

“We are one body” 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

“For just 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 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. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts.”

Today we will continue from where we left it the last week. Just to remind you that the last time we reflected on how blessed we are that we can boldly and with confidence confess that Jesus Christ is God and that He is my Lord.

We are blessed for this is not by our choice, this is not our doing, we didn't choose Him, but He came looking for us and He called us by the Gospel. And here we are, gathered by the Father through His Son Jesus and made a new creation by the Holy Spirit, coming in His presence to hear Him speaking to us.

And there is so much that our God wants us to know and to understand. The last time we rejoiced that we are made members of God's own family, but our today's reading from Corinthians reveals even more intimate connection than being members of one's family.

“For just 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.” Paul speaks about us not just as Jesus' family, but he calls us the body of Christ. That's right. You are members not only of Jesus' family, you are members of the body

of Christ. What does this mean? Matthew has recorded the last words of Jesus before His ascension. “And I am with you always till the end of this age.” “I am with you always...” But Jesus is not only with us, He identifies with us.

Remember what happened on the road to Damascus? How Jesus revealed Himself to Saul the persecutor of the Church, who after that event became Paul the apostle. When Jesus spoke to Saul/Paul He said something remarkable.

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Why are you persecuting me...” Saul wasn’t persecuting Jesus, he was persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christians, Jesus’ disciples, just like us.

But Jesus said: “Why are you persecuting me?” Did you notice? This is how closely Jesus identifies with us, as with His body. If someone is persecuting us, they are persecuting Jesus. If someone welcome us, they welcome Jesus.

And as we reflect how intimate our relationships with our God are, how dearly He thinks about us, we need to understand that there are things that are not compatible with our Christian faith.

Things that are present everywhere in our society, things that have penetrated the community of God’s saints as well. What I have in minds is individualism, or we can say autonomy. It is this mindset that is so widespread around us and too often also among us. When we focus on “me, myself, I”.

Think about yourself first. Act in your own interests first. Do what you want and what you think is good for you. The Church, however, is the very opposite. It is not about “me, myself and I”. It is about us, about the body of Christ.

As Christians we do not gather together as autonomous individuals. We are one body of Christ. We are one holy community of God’s own people. But how often we fail to see this, and how often we fail to act accordingly.

How often we think mostly about ourselves. What I would like, what I want to happen, or what I don’t like or don’t want to happen. Instead we all should be asking: “What would be the best for the body of Christ?”

One of situations where we can see how people fail to understand what the Church as the body of Christ is, is when it comes to the foundational Sacrament, the Holy Baptism.

This is what Paul writes: **“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.”** However, many have those individualistic ideas about the Baptism.

That the Holy Baptism is some ritual where I can get something good and beneficial from God. Just like shopping. Like buying something useful. Just go and get it and you have it. But this is not what our God teaches us.

Our Baptism is not something that we can obtain from God, not at all. **You are baptized into one body...** In our Baptism the Triune God Himself joins us to His body, in our Baptism we are made members of Christ's body, the Church.

It is similarly as Jesus' illustration of the vine and the branches. Every branch receives its life from the vine. And if the branch happens to be disconnected from the vine, what happens? It withers and dies and ... is thrown into fire.

More so when we speak about the Church as the body of Christ. If any member of the body is cut off from the body, there is no life in it anymore. No life at all. We don't see separate, individual, autonomous body parts walking around. Members that are separated from the body can't live. And on the other hand, if the body loses any of its members, it hurts the whole body as well.

Paul always speaks so highly about the Holy Baptism. And this is why.

Because in our Baptism God gives us a new identity. The most important identity that shapes all our other identities. And how we think about our identity is very important. Who am I?

It is not only about this current moment. Our identity shapes our entire lives. It determines our worth, our significance. It gives meaning and purpose to our lives. For example.

If your main identity is your profession, your career, this is what your life will revolve around. Your success will give you worth and security, and your failure will take it all away. If your main identity is your family calling, or hobby, again – it is the same, most of your thoughts and efforts will revolve around it.

And how sad it is when people identify with something that degrades them as human beings as in the case with making someone's sexual desires their main identity. As for us, Christians, our main identity is given to us in our Baptism.

A child of God. An heir of God's Kingdom. A brother or sister of Jesus Christ. What it means is that we are infinitely precious in God's eyes. That there is nothing in this world that we need to fear.

That what is prepared for us surpasses our wildest imagination. And also for this life it means that we don't need to toil trying to prove to other that we are somebody, we know that we are. We don't need to worry about the future, for it is safe in our Father's hands.

We don't need to wonder about the meaning of this life, for us it is – to live in receptive relationships with our God and to serve all people whom He has placed in our lives. Thus we are free to devote our lives to what gives us the greatest joy. That is – giving, serving others, loving others. In our families. In our congregations. In our workplaces. In our neighbourhoods.

However, even God's people with new identities are not spared from battling with our sinfulness. It was so in Corinth, it is so in every congregations. Despite our best intentions, we fail. And Paul brings this up.

What he is concerned with is that some Christians look at others with envy, craving to be like them, to have what God has given to them. Sometimes it may refer to our earthly gifts, sometimes to our spiritual gifts.

Yet others look down to their brothers and sisters, despising them for they don't seem as good as others. Again, it may be about someone's status, or possessions, or mistakes of the past, or their failures to be good Christians.

Our sin taints even our most important relationships in the body of Christ. Caring for our unity and mutual love and respect Paul reminds us that all members, whatever diverse, are important:

“If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”

We, the body of Christ, are God's own creation. Now we are far from perfect, but when God has finished His work with us, when we will finally see what God has made of us, there will be no greater beauty than His Church, the Bride of the Lamb. And we want to be there to see it.

Finally Paul also speaks about different gifts. **“God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.”**

The problem is that we tend to compete with our gifts, comparing which of them are greater. And unfortunately often we have wrong criteria. Often even Christians value higher those gifts that come with glory here on earth.

Thus you probably know what spiritual gifts certain churches consider as the signs of real Christians. I think usually it will be speaking in tongs, healings, foretelling the future under umbrella of prophesizing. No doubt it may seem impressive to witness such miraculous things happening.

But the word of warning is due. It is true, that these signs, or we can say spiritual gifts accompanied apostles, and from time to time they accompany missionaries even today, true.

However, did you know that all these phenomena – speaking in tongs, healings, foretelling of future are also manifest in almost every religion? You will find them among Buddhists, among Muslims, among Hindu, among African animist religions. We have this warning from God that evil spirits too have spiritual powers and can perform great miracles to lead us astray.

Luckily our God gives us tools to evaluate these spiritual activities. And it is simple. The most important thing is the message, the teaching. If the teaching is in accordance with the Bible, and then is accompanied by miracles, we can be assured that this is God's Spirit at work, as He confirms His own message.

But if the teaching is distorted, if it obscures the Gospel, if it takes our focus away from Jesus, or ignores some parts of God's Word, and such teaching is accompanied with miracles, we need to be very, very careful. And when it comes to eternal life, one can't be too careful.

This is why, when we look at the descriptions of the spiritual gifts, what are those that Paul lists first? Apostles, prophets, teachers... He lists first those gifts that deal with the Word of God, with His Gospel message.

For these indeed are the greatest. It may be great to get healed. It may be fun to listen to others speaking in different language. But it is the Word of God, which comes to us hand in hand with the Spirit of God, that actually creates true faith and gives us eternal life. This is why Paul encourages us to “**earnestly desire the higher gifts**”. That is everything that has to do with the Word of God, with the life-giving message of our God.

Concluding just a few more reminders. We all are different, we all are unique, and we all are infinitely precious to our God. The same Spirit of God unites all of us more intimately that we can understand it.

We all are one body of Christ. And as one body we have the same mission. To continue what Jesus began and what He entrusted us to carry on. To make disciples. By calling people to repentance and proclaiming them the forgiveness in the name of Jesus.

By joining them to the body of Christ by means of the Holy Baptism. By continuing to shape and mould them by teaching them everything that Jesus has commanded to teach and to learn.

This is why we are here as one body. And may Jesus Christ, who is our Lord, help us, His body, may He bless us and guide us that everything we do pleases our God and grows His Church.

Amen.