

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Easter continues this Sunday and two more. Are you tired of it? I hope not. Jesus' resurrection gives us hope, and hope results in joy for us even now.

For the disciples, Jesus' cross caused a lot of emotions, not least among them was sorrow. Jesus told them: *"you will weep and lament ... [y]ou will be sorrowful"* because of my suffering and death; while the *"world rejoice[s]."* But, Jesus says, *"your sorrow will turn into joy."* It's the joy of Easter, the joy of resurrection, the joy of seeing Jesus again. Jesus foretold it, and His prophecy would come true. Remember on that first evening of Jesus' resurrection He came to them in the closed room, showed the disciples His wounds, pronounced peace ... and *"the disciples were glad"* (John 20:20) — they rejoiced. Christ is risen. Alleluia.

Yes, alleluia! Praise the Lord. *"Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!"* This is all wondrous good news. It is a fruit of the resurrection to us as individuals and to us as the Church.

You know that the Bible paints several pictures of who the Church is. It is *"a bride adorned for her husband,"* the Church as the Bride and Christ as the Bridegroom. It is a building built on the Rock, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). And it is the Body of Christ, Christ Himself the head of this Body, as St. Paul says: *"Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior"* (Eph. 5:23).

Moreover, in this Church, this one body of Christ, Paul acknowledges, there is great diversity. *"[J]ust as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ... For the body does not consist of one member but of many"* (1 Cor. 12:12, 14). Paul goes on to highlight this diversity and laud it. Just as the body has different members that are necessary for the functioning of the body — hands such that we can manipulate things, eyes such that we can see, ears such that we can hear — so the body of Christ has different members, all working together for the functioning of the Church, of the *"one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church,"* as we confess (Nicene Creed), emphasizing here the Church's oneness.

This was a lesson that Peter had to be taught. God taught him, and he taught the Church in Jerusalem, for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem criticized Peter for entering into Gentile homes and eating with Gentiles. What an outrage! According to the rabbis, such a thing would render him unclean, common, defiled. The Jews made such distinctions, and that divided people from each other: the circumcised Jewish Christians from the uncircumcised Gentiles.

This issue of “making distinctions that divide” is with us still today, although not usually the circumcised/uncircumcised distinction. Still, people make a big deal about identity today, and in doing so, they seek to divide us.

Who are you? Male or female? Young or old? Rich or poor? Black or white? European, African, Asian, Hispanic heritage? Democrat or Republican? Etc. The battles between these groups rage on. How many ways do we divide ourselves up? Separate ourselves from one another, even in Church? Repent!

Peter had to be taught, and he teaches us: none of these things matter in the Church, not even the Jew/Gentile distinction. In our First Reading, Peter recounts an experience he had that makes the point. Peter was praying on a housetop in the city of Joppa when he fell into a trance and saw a vision. He saw a great sheet being let down from heaven, and it was filled with all sorts of “*animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air.*” A voice told him to get up, kill, and eat them. Peter objected: “*By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*” But a voice spoke to him a second time — it was surely the Lord Himself: “*What God has made clean, do not [you make] common.*”

It took Peter three times to get it, but got it he did. He understood that the Lord was talking about His Church, and about who are permitted become a part of His body, the Church. Was it going to be merely a Jewish sect, or was it going to become a Church of all nations as Jesus had commissioned the apostles to go forth and make (Matt. 28:19)?

Three Gentile men showed up at the house where Peter was staying. They had been sent by a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius at the instruction of an angel of the Lord. Peter with three others accompanied the men back to Cornelius’ house and entered it, knowing that it was “*unlawful ... for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but [that] God [had just] shown [him] that [he] should not call any person common or unclean*” (Acts 10:28). And Peter proceeded to preach to these Gentiles.

He began: “*Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*” (Acts 10:34-35). And Peter continued to preach to those Gentiles the Good News of Jesus from John, the forerunner, to Jesus’ baptism and ministry, telling of His signs and wonders, all the way to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus is the Messiah to which “*all the prophets bear witness,*” Peter preached; Jesus is the Savior of the world through whom “*everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins*” (Acts 10:43).

And those Gentiles believed; the Holy Spirit fell upon them, and they themselves started speaking in other languages like the disciples did at Pentecost.

They praised God and were baptized, adding them to Christ's body, the Church, for that's how it works with Christ: *"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit"* (1 Cor. 12:13). Peter would later report this experience to the Jerusalem Council saying: *"by my mouth the Gentiles [heard] the word of the gospel and believe[d]. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith"* (Acts 15:7-9).

Truly, in Christ Jesus, all the distinctions that we make and that often divide us, are set aside. The only distinction that remains is: are you *"in Christ"* or not, for as St. Paul says: *"in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise"* (Gal. 3:26-29).

Some years ago, the LCMS put out a poster of the face of Christ — I liked it. It was kind of a rugged Jesus. From afar, that's what you saw — you saw the face of Christ. But seeing the poster up close, one could see that Christ's face was made up of a bunch of faces — of ordinary people of *"every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages"* (Rev. 7:9). It illustrated the truth.

That's the Church. That's who we are: sinners of all sorts given rebirth and made new in the waters of Holy Baptism, incorporated as one into the one body of Christ with Jesus as our head, given repentance and made heirs of life. What wondrous Good News! How can we do anything else but *"break forth into joyous song and sing [His] praises,"* for all of Jesus' disciples *"will see [Him] again"* — face to face, with our own eyes (Job 19:26-27). This promise is true. And in that day, our *"hearts will rejoice, and no one will take [our] joy from [us]."*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen. Alleluia.