Homily of Bishop John Fleming

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

St Michael’s Church, Ballina - January 18, 2023

My friends,

Belonging – the opening word of the theme of this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Yes, as a Christian and a human being, I can truly say that I belong; I belong to my family and my family tradition, rooted in Co Limerick. I belong to the brotherhood of the priests of the diocese of Killala. And, most importantly, I, together with all of you, belong to the Portion of the People of God that lives in this area. My sense of belonging gives me roots. It gives me confidence. It gives me a sense of purpose and direction. It makes me feel safe and secure. It gives me the freedom I need to go out, knowing that I can return to where I belong.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical Fratelli Tutti, ‘We are all brothers and sisters’ highlights the importance of this sense of belonging.  For all of us Christians, central to our Christianity is our sense of rootedness, as part of the People of God, even though, by history, we are members of different church traditions. This Week of Prayer for Christian Unity bring all of us out of our churches and into our common membership of the People of God, to which all of us belong. And right through the history of the People of God, God, through the Prophets, instilled in his people this deep sense of belonging, belonging to the Chosen People, the People of God. Pope Francis, commenting on the importance of this sense of belonging said; ‘A self-styled Christian who does not have this sense is not a true Christian. He is a bit particular. He feels justified without the people’. Belonging to a people, being at home in their company, having the memory of the People of God, is all important for us Christians today; something which, sadly, seems lacking in many who still acknowledge their Christian identity.

Pope Francis went on to spell out the consequences of a lack of a sense of belonging. He said; ‘If someone were to ask me: “ What do you think is the most dangerous deviation Christians can make?”, I would say without a doubt: the lack of memory of belonging to a people. When this is lacking, there is dogmatism, being moralistic, elitist movements’. Tease that out for a moment. I think it is true to say that in the individualism of today, a sense of belonging is missing. If you don’t feel part of a people what happens? You become dogmatic because you have no one with whom you can share your thoughts and receive advice and, perhaps, correction. Only my opinion matters. If as Church leaders and believers we live in our own little world; what happens? We know what happens. Our history tells us. If as Christians we live on our own little island. What happens? We don’t go to church. We don’t get involved in any community activity. We lose our sense of belonging, of being a member of a worshipping community, of being a member of a faith community, of being a member of the People of God.

Praying for Unity amidst injustice is the second part of this year’s theme.

I think that here in Ballina we have a particularly strong base from which we can look at injustice. As a Christian community we are more united through a sense of belonging to each other than any other community that I know or in which I have worked. As a Christian leader I feel as welcome in this church as I do in the Cathedral. And we have only to think of our work in Ballina Churches Together to see how united we are and how practical our Christianity is.

On injustice at a global level, I think many are encouraged by the united front presented at a political level today in the war in Ukraine. For all their different backgrounds and beliefs, the majority of world leaders in the so called developed World are united in providing backing for this war. They are united amidst and against this injustice.

However, I think we need to focus on issues closer to home. The Covid pandemic has dominated our thoughts in recent years. Pope Francis has a broader view on this. He argues that we are actually contending with more than one pandemic right now. Even before COVID-19 took hold at the beginning of 2020, he said that we were already facing pandemics of inequality, xenophobia and pollution — pandemics that are even more pernicious than the virus over the long run. And his observation forces us to think about what these pandemics might look like in our own communities, what injustices might be calling for our unified attention.

Inevitably, for example, some of the questions that arise for us are;

What are we doing here in Ballina that is contributing to the climate change that is having such serious impact on people in sub-Saharan Africa?

How are we failing to curb the radical rise in global hunger?

How are we thinking about those who are homeless, with no place to go?

What about migrants who are trapped in resettlement camps that are hotbeds for virus transmission?

And possibly the most insidious of all; what are we doing about the rhetoric of exclusion and the rise in apathy?

I think it is fair to say that in today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is ok in theory  but weak in practice. The dream of working together for justice and peace seems somewhat outdated or indeed ignored by many people. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference; for some, born of deep disillusionment and for others simple disinterest; while at the same time, everyone fails to realize that we are all in the same boat.

Our strength as a Christian community living in this area is our closeness to each other and our sense of belonging to one another. However, we need to go a step further. Our unity needs to express itself in the fight against the injustices in our midst. To recapture a political slogan ‘Much done. More to do.’ With that in mind and with God’s help, let us continue to work together in our fight against injustice.