

JULY 30, 2017

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I CORINTHIANS 1: 10-17

“IS CHRIST DIVIDED?”

Sheep are very vulnerable animals. They have no natural “weapons” such as fangs or claws, etc. And if a predator gets a hold of a sheep, the sheep really has no chance. Their only defense is safety in numbers. I doubt it works perfectly but they are safer if they bunch up and stick very close together. They are safer in a flock than walking around alone. A sheep dog’s job is to keep the flock together. Quite a few years back, my family and I got to see a sheep dog in action. It was fascinating to see how he, by nipping, growling, barking, and pushing, worked at keeping the sheep all together---because they are safer that way.

It’s the same for Christians—and remember how often we are called “sheep” in the Bible. The predator that is after us is the devil—he wants our souls. And if we are isolated, he can more easily pick us off one by one. To be safe, we need to be united, we need to keep the flock of God’s human sheep close together. There is an old saying stated by many of our Church Fathers-----“No one goes to heaven alone; but everyone that goes to hell goes all by himself.” (Father Christopher Metropoulos, “The Cure For Isolation”, “Again” magazine, Fall, 2006, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 34)

But sometimes congregations, those local flocks of God’s sheep, are not very united. This problem goes all the way back to the first century of Christianity. We see that today in our epistle reading, from St. Paul’s first letter to the early Orthodox parish at Corinth, Greece. They had plenty of problems with lack of unity. It seems there was usually some kind of uproar going on! St. Paul had started the parish not many years back and then had moved on to do missionary work in other places. But, even when not there, just like a diocesan bishop today, he got reports about what was going on back in Corinth. And they were bad reports. After getting these bad reports, Paul (as we say) was not a happy camper. Thus, this letter to them----and then sometime later another letter to them. That’s why we have both First and Second Corinthians in our Bibles.

Today’s assigned reading is I Corinthians 1: 10-17. Let me now read you a part of it---I Corinthians 1: 11-13-----“For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, “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?”

This rather new church in Corinth had already begun to fall apart into 4 factions that couldn’t get along. When we think of church fights, we usually think of 2 sides in the quarrel. They had 4! Each one identified with one particular person as their leader. Some said, “I belong to Paul!”. Others said, “I belong to Apollos!” (a lesser known leader in the

early church). Some said, “I belong to Cephas!” (whom we more commonly call Peter). And then there was the “holier than thou” group who looked down their noses at the other 3 groups and said, “**I** belong to Christ!”.

All of this upsets Paul. He had started that parish. He had worked hard for the people. And then he moved on to evangelize in other places.....and the Corinth church seemed to be breaking up in his absence. It was a very troubled place. Read through I and II Corinthians and you’ll see that right away.

The Corinth church was the kind that priests call “a tough parish”. The letters from Paul show they had lots of problems, not just disunity. But disunity was a big part of their problem. And it really bothers Paul. So the Holy Apostle lambasts them in verse 13 of our reading today. I imagine perhaps he wrote it in especially large letters so they would get the point. What he wrote was, “Is Christ divided?” The obvious implied answer is “No!”. How could Christ ever be disunited? And the implied follow-up is, “If Christ isn’t divided, why are you? Get with it! Get united!”.

But we shouldn’t judge the ancient Corinthian Christians, our ancient brothers and sisters, too harshly. Disunity in churches wasn’t unique to them. It’s been a common problem in many places ever since, and still today. And it greatly weakens a church.

There was a father who was retiring from his family business. He turned it over to his four sons to run. And he was disappointed that they started fighting among themselves almost right away. So he called all four to meet with him one day. He had put together a bundle of short sticks, tied together. He handed the bundle to one son at a time, asking them to try to break the sticks. They couldn’t do it. Then he untied the sticks and handed each son some loose sticks and asked them to break them. Easy as pie! Then to drive the point home, he said, “If you stay together, you will be strong. If you disunite, you will be easily broken.” (in “Ambo”, St. Theodosius Cathedral, Cleveland, November 21, 2009)

So for every parish, including us-----if we stay united, we will be stronger and able to do better service for God.

I would say over-all we’re a pretty well-united parish. But the future is coming—isn’t it always sneaking up on us? And in the future, we can be sure there will be new challenges, perhaps new problems. We don’t know what, but the future will not always be simple or easy.

Challenges and problems can bring disunity. And then the disunity causes more problems....and then the new problems cause more disunity.....and on and on it goes in a downward spiral..... We don’t want that!

So we should always be on our “spiritual toes”, guarding against disunity and working towards stronger unity. A couple of ways we can do that-----

---Get to know everyone in our parish family, not just those you’re related to, long-time friends with, or have lots in common with. We have a very diverse parish, so get to know those who are quite different than you. Get to be friends with everyone.

----Disagreements will happen. No large group of people can not ever have any disagreements in their midst. But we should take care of disagreements peacefully, remembering that we don’t always have to get our own way. We should be willing to give in, to forgive, to work together even when we don’t totally agree.

And we can only grow closer to the Lord if we do it together. St. Dorotheos of Gaza, a Palestinian holy man from about 600 A.D., wrote about this. He said to imagine a circle. In the center of the circle is God. Each of us are spread around at different points on the circumference of the circle. We can choose to either stay where we are, on the circumference; or we can decide to move towards God, towards the center of the circle. If we all start moving towards God in the center, we will automatically also draw closer to each other. As we move closer to the Lord, we converge upon each other. And as we draw closer to God, we grow closer to each other. It all happens simultaneously. (in Soul Mending, Deacon John Chryssavgis, Holy Cross Press, 2000, p. 10)

Remember how St. Paul, in today's epistle lesson, responded to the news that the Corinthian Orthodox Christians were fighting and forming factions. He asked them in verse 13—"Is Christ divided?" The obvious answer---"No!". And neither should we be divided!

As St. Paul wrote in verse 10 of our reading-----"I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." Let us be obedient to Apostle's appeal.

A SHORT APPENDIX----- Our epistle reading today was about the need for unity in a parish. But the point of the reading can be applied beyond the parish level.

There are about 25 Orthodox parishes in our county. All types and sizes. Different languages in worship sometimes. Differences in the details---but all the same beliefs, all in communion with each other. And we are all able to receive Holy Communion with each other.

25 churches. But there's another way to look at it. In the Cleveland area, there is one Orthodox Christian family. That family worships in 25 different buildings. But it is *one* family.

You chose this parish to be the one where you worship and serve God. Hooray! But we should not judge or criticize our Orthodox brothers and sisters in the other 24 parishes. It's easy to fall into that. We could call it religious gossip....."Did you hear what's going on at St.....?" "Guess what Fr. over at St. is trying to get done' Etc., etc.

Don't do it. Instead, love them, get to know them, enjoy fellowship with them. Our brethren in the other 24 churches are wonderful people!

All 25 are united, thanks be to God. May the Lord preserve and strengthen that unity.

