

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 19, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 1:29-34

More than one hundred years ago the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement in Garrison, New York, began an eight-day cycle of prayer for Christian unity. Christian unity was for those men very personal, as they were converts to Catholicism from the Episcopal Church. The prayers that they began have grown into the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, now observed across the globe—and not just by Catholics. This week thousands upon thousands of our separated brethren will pray the prayer of Jesus Christ from John, chapter 17, “that they may all be one.”

Our Gospel today points to this unity for which we too must pray, because in it we find the prayer that is said just before we participate in the Sacrament of Unity, the Holy Eucharist. John the Baptist says, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” as he sees Jesus walking towards him, and this is a phrase we repeat not only in the Agnus Dei, which we sing just before Holy Communion, but also in the invitation to Holy Communion. As I hold the Host and Chalice before your eyes, I will say, “Behold the Lamb of God. Behold Him that takes away the sins of the world.” How then is the Lamb of God a sign of the unity for which we must pray, as well as a sign of the unity we celebrate in receiving Holy Communion?

To understand the imagery we must remember the Passover of the Jews. The Book of Exodus describes how on the night the Jews prepared to leave behind their slavery in Egypt they killed lambs and placed the blood on the doorpost to identify the houses in which Jews lived. Thus, when the angel of God passed through Egypt, striking down the first-born of every family, the angel “passed over” those homes that had sacrificed a lamb. The lamb was not killed only for his blood; the Jews also then ate the lamb as part of their Passover meal, a tradition that continues to this day among the Jews every time they celebrate this delivery from slavery in Egypt.

Jesus is the Lamb of God by virtue of the blood he sheds for the forgiveness of the sins of the whole world. By Jesus’ sacrifice God “passes over” our sins, thus delivering us from slavery to sin and its consequence, death. This Blood, though, is no mere symbol placed upon the doorpost to show God which households to spare. Jesus has made the Blood the very means by which we are cleansed when we, too, consume the Passover Lamb. “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.” The Words of Institution, spoken by Jesus Himself at the Last Supper, tell us plainly: “This is the Chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the New and eternal Covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.” When we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ in a worthy manner, the Lamb of God cleanses us of our sins.

The unity can be seen in the reality that we all drink from the same cup. It is our confession of Christ, with St. John the Baptist, that He is indeed the Lamb of God which unites us. We confess that He is the Son of God and plead that He will have mercy on us. Then together we drink the Blood He has poured out for the salvation of the world. Receiving Holy Communion is the corporeal manifestation of the spiritual truths we confess. But more than that, drinking the Blood of Christ, the Lamb of God, actually accomplishes what we say it will: it takes away the sin of the world, while drawing together people from every race and nation into one Body. Through Holy Communion I am united not only with

those who will receive here today, but with everyone across the globe who has received our Lord's Body and Blood. From Australia to England to Canada I have in common with everyone who drank our Lord's Blood the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The unity of Christians is thus tied up with the unity that is expressed and fulfilled in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It is not a mere spiritual unity that we must strain to see, impossible to identify because we don't have the power to read men's souls. The unity of Christians is manifested every time a priest in union with his bishop in union with the Holy Father celebrates the Holy Eucharist. We can see as clearly as we can taste the Body and Blood who is a member of the Church, who is united to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary. This is, very simply, why we cannot share the Eucharist with those who have not made the profession of faith. Words have meaning, and we are not in union with them. We cannot do with our bodies what we have not consented to in our hearts and through our speech. If we are not in union with them, and this is truly a great sadness, then we cannot share Holy Communion with them.

One hundred years after the Graymoor Friars began their apostolate of unity, the Holy Father, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, gave us the means by which to expand our ministry of unity. The Mass I will celebrate in Bath is an immediate result of the Apostolic Constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus*. To be sure, our parish existed before 2009, but we are able to open a mission there because in one fell swoop the Pope expanded scope of our work. In his letter granting permission for me to say Mass at Sacred Heart, Bishop John Barres, Bishop of Allentown, explicitly mentions the Anglican Constitution and states that his permission is a response to what Pope Benedict has already done.

We are an instrument of unity because we are able to offer the Lamb of God, the Body and Blood of Christ, in forms familiar to those once separated from the Catholic Church. The Mass we celebrate incorporates elements with which Anglicans are at home, not only the smells and bells, but Holy Communion in both kinds, receiving the sacrament on our knees, hymns we know and love, and homilies longer than what we typically might hear at a Roman Rite Mass. Add to these similarities things we've known outside of worship, such as our fellowship and married clergy, and we have an environment in which some stumbling blocks have been removed and those thinking about coming into the Church have fewer distractions to draw their attention away from the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is authentic unity, wherein we acknowledge we've come to the Faith in different ways, through different means, by different experiences—yet we all celebrate the same faith, and we all partake of the same Body and the same Blood. This liturgy and our parish life will not be the best fit for everyone, but there are millions for whom our disciplines are familiar, and Jesus would like to see them come home. So I invite you to invite others so they can see for themselves whether this is the means by which they will become fully united to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.