

❖ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The topic that I was given for this evening's sermon is from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Chapter 4, verse 4, he writes, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling." It's clear that this topic is intended to inspire thought, reflection and discussion about the topic of unity. All of the sermon topics of this week have steered us in this direction. In fact, the theme of this Convention, as well as our Diocesan Conferences, has pointed us toward this discussion of unity. The Orations that we will hear tomorrow morning will, no doubt, cause us to reflect on the concept, and benefits, of unity. Before we look at this particular verse, especially as it specifically impacts the topic of unity, American Orthodox Unity, let's look at it in its context so that we can truly understand St. Paul's entire point. Ephesians 4:1-6 says the following:

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

Clearly, St. Paul is speaking here about the unity that we are all called to share; the unity that comes from "one Spirit...one Lord...one God and Father of all". This unity that we find in the most-Holy Trinity is what we must use as a model for the unity that we are called to share...no, that we are challenged to share...as part of the New Creation, the Body of Christ. So, at this point, we need to ask ourselves 'How do we go about it?'... 'How do we realize this unity?'

For those of you who know me, I'm about to say something that probably won't surprise you. For those who don't know me, I am going to say something right now that might surprise you, that you might scoff at, or that you might even disagree with. So, here we go. After

decades of conversation about Orthodox unity, I believe that these 6 verses from St. Paul's letter actually hold the key that can unlock the gates that have prevented us from sharing in a unified Church in this country. Let me say that again... I believe that these 6 verses from St. Paul's letter actually hold the key that can unlock the gates that have prevented us from sharing in a unified Church in this country.

Okay, so let's hang on to this key for a while, because we are going to come back to it later. Before we do, however, let's take an even closer look at these verses and what they are saying. Our Father-among-the Saints, John Chrysostom has a number of interesting things to say about them. In fact, these 6 verses are the inspiration for 3 distinct sermons that he delivered. Imagine...6 verses...a total of 2 sentences...3 distinct sermons. So, what exactly does St. John have to say? Here are some excerpts. He says, "We are called to have Christ as our Head." He says, "The man who walks in lowliness is able to be a grateful and generous servant." He says, "Bind yourself to your brother, this is the strong chain." Here's my personal favorite, "This chain no distance of place can interrupt, neither heaven nor earth, nor death, nor anything else, but it is more powerful and stronger than all things."

Great! Now what? How does this unlock the door that leads to unity? Well, here's another opinion of mine. Ephesians 4:1-6 has confirmed something that I have believed for some time now. With all due respect to bi-lateral commissions and SCOBA and a variety of committees that have met over the years, it is my opinion, and strictly my opinion, that we are going about this the wrong way, and I believe that St. Paul's letter, Chrysostom's sermons and our own history support this opinion.

Think about it...when we talk about Orthodox unity, we talk about it as if it's a merger that is taking place in the business world. Now, I'm not naïve, and I understand that there are

Departments and Committees that need to merge, but that's all we talk about...business plans and merged Departments. What's wrong with this picture? What's missing? Why was the Ligonier Conference of Bishops so successful, and since that time we find ourselves spinning our wheels? In the Book of Acts (2:42), it tells us that the New Testament community, "the Way" as they referred to themselves, "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in prayers." Quite frankly, since the time of Ligonier, we have spent an awful lot of our time with the first two elements of the statement from Acts, and not nearly enough time with the second two. We talk about merging Departments, thereby streamlining and maximizing our efforts. Great! Very important! At the same time, we go out of our way to share in fellowship with one another regardless of jurisdiction. How often have we heard (or how often do we say) "I have to go to St. such-and-such Church this weekend because they are holding their...fill in the blank...bazaar, festival, even Christian Education lectures?" It's a wonderful thing, but it's putting the cart before the horse. Ligonier succeeded because of the time that was spent with the second two elements of the passage from Acts. Ligonier succeeded because of the breaking of the bread and the prayers.

That, brothers and sisters, is where I believe we need to start and that's the point that we are missing. Our efforts towards Orthodox unity must begin at the Holy Table, the Altar, the Throne of God, if they are to succeed. Think about the Divine Liturgy for a moment. What's one of the things that we ask God for? We ask God 'for the unity of the faith', immediately before we pray the words that our Lord gave us to pray. Having now said this, let's turn back to Ephesians to determine what prevents this unity from being realized. St. Paul challenges us to bear "with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." When it comes to our relationships with other Orthodox Churches, are we successful in this

endeavor? Do we bear with one another in love...do we strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? In practical terms, do we go out of our way to invite other Orthodox to services in our Churches that might not be taking place in their own? Do we invite them to pray with us? On the other hand, do we attend services in their Churches that we are not holding ourselves? Do we pray with them? Do we speak to them about putting together a joint schedule of shared services so that our people can pray together...can worship God together...can break bread together...as one body? As a tragic example, we all know of areas where, sadly, the Sunday of Orthodoxy celebrations...the triumph of Orthodoxy...have been divided into Saturday evening and Sunday evening celebrations held separately from one another. Now, let's go back to the series of questions that I just asked about praying together. Did anyone notice that I referred to "us and them?" Probably not and this is just wrong. This is just wrong and it must stop if we are even to be bold enough to mention the phrase 'Orthodox unity.'

This morning, in his message to the General Assembly, Sayidna PHILIP challenged us to put our house in order. For us to accomplish this, we must "re-prioritize". We must rearrange our priorities so that prayer and the breaking of the bread come first. Do you remember the key that I referred to earlier? As I said, St. Paul is handing that key to us. What steps do we need to take with it? The first step is to worship God in Trinity, "one Spirit...one Lord...one God and Father of all". The next step is to accept this calling, this calling to unity, "with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Third, we must acknowledge that God "is above all, and through all, and in all". Finally, we need to do this now...starting today. St. John Chrysostom points to this immediacy in the sermons about Ephesians that I have already mentioned. In Homily 10 on Ephesians, when he speaks about unity, he says the following: "I wish to set

before your eyes, as vividly as I can, the calamities of the Church...like a thunderbolt hurled from on high, they have landed on the roof of the Church, and yet they rouse no one; but while our Father's house is burning, we are sleeping, as it were, a deep and stupid sleep. And yet who is there whom this fire does not touch?"

Who indeed does this fire not touch? Perhaps it's time for us to be roused from sleep and to "walk worthy of the calling with which you {no, with which we} were called."

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