

A Philosopher's Dilemma

A number of years ago, I was living in Philadelphia – more precisely, in Fox Chase, at the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Basil the Great, who taught me in grade school back when I was still well-behaved. Weekdays, I made the trek down to the archieparchial chancery where I disturbed the Metropolitan's peace with my boisterous ways. The rest of the time, I served as chaplain at the motherhouse, inflicting my ministry on the sisters - some of whom scratched their veiled heads in puzzlement. (What can I say? The grace which God provides is not always what we would choose!)

While I was there, His Beatitude Lubomyr came to Philadelphia for eye surgery. I was honored to cede the altar to him one Sunday so that he could celebrate Divine Liturgy with the sisters. I tried to do two seemingly contradictory things: 1/ be helpful, and 2/ stay out of the way; it must have worked, because +Lubomyr seemed pleased. Later that week, His Beatitude came down to the chancery for a visit. Seeing me there, he said, "Do you work here too?" I answered "That depends what you mean by work", to which he quipped, "A true Dominican, always a philosopher!"

Whether I am a true Dominican or not (you'll need to consult with the friars on that!), my mind nonetheless turns to the ancient philosophical problem of the one and the many. This problem surfaces in civil society: how can fifty states – plus the District of Columbia and various territories – form one country? Another problem: how can the multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-confessional mix which is the United States produce a united, unified people? The mind boggles! Given the shrill, accusatory screams which we hear emanating from partisans in the government and in the media, it would seem that we have not yet come upon a satisfactory, lasting solution. (So much for E Pluribus Unum, alas!)

Theologically, the problem surfaces in one of the fundamental truths of our faith: how can the one God be three Persons? Inquiring minds wantt to know! Theologians have spilled much ink over this question over the past two millennia, but seem unable to convince all the atheists who seem to be popping up everywhere these days, attacking our beliefs and theological formulations.

It seems to this poor philosopher that no arguments will be convincing. Arguments, by definition, pit opponents against one another until "clarity" emerges – that is, until victor emerges over vanquished. Is this the way religion works? If so, is it the only option? My novicemaster would ask the crucial question, "Is it helpful?" I would answer, "Methinks not." Permit me to repeat what I have certainly written before: at every Divine Liturgy, before the creed, we say, "Let us love one another so that we may profess ... the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the consubstantial and undivided Trinity." First comes love; everything else is secondary. An embrace is more convincing than any argument. In the early Church, pagans marveled saying, "See how the Christians love one another!" People saw and were converted. These conversions were not primarily due to the "arguments" of the Christians; rather, they were accomplished thanks to the witness of their lives, which people found very convincing.

What about us? Is our Christian life convincing? During the Divine Liturgy, the priest offers this silent prayer: "You have given us the grace to pray together in harmony, and have promised to grant the requests of two or three who join their voices in Your Name." Is our Church life always so harmonious? If God blesses those who unite in prayer, why do our actions so often betray an underlying selfishness and a lack of concern for others, attitudes which lead to divisiveness?

This month, the Church offers us the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The fact that we need to pray for lost unity is an indictment of Christians who have, right from the beginning, been very fractious. The fact that we choose to pray for unity is a sign of hope. We pray, as Jesus did, that all might be one. As Eparchial Ecumenical Officer, I am convinced that our prayer bears fruit: in my collaboration with Christians of other Churches, I have experienced an outpouring of love and support

which I can only attribute to grace. When we pray and work and struggle, we set aside the arguments which have persisted over the centuries, and we embrace one another in love as Christ would have us do.

Everywhere, there are gaps waiting to be bridged, wounds needing to be healed, strangers longing to receive and offer friendship. I beg to differ with the philosophers: they find a problem with the one and the many, but God's grace turns that problem into possibilities and richness which are out of this world. Especially during this month, I encourage you to pray for the unity which God desires – for our country, for the Catholic Church, and for all the Churches where Christians seek the Triune God. As the three Persons of the Trinity are united in love, so may we all be – with God and with one another.

Fr. Jim Karepin, op