

Easter 6. 2007

1. We are celebrating so many different things today. It is Mother's Day in the nation's calendar, and it is fitting that we honor that day in our prayers as well, for, despite our male names for God, our mothers are often the most important incarnations of love for us, and since God is love, they become for us symbols, sacraments of God's love for us. We are also celebrating the First Communion of three of the children of the parish: Tyler Riendeau, Jessica Paquette, and Kaitlynn Heaney. On Tuesday we will celebrate Confirmation, and Amanda Richards will be confirmed with members from three other parishes and the Brazilian community. And today we also crown our Lady with flowers to commemorate the fact that we dedicate this month to her. So a celebration of many different things.

2. Yet when we listen to the readings for today, we notice that there is talk of dissension in the first Christian communities, and that does not seem to be a fitting topic for a time when we are celebrating such happy events. But there it is. Of course in one way this is not a surprise to us. Dissension is part of life. It is part of family life, indeed part of every form of human life. Where there are people, there will be opinions, and where there are opinions, there will be differences, and where there are differences, there will often be disputes or dissensions, and from there things can escalate into violence and killing. In one sense it is even it is even consoling for us to know that the two main pillars on which our church is built, the two apostles Peter and Paul, disagreed with each other. It shows us that they too were human.

3. In this disagreement about the conditions under which the Gentiles would be admitted to the first Christian community, which was at first all Jewish, some scholars think that Paul lost out to Peter who represented a kind of middle ground according to which new Gentile male converts would not have to be

circumcised, as the leaders of the strictest position advocated, but would have to observe other Jewish laws respecting marriage and diet. Paul rejected this compromise. He did not want any Jewish restrictions placed on the Gentiles. Later on when the Gentile members became more numerous and the separation between Jews and Christians grew, his position took over.

4. Down through the ages our church has had to meet with many difficult issues about which church members disagreed. Sometime we have been able to solve these differences while maintaining unity. At other times we have failed. Thus we, the church of the West, separated from the church of the east in the 11th century. And in the 16th century we separated from the Protestant reformers. Both divisions still exist despite the ecumenical efforts which have been made since Vatican II, despite the wish JPII had to see the third millennium of Christian faith begin with the removal of the division between the Catholic and Orthodox churches which began at the beginning of the second millennium of Christian faith.

5. Now the pope is in Brazil. The papers are saying that a major reason for his visit is to bolster the Catholic Church there and help it stop the loss of its members to evangelical Christian groups which are growing by leaps and bounds and which are often hostile to the Catholic Church. So here again we face division. In fact, we can see that division even right here in Woonsocket. If you take a walk down Main St, you will see all sorts of Christian churches, especially those which cater to the Hispanic community.

6. What should be our reaction to these churches? I don't know about you, but I find myself very defensive, often angry, when I am confronted by these churches. I suppose this is so because I am presuming that Christians should be united—that they may be one, Father, as you and I are one, Jesus prayed in the Gospel of John--, and the church in which they should be united, in my belief, is in the Catholic Church. And my defensiveness and anger are more

acute when I meet someone who grew up Catholic but is now telling me how good his non-Catholic church is. What he is saying implicitly is that his church gives him all the things he could not find in the Catholic Church.

7. But didn't Paul say that he didn't care who preached Jesus as long as Jesus was preached? Therefore, should I not be happy that this man and these churches are living and preaching Jesus? Can I not adopt this attitude without abandoning my theological belief that the Catholic Church is the true church of Christ and every Christian should belong to it? Can I not leave it to time and the Holy Spirit to bring Christians and Christian churches together? And in the meantime can I not try to overcome my anger and defensiveness and try to be happy that Jesus is preached and people believe in him? Should I not tell myself that my anger does not work God's justice and that the first commandment of our faith is that of love? Yes, if I find that these churches are preaching what I consider to be a false or deficient form of Christian faith, I can note that both for myself and for others. But even then I should still treat the individual members of these churches with respect and love.

8. If that is the case, perhaps Pope Benedict and the bishops of Brazil should not worry too much about the evangelicals. Perhaps we here, the church of Woonsocket, should not worry too much about the Main St. evangelical churches. Perhaps we should concentrate more on our own living of the Gospel. Perhaps, if we treat them with respect and care, they will take another look at us. Perhaps they will even begin to be able to see that our claim, to be the Church of Christ, is a credible one. Perhaps they will begin to see us as the church we claim to be, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Christ.