

In order to form a more perfect union ...

If you are anything like me, you have had your fill of 4th of July fireworks! (My Chicago neighborhood goes absolutely wild with illegal fireworks: the smell of gunpowder permeates everything, the night sky is lit up brighter than Van Gogh's "Starry Night", and any thoughts of sleep are an unrealistic dream thanks to a cacophony of incessant crackling, hissing, and booming.) Everything else is drowned out – even the performances of patriotic music and the dramatic readings of the Declaration of Independence hauled out for their yearly appearance. By now, these have certainly been relegated to their storage bins to await July 4, 2011; moreover, summer thunderstorms and the DPW will doubtless do their best to rid us of all other evidence of our fleeting patriotic fervor and our frenetic frolicking. We are back to the doldrums of a sweltering summer, interrupted only by reports of spreading oil slicks and threats of tornadoes and hurricanes.

What lingers between my ears is the words of another document, the Constitution of the United States of America, whose preamble begins: "We the people of the United States of America, in order to form a more perfect union..." These words were very necessary because, at the time of their writing, the country was a mess: under the previous form of government, the Articles of Confederation, there was endless squabbling among the loosely connected states who often seemed more interested in rivalry than in cooperation. It was, in a sense, imperative to refound the nation to keep the union from dissolving: "a more perfect union" was not a luxury but a necessity. Perhaps the Founding Fathers foresaw words which would be sung by fractious Ukrainians two centuries later: "...in unity is the strength of a people; God grant us unity!"

Unity takes many forms – surprisingly, not all of which are beneficial! Can it not be said that slaves are united – held together as they are by their chains and joined in a common task by the overseer's whip? Those who lived under the USSR might say that this was indeed the kind of "union" imposed upon the enslaved peoples of the Soviet Republics! What about the "group think" imposed by "Big Brother" in George Orwell's novel 1984? Is this so different from the "bandwagon effect" so prevalent today, where shrill demagogues accuse one another of manipulating unthinking followers by whipping them into a frenzy – even to the point of acting against their own best interest? Perhaps unity is not always the strength of a people!?

The citizens of Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Kentucky remind us that there is nonetheless a beneficial form of unity: "commonwealth", which those citizens wisely use instead of the word "state". "Commonwealth" refers to something which benefits all; this is perhaps best summed up in the Three Musketeers' motto "All for one and one for all!" When one member of a group flourishes, the well-being of all increases; likewise, when one member is harmed, all members of the group are put at risk. In short, the well-being of each member becomes the task of all, for the common good depends upon this – even my own well-being. Our individualistic culture, where we are surrounded by messages both explicit and subliminal telling us to "look out for #1" – i.e. hooray for me and forget about everybody else – flies in the face of this wisdom.

The vision of unity and mutual care is a Christian vision deeply rooted in Scripture. As the Founding Fathers refounded the nation by writing the Constitution, so does Jesus refound humanity when tells us, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13: 34-35) This love is not just warm fuzzies; rather, it must take the form of concrete actions. St. Paul shows this in his epistles: he reminds the Romans how to live out this love daily (Romans 12: 9-21), and he tells them to beware of those who create divisions in order to advance their own agendas rather than the Gospel (Romans 16: 17-20); he not only encourages the unity which comes from love, but he also excoriates the Corinthians for their partisan divisions which favored some groups over others to the detriment of the Church as a whole (1 Corinthians: chs. 1, 10-13 *passim*).

In the Divine Liturgy, before the Creed we say “Let us love one another so that we may confess: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the consubstantial and undivided Trinity.” It is not enough to proclaim the Trinity or to sing its praises, which St. Paul might equate with empty clanging (1 Corinthians 13: 1-3); rather, we are to live out in our lives the love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the indissoluble unity of Three Persons in One God. Only when we learn how to do this can we become the loving Church which can enlighten a world filled with the darkness of hatred, the unified Church which this divided world so desperately needs as a model. Will there be a more perfect union – in our nation, in our Church in our world? We can only pray – and let ourselves be changed by our prayer!

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