

Our Divided, Divided Church

3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year A
Catholic San Francisco – January 21, 2011

Isaiah 8:23-9:3

Psalms 27:1, 4, 13-14

*1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17***

Matthew 4:12-23

When Mel Gibson released his film *The Passion of the Christ*, the release was accompanied by a certain degree of publicity for Catholicism. This was because Mr. Gibson, himself, professes a Catholic faith. The publicity, however, was not as positive as one might have imagined, considering a Hollywood figure was making a major motion picture about the death of Christ. Rather, the message people got about the Catholic Church was that, as old and as large as the Catholic community is, it is essentially a divided community. This was expressed in the manner in which the media referred to Mr. Gibson's Catholicism. It was not enough to refer to him simply as "Catholic." Rather, Mr. Gibson was described as a "traditional" Catholic. While this assertion left many asking, "is there another kind?", our division is further compounded by the answer of many Catholics - *yes!*

I have had similar experiences myself in the ten years since my ordination to the priesthood. On various occasions, usually when I begin work at a new parish, one or two parishioners, while introducing themselves, immediately ask me, usually with an air of suspicion, "are you a traditional priest, or are you one of those liberals?" Whereupon I usually answer, "Neither, I am a *Catholic* priest."

St. Paul was no stranger to this phenomenon; perhaps one that the Catholic Church will never fully overcome. At a time when there was no mass media, no internet, no printed newspapers, nor were there radios or television, but rather dedicated missionaries, apostles and evangelists, who traveled from place to place, spreading the word, establishing Christian Communities and moving on to continue their work, leaving presbyters and other elders to lead and nourish, it was natural for a particular community to develop an exaggerated fondness for their founding apostle, or even for the leader left behind. Perhaps one leader over others had a way of being more forthright in their leadership, another more gentle, another more poetically eloquent, another more in tune with the community's history, another more able to challenge in ways the others could not, still another who simply buttered the people up by telling them what they wanted to hear so as to generate greater contributions. Be that as it may, St. Paul was more than a little astounded when the result was a few of these communities defining their identity first and foremost by the leader to whom they were so attached - I belong to Paul, I belong to Cephas, we belong to Apollos, etc.

We ourselves are no stranger to this phenomenon. One need simply consider a parish going through a transition of pastors, particularly if the retiring pastor was long tenured in the parish. There is hardly a priest alive who hasn't heard the phrase, "you're not like our last priest," or "we miss Father So-and-so." In some unfortunate cases, there may be factions who want to accept the newer leader, facing antagonism from a group who prefers the former, and vice-versa, or groups who advocate faster progress with the new leader pitted against those who want slower developments (not to mention those who want no change at all!). Given the divisions between

Mass times, between parishes and parochial schools, between "traditional" and "progressive", "orthodox" and "liberal", between old and young, between clergy, religious and laity, even between men and women, or between cultures, we are truly a divided Church.

Paul could not deny the importance of a community's founder, nor deny the attachment many had to their local Christian leader. It was from such as these that the living word of the Gospel and the presence of and connection to the Apostolic Church was to be found. In addition, Paul was aware that the distance and diversity between the different communities, cities and regions made for very different communities. Paul also does not deny the diversity of gifts among Christians, which contribute to the unity in function of the one body that is the Church. Paul points out, however, that all are united through one Baptism in Jesus Christ, in which all are united to one another in and through His Cross.

In the same way, our Church has inevitable and unavoidable differences. We find a personal identity in our families. We take pride in our identity and history as parishes. We are united to our particular apostolic leader in our dioceses and find identity in the cultures and nations to which we belong and from which we have come. Nonetheless, as all come together in worship and in sacrament, we are brought together - families, parishes and so upward - in a progressive unity that is the universal Church throughout the world.

As Paul did then, so Paul now calls on us to recognize (whether we belong to one group or another, whether we consider ourselves "traditional," "conservative," "liberal," "progressive,"; whether we belong to one parish or another, to one organization or another, participate in one ministry or another, all dedicated to various services done in the name of the Church; whether we take pride in our parish community as "the one and only," "second to none," "first among equals," "the friendliest little parish in the valley" or "the finest, the greatest and the best,") that in the end our identity is defined not in what divides us as communities, parishes, groups, even cultures and ideologies, but by Christ who bridges the great divisions within our divided Church. In Him we are defined, not by our parts, but in Christ, as a Church that is One and Catholic.

Fr. William Nicholas