

Nothing More Beautiful

Year Three, Session One

“The Church We Believe in is One”

Catechetical Reflection

Most Rev. Richard Smith, Archbishop of Edmonton

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In this third year of our *Nothing More Beautiful* reflections we give our attention to the mystery of the Church. There will be four sessions in all, with each dedicated to one of what we call the “marks” or essential characteristics of the Church. The Church of Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Our opening session, with me as catechist and Julien Hammond as witness, focused on the oneness of the Church.

To draw out the essential points of the two presentations I draw your attention to a teaching of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. In chapter five of that letter Paul speaks of marriage, and applies by analogy the beauty of the marital bond to the mystery of Christ and his Church. Following St. Paul, if we apply certain aspects of the relationship between husband and wife to the mystery of the Church we gain insight into the main points of the opening presentations for Year Three of *Nothing More Beautiful*.

First, we know that the marital bond in God’s design is forever. It is God’s work to unite a man and woman in matrimony. Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate, as Jesus himself says (cf. *Matthew* 19:3-6). This mystery of indivisible union applies to the relationship between Christ and his Church. For the sake of the Church, Jesus Christ gave his life on the Cross. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, he has united believers to himself and thus to one another. For this reason St. Paul speaks of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, with Christ the Head and we the members (cf. *1 Cor.* 12:12-31; *Col.* 1:18; 2:18-20; *Eph.* 1:22-23). The Church is Christ and his people joined together inseparably by the action of God. What God has joined let no one separate.

Yet this is precisely what many try to do, when they separate their belief in Christ from participation in the life of the Church. This runs counter to the design of God. “I believe in Jesus but do not see what that has to do with the Church.” “I am spiritual but not religious.” These are some of the ways in which the separation is expressed. Of course, there are any number of reasons why a person may separate himself or herself from the Church. Maybe they have not grown up in the Church; perhaps they have been hurt by one of the Church’s members or have not been welcomed; or it is possible that much misinformation in the secular media has left them with a false impression of the Church. Whatever the reason, this is not the will of the Lord. He has given himself in love upon the Cross to draw into unity the scattered children of God (cf. *John* 11:52), the unity we call the Church. When we stray he wishes to draw us back to himself, and when we encounter Christ anew, his love draws us at the same time into the union of the Church.

St. Paul’s teaching about the indivisible unity of the Church with Christ arose from his own personal encounter with the Lord. As we know, he had been a fierce persecutor of the Church.

When Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus, he did not ask Paul why he was persecuting the Church; he asked “Why are you persecuting *me*?” (cf. *Acts* 9:1-6). Christ and the Church are one.

The second dimension of marital life to notice is its nature as a covenant. When a man and woman exchange their consent they enter into an unbreakable covenant of love, in which each pledges for life to love and be faithful to the other. In the catechetical presentation I demonstrated how God’s desire for a covenant with his people has given birth to the Church. Throughout salvation history God pledged himself to his people, and sought from them a response of faithful love. Only in Jesus Christ has the perfect covenant desired by God come about. In his divine nature Jesus is the perfect expression of God’s fidelity to humanity; in his human nature he is the perfect expression of humanity’s fidelity to God. We share in this relationship of perfect covenantal love when we are drawn into unity with Jesus Christ, a unity that is brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit. And because Jesus is the one Lord, unity with him brings us into unity with one another. We call this unity the Church. If this unity has as its foundation the covenant of faithful love between Jesus and the Father, this means we need to live out covenantal love with each other. In other words, we need to be committed to one another as fellow believers, and in a particular way committed to preserving among us the unity for which Christ gave his life (cf. *Ephesians* 4: 1-5).

An example of such a commitment was given to us in our witness for this evening, Julien Hammond. As we heard him share with us the story of his friendship with Christ, we learned that his encounter with the Lord led him to dedicate himself fully to work for the unity of the Church. Although we may not be professional ecumenists, as he is, nevertheless the call to work for unity in our own way is clear. Again, consider the marital analogy. Unity between husband and wife is fashioned by God the moment they exchange their consent on the day of their wedding. Yet they still must work at preserving that unity by continually loving the other and sacrificing self for the sake of the other. The unity of the Church has been fashioned by God the Father in sending his Son and Holy Spirit (cf. *Lumen Gentium* nn. 2-4). Yet it remains incumbent upon each one of us to work at preserving that unity.

So we can ask ourselves: how is God calling us to work to maintain the unity of the Church? Are there divisions in our families that need reconciliation? Are there rifts in the parish that we can help to heal? How is God calling us to be more faithful to the teaching of the Church? What opportunities is God giving us to work or dialogue together with Christians of other denominations? Do we live in isolation when God is calling us to be engaged in the life of his people, especially those who suffer?

These and other questions arise from the nature of the Church as one. We profess this Church as essential to the accomplishment of God’s saving purpose for the world. Let us live out this profession by committing ourselves ever more fully to participating in her life and mission.

✠Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton