

Homily
2EasterA
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Church of Saint Bernard, Tulsa
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The early Christian community went through a powerful, dramatic change during the 50 days after the Resurrection of Jesus. Before the Resurrection, the disciples of Jesus were confused and afraid. But then, following the Resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples and the whole Christian community became amazingly bold and fearless.

Led by Peter, there were healings of the sick and rousing proclamations about the life of Jesus that brought in thousands of converts to Christianity in just a single day.

As our first reading today describes it, “Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need...And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The aspect of this early Christian community that I want to emphasize this morning is its unity.

“All who believed were together and had all things in common.”

In his Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul describes the early Christians as “members of the household of God...striving to preserve the unity of spirit through the bond of peace; one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism...”

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul urges the early Christians to agree in what they say, to have no divisions among them, but that they be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.

In His final words to the apostles before His arrest, Jesus prayed that all of His followers “may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.”

In these words, Jesus is acknowledging that His life and His teachings would lack credibility to the extent that Christians were not united in following Him.

We know today that there are numerous divisions among Christians. It is estimated that there are over 20,000 Protestant denominations. And there can be divisions even within the Catholic Church.

One of the primary sources of division is the Bible. The revealed word of God in the Bible, which should be a fundamental source of unity, is used to bring about separations among followers of Jesus.

As we know, many Protestants reject the authority of the Catholic Church and believe that the Bible is the sole source of authority for Christians. Yet Protestants don't completely share understandings of what the Bible actually says.

So what are some of the major issues that divide Christians, and how do those issues relate to the Bible?

The major issues that Christians disagree on include the authority of the Pope and the Church, whether we are saved solely by our faith, confessing sins to a priest, the communion of saints, the significance of Mary, the role of suffering and perhaps the biggest issue, the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

This raises a question. What resource would a Catholic use to best explain the Catholic position on all the issues I just listed that divide Christians?

The answer is: THE BIBLE.

Every Catholic over the age of 12 should know the passages in the Bible that support the Catholic view on all the major issues that trouble our Protestant brothers and sisters.

For example, what would be the primary passage in the Bible that a Catholic would use to explain why we believe in confessing sins to a priest?

The answer is in today's Gospel, John 20:21-23. Jesus, following His Resurrection, appeared to the disciples and said:

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’”

In case you might be thinking this is just a Catholic translation of this passage, the King James Bible, the most popular Protestant Bible, says the same thing.

I had a friend, Larry Lewis, who was a Methodist pastor when I met him. At that time, he and his wife were energetically studying the Catholic Catechism, and they both eventually became Catholic.

Larry loved the Bible, and after he became Catholic his understanding of the Bible took on a whole new dimension. He would often call me to go over specific lines in the Bible and explain how he understood these passages so much better now that he was Catholic.

One time, he got so excited that he was actually yelling over the phone. “Larry,” I said. “I have to ask you something.” “I know,” Larry said, “You’re going to ask me why I never saw this in the Bible before now.”

Larry went on to explain that, when you're Protestant, you are raised to see the Bible in a certain way, and you are just blind to see many of the passages the way Catholics see them.

Larry ultimately became a Catholic evangelist, traveling all over North America, inspiring people to have a deeper understanding and enthusiasm for the Catholic faith.

I have several friends who, like Larry, left ministry in the Protestant church to become Catholic. Every one of them would say that the Catholic Church is the one true Bible church.

To learn more about how to explain the Catholic faith using the Bible, you can check out an organization called Catholic Answers on the internet. You could also go to one of our Catholic bookstores here in Tulsa. And you could even go to my personal website, twoedgetalk.com, click on the "Resources" page and download a document entitled, "The Bible Is the Catholic Book."

The deeper we go in knowing our Catholic faith, the more we will experience the awe that characterized the earliest Christian community, the more we will expect and witness the signs and wonders that they witnessed. The better we are able to gently but clearly explain the Catholic faith to non-Catholics, the more unity there will be among Christians.