

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Yr. A.
January 22, 2017
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In a museum in Amsterdam hangs a painting by the Dutch Master Adriane van de Venne. I don't know where the painting hangs in the museum, but on the cigar box he's third from the left. The painting is entitled "Fishers of Souls", but when you look at it you immediately see that it's more than an illustration of today's gospel reading.

The center of the painting is occupied by a wide river, which narrows toward the viewer so that both banks are visible in detail. What you see on each bank is a rival camp, Calvinists on the left, Catholics on the right. In the center, on the water, are boats from each group, and from other groups in the background, competing with each other to pull people out of the water into their own boat.

1614, the year "Fishers of Souls" was painted, was a year of truce during the Thirty Years War, part of the so-called Wars of Religion that followed the Protestant Reformation. Alliances shifted, but in general Lutheran Germany was fighting Catholic Austria for independence. Calvinist Netherlands was fighting Catholic Spain for independence. Because Catholic France was already a rival of Spain, France sided with the Calvinists and Lutherans. So just how religious were the Wars of Religion? The painting contains clues that van de Venne sided with the Protestants, yet his painting makes a larger statement as an ironic commentary on the state of Christianity. It's an obvious reference to Matthew, chapter 4: "Come after me and I will make you fishers of men", but surely what you see is not what Jesus had in mind.

Today has been designated "Ecumenical Sunday", and it falls about in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, so it's a good time to think about what Jesus had in mind for his Church.

His Gospel, which he told us to take to the whole world, is all about reconciliation. Jesus came, preached, died and rose to reconcile humanity with God, and human individuals to each other. After all, how can I love the God I do not see if I hate the brother I do see? So to be reconciled with God I must be reconciled with my neighbor, and that calls for very personal repentance. Which is where Jesus started. His own disciples squabbled over who was most important. So he placed a lowly child before them as their model. James and John angled for places of honor, so he challenged them to drink his cup of suffering. At the Last Supper he got down on the floor like a servant and washed their feet, then told them to wash each others' feet if they wished to be his disciples. But Jesus didn't stop with correction, or even personal example-- he eventually gave them the Holy Spirit to empower them to follow his example.

The Holy Spirit is to the Church as the soul is to the body-- the principle of life. And just

as a single human soul animates a single human body, so the one Holy Spirit gives life to one Church. There can be only one Church because there is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, as Paul wrote the Ephesians. There is only one Church, and so an appropriate name for that Church is “Catholic”, which means “Universal”.

Baptism gives the Holy Spirit to a person, incorporating them into the Church, making them a living member of the one living Body of Christ. And while the Holy Spirit, the life of the Church, is invisible, the body of Christ in this world is visible. Christ instituted sacraments which he commanded us to celebrate. He gave the Church a visible leadership in Peter and the apostles, a leadership that has had successors. He taught a body of truth and promised that the Holy Spirit would maintain that truth down through the ages until he comes again. And let's remember the core truth: God is love. And the core moral command: love God with all you are, and your neighbor as yourself.

Over the centuries since Christ his followers have not always followed very well. We are flesh and blood, after all, inclined to sin. We are prone to pride and greed, to ignorance and fear. But just as Christ took the apostles as they were and worked with them, he takes us as we are and works with us. He has given us a common life, his Holy Spirit, so we belong to Him and to each other.

Over the centuries, the Church has been something like a family, with many wonderful episodes and also with some problems. Somebody is overbearing. Somebody is resentful and rebellious. Somebody moves across the country and never calls. They say they have disowned their family, but you can't escape who you are. Like it or not, they are still a member of the family, just an estranged member. Reconciliation is preferable to trying to live like someone you're not.

Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant each have their own voice and perspective. John Paul II called East and West the two wings of the Church. He looked forward to the day when the Church would again breathe with both lungs. The Gospel calls mankind to repentance and reconciliation, but we Christians have little credibility if we are divided among ourselves. Do you know who holds the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem? A Muslim family, because the different Church groups using the place could not agree. What does that say? Though, on the other hand, maybe it says that Catholic and Orthodox would rather give up control than fight each other.

When the world can again say “See how these Christians love one another”, when they see Christians living by the maxim “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity”, then the world will be ready for reconciliation, and the Church will have served its purpose.