

7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER, C
CHRISTIAN UNITY: A REALITY YET TO COME

“Holy Father, I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in Me” (v. 20).

The Waiting Sunday: The Seventh Sunday of Easter is a very interesting Sunday. It is the Sunday after the Ascension and the Sunday before Pentecost. “The Waiting Sunday”, I like to call it. It was a period during which the Apostles waited for the fulfilment of the promise. We too wait for that same fulfilment when the Holy Spirit will come down on us as the Lord said he would. After the Ascension, the Evangelist reported that the disciples “*went back to Jerusalem with joy; and were continually in the Temple praising God*” (Lk. 24: 53). This is rather surprising, for one would have thought that they would be distressed, dejected and sad that the Master “was carried up to heaven” away from them. The joyful mood testifies to the faith that had been deeply developed, especially in course of the forty days, during which Jesus convinced them of the reality of His Resurrection. It also reflects the trust and confidence they had in the promise of the Master: “*And now I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city then, until you are clothed with the power from on high*” (Lk. 24: 49; Jn. 14: 18-24; 16: 5-15; Acts 1: 4-5). Thus, they returned to wait in joyful anticipation. The Church invites us to wait with the Apostles, with the same joyful expectation and disposition of hope, knowing that the Lord will not fail in His promise to send us the Holy Spirit. The Novena to the Holy Spirit, the Sacrament of Reconciliation are highly recommended practices that aid our preparation.

Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer: The chapter 17 of John’s Gospel is the last chapter of the long discourse of Jesus at the Last Supper (Jn. 13-17). Of all the evangelists, only John records this account, “The Last Supper Discourse”, in such detail. The prayer of Jesus here resonates with the Day of Atonement liturgy in the Old Testament when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and made atonement for himself; the priesthood; and the people of Israel. Similarly, Jesus prays for Himself (1-5); the Apostles (6-19); and the Church (20-26). In today’s gospel (Jn. 17: 20-26), which is the pericope of prayer for the Church, Jesus prays: “*Holy Father, I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in Me*” (v. 20). How blessed we are that Jesus thought of us, who through the teachings of the Apostles in an unbroken tradition down through the ages, have come to believe in Him. The Apostles treasured the message, protected it, preserved it and neither wasted time nor spared their lives in transmitting it in its unalloyed form for the expansion of the

Kingdom. The entire Acts of the Apostles gives lucid and detailed accounts of the selfless endeavours of the Apostles as they traversed lands, cultures, peoples, and races to witness to the truth of the gospel *“beginning from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1: 8). Today, we are the fruits of their undaunted spirit. How have we responded to this mission? How much of the gospel have we embraced? Could we say, we are contributing to the growth and spread of the gospel?

That They May Be One: The theme of unity echoes in the Prayer of Jesus with great emphasis. He prayed: *“May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us as You are in Me, and I am in You”* (v. 21). The unity of the Church is necessary to convince the world of its divine foundation and the loving relationship between Christ, who is the Head of the body, the Church. The unity of Church can only be evidenced where there is humility which allows us to be true followers of Christ sharing a common mission. Unity of the Church is possible only when we freely open our hearts to love as Christ did – indiscriminately and unconditionally. Unfortunately, these essentials are critically lacking in Christendom. The body of Christ has been shredded by human greed and envy so much so that the world mocks at our piety. But this is where the challenge must be embraced, and the battle fought to the finish. We have a duty to strive courageously to live out this mission. Pope Francis instructs that “unity happens when we can pause, to listen and understand one another. Unity happens when we walk together.” Charles H. Brent, Episcopal Bishop of the Philippines Islands once said: *“The unity of Christendom is not a luxury, but a necessity. We must have unity, not at all costs, but at all risks. A unified Church is the only offering we dare present to the coming Christ, for in it alone will He find room to dwell .”* Therefore, unity is a task that must be done with sacrifices and great costs. Pope Benedict caps it with these words: *“Christian unity can exist only if Christians are deeply united to him, to Jesus.”*

The Example of Stephen: The First Reading (Acts 7: 55-60) is a classic report of the success or answer to Jesus’ prayer for “those who also through their words will believe in Me.” Stephen, the first martyr, having been converted by the witnessing of the apostles became an indefatigable witness himself. “Filled with the Holy Spirit,” Stephen stood in defence of the faith before the mighty Sanhedrin by recalling how God’s people persecuted the prophets before persecuting Jesus. He was condemned by the mob and stoned to death. But his death was both heroic and enviable. There were striking similarities with that of Jesus. Both were innocent but condemned by a misguided mob; both saw the heavens and cried out to the Father; both died praying for the forgiveness of their executioners; both died commending their spirit to God. Thus, who was

conformed to Christ in life, was also conformed to Him in death. There is something intriguing about the vision of Stephen: St. Luke, author of Acts of the Apostles reports Stephen saying: "I can see heaven thrown open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (v. 56). Why "standing"? We are familiar with the expression: "sitting at the right hand of God." This is what we say in the Creed; Psalm 110:1 says that and there are about twenty references to this in the New Testament. This is the only time in the entire Bible when Jesus is said to be "standing at the right hand of God." As John Bergsma explains, the king never rose from his throne except to honour the one coming into his presence. Jesus rose to from His throne to welcome Stephen, the first martyr, coming into His presence. The Lord who died in obedience to the Father knows the sacrifice it takes to offer one's life in love and obedience. Today, we might not be called to offer our lives, but we must always carry in hearts this challenge, and never forget our brothers and sisters who are suffering all kinds of persecutions around the world.

My dear friends, as we prepare for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, let us open our hearts to welcome the Spirit so that we experience the power of love that purges all selfishness, envy and hatred, and breaks all barriers setting us free to accept and collaborate with one another for the fulfilment of the mission of Christ. The prayer of Christ for the unity of the Church can only be realised if and only when we, the followers of Christ, allow the Holy Spirit to guide us.