

Convention 2007

The Unity of Christ's Church

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“That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in You.” (John 17:21)

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit:
Your Eminence, you Graces, Christ is in our midst.

At that time just prior to Jesus' passion, when all the disciples would separate and scatter, the Lord lifted up His eyes to heaven and offered a prayer to His Father for those who would believe in Him, asking “that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in You” (John 17:21). What a great contradiction we see between Jesus' prayer, which expresses the superlative and eternal unity between the Father and the Son, and the scattering of the frightened disciples as their faith in Christ is shaken, divided before the face of the entire world. Jesus acknowledges the disintegration of the disciples' unity during his agonizing prayer at Gethsemane, even while He gives thanks to His Father for His gifts, i.e., the gift of the disciples themselves: “Yours they were, and you gave them to me.”

Christ not only lifts up His prayer to the Father asking for the disciples' unity, but presents Himself as an example of how to endure all sorts of evil for the sake of this unity. In His prayer, and in His subsequent self-sacrifice, He holds together the ecclesiastical communion that looks to splinter. We see that Christ's ability to hold the Church together is no less than His ability establish it in the first place—in fact, it's even greater. This is indeed a great, a wonderful, and a certain proof of His omnipotence. He prayed, “That they *all* may be one.” The Church's unity cannot be broken up into parts, so that one part of the Church belongs to this group, and another to that. Rather, the Church is only the Church in its entirety, even as it recognizes a diversity of language and culture. Therefore, unity derives not from tribal, racial, or national ties, but from a trans-ethnic unity given by Christ. In fact, Orthodoxy actually doesn't recognize national or ethnic identity at all, even though we often see national and jurisdictional boundaries, for the Church can not be separated into national or ethnic

“parts.”¹ Building a political unity at the expense of Christ’s Catholic and all-embracing unity ultimately betrays Christ’s prayer that ALL may be one (regardless of nationality or ethnicity) as the Father and the Son are one.

Christ’s all-embracing unity brings with it a glory that is only achieved through the Cross. In His prayer at Gethsemane, Jesus asked His Father to glorify Him through His suffering on the cross, a humiliation that would at first seem anything but glorious. Jesus glorification was accomplished on earth when He came to unite mankind to Himself, elevating us through His resurrection and ascension to a perfect unity with Him. When Christ asks His Father to glorify Him, He does not ask something for Himself (as though He somehow lacks this glory), but prays that we might realize the Trinitarian unity, becoming deified by grace. Without humility and the Cross, there can be no deifying unity, but only political agreements fabricated according to the image and likeness of the world.

Manifesting the unity of the Father and the Son, Jesus describes His own union with the Father by pointing out that “you, Father, are in me and I in you.” Jesus thereby highlights the unity of nature between the two divine Persons. This intimate unity between them is expressed in a very affectionate manner in the Syriac rendering of the text: “As you, my Father, are in me and I in you” The possessive pronoun “my” indicates the unique bond Jesus has with his Father, expressed through the mutual interchange of paternal and filial love. No separation, then, is possible between the Son and the Father in power and wisdom; nor is there any innate subordination of the Son to the Father since there exists a unity of the divine essence. If, as we hold, Orthodox ecclesiology reflects the Trinitarian unity of Persons, then no local church can claim an essential supremacy over any other church. This belief necessarily invalidates the recent anti-Trinitarian statement of Pope Benedict XVI in reasserting the universal primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, how can Rome be *in* Antioch and Antioch *in* Rome if Antioch is subordinate to Rome, as though it possessed a nature inferior to Rome’s?

The Trinitarian unity descends upon us as a theological reality designed to incarnate itself as a historical reality. Jesus took upon Himself our nature not so that we might become sharers not in His divine essence, but in His divine energies. Notice that He did not say, “You in us, and we in you” but “You in me, and I in you,” setting Himself apart from us. We are not one within the Trinity according to divine nature, but according to divine grace. Further, Christ adds his desire “that they also may be in us” in order to separate us from the Trinitarian dignity, so that our union with the Trinity

may unambiguously appear as the result of grace. Unless our willing participation in the divine energies joins us unites us according the image of the Trinity, our unity is a sham.

The important point here is that the unity of the Church can not be built upon sociological models or theories. True Church unity will thus never be realized through mundane legal structures, confederations and alliances, subjugating others under the pretext of supremacy, or national/ethnic groupings. Rather, Church unity can only result from our willing participation in the divine energies of the Holy Trinity. In other words, authentic ecclesiastical unity must exist as a theological phenomenon, not merely as a sociological or political one. Moreover, Orthodox canonical unity must model itself upon the unity of the Father and the Son if the Church is to fulfill its primary function to witness to the love and unity of the Holy Trinity.

I hardly need point out how greatly our sins divide us and frustrate the peace that ought to reign within the Church. Our hardness of heart fosters alienation, dissension, and even at times false unity. We thus become blind to the unity that Christ has given us. However, if we attend to Jesus' prayer, true Christian unity presents itself as a real possibility. We learn to abandon our self-professed ethnic and cultural superiority, along with our related political agendas. We remember that Christ divests us of what is ours, such as our pride and divisions, in order to give us in return the unity that flows from God. We thus learn that we must imitate the Trinitarian unity if we are to look for the restoration to unity we once had with God. Christ no doubt desired that we should, in this way, live in one accord knowing that divisions cannot enter the kingdom of God. This desire is reflected in the fact that our Lord did not pray for the twelve apostles alone. He prayed for us today who are called to this unity in the faith in order to attain the stature of perfected humanity. The abiding communion of the Holy Spirit has been gifted to us for this very purpose, to join us together spiritually despite our separate identities so we might enter into the unity of God.

Brethren in Christ, we are today experiencing a most serious fragmentation—and not on this continent only, but on many different continents. We must remind ourselves of the unity subsisting between the Father and the Son, and begin to see our brethren as blessings with whom we are called to live in grace and harmony. If true unity (as opposed to political or sociological unity) is not realized per Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, our estrangement and fragmentation will only deepen. We therefore need to return to Jesus' own teaching on unity as the only authentic form of Church polity. His prayer must become ours if the Church is not to splinter endlessly

into discrete sects, each inevitably claiming to be the true “remnant” of Orthodoxy. We must come together not simply in the most expeditious manner, but in the most authentically Orthodox manner if we are to overcome this present tendency toward fragmentation.

In His prayer at Gethsemane, Christ urges us to transcend not only schisms but also worldly forms of unity. Once we cleanse our minds of depraved thoughts promoting discord, we will once more contemplate the unity that Christ has bestowed upon us and turn our backs upon strife. Let us then become an icon of the Trinity. Let us mount up to heaven’s heights, where there exist no divisions. Let us rely upon Christ, who teaches us in His prayer to leave behind all that separates us in order to ascend to the unity of the Holy Trinity. Only if we are united together may we become united to the Trinity. This unity is divine in nature, not permitting division; consequently, even our fragmentation does not destroy the inherent unity of the Church, for we but split among ourselves. Thus, if we weed out the thorns of discord, we will better reflect the unity of the Father and the Son, thereby becoming approved to partake of the blessings of the Holy Spirit. Unity is thus our great hope in the midst of the world’s misery.

¹Recall what the Apostle Paul says on the subject of ethnicity in the Church: “For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him” (Rom. 10:12); “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28); “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11).