

15. The true source of unity

Where does the unity of Christ's disciples start from? From what source is it nourished? It seems to be a useless question, and yet it is not true that we are truly aware of it, because if we were, when we are lacking in unity, communion, we would go right to the source to rediscover or bring back nourishment to what we have lost or are losing. Jesus educated his disciples toward fraternal communion; he always corrected and reproved them when they began to argue, to seek to be greater than each other. But he did not have much success in this during his earthly life, so true is what Luke recounts, that it was precisely during the Last Supper, right after Jesus had instituted the Eucharist, that the Apostles started to debate about "which of them must be considered the greatest" (Lk 22:24). They understood absolutely nothing! But we too, our jealousies and divisions, our explicit or secret disputes about who is the greatest, which abound and persist in monastic communities too, we also live these out in the presence of Christ who gives his body and pours out his blood for our salvation.

Jesus immediately corrects his disciples, calls them back to humility in communal relationships, that is, to hold that others are superior to ourselves, because first He is in our midst "as one who serves" (Lk 22:27).

But in that scene, as in so many other scenes in the Gospel, you see that the disciples do not understand, that they do not take Christ's reminder, that they do not truly listen, just as, deep down, they did not truly listen during the three years that they lived with Him. If they had, they would not have ended up arguing in front of Him about being greater than each other up to the last moment.

How obtuse we are! We never truly and definitively understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is as if we never truly learned to be what Jesus is in our midst. Just think of how little in our life we commemorate his death on the Cross for us. If we thought about it, if we had living and burning awareness, how much more gratefulness, how much more capacity for service and sacrifice would animate our daily life, our relationships, our use of time and things!

Why are we so hard, obtuse, slow to understand and live out what Christ came to bring to the world, and which does indeed fascinate us, attract us, otherwise we would not be practicing Christians and even less would we be persons dedicated in a vocation of special consecration?

But when we ask ourselves these questions, when we are scandalized by our obtuseness and slowness, ultimately that is where we make the biggest mistake. Why? Because when we are bothered by our own and others' incoherencies, it is always as if we ourselves had to be capable of living out the love of Christ, his gift of life even to death for all, his humility, in the end his holiness. Rather, the experience we are having, and from which we must learn, is that we are not capable of overcoming our incapacity to live like Jesus, to live the Gospel.

If we are surprised, if we are scandalized by the fact that the disciples of Christ argue up to the Last Supper about which of them is greatest, it means that we have not understood that, truly to follow Jesus, we must not resolve our obtuseness ourselves but ask Him for the grace that changes us, that opens us, that makes us understand and receive the Gospel. What should truly scandalize us and above all sadden us is not the fact that we are obtuse, but that we do not ask God to change our hearts, to convert us toward what he calls us toward.

For this reason, returning to the question I asked at first, “Where does the unity of Christ’s disciples start from?”, the first answer that we honestly must give is that it does not start from us, does not start from our initiative, from our effort and dedication. The unity of the disciples, the unity of the Church, the unity of a community, the unity of an Order, the unity of all Christians and also of all humanity, starts ultimately from what we meditated on in chapter seventeen of John: the prayer of Jesus. The unity of the disciples starts from Jesus, who asks the Father: “That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you” (Jn 17:21).

This prayer is the origin and continual nourishment of the unity among us, of the unity of each group of disciples, big or small, gathered in the name of Christ.

When we experience division, in our community, in our Order, in the universal Church, it is then important that we not start gluing the shards of the broken vase together ourselves, especially if we are the ones who broke it. For the unity that we fabricate or repair ourselves will remain as fragile as before and even more than before. A glued together vase is more fragile than a whole vase. Ecclesial unity, unity in Christ, is something greater and more profound, and thus more solid, than the one we claim to fabricate ourselves.

But what does it mean that our unity has its origin and nourishment in the prayer of Jesus? Here too we risk giving a superficial answer. We think that communion is a simple “prayer intention” of Jesus to the Father, like a point in the list of intentions we recite at lauds and vespers, or our personal intentions. As, for example, when we ask for the healing of a sick person, or that an exam go well, or that we not miss our train connection.

No, for Jesus the request for the unity of the disciples is not one of many prayer intentions that He too was expressing, as when he taught us to ask for “our daily bread.” The request for unity, communion, is much more profound, because in it Jesus does not simply ask for “something” for us: he requests the Communion of the Trinity for us; he asks for there to be among us that which unites the Father and the Son in the Spirit. That is: he asks for everything, absolutely EVERYTHING!

So we understand something fundamental: that we must not just receive unity among us *thanks to* Jesus’ prayer, as an *effect* of Jesus’ prayer, but *with* Jesus’ prayer, *in* Jesus’ prayer. In other words: our fraternal unity is Jesus who, in our midst, prays for the Father to make us sharers in the communion that unites them in the Trinity.