
Holy Fathers of Nicaea -2020 (2)

Acts 20:16-18;28-36 & John 17:1-13

In commemorating the first ecumenical council this Sunday, we look back at the work of evangelization as Christ desired. Christ charged the apostles with teaching all nations the good news of the New Covenant's Gospel. Thus, the work of the infant Church has begun.

But with the New Covenant, new problems inevitably arose. The Jewish problem relating to the Old Testament had been slowly but painfully resolved. But these were quickly replaced with new challenges. The Christian martyrs would solve the harsh Roman persecutions, but the more severe and more challenging problems would be internal. St. Paul gave this forewarning, in the Epistle reading this morning. "I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will get in among you and will not spare the flock. And from among your own selves, ' men will rise speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." (Acts 20:29-31)

These internal problems forced ecumenical councils to develop. At the Pope's request, Church delegates met to consider matters of faith, morals, worship, and the general conduct of Christian life. The councils condemned errors and clarified the meaning and relevance of truths of divine revelation. In disciplinary affairs, they acted against abuses and promoted measures for the reform and renewal of Christian life. These councils represented attempts of the Church to mobilize itself for self-preservation and self-purification in times of crisis. The first eight ecumenical councils convened in the East and the other thirteen in the West

Unfortunately, some things done in Church or the name of the Church do not reflect God's glory. We know that in history, there has been discord and disunity in God's Church. This disunity shows itself in the numbers of denominations we have.

At first, it was just a family dispute. One group that put Scripture above Church structure and called for change, lost their appeal, so they protested. Then one family became two - the Protestants and the Roman Catholics. But once the dispute started, it snowballed. It was not long before the Protestants disagreed and became disagreeable toward their brothers and sisters in the faith. And there was disunity in the body of Christ.

That sounds nothing like this prayer, which Jesus offers for the disciples, does it? This prayer recorded in John's Gospel is a prayer for unity. Some called it the real Lord's Prayer because it is one that Jesus prayed for His disciples. It is the Lord's prayer for His companions and His Church. It was the first prayer for Christian unity. Jesus prayed that His disciples may be "one."

On the last night of His life, Jesus prayed that the apostles would get along with each other. Our Lord's prayer was for unity between His disciples and unity within His Church. So, how do we accomplish that? How do we work toward unity?

Imagine the dominant force we could exert as a congregation, a denomination and a Church in the world if we all "pulled together as a team." We cannot accomplish as much if we are going in many directions. We must have a common goal and a common purpose. When we have that common purpose, that shared vision, that common goal, then we can do almost anything, especially when that goal or vision is God-given and God-driven.

In a Family Circus comic, little Billy was praying. He prayed, "Make me good. And if you don't get through to me the first time, please keep tryin' 'til I answer." That should be our prayer. As Jesus prayed for our unity, we should also continue to pray. We need not do it alone. We must all pull together to serve God through Christ. "Make us one, Lord. And if you do not get through the first time, please keep tryin' 'til we answer and begin to pull together."

Unity is difficult. But Jesus not only prayed for it, He also modelled it for us. Remember, when the disciples came to Him complaining about the people preaching and doing signs and wonders in Jesus' name but were not part of the crowd of disciples. They were ready to run them out of town or call down lightning upon their heads. Jesus told the disciples not to stop them and said, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit."

Christian unity is not determined by whether we agree with each other about every interpretation of scripture or doctrine or form of church government. Christian unity is determined by whether we love one another, and whether we reflect the love of God in Christ for the world. There will always be that which separates Christians from Christians and denominations from denomination. But we can still affirm and celebrate God's love for us all and our love for one another. In the ways of love, mutual respect, understanding and acceptance, we can be "one" in Christ.

We must continue to work toward unity and understanding – between each other, between the races, between cultures and between denominations. We may never reach it, but we will at least be going in the right direction by working toward it.

We must work toward breaking down racial, cultural, and denominational barriers that divide us as Christians. We must let go of past hurts that have separated us from one another by turning them over to God and offering those who have hurt us forgiveness. And in seeking forgiveness from those, we have hurt. We need to demonstrate our unity in Christ through love. But that Love needs to begin with us. We will then be one as Jesus is one with God and love one another as He has loved us.

Amen!