity we devise on our own apart from him, or worse, in contradiction to him, is going to be false and empty – a unity of appearance only. More on that later.

But now being united in Christ we see them working together with one accord to correct a discrepancy that existed among them. One of the apostolic offices was empty having been vacated by Judas. The Church understood that Jesus had chosen the theologically significant number of twelve apostles. And note that this is a distinct office in the Church. Everyone is a disciple, but not everyone is an apostle. These men had a particular role to play in the development of the Church. We heard it described in last Sunday's reading from the Revelation to St. John. There he described a vision he had of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It was built on twelve foundations on which were inscribed the names of the twelve apostles. This signifies that the twelve are the primary witnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus. It's their teaching that they acquired directly from the mouth of the Lord, their accounts of what they saw him do, and their confession of faith upon which the Church of all ages stands. Their testimony is the foundation of the Church, which is the City of God.

As he often did during the days of Jesus' ministry, we see Peter acting as the spokesman for the group. Note that he addresses them as brothers. He doesn't see himself as their supreme infallible leader and certainly not as their pope. To him all are equal. In order to fill the vacancy, Peter sets forth the criteria for the apostolic office. It must be someone who had been with Jesus the entire three years of his public ministry, from the time when John was baptizing right up until the end. Most crucially, it must be someone who was an eyewitness of Jesus in the flesh after his resurrection because this is the single most important truth in the Christian Church. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we should all go home. There's nothing going on here. But if he did rise, as all the apostles testify that he did, then he's the guy we should be listening to.

Okay, having set forth the criteria to the group, we see that they are in total agreement: yes, the office must be filled; and yes, a man filling the office must have these qualifications – which only makes sense. Since witnessing to the life and ministry of Jesus is an apostle's main task, only someone who was actually with Jesus for the three years of his ministry could qualify. Side note: there are some churches that claim to have men (and in a few cases women) in the apostolic office today. They don't. It's not possible. No one meets the biblical requirements.

Now, we don't know how many men in the group of the 120 did meet the standard; but from the pool that did, two men were put forward: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. Again we see perfect concurrence among the faithful. All agree that these men fit the bill, and they'd be happy with either of them in the office of apostle. It's worth noting too that it's the group that names the candidates, not the candidates themselves. In the Church the office seeks the man. Beware the man who seeks the office.

Having named two qualified candidates, the whole Church with one accord joins together in prayer to turn the final decision over to the Lord Jesus to make. Only Christ can call an apostle. They pray, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show us which one of these two you have chosen." And then they cast lots, which fell in favor of Matthias. He – with the approval of all – was thereafter numbered with the other eleven apostles. And he's not heard of again, but then neither are most of the other apostles. The point is that they did their duty. We know because their witness lives on even today and remains the foundation of the Holy Christian Church. And perhaps it's worth noting that the name Matthias means disciple or student because that's what all of us are who follow the Lord Jesus through the testimony of the twelve.

So, what we have in this brief account is a snapshot of the Church united. They are worshipping together, they are praying together, and they are solving problems together. All are in harmony and accord. There's no disagreement or dissent. They are exhibiting the perfect oneness that Jesus prayed for them to have. But even in this text, which stresses this oneness, it's evident that the Church's unity can and will be broken at times. After all, the reason they had to fill the apostolic office was that Judas left their fellowship. He had been one with them and with Christ, but he became divided.

A lot of ink has been spilled by theologians speculating as to why Judas did what he did. How could a man called by Christ, who heard Jesus' teaching, who saw him perform hundreds of mighty miracles, who believed in him, and who went forth at one point preaching the good news and casting out demons in Jesus' name turn around and betray him to his enemies? All kinds of wild theories have been suggested; but this is a case in which Occam's razor applies. That is to say the simplest answer is almost always correct. Judas fell and became divided from Christ and his Church because of his sin.

In John's Gospel we are told that Judas held the purse for Jesus and the disciples. He was in charge of collecting and distributing funds. And of course someone had to do this duty. I mean the group had to buy food, clothes, sandals and whatnot. And we can surmise that a lot of money went through Judas' hands. Think what kind of donations would have been made by people grateful for having received healing miracles. Some of this would have been kept for the group's expenses. And a larger portion would have gone to aid the poor. Jesus practiced what he preached. But with all this money coming and going under his control, Judas succumbed to the sin of greed. At some point he started skimming a share for himself off the top. No doubt he justified it in his own mind, telling himself he deserved it or that he needed to save some for a rainy day. But this became Satan's open door to Judas. What began as a small thing grew

over time until it was Judas' all consuming passion. And when he saw his opportunity to score big – 30 heavy silver coins – he took it. He betrayed Jesus and led his enemies to where they could find him away from the adoring crowds. And friends, don't think for a moment that it couldn't happen to you. When you let sin into your life, when you give it a place in your heart and keep it there, it will become your god. You might think you can control it; but it ends up controlling you. And I say this not just of greed, it could be any sin.

What Judas did in betraying Jesus was terrible thing; but it was not the unforgivable sin. He could have repented and returned to the fellowship of Jesus and the disciples. He could have been forgiven even for this. But his actions prove that he didn't want forgiveness. He didn't believe in it. Instead he tried to make amends himself. He thought he could undo what he'd done by returning the money. But sin doesn't work that way. You can't undo the damage you've done to yourself and to others. You can't make up for it yourself. It's proud presumption to think that you can – which is another sin. It's also bad theology – which is the other cause of division within the Church. Only Jesus can make up for sin. Only through him and his cross and passion can the sinner be made one with God. Judas didn't want that. He didn't trust in that. And seeing that he couldn't erase his shame on his own terms, he gave in to despair and took his own life. But it needs to be stressed that he is lost not because of his sin, but because of his lack of faith in Jesus and the forgiveness he died to secure.

When we look across the wide field of the Christian Church today, it's tempting to long for the days of that early Church that was so united in mind, purpose, and Christian love. We ask, why are we so divided? Why are there so many different denominations? The answer is sin; sin and bad theology – which is also a sin. I'm sure you know that there are church bodies that have not only stopped calling sin what God's Word says is sin, but they're actually celebrating some of these sins – and they're proud of themselves for doing so. Likewise there's plenty of bad theology that divides us. And let me make this clear: what makes a theological teaching bad is that it somehow undermines, denies, or obscures the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For example, teaching that Baptism is only symbolic, a means for a believer to show his submission to Christ, and not an actual washing of regeneration that forgives sins, gives the Holy Spirit, and saves robs people of the confidence Jesus wants them to have in their Baptism. It becomes what I do for Jesus rather than what Jesus did for me.

Now, there are some in the Church who think we should simply ignore our differences and all try to play nice and get along – show the world what a united bunch we are in Christ. After all, it's what Jesus prayed for. But that can't work. Then our so-called unity would be something we created. It would also be a unity that made room for sin and bad theology. It would, in a word, make us exactly like Judas. And it would lead to our destruction as it did for him.

Listen: it's not our job to bring unity to the Church. That work belongs to Jesus. And he is doing it. He's doing it wherever and as often as sinners are being called to repentance. He's doing it where his forgiveness is being proclaimed. He's doing it where his Word is being rightly divided and taught in all of its truth and purity. He's doing it where his Sacraments are being properly administered. Yes, I can boldly say that he's doing it here and in countless other places throughout the world. And by these means he is uniting us and making us one with him and his Father. And for that with one accord we praise Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!