

Sanctified in Truth

In the name of our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord Jesus, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus pouring out his heart to his Father in heaven. He has a lot on his mind. He knows that in just a few short hours he will be subjected to unspeakable horrors as he endures arrest, betrayal and abandonment by his followers, cruel mocking and ridicule, merciless beatings, and the agonizing torment of crucifixion. Worse, he knows that in the midst of all this he will also be exposed to the fearful wrath of God as he bears the shameful disgrace and full penalty of the world's sin. But despite the terrors he will soon face, his chief concern not for himself but rather for his disciples. It is for them – and we can say for us, the whole Church – that he prays. And his request is twofold: first that they may be united as one, even as he and his Father are one; and second that they be sanctified in truth.

These petitions of Jesus on behalf of his disciples are closely related – like two sides of the same coin. Unfortunately, especially in our time, there is a lot of misunderstanding about them. This unity Jesus speaks of, what does it look like? In what does it consist? How does the Father answer this prayer of his beloved Son? And what does it mean to be sanctified in truth? Trust me, there are a lot of different answers to these questions out there. And most of them are wrong. So it will be good for us to spend a few moments this morning unpacking what above all else Jesus desires for his Church, and too, how his prayer is answered.

We begin with his second request because of the two it's the one that needs the most explanation. Jesus asks that we be sanctified in truth. We have to ask, what does it mean to be *sanctified*? It's one of those churchy sounding words that gets thrown around, but few really grasp its meaning. Simply put, to sanctify something is to make it holy. And when we hear the word holy, most of us think in terms of moral perfection or the state of being sinless; but that really isn't the idea. No, holy means separated or set apart – particularly for the Lord's use and purposes.

For example, the space in which we are sitting is called the *sanctuary*. It's been sanctified, made holy, set apart for the worship of the one true God. It wouldn't be right to allow this same space to be used as a gymnasium or for the worship of a false god. That's not what it's been set aside for.

In a similar way, we who have been called by Christ into discipleship have been made holy. We have been separated from the world, made children of the heavenly Father, and heirs with Jesus of eternal life. How? By the truth, the truth of Christ, the truth that he taught to his disciples and sent them out into the world to proclaim about who he is, what he has done for our salvation, and how our sins are forgiven and life is granted through faith in him.

You see the world at large is under the deception of the devil. He is the father of all lies. And the world believes his lies which are many. They come in all kinds of forms: from the various teachings of false religions to the belief that there is no God at all, and all points in between. What's more, these lies kill. The devil murders people through his lies. Those who believe them will perish eternally in hell. This is why Jesus wants us to be sanctified in his truth. We become and remain sanctified – separate from the world and its lies, and heirs of life – only by hearing the truth of Christ through which the Spirit works in us the faith to believe it.

And this in turn is what unites us: our common confession of Christ's truth. When we believe his truth, when we confess together what Jesus did and taught, we are one with him and with everyone else who believes and confesses the same truth. Furthermore, being united as one in the mind and body of Christ, and being set apart for the Lord's use and purposes, we live out this holy unity in our words and actions. We care for each other as Christ cares for us. We serve one another as Christ serves us. We forgive one another as Christ forgives us. And we pray for each other as Christ prays for us, for we are all the members of his one body.

We actually see this sort of unity in Christ's Church in the early chapters of the book of Acts. The apostles and the other believers with them number about 120 people. They are said to be in one accord. There are no conflicts or divisions among them. And when Peter proposes they choose someone to replace Judas as one of the twelve, citing several Scriptures in the process, they all agree it's a necessary thing to do. They set forth two men with the right qualifications and leave the decision up to the Lord. They are perfectly united in this.

Then again later, after the day of Pentecost when several thousand more come to faith in Christ, the Church is described as completely unified as its members devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, to the fellowship, and to the breaking of the bread – by which is meant Holy Communion: the sacramental meal in which Christ gives his body and blood for his bride, the Church, and so unites himself with her. It's beautiful. And too we hear how the members of the Church were taking care of each other. Those with means were, as necessary, gladly selling their possessions to contribute to the poor and needy so that everyone was properly fed, clothed, and sheltered. It really was the way Christ intended it to be.

But as you know, it didn't last very long. The rest of the book of Acts and indeed the entire New Testament period since has seen the Church beset by many trials from without and countless divisions from within. And I hasten to add that it's not because the prayer of Jesus failed or that his Father refuses to answer it. No, Jesus anticipates these very things as he prays. After all, the Church is still in the world. He didn't take us out of it. He wants us to continue the mission for which he has sent us, which is to bear witness to him and to bring more people to faith and salvation. And that means the Church is going to come into conflict with the world. As Jesus says to his Father, "I have given them your Word and the world has hated them."

Thus we see the devil attacking the Church from without through unbelievers who persecute its members. And we see him attacking the Church from within by attempting to substitute some of his lies for the truths of Christ. We also see him tempting members of the Church to sin, like Ananias and Sapphira who donated money not because they cared about the poor, but because they thought it would make them look good and the other members of the church would praise them.

Regarding persecution, the devil's attacks from the outside, it always serves to strengthen the Church. It separates true believers from those who only have a fair weather faith. And the witness of those who remain faithful under trial is a powerful thing. Satan will never destroy the Church or any of its faithful members by persecution no matter how hard he tries.

No, he is far more successful in damaging the Church from within through his lies by which he subverts, waters down, or outright denies part or all of Christ's truth. This is why we have so many different denominations today all calling themselves Christian, and yet divided over various substantial points of doctrine. And let's be clear here: when we are talking about

doctrine we are talking about Christ's truth that gives life, and the devil's lies that bring death. The two are not to be mixed.

This is precisely what's wrong with the thinking behind the ecumenical movement. The idea is that Jesus wants his Church united. Therefore it's our job to do it – to unite with other believers regardless of what they believe or what parts of Christ's truth they deny. They say that since we'll never agree or come to a consensus, we shouldn't argue about it at all. Besides, individual doctrines don't matter. It's far more important that everybody who calls themselves a Christian get along, play nice, and work together on social improvement projects.

But that isn't the unity Jesus prayed for. That's a false unity based on a willingness to accept lies and to deny Christ's truth. It's also a man made unity. Jesus prayed to his Father, not to us. It's the Father's job to answer prayer, not ours – and certainly not by sacrificing any of the truth.

And the Father does answer his Son's prayer. How? By sanctifying the Church in truth. *His Word* is truth. And so when we have a disagreement on some point of doctrine, we recognize that's where the battle is. That's where the devil is trying to deceive us. And what he'd love for us to do is to say, "We'd best not argue about this. Let's remain united and simply agree to disagree." The devil likes that because then his lie can stand side by side with Christ's truth, both equally accepted. The devil wins.

No, the answer when we have a difference in doctrine is to have the argument, to fight the fight of faith, not based on feelings or worldly philosophies or what happens to be fashionable at the moment in the culture; but based solely on the Word of God. That is our source of truth. That's where we go for the answers when there is a disagreement. And by God's Word of truth and the illumination of his Spirit the lies of the devil are then revealed for what they are and we reject them. We adhere to the Word of truth. Thus the Father separates us from the world and sanctifies us in his truth, Christ's truth, the truth that sets us free, grants us life, and unites us in heart and mind with one another. And in this way the Father answers the prayer of his beloved Son, our Savior Jesus Christ to unify us and to make us holy. May he continue to guard and keep us by sanctifying us in his truth now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!