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“CALLED TO BE EXPERTS IN COMMUNION”
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Introduction: The Church – A Bride Bedecked with her Jewels

My Dear Sisters in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I greet you in the name of the Holy Father, assuring you of his prayers and closeness as you gather for this national assembly, addressing the theme, “Called to be Experts in Communion.” The theme is timely as I am sure your communities, like the Church throughout the United States, are experiencing growth in members from different cultures and backgrounds.

Last year, I could not join you, because the Fifth National Encuentro was taking place in Grapevine, Texas, acknowledging the large presence of Hispanic Catholics in the United States and the growing diversity here. Similarly, two months ago, I went to Atlanta to address the African Conference of Clergy and Religious in the United States.

The diversity in the Church should not surprise us as ours is a universal, that is, *catholic* Church. At the same time, the gifts of the different members of the Church can be harmonized to advance the Kingdom of God and show forth the beauty of Christ; thus, the Church becomes the *sponsa ornata monilibus suis* (cf. Is 61:10).

As the Holy Father wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have one cultural expression, but ‘rather remaining true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root.’ In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the ‘beauty of her varied face.’” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 116)

In addition to its marks of catholicity, apostolicity, and holiness, the Church also possesses the mark of unity. She is called to be one Body and one Spirit in Christ, living in communion and as a *communio*. Undoubtedly, the experts gathered here will offer practical advice as to how to achieve this harmony and how to address the spiritual and formational needs of your members.

The Church is One: The Church as a Communion

I want to begin then by quoting the French Cardinal Henri de Lubac:

“Multiple or multiform, she (the Church) is nonetheless *one*, of a most active and demanding unity. She is a people, a great anonymous crowd and still the most personal of beings. Catholic, that is, universal, she wishes her members to be open to everything and yet she herself is never fully open but when she is withdrawn into the intimacy of her interior life and in the silence of adoration. She is humble and majestic. She professes a capacity to absorb every culture, to raise up their highest values; at the same time, we see her claim for her own the hearts and homes of the poor, the undistinguished, the simple and destitute masses. Not for an instant does she cease to contemplate him who is at once crucified and resurrected, the man of sorrows and lord of glory, vanquished by, but savior of, the world. He is her bloodied spouse and her triumphant master.” (HENRI DE LUBAC, *THE CHURCH: PARADOX AND MYSTERY*, TRANSL. JAMES R. DUNNE (STATEN ISLAND: ALBA HOUSE, 1969), 2.)

De Lubac, who was one of the great experts in ecclesiology during the twentieth century, places Christ at the center of our reflection. The Church is not merely a gathering of an external community of like-minded thinkers; rather, she is revealed in the Mystery of the Incarnate Word of God, who dwells in unapproachable light with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The Communio of the Church is derived from the Communio of the Trinity

The Eternal Godhead is itself a communion of three Divine Persons. In the Incarnation, a communion was brought about between God and man that had not previously been known. The Church herself is at the service of this communion. She is communion – and not only communion between men and women but communion with Christ and through Him with the Triune God who is love. Jesus was in constant communion with His Father and loved Him. The Father loved the Son and sent Him to communicate His love to us, which He did in a most perfect way, offering Himself back to the Father in love at Calvary. The Father, loving the Son and rewarding His fidelity, raised Him up in the Spirit, who was breathed out upon the Apostles on the evening of the Resurrection and poured out on them at Pentecost.

Communion with God is mediated through Christ, who is true God and true man, and our encounter with Christ (in the Church) brings about our communion with Him, and through Him with the Father and the Spirit, thereby, also uniting us with those who believe in Him and who have been incorporated into Him through baptism. The Spirit is the bond of love – of communion – between the Father and the Son. This same Spirit has been poured into our hearts, binding us in unity. Unity in the Church and the unity of the human family is based on the *communio* of God Himself.

The Communio of the Church and Eucharistic Communion

The Church, in communion with her Lord, wants to lead all men and women to eternal joy. Inasmuch as she communes with Christ, she represents Christ – is a sign of His visible presence– to the world and thereby becomes a sacrament and sign of both unity and salvation. This is most clear when she gathers as His Body to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the source and summit of all life in the Church. There we receive the Lord and become one with Him and one another. The understanding of the Church as communion goes hand in hand with Eucharistic ecclesiology.

This same idea can serve as a remedy for the polarization and fragmentation experienced by humanity today. Indeed, in American culture, one of the greatest challenges to ecclesial life is hyper-individualism. Individuals, parishes, and religious communities can easily become self-referential and lose sight of their bonds to the larger Church. The sacramental life of the Church should help us to realize that being a member is not just about “me and Jesus” but rather, that all sacraments have an essential social character by which God offers grace to individuals and builds up His Church.

The understanding of the Church as communion also helps us appreciate the Church as a liturgical community, not merely an external society of believers. As a liturgical community, the Church makes present the redemptive love of Christ, which frees us from loneliness and isolation and draws more into communion with God and one another. In the celebration of the Eucharist, there is a communion of the Word and the Body of Christ, which brings about communion between men and women, not only drawing them together from their homes and cultures, but also making them one – strengthening their unity – from within.

The Communion of the Church and the Preaching of the Apostles

The understanding of the Church as a communion also emphasizes that there is communion with Christ and communion in His Word, written and handed down. That is, in the Tradition, we find a content for our faith – a content found in the preaching of the Apostles. There is a unity in belief that is to be sought. Unity does not mean uniformity; one may always seek new ways of expressing eternal truths.

Pope Francis writes:

“In the Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face. Through inculturation, the Church ‘introduces peoples together with their cultures, into their own community’, for ‘every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood, and lived.’ (EG, 116)

Nevertheless, communion involves unity in what is to be believed and taught. This also demands a degree of authority which comes through the successors of the Apostles and the successor of Saint Peter, who is the guarantor of this Communion. The preaching of the Apostles and its reception should reflect a radical change in our way of thinking and acting as persons and as a communion of believers, who support one another. Just as the early Christians were united in mind, heart, in the teaching of the Apostles and the Breaking of the Bread, so too when there is theological communion, which penetrates to the heart, the inward unity of believers comes to be manifested in the outward unity of the Church. This unity is so great that even in the mystery of death, the community of believers supports the deceased member so that he or she may enter into Paradise.

The Communion of the Church: Openness to the World

The Holy Father has stated that he does not want a self-referential Church but a Church which goes forth. He further states that he has a dream for a missionary Church (cf. *EG*, 27). Although our world and this country is becoming increasingly fragmented and polarized, the Church should not cease to engage the world. Evangelization demands such engagement; however, God's self-disclosure in the person of Jesus Christ cannot have the purpose of affirming the world and worldliness in all its dimensions. It is precisely this spiritual worldliness that Pope Francis condemns in *Evangelii Gaudium* (cf. *EG*, 93-97)

Rather, the Church in her mission must be faithful to Christ in her engagement with the world, and this engagement takes the form of dialogue. Jesus engaged tax collectors and sinners, Scribes and Pharisees, Gentiles and Jews in dialogue, revealing to others what self-giving love looks like. In agreement with de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger also believes that the starting point must be Christ Himself:

“The Church has no nature and no significance of her own besides Christ; instead, she must find her meaning in being the instrument of Christ's movement. If this is so, then on this basis her course and her mission are charted clearly enough. The Church has no option of becoming self-enclosed in her contentment about what she has already achieved. She is herself the gesture of self-opening and hence must continually place herself at the service of this gesture and must carry it out historically. But this gesture is by no means an end in itself; its real goal is to introduce souls into that *sacrum commercium* into that holy exchange which began when God became man.” (JOSEPH RATZINGER, QUOTED IN MAXIMILLIAN H. HEIM, *JOSEPH RATZINGER: LIFE IN THE CHURCH AND LIVING THEOLOGY* (SAN FRANCISCO: IGNATIUS PRESS, 2007) 297.)

God enters into dialogue with men and women in Christ and through the Church, leading the world to salvation. The Church continues Christ's mission in the world, while serving others, pouring out the love of God, among the poor and even among those who refuse to reciprocate in love. The Church looks beyond herself in her mission of evangelization, engaging new peoples and new cultures. Pope Francis reminds us that “in the evangelization of new cultures, or cultures which have not received the Christian message, it is not essential to impose a specific cultural form, no matter how beautiful or how ancient it may be, together with the Gospel” (Cf. *EG* 117), rather, her Church's mission, driven by the Spirit of God, helps bring diversity to the Church, while holding her in unity.

Many of your communities are experiencing this growth and diversity, which since it is gift of the Spirit, is not a threat to Church unity. Pope Francis describes this outpouring of the Spirit in this way:

“The Holy Spirit sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the People of God. The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son.” (POPE FRANCIS, *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 117)

If we can speak of an internal unity in the Church – a theological unity, as well as a unity of hearts, especially in the sacraments – granted to her because of her fidelity to Christ, then the Church must become a leaven in the world, animated by the Spirit given to her by Christ. It is the Spirit of God who helps the Church carry out her mission in the tension between continuity and authentic renewal.

Concluding thoughts: Unity Prevails over Conflict

I have remained largely at a theological rather than practical level. I am sure that your panel discussions and talks of some of your experts will be fruitful, as will your own dialogues. At the same time, as beautiful as cultural diversity is, it can also bring some tensions, misunderstandings, and even conflicts within community life. You cannot ignore these or simply bury these, nor can you allow these conflicts, little or big, to consume your community life. The Holy Father warns:

“Conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced. But if we remain trapped in conflict, we lose our perspective, our horizons shrink and reality itself begins to fall apart. In the midst of conflict, we lose our sense of the profound unity of reality.” (EG, 226)

The first thing, I might advise is to put things in perspective. Within your communities, you have much more in common than that which divides you. Your faith and your spiritual patrimony, from your founders and foundresses, can be a great source of unity. Unity is never built up by dishonesty or lack of transparency. Be honest with one another, sincere, speaking from the heart, but with prudence, mindful of your unity in Christ.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (nn. 222-237), in his treatment of the common good and the promotion of peace, Pope Francis articulates four principles: *Time is greater than space* (nn. 222-225); *Unity prevails over conflict* (nn. 226-230); *Realities are more important than ideas* (nn. 231-233); and *the whole is greater than the part* (nn. 234-237). It is the second principle – *unity prevails over conflict* – that I believe can also be useful as you try to prayerfully and practically harmonize life within your communities.

In encouraging people to face their conflicts head on, the Holy Father notes:

“In this way, it becomes possible to build communion amid disagreement, but this can only be achieved by those great persons willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity. This requires acknowledging a principle indispensable to the building of friendship in society, namely that unity is greater than conflict.” (EG, 228)

In the Church, we speak about the dignity of the human person, usually in the context of respect life issues. Often, we forget about dignity in dialogue within our own communities. That would be my second piece of advice as you attempt to harmonize your different cultural gifts and backgrounds: remember to have mutual respect for one another’s profound dignity as both persons and women religious.

Thirdly, I would advise you to look always to the source of your unity, who is Christ, especially in the Holy Eucharist. The Holy Father commenting on this principle – *unity prevails over conflict* – reminds us that:

“Christ has made all things one in himself; heaven and earth, God and man, time and eternity, flesh and spirit, person and society. The sign of this unity and reconciliation of all things in him is peace. Christ is ‘our peace’ (Eph 2:14). The Gospel message always begins with a greeting of peace, and peace at all times crowns and confirms the relations between the disciples. Peace is possible only because the Lord has overcome the world and its conflict ‘by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Col 1:20)” (EG, 229)

Finally, be open to the power of the Holy Spirit to unite you. On the evening of the Resurrection, Jesus wished His Apostles peace, not once, but twice, and then He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity. It is the Spirit, after all, who made you a new creation at your baptism, whose Temple you became at your baptism, and who drew you and the other members of your communities to your particular religious charisms. Even if there are moments of tension, why should you doubt that the Spirit will lead you into unity and peace? The Spirit of God will maintain you in unity. Be open to the Spirit.

I conclude where I began, with the words of Henri de Lubac:

"Unity is in no way confusion, any more than distinction separation. For does not distinction imply a certain connection, and by one of the most living bonds, that of mutual attraction? True union does not tend to dissolve into one another the beings that it brings together, but to bring them to completion by means of one another." (HENRI DE LUBAC, *CATHOLICISM: CHRIST AND THE COMMON DESTINY OF MAN*, TRANSL. LANCELOT SHEPPARD AND ELIZABETH ENGLUND (SAN FRANCISCO: IGNATIUS PRESS, 1988): 327-328)

God has brought your communities together. May He now bring his good work to completion in you through the power of the Holy Spirit, forming you into experts of communion. Thank you.