

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. Last year, the observance of the Holy Trinity fell on May 26. I have distinct memories of this because I was at the Creighton retreat center. Father Bob Dufford presided over Mass. He began by joking there was not enough time to adequately explain the Holy Trinity in a single mass. Now, if a retired Jesuit can recognize the complexity of the Holy Trinity and explaining it in Mass, I a lay person, know better than to dare try.

Instead, I will share one of the reflections I prepared during that retreat.

*We gather ecumenically, as the people of God divided by tradition, history, and practice but united by our baptism into Christ.*

These were the words printed in a program for the 3-hour service at my church last year on Good Friday March 29, 2024. An ecumenical service with 7 speakers from protestant denominations and the Catholic Church.

A little over a month later on May 3, I attended Ablaze, a Pentecostal worship service at Saint Gerald's Catholic Church in Ralston Nebraska.

The following day, May 4, I got a bonus Easter experience on Holy Saturday in an Eastern Orthodox church when I attended a young friends Chrismation. (A Chrismation is a baptism, confirmation, and first communion all in one.) I was told by my young friend that the service would last about three hours. The service concluded four and a half hours later after much chanting and repetition.

On Sunday, May 5, I was here at St. John's for a 19th annotation retreat. Finally, at 11 o'clock the same Sunday, I was at my own Lutheran Church serving as a communion assistant. It was an invigorating weekend for me because the blending of our Christian faith traditions fills my heart and soul.

Our division is a sad consequence of human history. The first division of East and West in 1054 was over the Filioque when "and from the Son", was added to the original Nicene Creed. This split was over more than linguistics, but the Filioque is what it is widely known for. Martin Luther in 1517 had no intention of splitting from the church when he posted his 95 theses. He had no intention of leading a movement away from the church but rather of reforming the church from within. Nonetheless, the Protestant reformation began. There were early divisions within the protestant reformations as well. Calvinists claimed Lutherans were still too Catholic. And if not for the tantrum of King Henry VIII the Anglican church may have never come to be, either. Some of these divisions were a result of cultural and national interests as much as they were of religious or theological differences. Division was never part of God's plan. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of areas where we, in the United States at least, can find something to deeply disagree about.

Our differences have faded since the great schism 1,000 years ago and the reformation 500 years ago. There has been progress in reconciling our differences over the Filioque. The largest theological issue of the Protestant reformation, the doctrine of justification was resolved with the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification." A document agreed upon in 1999 by the Catholic

Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation as a result of Catholic – Lutheran dialogue. It states that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." To the parties involved, this substantially resolves much of the 500-year-old conflict over the nature of justification which was at the root of the Protestant Reformation.

Last year I attended a service on October 31, Reformation Day for Lutherans, via zoom where a Catholic priest of the diocese in Dubuque Iowa spoke during a Lutheran worship service at Wartburg Theological Seminary. This had been a day historically seen as marking our division, however the catholic church chose to participate in this service to commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the joint declaration on the doctrine of justification. This joint declaration may have only resolved one issue, but it demonstrates progress. Over the last 25 years a number of ecumenical partners of the ELCA have signed on to this document as well. The full communion partners of the ELCA include the Presbyterian, Reformed, Episcopal, Moravian, United Methodist churches and the United Church of Christ.

In smaller rural communities you may find churches from these different faith traditions sharing the same pastor. Another example of progress, yet to be realized, was when early in his papacy Pope Francis opined on the possibilities of Lutherans taking communion in the Catholic church.

I share these examples to emphasize my point that in a world so deeply divided over just about everything, we the followers of Christ, can model for the world how we have overcome our differences and found a way to celebrate our diversity. In this lifetime, we may be divided by tradition, history, and practice but we are united in our baptism. A unity which will only be fully realized in eternity. Where we will stop being Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc. Where we will be the body of Christ. No longer defined by our race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, economic or social status.

Let us, the followers of Christ, lead by example in our world by modeling how, despite our differences, we choose unity over division as we grow in our mutual understanding of a shared faith working together whenever possible to the greater glory of God.

*I have personalized the quote I heard last Easter and made it my own as I have come to realize it is the golden thread of my faith journey:*

*Though we may be divided by tradition, history, and practice we choose to gather ecumenically united by our baptism into Christ.*

Amen