

How can we foster unity in the Church?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus prayed that Christians would be united just as he and God the Father are one.

But from the Church's early days, that unity has been tested. Christians over the centuries have disagreed with each other over many issues. St. Paul wrote that he once had to correct St. Peter for not eating with Gentile believers in Antioch (see Gal 2:11-14).

Having a common Catholic faith does not equate a uniformity of worldviews, life experiences, personal tastes and political opinions.

Contentious debates

"It's nothing new in the Church to have vivid discussions. You can look at St. Paul's letters, and it's pretty clear there were vivid discussions about issues. It's just part of the way the Church works," said Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas.

Bishop Flores, who is a past chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Cultural Diversity in the Church, told Our Sunday Visitor that it often takes time for the Church to arrive together at a deeper sense of one issue or another.

"God gave us minds and wits to do that in conversation with each other, in conversation with the mystery of the Faith, in conversation with the teachings of the Church, in conversation with Scripture and in conversation with each other," he said. "Those conversations can be illuminated over time by grace, if we allow grace to come in."

In recent times, however, grace has not always been welcomed in the contentious debates, often conducted over social media, between Catholics who have quarreled with each other over liturgical styles, politics, dialoguing with the LGBT community and how best to provide pastoral support to the divorced and civilly remarried.

Those conversations often break down into name-calling and accusations of heresy. Instead of recognizing each other's common faith and presuming their goodwill, Catholics with different views are attacked and their motivations questioned.

In the United States, too many Catholics appear to focus on political divisions and derive a significant part of their identity by opposing other Catholics, said Charles Camosy, a moral theologian at Fordham University.

"Liberals criticize the 'pro-birth' Catholics while conservatives hate the 'social justice warrior' Catholics," Camosy said. "We instead need to state that the fundamental aspect of who we are is the same: brothers and sisters in Christ."

"In our society, we have adopted as a rule that anybody who disagrees with us is either demonized or doesn't have the Church's best interest at heart or the country's best interest at heart," said Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski of Springfield, Massachusetts.

Bishop Rozanski, who until last year served as chairman of the USCCB Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, told OSV that in a Catholic context, committed disciples of Jesus Christ can approach a topic from different angles and engage in healthy dialogue with each other.

"We have to realize that Jesus calls Christians to be countercultural," Bishop Rozanski said. "While in our day and age, it's easy to demonize others who disagree with us. That's not the Christian thing to do."

No to 'false unity'

In his five-year pontificate, Pope Francis has shown a willingness to foster open and spirited debates within the Church. In November 2016, while addressing members of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the pope warned of a false Christian unity that proselytizes and imposes an artificial uniformity.

"It is our personal and community conversion, our gradual conformation to him, our living increasingly in him, that enable us to grow in communion between us," said Pope Francis, who also emphasized that unity is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not the product of human efforts or Church structures.

When the Synod of Bishops discussed modern challenges facing the family in 2014 and 2015, Pope Francis encouraged delegates with different viewpoints to contribute to the discussions.

"I was really encouraged by how Francis was comfortable with that debate," said Julie Hanlon Rubio, a professor of Christian ethics at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Missouri, "how he encouraged debate and how he, in my mind, made attempts to reach out to different camps and say, 'You have really important concerns. I hear you. We're all going to keep talking because we're all in the Church and we're going to figure this out together.'"

Rubio, the author of the book ["Hope for Common Ground"](#) (Georgetown University Press, \$29.95), told OSV that unity in the Church does not mean that Catholics agree on everything. She noted that Catholics have never had that kind of uniformity.

"The Church is absolutely a place where dialogue and debate is part of our tradition," Rubio said. "That goes back to the Scriptures and the early Church. We should be able to recognize in each other some kind of common faith that enables

us to say, 'We're disciples of Christ together.'"

In paragraphs 813-816, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that Christ has given the Church its unity, and that unity "is of the essence of the Church." That unity is assured by visible bonds of communion such as the profession of one faith received from the Apostles, the common celebration of divine worship, especially the sacraments, and the apostolic succession of Holy Orders that maintains "the fraternal concord of God's family."

But like all families, the Church's unity can be wounded by sin. Grudges, misunderstandings, stubbornness and selfishness have led to schisms over the centuries, and they continue to tear at the unity shared between Catholics of different races, ethnicities and political persuasions.

To strengthen unity in the Church, it is important to remember that unity is necessary to the Church, said Timothy O'Malley, the managing director of the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame.

"The Church is not the gathering of those who share political ideologies. It is not the society of the like-minded," O'Malley said. "We have been brought together into one faith, one baptism and one Lord. The Church is not a social club. It is meant to be the gathering together of all humanity in Christ."

To foster unity, O'Malley added, Catholics "have to first realize that we share something deep in common from the beginning: an identity in Christ."

Hot buttons vs. dialogue

Bishop Rozanski said he believes the "hot-button" topics facing the Church today all have their answers rooted in Scripture. But arriving at those answers requires Catholics of goodwill to accompany each other. The bishop said Pope

Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* has opened up a largely healthy spirit of dialogue in the Church about how best to support the family in the modern world.

"Pope Francis talks a lot about accompaniment," Bishop Rozanski said. "We might not always agree with the people with whom we dialogue, and we might not come into agreement, but at least if we present our side in the idea of being based in Gospel values and accompany that person, then that contributes to a healthy dialogue.

"Even if the person ends up not agreeing with us, then at least we have put our side in a Christian way that invites accompaniment and not in a way that alienates," Bishop Rozanski added.

Bishop Flores said a mark of Christian humility is the ability to spend as much time listening to someone as trying to think about what to say in response.

"The media in general today doesn't lend itself to the art of conversation," Bishop Flores said. "It's really hard to be angry with somebody when you know them, even if you disagree with them."

Brian Fraga writes from Massachusetts.