**Homily for the 17th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B**

**July 25, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: 2 Kings 4:42-44 (Elisha feeds a hundred men with 20 barley loaves.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 145 (The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.)*

*Second Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6 (Strive to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.)*

*Gospel: John 6:1-15 (The multiplication of the loaves and fishes.)*

In his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul pleads with his fellow Christians to “live in a manner worthy of the call you have received.” Many Pastors have given similar exhortations to their flocks over the years. However, too often their advice is limited to repentance for sins and an individual pursuit of purity and righteousness. Paul, on the other hand, is far more concerned about relationships within the Christian community. He wants his fellow Christians to preserve “the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace,” by practicing the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience and love. Later in the same letter, Paul will give specific examples of how to do that. He will explain how husbands and wives, parents and children, even masters and slaves, can forge bonds of peace by the way they treat each other with mutual love and respect.

As important as the practice of these virtues is, however, the Christian community can still experience discord and division. So, Paul encourages us to recognize the many sources of unity which bind us together. He lists a number of them for us. There is one (Holy) Spirit, which lives and moves in all of us, guiding us gently along the path toward holiness. There is one hope (of eternal life), which directs all of us toward our common goal of life with God. There is one Lord (Jesus Christ), who suffered and died for all of us, and who prayed that all of his disciples would be one, as he and the Father are one. There is one faith (in Jesus Christ), shared by all who claim the title “Christian.” There is one baptism (into the death and resurrection of Christ), through which all of us are saved. And there is “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Hence, the oneness of God with all of his Creation should be the ultimate source of unity for all those who believe in Him.

In addition to all of these sources of unity which Paul identifies, there is also a sacrament that so strengthens our communion with God and with one another that we actually call it “Holy Communion.” The gospel story about the multiplication of the loaves and fishes immediately brings Eucharist to mind. Here we see Jesus doing essentially what the priest does at the altar whenever we celebrate Mass. Jesus takes the bread, provided by the community, blesses it, and gives it to his disciples to distribute among the people. All are fed in abundance – a sign of the abundant *spiritual* nourishment that Jesus would one day provide to all his believers in the Church, through the sacrament of his Body and Blood. Our offerings of bread and wine, together with our prayers of thanks and praise, seem as meager as those five barley loaves and two fish that the boy offered to Jesus. But, when those simple gifts are returned to us later in the Mass, they have been transformed into the life-giving Body and Blood of Christ, which nourishes us and sustains us throughout our Christian journey. The Eucharist also serves as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, which is beyond both our bodily senses and our human imagination. Hence, unlike *earthly* food, which satisfies only for a short time and then leaves us hungry again, the *heavenly* food that we receive from the Eucharist has a lasting effect, which touches body and soul.

The coincidental pairing of the loaves and fishes passage with Paul’s exhortation to unity reminds us that, for us Catholics, the Eucharist is the highest expression of our communion as a Church, as well as the central means of strengthening that communion. When we receive the Body of Christ together, we *become* the Mystical Body of Christ in the world. And, we should always be mindful of that fact as we receive the Eucharist together. The special moment when the Lord gives himself to us under sacramental signs is an opportunity not only for great intimacy *with him*, but also for a heightened sense of intimacy *with one another*. We are one because of Christ and his gift to us. We *become* one when he draws all of us to himself.

Unfortunately, the fact that the Eucharist is such a powerful symbol of unity for the Church is also the reason why we cannot invite our separated brethren from other Christian faiths to partake of the Eucharist with us. It would be wonderful if we could one day end the divisions within the Body of Christ, becoming one body and one Spirit, as in the beginning. But, until we do, our inability to share the Eucharistic banquet as brothers and sisters remains a powerful and painful sign that we are *not* one, as Christ prayed that we would be.

In recent years, especially the past year, political divisions in the United States have grown so poisonous that they now threaten the unity of the Church, as well as the foundations of our democracy. There have always been differences of opinion within the Church, including differences over which Church teachings should receive more or less emphasis in public policy and in preaching, and which Church teachings might need to be reviewed and updated for modern times. Every parish priest knows that if you’re not upsetting somebody, then you’re probably being too timid about proclaiming the Gospel. Still, we seem to have entered a new era, when far too many people wish to label their fellow Catholics not just as “liberal” or “conservative,” but as “with us” or “against us.” Some have even advocated that those in the opposing camp be excommunicated, turning the sacrament of unity into a weapon to instill fear and enforce conformity. I never thought I would see such acrimony within the Church. But, then again, I never thought that I would see people choosing to switch parishes in order to avoid wearing a mask during a pandemic. Something has gone horribly wrong!

The causes of division are obvious, but so are the reasons for unity. Which of the two we choose to emphasize is up to us. We can dwell on the frustrations, the different points-of-view, the misunderstandings, the hurt feelings, etc. Or, we can try to bear with one another through love, with humility, gentleness and patience. We can strive to preserve “the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.” If we truly desire that unity, then the Eucharist is where we can cement the bond of peace with our Catholic brothers and sisters. We can come to Christ together, with our varied opinions and priorities and viewpoints, and ask that he make us one *in himself*.