E pluribus unum: ‘From many, one’ is the motto of the United States that appears on all of its coins. This striking motto certainly captures the wide-ranging racial, ethnic, and religious makeup of the population. However, the ‘unity in diversity’ of ideology, politics, and values is a goal not fully achieved. And there is the rub. The readings for this Sunday invite us to focus on such ‘unity in diversity.’

The first reading for each of the Sundays of Easter is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. It highlights an aspect of a post-resurrection Christian community. Sometimes what we see in that community is remarkable; at other times it is less than honorable. Today’s reading moves us away from the idealized picture of the early community to one that admits the nitty-gritty of favoritism. It depicts contention in the community because of ethnic origin. It is not clear whether the Hellenists are Gentile-Christians or Hellenistic Jews who accepted Jesus. In any event, the contention seems to revolve around ethnic diversity rather than a problem of theological difference. Specifically, the Jewish group seems to be somehow privileged. The community resolved this ethnic disparity by appointing a group of Hellenistic overseers, this demonstrating the respect and love that Jesus taught.

The primary theme of the gospel passage is Jesus’ relationship with the Father. However, there is a verse that suggests a form of ‘unity in diversity:’ “In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places” (John 14:2). The narrative context of this verse gives little indication of what this diversity might be. Most commentators maintain that Jesus is assuring his disciples that he will go to the Father ahead of them and will there prepare a place for them. Whatever the original meaning, the passage implies that even in their difference they all (diversity) will together (unity) enjoy the company of God.

In the reading from 1 Peter, the author employs a construction metaphor in describing Christian believers and their relationship with Christ. He compares the Christians to the stones of a building, and Christ to the cornerstone. He includes a verse from Isaiah (28:16) and one from Psalm 118 (verse 22) to show that Christ fulfills ancient Israelite expectation. Ideally, the community consists of many stones, but comprises one building. Once again we see ‘unity in diversity.’

‘Unity in diversity’ seems to be the challenge of the day, both socially and religiously. We live in a contentious world where the need to be seen as superior too often outweighs mutual respect, and some regard reconciliation a sign of weakness. Our children are bombarded with images of glamor and wealth to be emulated, and unfortunately, we too yearned for just a bit of the apparent privilege that it seems to flaunt. Are we any better in the community of faith?
How quick are we to condemn or ridicule those whose theological understanding or devotional practice are either more progressive than our own or more traditional? How quick are we to point fingers? Like the early Christians, we must learn to resolve our differences without trying to eliminate differing views. Jesus said: “In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places.” We don’t have to all live in the same room to be welcome.

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