

O God, You have united disciples of every nation in the confession of Your name, and continually multiply Your Church with new offspring: Grant that those who have been born again, of water and of the Spirit, may be one both in inward faith and in outward devotion, and thereby might fight faithfully against sin, the world and the devil and may finally, with Your whole Church, be inheritors of Your everlasting kingdom; through Christ Jesus, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In Christ Jesus, who unites His Church through His holy presence, promised to us until the end of the age, dear fellow:

Have you ever noticed that never in Scripture are we told to baptize ourselves? Even Jesus, over John's objection, did not baptize Himself. We are to **BE** baptized; this saving action is to be done to us. Who does it? Christ's Church is commanded to baptize. It is not some empty ritual of tradition, rather it is an action done by God through the instrument of His Church here on earth.

Who is it that gathers the Church of believers together, uniting them with one another? There can be no question this is the action of God alone. The Church is not a man-made club or society. It is the ongoing living creation of our Lord. So it is that our unity as Christ's Church is not created nor maintained by our action. Rather as we see: **Christ's Disciples Are United through Their One Holy Washing.**

I

Often when people ask how many members are at any given congregation, they usually want to know the number of adults? Why? Because they are the contributors and those who make key decisions. The number of baptized members is often dismissed, unless the one asking the question is concerned about the viability of the congregation in the future, i.e., are there potential contributors coming up through the ranks. At times we have had to remind the ushers who count those attending the divine services that all children, even babes in arms are to be included in the count.

But such dismissing of children is nothing new. You probably remember when the disciples rebuked the parents who were bringing their children to Jesus and He said to them with indignation: "Let

the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

Now these children may not have **yet** been baptized, but when Jesus instructs His Church to make disciples of all nations, He was including children, yes, even infants. And how is it that people of all ages of all nations become His disciples, by baptism? We, Jesus' disciples down through the millennia and even to this day, are sinners who have been cleansed from all our sins through faith in Him as our only Savior. By this work we are regenerated, born again, as true children of the heavenly Father. I often point out there is an age requirement for baptism – it is birth; one must be born in order to be born again!

So you among us who are in your 80s or even 90s, continue to receive the kingdom of God in Christ as a little child. Believe that God has made you anew by His grace in Christ. For Jesus' sake you are truly a child at heart.

Baptized in Christ you have been united with Christ. You were baptized into His death, buried with Him and what is more - raised to the newness of life with Him. The unbelieving world only sees common ordinary water and hears some words of a strange sounding God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. But we who have been born again by water and the Spirit, see this as a gracious water washing away all our sins, giving us new life, as God through His mighty Word places His holy name upon us, calling us His dear holy children for the sake of His only begotten Son. So God has united us in this one holy Christian Church spanning all nations, and all generations.

II

But just as the devil sought to destroy God's first creation in the Garden of Eden, so in this Holy Church, he seeks to destroy this new creation by water and the Word. Where does he tempt us to look? - to ourselves and down upon one another and away from Christ.

The Gospel lesson for Trinity 4 includes those familiar but often misunderstood words from Jesus' sermon on the mount, which calls us out as we seek to divide ourselves. He said: "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you." Our Lord does call upon us to make judgments for sure. We are to identify the false prophet or to call to repentance the impenitent brother or sister who is going astray. But here Jesus warns us not to make assumptions about our neighbors, i.e., assumptions about what is going on inside them, in their inner thoughts and feelings.

This especially applies to our fellow believers. Our Lord knows how the devil is in league with our sinful natures. Those untamed beasts still lurking within each of us wants to figure out reasons God should be more pleased with us over against our fellow Christian. What God united through Holy Baptism no one is to put asunder. But again Satan loves to see this happen. Christian congregations and church bodies have been so divided based on such diabolical tricks.

Do not think this is something new, perhaps in the last few decades or centuries. The churches in first century Galatia and the congregation in Corinth were being divided by those who thought more highly of themselves than was warranted and condemned others by their rampant self-righteousness.

While we are united through the holy washing of Baptism, we who make up the Christian Church are not now sinless. We are saints and sinners at the same time. We are saints for the sake of the work of our holy Substitute, Jesus, who paid the eternal punishment we deserved and lived the holy life under God's Law in our behalf, so that through faith in Him, the Father considers us to have lived such righteous and exemplary lives. The sinner part of us inherited from our parents will not be finally destroyed until death.

This is the status of all believers, so Jesus asked the obvious question: "Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye." A Christian is called to be a living member of the body of Christ, not an individual with a personal relationship with God. Our Lord instructed His Church to baptize and teach; it is not a solitary activity as the individual is to baptize and teach self! You need to be born again and then not only become a little a child but remain in that relationship all your life!

Sometimes you will hear people claim they are Christian but are not part of any organized religion, they are independent purveyors of the faith. But in so doing they must ignore how our Lord has called us to be part of the Church. As brothers and sisters, we are called together to care for one another. This sacred union through holy baptism does carry mutual responsibilities. But instead of desiring to catch each other in sin eager to speak the word of condemnation, we are called to love each other and treat the other as we would like to be treated. We are to be eager to forgive one another, to support one another in this life of great challenges, to pray for one another. Jesus promises to be present with His gracious forgiveness not just for you, but for all your brothers and sisters.

Such a spirit of unity in Christ should mark all we do together. We are not to divide ourselves into cliques – the young and the old, male and female, one ethnic group over against the other. We need each other. Our Lord has brought us together for a purpose, for this life to be sure, but also for everlasting life. The Lord of the Church, who has all authority in heaven and on earth, rules all things for your benefit. Recognize what He has and promises to keep doing for you, making you His disciple having cleansed you with the holy waters of your baptism forever. Amen.