Abide in Christ

Abiding in the Mystical Body of Christ

In my previous articles, I wrote about the mystery of life, concluding with the mystery of Divine Life, since the Incarnation reveals God’s generous invitation to share in His Divine Life by grace. This shared appreciation of the life of grace has brought me to reflect upon what this means for us as the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, as put forth in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium #7). A friend recently told me that he had seen a sign boasting “Church without Religion” and he said that saying that was like boasting “Marriage without commitment.” He felt both missed the point. I believe that at the very heart of what it means to be Church is religion, that is, our belonging to one another. For the Church is “one Body, one Spirit in Christ” and the theological concept of the Mystical Body of Christ aptly captures so much more than we realize.

The episcopal motto I chose as bishop is “Abide in Christ.” It is both our Lord’s invitation into a deep relationship with God, as well as an exhortation for us to remain faithful to that relationship with Him. And since the Church constitutes the Body of Christ, this relationship with the Lord is also a relationship with each other in Christ. The Church is then, by its very nature, relational. Just as the Trinity itself is a mystery of the divine relations and since we are created in the Divine Image, we also must always abide in that relationship with Christ and each other. The challenge comes when we, as Church, face new and uncertain realities. These are moments when the bond of charity is tested but must never be broken. As I say, “Abiding in Christ” is both an invitation and an exhortation, especially when the Church is called by the Holy Spirit into uncharted waters.

St. Paul speaks eloquently of this reality in his letter to Timothy, his friend and fellow co-worker (who was the first bishop of Ephesus and whose feast we celebrate this month), exhorting him amid uncertain times on the importance of preaching the Gospel. Paul wrote: I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:1-5). Abiding in Christ means we are faithful to the Holy Spirit at work in the Church and in our world. This is difficult, especially today, when the only authority allowed by many is that of one’s own personal opinion. In that case, one never hears either the Lord’s invitation and certainly not His exhortation. Being Church, our abiding in Christ, is richly presented in Vatican II as the “Mystical Body of Christ” which we find in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium #7). This theological concept actually arose during a time of political instability, under Pius XII, who used it in his 1943 encyclical Mystici Corporis Christi, so as to better express the unity of the Church in the modern world. But the fact of the matter is that we see the challenge to our abiding in Christ and being the Church as existing even before Trent in the 16th century. And again, 300 years later with Vatican I, and 100 years after that in Vatican II, this challenge for the Church to abide in Christ remains. The challenge of our being the Church is one that I reflect upon often as I hear from people who are hurt and feel alienated from the Church, or from those deeply wounded by sinful individuals who failed to care as Christ. I also sense this challenge to abide in Christ when I encounter the polarization and alienation so prevalent in society that has impacted the Church at so many levels. It is so important now that we cling to the bonds of charity, especially when our political and social fabric is fragile, and that we accept Christ’s invitation and challenge to abide in Him. It is tempting in the midst of these modern day challenges to just walk away from the Church but Christ’s call to be one with Him and each other is not lightly dismissed. Deepening in our appreciation of the Second Vatican Council’s understanding of the Church.
as the Mystical Body of Christ is an important part of our remaining in union with Christ and each other. The “Body of Christ” phrase is found first in St. Paul, I Corinthians 12, wherein the Holy Spirit is at work through the gifts bestowed on all, forming one body in Christ. Throughout Christian history the Body of Christ has fashioned our sense of the Church’s mission, but it is in the modern era, or what is considered the modern era, when the Church struggled with the social sins of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Pope Leo XIII came to the throne of Peter at a time of social and political change and challenge. His efforts to engage the realities of the day made him popular among many but reviled by some. His 1896 encyclical on the unity of the Church, *Satis Cognitum*, is an affirmation of the special ministry of unity given to the Church, as well as an invitation to an ecumenical unity among Christians, that unity exercised through the three-fold ministry of sanctifying, governing and teaching. Pope Leo’s earlier 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, treated the relationship and responsibilities between labor and capital, between government and its citizens. These are just some examples of how the Church has been commissioned with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and how the popes from Leo on, but especially the recent popes from John XXIII on, have confronted the mystery and meaning of what it is to be the Church. From St. Paul to modern times, the Church has seen herself as the Mystical Body of Christ and has confronted in each age the challenge of remaining united: “May they all be one, Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you...” (John 17:21) In the months to come, I plan to treat our appreciation of what it means “To abide in the Mystical Body of Christ.” But for now, as we have just celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany, God’s manifestation to all the world of the Incarnate mystery, I wish to invite each of us to prayerfully discover what it means to be the Church, to abide in Christ, hearing the invitation of our Lord as well as His exhortation to remain one with Him and each other. How fitting that the Collect for the Epiphany of the Lord invites us to behold that glory of God so beautifully mirrored in our unity as a Church. We pray: *O God, who on this day revealed your Only Begotten Son to the nations by the guidance of a star, grant in your mercy, that we, who know you already by faith, may be brought to behold the beauty of your sublime glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord,

[Signature]

Most Rev. John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe