

Our Unity through Christ

July 19, 2015

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Jeremiah 23.1-6;

Ephesians 2.13-18;

Mark 6.30-34

By Rev. Bevil Bramwell, OMI

The readings for the 16th Sunday first of all raise a historical question. They tell us God has chosen to work with us right here in the middle of our time. Unfortunately, history has a bad name in modern Western culture, but in fact – whether we like it or not – we are historical beings. We learn who we are from past events. These shape how we behave in the present, and help us get some understanding of the future.

The Importance of Interaction

We also grow and learn through interactions with each other through time. Interaction is the visible trademark of our unity as a Church and helps to show that we are united in Christ. In fact, Saint Catherine of Siena, in one of her *Dialogues*, has God saying: “I distribute the virtues quite diversely; I do not give all of them to each person, but some to one, some to others. . . . I have not given everything to one single person, so that you may be constrained to practice charity toward one another. . . . I have willed that one should need another and that all should be my ministers in distributing the graces and gifts they have received from me” (CCC 1937). Can you see how God has built a higher goal into the cohesion of the community, namely, to enrich and develop the community of the Church?

In the Old Testament, God appointed prophets, priests, and kings to lead his people, and the legitimate mediators received some of God’s Spirit to make them authentic leaders of the people of God. There were also inauthentic leaders – bad kings and fake prophets – but we will not spend any time on them. As we see from the first reading, they were punished.

In the New Testament, Jesus himself is *the Prophet, the Priest, and the King*. As God said in the first reading, “I *myself* will gather the remnant of my flock.” We can learn something of what this means through reading about the prophets, priests, and kings of the Old Testament, so that we can understand Jesus better. That is why the Old Testament is there and why we still read it at almost every liturgy!

God says in the first reading: “In his days Judah shall be saved, Israel shall dwell in security. This is the name they give him: ‘The Lord our justice.’” For our purposes, “Judah” and “Israel” are metaphors for the Church. In the New Testament, the whole community is under the one Shepherd: In Jesus Christ, the Church enjoys the salvation of God and dwells in security.

The responsorial psalm picks up the theme of the one Shepherd with the words “the Lord is my Shepherd.” The writer of the psalm is not going to follow any other shepherds, such as politicians or celebrities. In a world full of false gods, he follows the Lord God alone.

When the psalmist follows God himself as the Shepherd of his life, then, he says, God “refreshes my soul,” “guides me in right paths,” and “I fear no evil.” In short, “there is nothing I shall want.” This is what happens when I allow God himself to be the Shepherd of my life. This is what will happen when I allow the shepherds God calls – whom he spoke of in the book of Jeremiah – to be the shepherds of my life. When every person in the Church does this, we have another visible sign of the unity of the Church for all the world to see.

The scriptures are very clear that there is only *one* Body of Christ because there is only one Christ. This oneness is not simply for convenience; it is essential for our understanding of Christ himself. Because we are historical beings, we may meet many different “bodies of Christ” as we go through life, which causes us to develop a fractured sense of who Christ is. One community over here may present some aspect of Christ that seems to contradict something another community over there presents. Or a particular feature of Christ may be played down in one community but emphasized in another. Or another aspect is forgotten altogether by one community but remembered by another.

So let’s be very clear: Ordinarily we learn who Christ is only from encountering the community that is his Body, namely, the Catholic Church. We continue to learn who Christ is only by participating in the community that is his Body.

In this community of the Body of Christ we “have access in one spirit to the Father.” This is explained in the passage from the Letter to the Ephesians we read at today’s Mass. The Body of Christ is blessed with the Spirit of God that Christ shares with his divine Father. In the Spirit of God Jesus can show us the Father (cf. John 14:8). You will notice that the main prayers of the Mass are addressed to the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit of God, and with good reason. The community, filled with the Spirit of God, is joined to Christ as his Body and prays to the Father.

Another very rich concept in this part of the Letter to the Ephesians is the fact that Jesus has reconciled the Old Testament people of God with those who did not originally belong to that group. God began by working with the people of Israel; slowly they became a sign that God had chosen a people and made them his own. This was meant as a sign that, in fact, God wanted to bring all nations of the earth together as one community, filled with his grace and truth, and offering praise to him. God ultimately shepherds the whole world to become one community of grace. This is another sense of the oneness of the people of God of which we have been speaking.

It is important to appreciate how this oneness is brought about. As Saint Paul explains, Christ lived and died and rose again so that he “might reconcile both [Jews and Gentiles] with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it.” Here is the sense of oneness again. In this case, Paul speaks of Christ’s one body, his *physical* body. Christ in his physical body walked around Israel preaching this new message of the unity of all mankind that would become potentially possible through his death upon the cross – *potentially*, for we are not speaking of a magical transformation. As free persons making our decisions and acting upon them, we are all intimately involved in this change.

We should not forget the importance of interacting with others. In his commentary on chapter 13 of John’s gospel, Saint Augustine says: “[A]nd so all her members make each other’s welfare their common care. When one member suffers, all the members suffer with him, and if one member is glorified all the rest rejoice. . . . Not merely on account of their common humanity, but because they are all gods and sons of the Most High. They love one another as God loves them so that they may be brothers of his only son.”

Led to Unity

Once again, we see the people of God have to be *led* into this mode of life. This is where the shepherds come in. Their role is to train people to live this way. The oneness of God’s people, their cohesion and solidarity with each other – this is achieved by the active leadership of their shepherds. Another feature of the shepherds’ work appears in the gospel acclamation: “My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord; I know them, and they follow me.” The interpersonal nature of this leadership is immediately apparent.

Finally, there is the gospel for today, taken from Mark, who tells us about the daily work of shepherding being done by the apostles and by Jesus himself.

Mark starts with a matter-of-fact description: “The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.” The shepherds still gather together today. They still pray and meditate and keep in constant contact to remain in relation to Jesus, the Head of the Body of Christ. (They are doing their part to maintain the unity of the Church.) In fact, Vatican II taught that “[a] bishop, since he is sent by the Father to govern his family, must keep before his eyes the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to lay down his life for his sheep” (*Lumen gentium*, 27).

Then Mark gives a very simple detail. Jesus said, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile.” Jesus was taking care of the apostles, and he still does that today, because they manifest his presence. The apostles were beginning to act like shepherds, and as we shift our focus between Jesus and his delegates, we begin to understand more about how his delegates ought to behave.

Jesus was moved with pity when he saw the people following them – an emotional identification that should arise between the shepherds and their people – and so he began to teach them “many things,” as Mark says. Similarly, the shepherds, in our case the bishops, ought to be teaching us many things. If they do this and are consistent among themselves, they will maintain the unity of the Church in the truth of Jesus Christ.

So there are many different dimensions to the unity of the Church. They all rest on the spiritual unity brought about by the power of Jesus Christ through our baptism. Our unity is manifested in different ways according to what is needed. Many times the Church needs our interpersonal relations, as we help each other to grow together. But the Church always needs our love and our attention to the truth of Jesus Christ and his manifestation of himself in the bishops.

About the Author

Father Bevil Bramwell, OMI, teaches theology online at Catholic Distance University. His books are Laity: Beautiful, Good and True, The World of the Sacraments, and Catholics Read the Scriptures.

FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§871-945, available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/

Francis, “General Audience” (June 18, 2014), available at: <https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences>

Rev. John A. Hardon, “Bellarmino on the Mystical Body of Christ,” available at: http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Mystical_Body

William E. May, “Authority and Dissent in the Catholic Church,” available at: http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/wmay_authority_nov06.asp

Br. Innocent Smith, O.P., “John Paul II and the Ever-Expanding Unity of the Church,” available at: <http://www.dominicanajournal.org/john-paul-ii-and-the-ever-expanding-unity-of-the-church/>

IN SHORT . . .

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- **We continue to learn who Christ is only by participating in the community that is his Body.**
- **God began by working with the people of Israel, and he ultimately shepherds the whole world to become one community of grace.**
- **As free persons making our decisions and acting upon them, we are all intimately involved in this change.**
- **The oneness of God’s people, their cohesion and solidarity with each other, is achieved by the active teaching and leadership of their shepherds.**