

November 5, 2017

31st Sunday in ordinary Time

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted

It is more important to have unity in faith than conformity in how we explain it

Biblical historian, John Pilch, offers this understanding of Jesus' command not to call anyone father: *"In the first century, the term "father" was applied to elders and certain respected deceased persons. Jesus' cautioning his disciples not to address anyone as father was to discourage them from seeking honor by selecting titles, like 'father', they may not deserve. This has no relationship to the modern practice of addressing ordained male priests as 'father'."*

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This year is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. I would like to share with you an article written by Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, "National Catholic Reporter," October 31, 2017, titled, *"The Ecumenical Movement is as important historically as the Reformation."* Hearing its history is not just about what happened in the past, it is about something that is happening today in the Catholic Church, in you and with me.

"A hundred years ago, Catholics were not interested in celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. This year, Catholics, led by Pope Francis, are celebrating the Reformation with their fellow Christians. The division of Christianity led to warfare and bloodshed on a par with the conflicts between the Sunnis and Shiites in the Muslim community. It was not pretty. We Christians cannot look down our noses at Muslims as if we have not also killed our sisters and brothers. It was not till the 20th century that progressive Protestant churches initiated the ecumenical movement. Both conservative Protestants and Catholics held back, seeing ecumenism as giving in to '*relativism*'.

"Then came Vatican II in the early 60's. Its document on Ecumenism allowed Catholics to jump into this movement with both feet, and jump in they did. Catholics are now dialoguing with everybody, especially in the United States where there are so many religious groups. Likewise, the Vatican is engaged in dialogues with almost every religion of any significant size.

"Vatican II accepted many of the reformers' reforms. *'The Mass is in the vernacular; the laity can now drink from the cup; we are not selling indulgences; married Protestant ministers have been ordained as Catholic priests (and Francis is open to married priests); the theological dispute over faith and works has been resolved; the Catholic Church encourages the laity to read the Scriptures; and the concept of collegiality tempering with the absolute monarchical model of the papacy.'*

"Pope Francis said, *'My wish is that the dialogue between us should help to build bridges connecting all people in such a way that everyone can see that we are brothers and sisters to be welcomed and embraced! Praying together, exchanging pulpits and sharing the Scriptures are all signs of progress, but the work is not finished. Unity is primarily a gift from God for which we must pray incessantly.'*"

Is a Catholic Reformation happening today?

Vatican II launched a kind of reformation of its own when it sought in 1963 to "bring the Catholic Church into the modern world." It also brought disagreement and conflict out into the open around such issues as: *"the language of liturgy; the place of the laity in the church; opening communion to remarried and non-Catholics; the celibacy of the priesthood; the role of women in worship; shared authority tempering the absolute monarchy of the papacy, the primacy of conscience in the practice of faith,"* and so on. Part of this thrust was to promote the participation of the church in the ecumenical movement with other churches.

The paths toward unity

Fr. Reese offers three steps towards the path toward unity, not only between Catholics and non-Catholics, but among Catholics as well:

1. Spouses in ecumenical marriages should be welcomed at the Lord's table in the churches of both spouses confirming the unity of their marriage. He quotes Pope Francis who says, *"Communion is not a reward for the perfect but food for the weak."*
2. The unity from sharing in the same baptism should trump most doctrinal disagreements. Praising God is more important than agreeing on transubstantiation, a term even Catholics do not understand.
3. The Catholic Church has to return to seeing itself as the big tent - inclusive of other churches rather than exclusive.

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Pope Francis says, *"It is clear that faith is not rigid, but grows in coexisting with and respecting the other. More than our possessing truth, it is truth that possesses us."*

If the Catholic Church practiced this, it would lead towards the path of unity, not only between Catholics and non-Catholics, but among Catholics themselves.

And now about us

What do you think Catholic Church will look like 100 years from now? Will it be emphasizing conformity in church doctrine and practice, or will it be following the path toward unity, not only between Catholics and non-Catholics, but among Catholics themselves? Part of the answer will depend on where we stand - towards unity in faith, or conformity in how we explain it?