

Archdiocesan Pastoral Assembly
Pastoral Address

Given by Archbishop John G. Vlazny to pastors and pastoral council members gathered at St. Pius X Church on November 21, 2009.

Some years ago there was a Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy demanded that Linus change the television channel. She threatened him with her fist if he wouldn't do it. Linus asks her, "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" Lucy responds, "These five fingers. Individually they are nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold." Linus looks at her and says, "Which channel do you want?" He turns away and looks at his own fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

For years, in my role as your archbishop trying to articulate a vision for this local church, I have been up and down the I-5 corridor repeating again and again the importance of understanding that the essential mission of the church is evangelization, bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to every corner of our world. By and large, I sense that people understand and appreciate what our mission is. But we could be a lot more successful if we could only get ourselves organized like little Lucy's five fingers and become a truly effective single unit, forming a true community that is "admirable and effective" in building the kingdom of God right here in our own midst. The problem today, as in all the ages of the church, stems from the failure to acknowledge the fact that "united we stand, divided we fall."

Earlier this year, Pope Benedict met with a group of bishops from Argentina. He told the bishops on that occasion that their ministry "serves the unity and communion of the entire mystical body of Christ." The Pope went on to say, "The bishop, who is the visible foundation of unity in his particular church, is called to promote and defend the integrity of the faith and discipline

which the whole church shares, at the same time teaching the faithful to love all their brothers and sisters.” I have to admit that, after twelve years serving here as your archbishop, I would say the principal cause of our failure to be more effective as an evangelizing community is the disunity we experience and that so often becomes quite visible to our non-Catholic neighbors.

As you know, Pope Benedict XVI has asked Catholics the world over to observe a *Year of the Priest*. He reminded us that the special patron of all our parish priests is St. John Mary Vianney, more popularly known as the Curé of Ars. St. John Mary was a wonderful man and was sent by his bishop to a small remote village called Ars which was largely unknown at the time. It is the kind of place that I would have a hard time convincing one of our priests to accept for an assignment. When the bishop sent St. John Mary to Ars, he told him, “There is little love of God in their parish. You will be the one to put it there.” My friends, putting love where there is little or no love, but rather much disunity, is not an easy task. Yet, without love as the foundation of our daily lives, most of our relationships will go wrong and we will live, if not in open hostility to one another, certainly with lots of hard feelings exchanged back and forth in our efforts to proclaim the good news.

On the last day of October I had the privilege of ordaining three men from Portland, Roseburg and Port Orford as deacons. The next day was the feast of All Saints and I reminded those about to be ordained that here in western Oregon, as in many other dioceses, we seem to be having a struggle living together as a communion of saints, the kind of communion for which Jesus prayed on the night before he died. Back in the days of the early Christians, non-Christians would often say, “See how these Christians love one another.” Well, I am not to sure non-Catholics would say the same about us Catholic people today. The divisions among us become too often a cause of public scandal because of the uncivilized behavior among people who have been called by their Baptism to be the one family of God.

Let's be honest. Nowadays our differences too often are aired publicly, with lots of hostility and not much civility. I asked the new deacons to join me in the responsibility I have as bishop of promoting unity within the church. No, I am not talking about uniformity. There will always be differences among us. The same sentiments were expressed by Irish author James Joyce, in describing the Catholic Church when he said, "Here comes everybody." In many of our parishes we sing the hymn, "All are welcome." But I sometimes wonder if we really mean it.

Unfortunately, our disunity closely resembles the lack of virtue on the part of the people back in Ars when St. John Mary Vianney went among them and tried to bring love where there was little love. My friends, we need to learn to love and respect one another, no matter what our differences may be. We must pray for one another. The clergy and pastoral ministers need to encourage parishioners to love and respect one another, even in spite of honest differences. Yes, we must speak the truth. And sometimes it's hard to hear what's true. But we can make it a lot easier for listeners to accept that message if we speak the truth with love.

My predecessor, Francis Cardinal George, now serving as Archbishop of Chicago and President of our United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a recent book entitled "*The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion and Culture*," echoes some of the sentiments of Pope Benedict XVI in his most recent encyclical, "*Charity in Truth*," where he states, "the earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion."

In his book the Cardinal explains that the modern idea of the person is focused on individualism and subjectivism. People don't see their identity in terms of relationships. The Cardinal states, "If we are individuals for whom

relationships are just added on, rather than being persons who are born related, then we start with rights and not with duties or obligations to others. Since rights have to be protected, we get into a legal framework that is almost always adversarial. Society becomes brittle and violent. Natural community, such as marriage is much weakened. The pursuit of one's own dreams, even in conflict with others, have become something of a priority in our culture." The Cardinal goes on to say, "You can see it in all kinds of ways. Violence is the most obvious. Modern culture is based upon opposition and contention: the media needs oppression and victims or there isn't a story. Courts are set up for winners and losers; and politics is those in power and those who have lost power. It's all conflict."

Now, sad to say, these societal attitudes and behaviors have crept into the church and the way we relate to one another as sisters and brothers in the family of God. We no longer simply disagree. We become mean-spirited quite quickly and go on the attack against those who see things differently. Christ's encouragement to come together peacefully to try and reconcile our differences is seldom heeded. I think that all too often we forget that as a church we are family. We don't vote father or mother or sister or brother out of the family. We have respect for each and every individual and we try to work out our honest differences and recognize that we will not always agree. Amazingly, a president can get a vote of 53% and consider this a mandate, but a pastor or another pastoral minister can be so harassed and quickly discouraged by five or ten percent of the parishioners who are malcontents that he or she may feel it's time to move on.

Every day in my morning prayer I ask the Lord through the intercession of Saints Peter and Paul, the founding Fathers of the church of old, that we here in this Catholic Church of western Oregon will truly be the Body of Christ. Pope Benedict said that for this to happen all of us must be led to a more profound experience of Jesus Christ and the mystery of his love. A permanent

relationship with the Lord through an intense life of prayer and adequate spiritual and doctrinal formation will increase the joy of all Christians in believing and celebrating their faith and in belonging to the church.”

As we embark upon this day together, I encourage you strongly to love the church. Some have said, “Well, of course, we love the people of the church. It’s the institution that gets us down.” But without some kind of institutional presence across the globe over the past 2,000 years, do you really think that the evangelizing mission of Jesus Christ would have been passed down successfully from generation to generation as it indeed has? The church is a very human institution just as those first apostles were very human individuals. They and their companions made plenty of mistakes. It was not through their gifts that the work was ultimately accomplished. It was through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit who has empowered us and guided us on our evangelizing mission, bonding us together as sisters and brothers, all, members of the one family of our heavenly Father.

When we recite the Apostles’ Creed we profess our belief in the “communion of saints.” Where is that communion of saints? It is here, among us. As I like to remind the youngsters at the time of Confirmation, saints are not those who lead perfect lives. Saints are those who, when they fall or stumble, reach out for help, get up and keep moving forward. We need to be there for one another to pick up the pieces and move on together along the road to glory, inviting the stragglers and hitchhikers to join our companionship.

The founder of the Holy Cross community which serves this church through the University of Portland and a number of parishes was Blessed Basil Moreau. He spoke about the importance of communion on one occasion and stated, “It is this union, the fruit of sanctifying grace, which will strengthen us against the work of the devil, while being at the same time the source of our

success and consolation. It is like the mortar which holds and binds the stones of the building we have undertaken, and without it everything will crumble and fall into ruin.” In reflecting upon those remarks of Blessed Basil, one Holy Cross priest stated that, “Without true communion our work and our lives would become directionless. We would become isolated individuals, unable to recognize how God seeks to unite our gifts to those of our neighbors in greater service of this kingdom.” In other words, if we want to be more effective in our evangelizing mission, we need to realize that this will be accomplished much more readily if we work together instead of working apart.

Every January we set aside a week of prayer for Christian unity. In spite of some honest differences, Christians have experienced separation now for many centuries. Clearly this was never the intent of Jesus, but it happened. The alienation of one Christian community from another is indeed a serious problem. But the more serious problem, in my judgment, which I ask you to take into consideration this morning, is the growing separation and even alienation within our own Catholic community. Several weeks ago on a pastoral visit to the Italian city of Brescia, the birthplace of Pope Paul VI, Pope Benedict addressed this growing problem. There he told the people not to forget “the immense gift we received the day on which we were baptized. At that moment Christ bound us to himself forever. Yet, do we, for our part, remain united to him through choices coherent with the gospel? It is not easy being Christian. It takes courage and tenacity not to conform oneself to the mentality of the world, not to allow one self to be seduced by the temptations... of hedonism and consumerism; to face, if necessary, misunderstandings and sometimes even persecutions. Living our baptism means we remain firmly united to the church, even when we see her face darkened by certain shadows and stains.”

Here in western Oregon we know the shadows and stains all too well. The terrible scandal of child sexual abuse by our own clergy has hurt us

greatly. It may seem self-serving of me to say so, but I think we all have to admit that the blatant hostility towards people in authority, especially when they make a mistake, serves no purpose except disunity. The growing separation between more progressive Catholics and more traditional Catholics, expressed in the media and among ourselves in such disparaging ways, clearly impedes the proclamation of the good news and the call to conversion. The disregard for official church teaching in favor of personal opinion also makes it hard for us to impact the public with beliefs and values that we treasure.

Scripture abounds with the call for communion among our people. On the night before he died, Jesus prayed, “May they all be one as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that the world will believe that you sent me.” Jesus clearly understands that it would be hard for the world to believe in him when his followers are perceived as a dysfunctional family rather than as a community of saints. St. Paul often echoed the Lord’s call for unity. In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, “I urge you brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... that there be no divisions among you, that you be united in the same mind and of the same purpose.” In his Letter to the Ephesians he writes, “I urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Again in his Letter to the Colossians Paul writes, “Let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one Body.”

The Archdiocesan Pastoral Council which is hosting this fourth pastoral assembly, will be completing its service today. A new Council will be formed and it will be the task of that body to further the implementation of our Archdiocesan Priorities, namely, faith formation at all levels, youth and young adult ministry, and more effective outreach to our multicultural communities, especially our growing Hispanic neighbors. In addition, the Pastoral Council which is passing on the torch today has been encouraging all of you, through

the spring vicariate meetings, to consider some of their own interests, namely, evangelization strategies which help people strengthen their personal relationship with Jesus, promoting peace and justice ministry as a constitutive element in parish pastoral planning alongside worship, education, governance and charity and encouraging greater familiarity with the rationale for a need of immigration reform in our nation.

All those items deserve our attention, but we will accomplish very little if we go about it in a fragmented and divided way. The secular world sees the Catholic community as one that is strongly pro-life. They suspect that our pro-life stance is more verbal than real, particularly when they see we have little respect for one another when we disagree. Yes, my sisters and brothers, Jesus Christ knew what he was asking for on the night before he died. If any one of us were told we had only one night to live, he or she would think long and hard about what he would ask of God. I'm sure Jesus did the same. The prayer for unity, for a true communion among the saints he called to be his disciples, was a fervent plea from his heart. I implore you to take his request seriously and to join me in doing what we can to build communion within our own church family so that we might more effectively carry out our church's evangelizing mission.

God bless you all. Thank you for accepting the invitation to participate in this important gathering. This year the Archdiocese of Portland celebrates its 163rd birthday. The divisions and hurts we sometimes feel are not new to Catholic families. The older churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Carthage and Paris have experienced some long before we have. But it is the same Holy Spirit who has sustained them and bonded them more closely with his powerful gifts. We pray today that the same Spirit will unite us and guide us as we take seriously Christ's call to go and make disciples.