

- I We have been hearing from the Gospel of St. John on our Easter Season Sundays. At the time he wrote this gospel persecutions of Christians had just begun. The Roman Emperors had already begun their policy of executing Christians for treason, because Christians refused to worship the Roman gods. One of John's themes, therefore, in all of his New Testament writings, is the power of the Church to grow and to endure even through difficult times, even violent persecutions. To complement this theme of endurance, John, in this week's gospel, presents Jesus addressing the need for unity. Jesus is praying that we may be one in him just as he and the Father share in oneness.
- A. Unity in the Church is needed at all times but especially when the Church is experiencing difficulties. Some of these difficulties can be of the Church's own making as we are presently experiencing. Unity and oneness with Christ is thus needed all the more. While the current moment is important if that is all we focus on we can lose perspective; we can lose the benefits of taking the long historical view, and thus mistakenly think that the Church is falling apart.
- B. The Church has endured for over twenty centuries maintaining the same doctrine, the same forms of

worship, meaning the seven sacraments, the same structure, meaning bishops, priests and deacons all united under the pope's leadership to serve believers in Christ. The Church has endured and even flourished during these centuries despite its many human flaws. This historical fact of the Church's longevity is miraculous. It points to the founding of the Church to be God's will expressed in and through Jesus Christ. It points to the action of the Holy Spirit continuing in his Church to this present day.

- C. This fact of the Church's existence becomes all the more amazing when we look at the actual obstacles and enemies it had to overcome.
- * The Roman Empire tried to stamp out Christianity for 300 years. That Empire is gone, the Church remains.
 - * In the Middle Ages, the Islamic Empire extended over even more territory than Rome had and conquered many Christian lands. It invaded Europe and tried to do away with the Church. That Empire fell, but the Church remains.
 - * In the sixteenth century, most of northern Europe rebelled against the Catholic Church in what was called the Protestant Reformation. In some countries, being Catholic became a capital punishment. Yet today, the Catholic Church

remains the largest Christian community, and in those countries the Church remains.

- * In the seventeenth century a new Islamic Empire, that of the Turks, tried again to overrun Christian civilization. That Empire is gone, the Church remains.
- * In the eighteenth century, the French Revolution tried to eradicate the Church in France, martyring hundreds, if not thousands. The Revolution passed, the Church endured.
- * In the nineteenth century, Napoleon conquered all of continental Europe, usurped the Church hierarchy, and imprisoned two popes in efforts to take over the Catholic Church. His empire passed away; the Church remains.
- * In the twentieth century, Soviet Communism under the USSR tried to wipe out the Catholic Church in all of its territories, as did the German Nazis. Those regimes are gone, the Church remains.
- * Today the saga continues in Africa, the Middle East, China and Vietnam. Of course, we face our own crises in the Church in this country.

D. Through all of these obstacles and enemies it has had to overcome the Church has done so not with simple human power. Left to merely human efforts and human leadership we would fail. But the unity the

Lord speaks of in today's Gospel presupposes human leadership, based on the rock which is Peter and his successors. They too have not all been saintly in their persons or leadership. Despite the all too weak human element in the Church now is not the time to abandon the Church. We will find the same human weakness wherever we go.

- E. We must remember it was Christ who founded this Church and the reason we exist today is because of the sustaining divine power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We will remember the descent of the Holy Spirit on the early Church next week as we celebrate Pentecost. We have needed in the past, need now and will always need this divine guidance in the Church. Jesus prays for the oneness of the Church. He sets the example for us. Please continue to pray for the Church, her leaders and that the Church may not merely endure but flourish.