

Darkness and Division, Light and Communion

January 22, 2017
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Rev. Paul Scalia

Readings: Isaiah 8.23-9.3;
1 Corinthians 1.10-13, 17; Matthew 4.12-23

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton quips that original sin is “the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.” This doctrine requires no faith. We see its effects all around us and feel them keenly within us.

Of the effects of original sin, one of the deepest is darkness – that is, the darkening of the intellect. By rebelling against the Light, our first parents caused their own intellects – and ours – to fall into darkness. Yes, in his fallen state man can still reason, and at times to an amazingly profound and accurate degree. Nevertheless, the fact remains that we do not perceive the truth as clearly or grasp it as firmly as God intended. Because of original sin we are subject to ignorance (*CCC*, 405).

This darkness leads us to further evils. St. John Paul II observes that this primordial wound inclines man to give “himself over to relativism and skepticism” and “go off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 1). We know this personally, from our own experience. Thinking that we see things aright, we head down the wrong path, mistaking good for evil and evil for good. Thus our own personal sins exacerbate this received condition. Our inordinate attachments blind us further to what is true and good.

Another deep wound we suffer is division. Indeed, all other effects of original sin come about from that division it created between God and man. The entire harmony and integrity we enjoyed at creation is lost by the sin of our first parents (*CCC*, 379). Once separated from God, we immediately suffered a process of dis-integration. We thus find ourselves divided from our own bodies, from one another, from the earth, and so on (cf. *CCC*, 400). We are first aware of this division perhaps as regards our relationships. We experience a lack of harmony and unity within our marriages, our families, and our societies. But most torturous to us is the disharmony *within us*: we are at odds with ourselves.

The Light Who Dispels Darkness

In bringing us both healing and salvation, our Lord Jesus Christ addresses himself to these primordial wounds. As the Light of the world he dispels our darkness. As Redeemer he restores us to the Father and begins the healing of those divisions within and without us.

*[T]he people who sit in darkness have seen a great light,
on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death
light has arisen. (Mt 4.16)*

St. Matthew describes Jesus’s beginnings in terms of light dispelling darkness. He makes clear that the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy has come. In this regard Matthew’s words resemble those of St. John: “through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1.4-5). Indeed, for God’s people light and salvation are practically synonymous. The Psalmist cries out, “The Lord is my light and my salvation” (Ps 27.1). Not two things but one: the light that is salvation. This Light delivers us from the darkness that envelops us externally and confounds us interiorly.

Notice that Matthew speaks of Isaiah's prophecy being fulfilled before our Lord speaks any word or does any work. In effect, before any preaching or miracle, he is already the Light. The very presence of our Lord brings light – because he himself is the Light (Jn 9.5). Then his public life casts his light ever farther.

“From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Mt 4.17). Our culture might not regard the call to repentance as giving light; it seems pretty dark to us. In fact, to deny sin and refuse repentance is to sit in darkness and to dwell in a land overshadowed by death. Jesus's call to repentance enlightens us because it reveals to us the truth of who we are. They repent who recognize that their actions are unworthy of who they are. If we do not know our true worth, our place in God's Heart, then we will not repent. Our Lord's words are the splendor of truth – about us, about God, and about our relationship with him. The proclamation of repentance shocks us into recognition of our dignity and our sinfulness all at once.

Establishing the Church

After narrating the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, the evangelist then recounts the call of the apostles. These two events are more than just textually related. It is significant that we hear first of the light arisen, and then our Lord's calling of the apostles: “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt 4.19). The Light himself calls other men to follow him and to accompany him “around all of Galilee as he teaches in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people” (Mt 4.23). He reveals himself as the Light, and then associates others with his mission.

In short, there is a connection here between the giving of light and the establishment of the Church. Jesus commissions the apostles and forms the Church in order to continue his work of enlightenment. The splendor of truth continues to shine through the Church's proclamation of the gospel. Put differently, by way of his Body, the Church, our Lord continues to bring his light to people who sit in darkness and dwell in a land overshadowed by death.

*I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you,
but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. (1 Cor 1.10-11)*

Christ came to reestablish the unity we lost by sin. He has reconciled us with God, with one another, and with ourselves. As with the bringing of light into the world, our Lord continues this work of reconciliation through his Body, the Church. Indeed, the locus of this unity is the Church herself. Through her teaching she rids us of the intellectual errors that divide. Through her sacraments she restores our interior unity and harmony of soul. Through her governance she maintains the communion of her often unruly children. So her very mission is to reestablish that lost unity. But more importantly, she possesses this mission because she herself is one. One because of her source, the Triune God; her founder, the one Lord, Jesus Christ; and her soul, the Holy Spirit (cf. CCC, 813).

So when St. Paul pleads for unity in the Church in Corinth he does so not merely because division is unpleasant, disagreement is disagreeable, and we should all really just get along. Rather, he pleads for that unity because unity is essential to the Church's being and mission. She is the place and means of communion with God and others. So how can we trust the Church to effect that communion if she herself is divided?

Divisive Truth?

Darkness and light . . . division and unity – these themes intersect. First, because the light of truth brings about unity. Error is a cause of division. Not the only cause, of course. Even when we see clearly, our willfulness and passions still get in the way. Nevertheless, errors about the truth and about other persons lead to those divisions and rivalries that St. Paul addressed.

Our culture often sees truth as divisive, when in fact it is an essential principle and cause of genuine unity. When our Lord saw the crowds like sheep without a shepherd, he first of all began to teach them many things (Mk 6.34). Error is what makes us like sheep without a shepherd – “all gone astray . . . following our own way” (Is 53.6). The truth of Christ unites us – in fact, makes us *one* as a body is one. Like her Bridegroom and Lord, the Church is one and brings about unity precisely because she proclaims the true faith.

Conversely, unity serves as a light to others, a convincing sign of Christian truth, and therefore a principle of evangelization. For the Church to be the radiance of Christ’s light, an authentic sign of his power to reconcile, she must be one. So our Lord prayed for his followers at the Last Supper: “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 17.21). The world believes the truth of Christ more readily when it sees the unity he brought lived out by Christians in communion with one another. Division compromises that message.

Darkness and light . . . division and unity – these themes intersect in a particular way every January. The anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* (January 22) and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25) always overlap. God’s providence is somewhat conspicuous here, for the Christian witness to life gives both light and unity.

That perennial darkness of mind – what St. John Paul II calls the “decline or obscuring of the moral sense” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 106) – has led our culture, first, to a promiscuous lifestyle that paves the way for abortion, and then to the tortuous reasoning that sanctions and even exalts it. Statistics say that the abortion rate has declined in recent years. This is welcome news. Nevertheless, dipping just below 1 million abortions per year is hardly a sign of cultural health. Our culture still resembles that land overshadowed by death.

The annual March for Life serves as a light in the midst of this darkness, a reminder of the truth about the human person and the common good. The tens of thousands who march in Washington, D.C. (and increasingly in other cities) every January shine the light of truth into a very dark culture.

Further, the March for Life is a great expression of Christian unity. Many different churches, denominations, and congregations give one voice to the fundamental truth about the human person. The witness of that oneness, and the oneness of that witness, reveal again how unity and the light of truth depend on one another. That should prompt us to pray more fervently for true Christian unity – that all who bear the name Christian be one, and thus bear witness to the one Christ who is the Truth and “the true light that enlightens everyone” (Jn 1.9)

About the Author

Fr. Paul Scalia is the Episcopal Vicar for Clergy in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia.

FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##385-421, available at:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm

St. John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor, available at:

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/>

Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, available at: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCCUECU.HTM>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "International Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," available at:

<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious>

IN SHORT . . .

- *Original sin divides us from God; in turn, we lack harmony and unity within our marriages, our families, and our societies, and we are even at odds with ourselves.*
- *Jesus's proclamation of repentance shocks us into recognition of our dignity and our sinfulness all at once.*
- *Through her governance the Church maintains the communion of her often unruly children; her very mission is to reestablish that lost unity.*
- *The Church is one, and brings about unity, precisely because she proclaims the true faith.*
- *The annual March for Life shines the light of truth about the human person and the common good into a very dark culture, and is a great expression of Christian unity.*