

National Catholic Prayer Breakfast

September 14, 2021

Address of
Most Rev. Steven J. Lopes, STD
Bishop of the Ordinariate of the Chair of Saint Peter

It is a great honor to be with you this morning.

I am the bishop of the Ordinariate of the Chair of Saint Peter, a rather new thing in the Church you have probably never heard of. In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI established a new diocese in the United States and Canada for groups of Anglican clergy and faithful who have come into full communion with the Catholic Church. Wherever my folks are, there the diocese is. My Cathedral and chancery office is in Houston, Texas, and we have 40 parishes in North America, including St. Luke's Parish here in Washington. Fully Catholic in every way, our communities celebrate a distinctive form of Mass and maintain some other elements of English Christianity that were distilled in Anglicanism and now add to the richness of Catholic life.

I suppose you can say that we are the diocese of Christian unity. Pope Benedict did this because he understood the unity of the Catholic faith as supporting a diversity of expression in that same faith. Now this is an important but not entirely new principle in Catholic life. Pope Saint John Paul II said much the same thing in 1992 introducing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, noting that it articulates the internal harmony of Catholic faith so as to be an instrument of the unity of the Church and therefore a direct aid to ecumenical efforts worldwide. In effect, my diocese shows that to embrace Catholic faith and to be embraced by the communion of the Church does not mean wholesale assimilation or the abandonment of those traditions and elements which lead one to seek that unity in the first place.

There is a real consonance, then, between the purpose of the Ordinariate and the great American ideal *E Pluribus Unum*, out of the many one. As its bishop, I suppose the thing would be to talk this morning about unity and its importance in ecclesial and public life. I mean, who wouldn't want to come to Washington and talk about that!

Unity is one of those things that everyone agrees is desirable, but few agree how to go about achieving it. It has become so reflexive to focus solely on differences in policy and approach that "gridlock" and "impasse" dominate the headlines and pundits are all too willing to declare the Church irreparably fractured or dismiss the idea of a unifying American dream as passé. Navigating that landscape is not easy, and the resulting confusion, isolation, and hardening of positions is perhaps understandable. Here's a quote that sums it up: *Public life is so enveloped...by the dense fog of mutual hatreds and grievances that it is almost impossible for common people even to breathe freely.*¹ Now, that's not from a current editorial page. That's Pope Pius XI in 1922. You see, I figured the bishop of a diocese you've not heard of before

should quote a pope you've not heard from before! And Pius XI goes on: *A much more serious and lamentable evil than even the threat of external aggression is the internal discord which menaces the welfare not only of nations but of human society itself...which like a cancer is eating away the vital forces of society, labor, industry, the arts, commerce, agriculture...To this we must add the contests between political parties, many of which struggles do not actually originate in a real difference of opinion concerning the public good or in a laudable...search for what would best promote the common welfare, but in the desire for power.*ⁱⁱ

The pope was calling out woke-ism a hundred years before anyone knew the word! And not much has changed. In fact, divisions have only hardened such that even something like a prayer breakfast is labeled as partisan, or at least so declares that new arbiter of American public life, Wikipedia.

Although taking on the theme of unity today is perhaps the rhetorical equivalent of running with scissors, we have to do it. For Catholics, the Gospel demands conversion, because the communion of Christ's disciples is itself a mark of the credibility of the Gospel. As Americans, the liberties we enjoy and the ideals that found our democracy demand that we fight for national unity. And by this, I mean real unity—something more than the superficiality of a group of like-minded individuals acting in roughly the same way at about the same time.

My little diocese exists because unity is not just important, it is what the Lord himself prayed for on the night before he died. So, our experience of bridging something new in Catholic life can perhaps give some insight on how unity and diversity work.

Unity is from God, not me.

Interestingly, entering into full communion with the Catholic Church was not the initial goal for many of our Ordinariate clergy and faithful, but it was an intention that was formed over time in the promptings of divine Providence. The journey into the Catholic Church took years and required an interior disposition of attentive faith, because we are not the architects of the Church's communion or of the unity of the human family. God is. And from the very first pages of the Bible down to our present day, God reveals himself to the women and men he has created *by forming them as a people* He then chooses as his own. *A people*, not just a group of individuals.

And in the fullness of that revelation, how does God show himself to us: As a communion of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father sent his Son, the Word made flesh, and the Holy Spirit to save his people by drawing them into communion with himself. The initiative is always the Father's, in creating us in his own image and likeness, and in recreating us by grace through His Son's passion, death and resurrection. Through the action of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost, Christ Jesus himself is made present and active precisely in and through the baptized, so that his saving mission may be carried forward to every time and place. Our communion with Christ through Baptism informs and secures all other forms of authentic unity and communion.

What does all this mean but that our very nature as human persons *seeks unity*. Relationship is not something added-on or extra, it is essential to our humanity because it is how God made us. The Bible says it simply: we have been created in God's own image (Gen. 1:26). St. John Paul II expands on this: *The fact that the human person 'created as man and woman' is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a 'unity of the two' in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Why should we care about unity? Because, simply, we have been made this way. And, the Catholic would add, in Baptism, we have received a vocation to make our Lord and God present in the world by manifesting the holiness of God who is One and Three.

Unity requires truth to work.

The scene from Saint John's Gospel when Pontius Pilate questions Jesus privately on the margins of his public trial is so poignant that it has always been understood as an allegory for the relationship between religion and the State. *Quid est veritas?* Pilate asks, *What is Truth?* It is as if the whole thing came down to that...because it did.

The people of my diocese embarked on the long journey towards the fullness of Catholic unity not because it was easy or comfortable, but because it was true. There was something unshakable about the right exercise of apostolic authority, about the full breadth of the Church's moral teaching, about the fullness of liturgical and sacramental life that struck a deeply interior chord. This was not a theoretical exercise, for that movement into truth often required leaving behind everything familiar and constructing a new parish life from the ground up. And in doing so, they discovered a new unity with the multitude of Catholics around them whose faith they shared, though they expressed it differently.

A noted Catholic political philosopher once said that "American democracy is not, and can never be a machine that runs by itself."^{iv} By that, I think he means that the American experiment in liberty and mutual responsibility succeeds to the extent that it attends to truth, whether that truth comes from the given-ness of the created order or from the wisdom of divine revelation. To Pilate's question, yes Rome's armies were mighty, but unity without truth is uniformity bound to fail. Pope Francis said it well: *We should recognize how in a culture where each person wants to be bearer of his or her own subjective truth, it becomes difficult for citizens to devise a common plan which transcends individual gain and personal ambitions.*^v

Regardless of what the pundits say, the truth of the intrinsic and inviolable dignity of the human person is not divisive, it is the foundation of all other rights. Uniting in defense of that fundamental truth gets uncomfortable because it crosses established political lines. The commitment to truth will always transcend the knee-jerk categories and characterizations that are

the media's daily bread, because our fundamental reverence for the sanctity of life, for example, does not begin at birth, nor does it end at the border.

Unity is magnanimous.

Many people, including those who made the original petitions to the Vatican that resulted in the Ordinariate, have remarked that they were surprised by the extent of Pope Benedict's offer for a new means of corporate reunion with the Catholic Church. A diocese with its own way of celebrating Mass is hugely generous and sparked comment in some corners that the Pope was "bending over backwards" to accommodate people who might as well be called apostate. The generosity of the gesture did not accord with an image of the Catholic Church which would rather say: If you want to be Catholic, get in line with everyone else.

What the pope did was more than an act of generosity. He exercised the virtue of magnanimity (literally great-soul-éd-ness). No less a figure than Abraham Lincoln built his second inaugural address around this same virtue, because he too saw it as the key to national unity: *With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to...bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves.*

Magnanimity is part of the glue that holds communities and societies together and fosters an enrichment of those communities by integrating new people. This is the history of our country. The American idea works because it is not an idea. It is a civic virtue, disposition of soul requiring real conversion and real action to embrace the other as good because we embrace the other as an equal. Only then can it be a unifying force, not just a blending of diverse and divergent bodies into exterior uniformity. Lincoln's words are engraved on his memorial just a few blocks from here serve as a summons. They are not merely meant as nostalgia.

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I am glad that this is a *prayer* breakfast, because at a fundamental level, unity is not something for us to create but to receive. This is where the Church has an important role in our society. If America wants to reclaim the power and appeal of its founding vision, *E Pluribus Unum*, then it will need us, it will need the Church.

It is people of faith who in the civil realm pose hard and necessary questions about human dignity, the inherent goodness of the created order, the nature of the human person—and without these questions, political discourse devolves into empty slogans or worse, totalitarian imposition. It is the Church that proclaims faith in Jesus Christ, to illumine that already knowable by reason. More basically, when the Church faithfully celebrates the Eucharist and then lives its public life as a consequence of that celebration, we are drawn into a communion we could not make or give ourselves. This constant reference to the work *God is doing* points to a depth to life that moves

beyond appearances and beyond what is measurable or purely observable. The Church bears witness to that domain of transcendence, and to remember that we are made for that dimension too is essential for a free and just society.

To return, finally, to the patrimony of English Christianity so central to the life of my diocese, the figures of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More loom large. A holy bishop and a holy politician—we should have more of those! In the thumbnail sketch of history they are perhaps most known for the final confrontation with the Crown, both executed by order of King Henry VIII two weeks apart. The eloquence of their witness should not be reduced to that confrontation. It can be measured rather in their love for God, for their country, and for the ultimate good of their people to which each committed himself magnanimously. And they were each resolute in their defense of the truth, without which there could be no lasting and just social order.

These convictions would lead these saintly Martyrs to a privileged embrace of the Cross of Christ. It is the same Cross in which you and I have been given a share through Baptism: a Cross that heals us, a Cross that saves us, and a Cross that discloses both God’s love and judgement on a broken and divided world. Today’s feast day in the Church is called the *Triumph of the Cross* for a reason. It is how we have access to the unity that the Lord prayed for during that Last Supper the night before he died: *that they all might be one, as you Father, and I are one.*

Thank you, and God bless you.

ⁱ Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Ubi arcano Dei concilio*, 11.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, no. 7.

^{iv} George Weigel. “Why We Are Where We Are.” Online column in *First Things*, 26 August 2020.

^v Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 61.