

“THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS BUILDS COMMUNITIES”

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When we were called by the Church and appointed to the episcopacy, each of us entered a new communion of life and mission. We were sent to shepherd a particular Church, to love a people who most likely were not previously our own, and to become fathers within a local community entrusted to us by Christ Himself. At the same time, we also entered more deeply into another communion: the college of bishops. We became part of a brotherhood not created by personal preference, affinity, or ideology, but by the providence of God and the will of Jesus Christ.

None of us chose the men who would become our brother bishops. We did not assemble this fraternity by temperament, region, pastoral style, or theological emphasis. Rather, like the Apostles themselves, we were gathered by Another. We were called into communion by Jesus Christ, who continues to gather His shepherds around His Most Sacred Heart. The experience of the first Apostles remains a living icon of our vocation. The first Apostles were distinct men with different histories, personalities, weaknesses, and perspectives. Yet the Lord chose them together, formed them together, corrected them together, and ultimately sent them forth together.

It is striking that some of the most intimate words Jesus ever spoke were addressed not to crowds but to the small apostolic fraternity gathered around Him at the Last Supper. After Judas departed into the night, seated around the table, Jesus spoke from the depths of His Sacred Heart: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34–35). These words were not spoken sentimentally. They came from the Sacred Heart of

Christ at the very moment He was preparing to lay down His life for the salvation of the world. One can almost imagine the intensity of His gaze as He looked upon each Apostle. He knew their strengths and failures. He knew Peter would deny Him, Thomas would doubt, and the others would scatter in fear. Yet even in the face of their weakness, His desire remained unchanged: “Love one another.”

Before the Apostles would preach, govern, sanctify, and hand on the life of the Church, they first had to learn to love one another as brothers. Their communion was not secondary to their mission; it was integral to it. The unity of their love would become a visible witness to the Gospel they proclaimed. The Church would not be built simply through their teaching, but through the charity that united them in Christ.

Perhaps this moment in the life of the Church invites us, as brother bishops, to reflect on our unity and love, and how the Sacred Heart of Jesus calls us further into community with one another. Perhaps Jesus desires once more to look each of us in the eye and say, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.” Before these words become a pastoral directive for the Church at large, they are first a summons to us.

If we desire our parochial communities to become authentic parishes animated by communion, missionary discipleship, trust, and mutual charity, we must first model that communion — we must ensure that our words and choices make visible our life-giving incorporation into Jesus Christ, a lived participation in Christ that binds us to each other with an unfeigned love. Constitutive of the call to the episcopacy is the call to discipleship and witness. We must be “present in the midst of those who believe” (*Lumen Gentium*, 21) as the Lord commanded us to be witnesses for Him even to the very ends of the earth (*Lumen Gentium*, 19).

The people entrusted to our care should always be able to look to us and discernibly see living icons of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

Being called to, and being animated by, communion and community, therefore, is not merely a helpful pastoral strategy or simply a practical means for greater collaboration within the Church. Being animated by communion and community belongs to the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church learns communion not only from our teaching but also from our witness. Our priests come to know and gain knowledge of fraternity, in part, by seeing it lived among us, bishops, the shepherds of souls.

As each diocesan bishop is the “visible principle and foundation of the unity of his particular Church” (*Ecclesia in America*, 36), in each of our particular churches, we are the centers of communion. Therefore, we, who have received the fullness of the priesthood, are therefore called to be the exemplars of Christ the teacher, Christ the shepherd, and Christ the priest. As such, the Christian should rightly learn from us how Christians ought to speak, to listen, to disagree, to forgive, and to remain united in Jesus Christ. If we are to ask our priests and parishioners to build communities rooted in charity, encounter, patience, and mutual love, we must first exemplify those realities ourselves, regardless from which directions the political, partisan, or civic winds may blow. Otherwise, our communion risks becoming reduced to a temporal ideological model we preach rather than the spirituality of communion and mission we visibly live and foster as genuine fraternity. After all, Pope Saint John Paul II reminded us that we, “as the icon of Christ the Good Shepherd, present in the midst of his holy people, have the primary duty of promoting and encouraging such a [spirituality of communion and mission]” (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 22).

In every age, the enemy seeks division. The Evil One delights in suspicion, judgment, factionalism, resentment, and isolation. Christ, by contrast, always labors to unite, reconcile,

strengthen, and heal. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is never indifferent to communion among His shepherds, because the shepherds' unity profoundly affects the life of the flock. Just as a divided presbyterate fractures communion in a diocese, division among the bishops deeply harms the Church's witness and calls us to feel the gravity of our unity's fragility.

For this reason, perhaps we must first allow the Lord to lead us in an honest examination of our hearts. How are we as brothers? How faithfully are we living the commandment entrusted to us by Christ? Are we becoming more deeply united in charity, patience, trust, and mutual esteem? Or have we allowed the pressures of our time to harden our hearts toward one another?

We must all always remember that authentic unity, communion, and community continually require ongoing conversion. Communion cannot merely survive on structures, meetings, statements, or procedures alone. Communion must be persistently renewed by humility, repentance, and grace. The Sacred Heart of Jesus calls us not only to defend communion externally but also to cultivate it internally, from our own hearts.

The Gospel reminds us that “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Lk 6:45). Those words invite a profound examination for each of us. What emerges in our speech when we speak about one another? What emerges from the clandestine commentary on social media about another of us? What surfaces in our hearts when another bishop’s name is mentioned? Are our conversations marked by respect and charity, even in disagreement? Or do irritation, suspicion, dismissal, or cynicism too easily take root in our hearts?

None of us is immune to the temptations of our present ecclesial or political climate. We live in a culture that instinctively divides people into camps and factions. Such habits can quietly shape even how we view one another within the Church. We can begin to see one another less as brothers and more as representatives of categories: conservative or progressive, doctrinal or

pastoral, theological or practical. However, we must keep ever before us that categories cannot love; only people can express love.

My dear brothers, the Sacred Heart of Jesus never encounters us as categories. Jesus Christ does not love abstractions. He loves people. He calls each of us by name and sees the human heart in all its complexity and dignity. If we are to always be continually striving to love one another authentically as brothers, we must resist the temptation to reduce one another to labels or conventions. We must continually return to the deeper truth that each of us – the man before me – is a successor of the Apostles, a bishop of the Church, a brother, and a beloved son for whom Christ gave His life.

This realization requires more than tolerance. This realization calls us to genuine openness toward one another. Do we truly listen to one another? Do we listen to respond or do we seek genuine encounter with one another? Do we seek to understand the deeper concerns, convictions, fears, and hopes that shape what another brother bishop expresses? Even when we disagree prudentially or pastorally, do we try to hear the underlying love for Christ and the Church that motivates the other? Brothers, charity does not erase differences, but loving with an unfeigned love changes how we carry such differences.

Make no mistake, communion among the bishops has never required uniformity of personality, style, emphasis, or pastoral instinct. Unity in the Church has always been deeper than sameness. Just as the Apostles themselves were not identical men, our communion today rests not on ideological agreement on every matter, but on our shared participation in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Before anything else, we are priests of Jesus Christ. Before our administrative responsibilities, public debates, or ecclesial tensions, we must keep before us that the ontological

change in each us has configured us sacramentally to the Sacred Heart of the Good Shepherd. None of us is worthy of this calling, yet each of us has been chosen. It was not by our own merit that we were chosen, but because Christ chose us. It is only by the grace of Almighty God that we have been entrusted with the responsibility to make Jesus Christ and His Sacred Heart visible in the world.

The people entrusted to our care do not simply need efficient leadership or compelling strategies. They long to encounter the Sacred Heart of Jesus in us, their shepherds. The Christian faithful seek to see bishops who continually and genuinely love one another, speak of one another with reverence, bear one another's burdens patiently, and remain united even amid difficulty. Such a witness is an exemplar of the evangelical beatitudes and possesses a formidable evangelical power.

Brothers, let us resolve this day to again have the courage to look honestly within our own hearts. May we allow the Sacred Heart of Jesus to purify whatever diminishes charity within us. And may we remember that the communion we seek to foster in the Church must continue to first be lived among ourselves, as brothers gathered around the Sacred Heart of Christ, united in His one priesthood and sent forth so that His love may be revealed to the world.