

HOMILY BY CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
MASS OF CANONICAL ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LAS VEGAS
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Unity, Diversity, and Gradualness in our Shared Journey of Faith

My brothers and sisters, the readings for this Mass highlight three aspects of what it means to be Church. *The first:* Jesus calls his disciples to **unity**. *The second:* The Holy Spirit brings about unity from **diversity**. And *the third:* the Church accompanies people according to a principle of **gradualness**. Unity, diversity, and gradualness. Let us look at these traits as presented in the Word of God.

In the first reading from *Acts*, chapter 2, Saint Luke shows us that the early Church was **united** around those things which were most essential: the teaching of the Apostles, the communal life, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers. Wherever we, the people of God, are manifest as Church – whether in a small group, or a parish, or in this Archdiocese – we will discover our unity in those same experiences of the first Christians. At that early stage of the Church’s life, Jesus had already ascended into heaven. But for the Lord’s disciples, this did *not* mean that his incarnation was at an end. Whenever they came together to pray, to listen to the Apostles’ teachings, and especially to break together the bread of thanksgiving, Christians knew, just as the disciples on the road to Emmaus had discovered, that Jesus was alive in their midst. Their eyes were open to the full reality of the Eucharist.

My brothers and sisters, here we are right now, in the midst of that same reality. We are together. We are listening to the Apostles’ teachings. We are offering prayers from united hearts. And soon, we will break bread together. May our eyes be opened to the incarnation of Jesus: his presence in our midst. May this Eucharist be an experience of the Lord’s presence that *unites* us, and which summons us to walk together with him. Our faith is not to be lived in isolation.

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In the second reading, Saint Paul identifies who is the true protagonist of the Church: *the Holy Spirit is the protagonist!* God’s Spirit is the one who unites the disciples of Jesus. But God’s unity does not mean “sameness”. Christian unity is the harmonizing of a fabulous **diversity**. Every person in the body of Christ has a different set of gifts. But in the Church, where the Spirit of God is allowed to act, diversity does not *divide*; rather, it is *harmonized*, like a beautiful and richly textured orchestra piece. Sometimes we are tempted to see difference as bad, and to pit our differences against one another. But in fact, the different gifts of the Spirit are intended to “weave together” the whole work of God. We are called to let the Holy Spirit be in charge: to trust God’s Spirit to take many different believers, and to make

them one in love. We are called to receive from the Spirit our own gifts with gratitude, to use our gifts for the good of others, and to appreciate and benefit from the gifts that others have.

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Even when the Church herself is harmonized in a diverse unity, however, she does not realize who she is until she “goes out” into the world. For the Church is missionary by her very nature. To accomplish our mission, we must know how to bring salvation to those on the peripheries. And for this, we must follow the example that Jesus gives by his own interactions with the poor and with sinners. He accompanies people with what can be called a principle of “**gradualness**”. That is to say, he recognizes each individual’s own capacity to live the ideal of love, and he accepts the love that the person is able to offer, while giving the grace to grow gradually into perfect love.

In John’s Gospel, we heard Jesus doing this with Simon Peter. The gradualness of the Lord’s approach with Peter is more evident both in the original Greek, and in Spanish, than it is in English. The first two times that Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” the Spanish word that is used for “love” is *amar*. *Amar* denotes an intense, committed form of love – the kind of love by which a person is ready to suffer for his loved one. It is this kind of love which Jesus asks of Peter.

Peter’s response is unexpected. When he says to the Lord, “You know that I love you,” the Spanish, following the Greek, uses a different word for love: *querer*. This kind of love is less intense than *amar*. It is like Peter is saying: *I love you, Jesus, but I am not sure that my love for you is as strong as you would like*. It seems that Peter has been humbled by his recent experience. On the night of the Last Supper, he had boldly claimed that he would never deny Jesus, going so far as to profess that he was ready to die for him. And yet, when the moment of testing came, he *did* deny the Lord. Peter remembers his weakness, and he is unwilling to overstate his love for Jesus again. He *wants* to love Jesus, but now the profession of his love is more modest.

How does Jesus respond to Peter’s weakness? Does he rebuke him and send him away? Does Peter’s imperfection disqualify him from the Lord’s call to ministry? No. It is precisely Peter’s weakness, which he admits, that qualifies him to receive Christ’s mercy. Jesus accepts the love that Peter is able to give. And so, questioning Peter the third time, the Lord asks, *¿Me quieres?* As if to say: *Peter, do you want to be with me? Are you willing to love me?* And Peter is able to say yes. To say to Jesus: *I want you in my life*. And this is enough for now. From that point forward, the grace of God will work in Peter’s life to perfect his love for Christ, until finally he is able to lay down his life for him.

My brothers and sisters, if we are to be the Lord’s missionary disciples, then we must follow his method of *gradualness* when we are proposing the Gospel to people. Not everyone we encounter is ready to appropriate every aspect of the Gospel ideal. But should we condemn them for that? Shall we exclude them from the possibility of finding welcome in the Church? No! As the Holy Father has said many times, the Church’s welcome is for *everyone*. The Church must be a place for sinners, for the imperfect, for those

manifesting difficulties but wanting to be in the company of Christ. The Gospel is not for the perfect, it is for people who are on the way. And that is all of us. In Saint Paul's words, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God" (*Eph 2:8*). Having received this gift, we must offer it to all.

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Unity in our life of faith. **Diversity** in our gifts. **Gradualness** in our work of evangelization. These are all aspects of what it means to be the Church. As the *Diocese* of Las Vegas, this is who you have been for many years, and because of this, your mission has grown. As the *Archdiocese* of Las Vegas, with the grace of God, this is who you will continue to be for years to come. As we sang in the Responsorial Psalm: "Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations" (*Ps 96:3*).