



Episode 11: Unity and Diversity in the Mass

SUMMARY

The Church's most fundamental principle in the celebration of Mass is that of unity. She has no greater interest than to foster unity when remembering the great sacrifice of Christ for love of us. Our harmony with one another sacramentalizes our unity with him. Catholics express this unity by participating in the common texts, postures and gestures.

Saint Pope John XXIII was very clear when in 1959 he urged that Catholics observe “unity in necessary things, liberty in doubtful things, charity in all things—in *necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas.*”

In the celebration of the liturgy, there remains room for legitimate diversity. As the General Instruction of the Roman Missal notes however, adaptation is not to be arbitrary. From the early days of Christianity, the Church has recommended a common sense approach. Saint Augustine tells us certain things “ought to be observed for the sake of fellowship with those among whom we live.” (Cf. *Letter to Januarius*, Chapter 2.)

General Instruction of the Roman Missal

In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people of God's own possession and a royal Priesthood, so that they may give thanks to God and offer the unblemished sacrificial Victim not only by means of the hands of the Priest but also together with him and so that they may learn to offer their very selves. They should, moreover, take care to show this by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration.

They are consequently to avoid any appearance of singularity or division, keeping in mind that they have only one Father in heaven and that hence are all brothers or sisters one to the other. (n°. 95)

Moreover, they are to form one body, whether in hearing the Word of God, or in taking part in the prayers and in the singing, or above all by the common offering of the Sacrifice and by participating together at the Lord's table. This unity is beautifully apparent from the gestures and bodily postures observed together by the faithful. (n°. 96)

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the “sacrament of unity,” namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops. (n°. 26)

Even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community... (n°. 37)

IN THE TRADITION

“He must increase; I must decrease.”

John 3:30

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

1 Corinthians 11:27-29

“When my mother followed me to Milan, she found the Church there not fasting on Saturday. She began to be troubled...” [...] Ambrose replied “observe the custom prevailing in whatever Church you come to...”

Letter to Januarius,
Saint Augustine

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “Liturgical diversity can be a source of enrichment, but it can also provoke tensions, mutual misunderstandings, and even schisms. In this matter it is clear that diversity must not damage unity. It must express only fidelity to the common faith, to the sacramental signs that the Church has received from Christ, and to

hierarchical communion. Cultural adaptation also requires a conversion of heart and even, where necessary, a breaking with ancestral customs incompatible with the Catholic faith.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, n°. 1206

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that your Church
may always remain that holy people,
formed as one
by the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
which manifests to the world
the Sacrament of your holiness and unity
and leads it to the perfection of your charity.

Easter Vigil

As this reception
of your Holy Communion, O Lord,
foreshadows the union of the faithful in you,
so may it bring about unity in your Church.

Prayer after Communion, Eleventh Sunday

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is unity of expression the Church’s most important value in the celebration of Mass?
2. What can you do to foster a deeper sense of unity in the liturgical assembly?
3. What roles are played by humility, patience, and charity during Mass?

FOR FURTHER READING

Pope John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*,
Encyclical Letter on Truth, Unity and
Peace in a Spirit of Charity, June 29, 1959.
Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, (New York:
New City Press, 2012).