

STS General Chapter 2022
Pastoral Address by Senior Paddy Rooney
Ephesians 4:1-16

It has been the fervent hope of every pope who has sat in the chair of Peter; every Patriarch who has presided in Constantinople; or every Presiding Bishop who has sought to govern a disparate entity called the Church. And Jesus Himself, shortly before He went to His suffering and death, uttered His prayer – that they may be One even as He and the Father were one. We see such oneness and unity existing in the natural world all around us; there exists a coherence and a real order to the great design of the universe; there is even a deep longing in the hearts of many for us to come together. Yet there remains among us great divisions where the oneness of our common humanity is too often shattered by the divisions we create between us - the privileged and the starving; the urban and the rural; the young in high school and those who are retired; the educated and the illiterate and in so many other ways. World leaders have sought to bring us together but generally they have failed. In the Church the Pope may meet with the Patriarch of Constantinople but the first great division of the Church into East and West remains and the divisions in the Church of Jesus Christ have only become greater since then. At the same time there is hardly a church body in the United States today that is not filled with strife, dissension and division. The great oneness for which Jesus prayed is sadly lacking in the world today and even more in the Church. It is to such a divided church body at Ephesus that Paul writes. A pagan city, given to the worship of the goddess Artemis, the beleaguered Christian community there is urged by Paul to live united by being faithful to the vocation to which they have been called. And this unity, this faithfulness to purpose, says Paul, will be accomplished through the Holy Spirit. Faced with the diversity of gods and worship practices in the world around him, Paul holds up a different vision for the young Christian community – that the community is one, that it is united in heart, mind and attitude, that there are not different kinds of Christians but only one – the baptized who follow the Lord Jesus. Thus, he tells the Ephesians, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” Paul affirms, indeed confesses for this was probably one of the earliest baptismal creeds, that there is only one body, which is the Church; one Lord who is the head of that Church, one Spirit by which that Christ is confessed; one faith and one hope accepted in baptism and one baptism itself. This oneness is then brought together as Paul speaks of the one God who is the Father “above all creation,” of the Son who is “through all” for He alone is the one mediator and of the Spirit who is “in all” the family of God, thereby sealing us in the identity of the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

My sisters and brothers we, as members of this Society of the Holy Trinity, are gathered here once again in General Chapter. And it is a special joy to celebrate this 25th anniversary of our founding, especially to be joined by 10 of my fellow founding members who are sitting here to my right...and a wonder that none of us has aged one bit since we first gathered in Morristown NJ that September 25 years ago! It saddens me that age and or infirmity has kept some of our other founding members away – Pastors Fred Schumacher, Ron Bagnall, Larry Yoder, Ray Kibler, Linda Larson and Glenn Johnson. And we recall with deep and abiding affection those founding members who have entered the Church Triumphant – Pastors Bill Hampton, Harvey Warren van Harten, George Muenich, Lou Smith, Richard Niebanck and Bishop Michael McDaniel...may their memory be blessed. And would any of us who were there in 1997

ever believe that we would have a gathering such as this today – a chapel filled with our members and guests. Clearly only the Holy Spirit can have produced such fruits in and among us and for that we can only say Deo gratias.

And we have gathered for what promises to be a celebration worthy of this anniversary. As we examine the meaning of Evangelical Catholicity in the Rule of our Society, we will hear from Drs. Baldwin, Ross and Bureson who are here among us today in what should be some fine teaching. We will receive new members into our Society, for which we again give thanks to God. We will celebrate at a supper tomorrow evening and hear an historical perspective from Dr. Johnson...no not the famous author, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, editor and lexicographer Samuel Johnson but our equally famous Richard Johnson, who shares some of those gifts but whose editorship of Forum Letter is, for me, one of the highlights of each month.

But while we have come to celebrate, we come acknowledging that we are not one, riven as we are by the divisions that afflict so much of our world and our society today. We come with different political beliefs whether that be Republican, Democrat, Socialist or Independent (although for some of us here it is Monarchists verses you ungrateful Colonials). We come with the divisions of our judicatories weighing us down – divisions such as the ordination of women, or sexual orientation, or closed v's open communion. We come with our peculiar Lutheran cultural differences – German Lutherans verses the Swedes and Norwegians, east coast Lutheranism over against that of the mid-west, the cultural distinctiveness of our Latino and African congregations. And amidst the anger that so dominates our culture today, we are called to acknowledge that we come with a certain level of moral certitude – that we are right and “they” whoever they are at that particular moment – they are wrong!

Over and against these divisions, we come together in this Society, laying claim to the understanding that we are one of the few truly pan-Lutheran bodies in the world and that here no divisions exist between us. But we cannot simply say that we are united, indeed that we are one, when we, as members of one ecclesial body, continue to criticize others who have remained in another ecclesial body. We cannot say we are one when we speak against a brother or sister in the Society, sometimes chastising them, because of something they wrote on a social media platform about a liturgical practice which we think is stupid or ridiculous. We cannot say we are one when we perpetuate the myths of the past and fail to listen to the cultural and ethnic differences which still live among us to this day.

I do not say these things in order to cast a pall of gloom and doom over this festive celebration, but rather to remind us of the history which helped form and shape the ethos of this Society and to challenge us as we move into God's future over the next 25 years of our existence.

For we should remember that our Society was forged in oneness when many of our original members came together from two distinctly different bodies – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. Many of those founders had gone through the great tribulation and were part of that pan Lutheran effort which resulted in the Call to Faithfulness conferences, the 9.5 theses and the Founding Statement of the Society. But despite the differences and distinctions between ELCA and LCMS, the founders saw a commonality which could bring them together and make them one.

And that commonality was first found, of course, in baptism, that God given means by which we enter into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ Our Lord and into this Body of Christ which we call the Church. Together we acknowledge that through this holy Sacrament, we become one in Christ with the

Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. And since this body of Christ is the Church, it is into this one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that we are baptized. There is not this church or that church, although a multitude of denominations exists. There is no Lutheran church, as though Luther himself set up a new shop, above which he emblazoned his name, in order to sell different goods from those sold before. Indeed, in reality, there are no separate entities called the ELCA, the NALC, the LCMS and so many more, as though what we do as Lutherans in this nation is distinct or different from the way Christians are called to live elsewhere in the world. Rather, we are baptized into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, for that is the only true Church that exists and there is no other. Called into communion with that Church, we live our lives of faith, hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ and trusting in the promises He has given us. For our baptism into Christ is not just for ourselves but for the sake of the world. Our baptism is not only to proclaim our own status as a child of God in the body of Christ but to call us to bring others into that body so that they too might know of His saving love for them. And to that end our baptism, as Paul goes on to tell us, gives us gifts, not for our own use but for the sake of building up of the body. “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.”

And here then is this second binding factor that exists among us in this Society and that is our common call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Rooted in the indelible character of our baptisms, our call to ordained ministry flows as one of the gifts given to us there by the Holy Spirit. Among us in this Society there are, as Paul reminds us, some who are called into parish ministry, or chaplaincy or academia but we share our common identity as priests in Christ’s One, Holy Church. Some are to serve as pastors and teachers and evangelists in our own calls, but we are one in our common call to Word and Sacrament. Indeed, while we may love and care for our deacons and appreciate the gifts they bring to the Church and while we are grateful for the support provided to us by so many of our lay members, one cannot be a part of this Society without being ordained. As the Preamble of our Rule states so clearly “Ordained to the Ministry of the Word and the sacraments in Christ’s Church and called to such an office in Lutheran churches...the membership of this Society shall consist of ordained Lutheran ministers who have accepted this Rule and joined a specific chapter.” Called and ordained therefore, we come seeking the support of this Society to strengthen us for the sake of the vows we spoke at ordination. Thus is the “whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”

My sisters and brothers, I am not Paul, far from it. But on this anniversary, I beg you just as he did to the church at Ephesus, I beg to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Our vision for this Society then, especially in this anniversary year, is to pray and seek this oneness in our common life together so that we may serve the one Church of Jesus Christ. Our call then is to pray as members of this Society, that the one Lord will continue to bless His one Church. And, having been united through our one baptism and our common call to ministry, may we, through the power of the one Holy Spirit, remain in the one true faith until Christ Himself shall come again. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen