The Wrong Kind of Unity
Scripture: John 17:11
Code: A315

The unity Christ prayed for in the church is not, to begin with, an *organizational* unity.

When Jesus prayed that we all might be one, He was describing a *spiritual* unity. In John 17:11, He prayed "that they may be one, *even as We are.*" Verse 21 continues: "that they may all be one; *even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us*" (emphasis added).

That describes a very specific kind of spiritual unity that proceeds from our union with Christ. Christ Himself likens it to the unity between Father and Son. It is certainly not something as mundane and superficial as the homogenization of all churches under one earthly hierarchy of bishops in Rome or Constantinople.

Organizational unity cannot guarantee true *spiritual* unity, and the proof is seen in the Church of Rome herself. Despite all the Catholic finger-wagging about the lack of unity reflected in Protestant denominationalism, there may well be more disharmony within the Roman Catholic Church than there is in the typical Protestant denomination.

Take, for example, Catholic Answers, the apologetics organization headed by Karl Keating. Although Keating and Catholic Answers did not invent the argument that Protestant denominationalism disproves *sola fide*, they certainly have perfected and popularized it. Staff apologists from Catholic Answers are the chief ones who brought this issue to the forefront of the Catholic-Protestant debate.

Catholic Answers [published the tract](#) cited in the first post in this series . And Keating himself personally trained a number of pro-Catholic debaters to employ this argument in their dialogues with Protestants.

Catholic Answers has [hammered this same theme for years](#) . According to them, an infallible, magisterial interpretation of Scripture is the only thing that can assure true unity, and [the continuing proliferation and fragmentation of Protestant denominations is living proof that there can be no unity under the principle of *sola scriptura*](#) .

Suppose for the sake of argument we grant their premises and measure the Catholic apologists themselves by their own standard? Keating is arguably the most prominent of dozens of Catholic apologists on the Internet. All of them claim they have an infallible interpretation of Scripture, given to them through the magisterium of Rome. So how has the principle of "unity" fared in the Roman Catholic apologetics community?

[Not very well, it turns out](#) . To cite one well-known example, Keating has disavowed and waged war on the Internet for several years against one of his best-known former lieutenants, Gerry Matatics, a convert from Protestantism who now heads [an organization of his own](#) . The trouble began, it seems,

when Matatics declared [his preference for traditional Catholicism with a Latin Mass](#) , while Keating is staunchly in favor of the innovations instituted by the Vatican II Council—including the new Mass in the vernacular.

In 1995, Keating said he considered Matatics "a sad example of how schism leads very quickly to heresy." [*The Wanderer*, February 16, 1995 p. 7.] Keating has published a number of articles over the years in *This Rock* magazine warning other Catholics against his former associate's influence. [e.g., [Karl Keating, "Habemus Papam?" *This Rock* (July/August 1995).](#)] Both sides took their case to the World Wide Web, posting articles and open letters, debating whether Keating or Matatics best represents the "Catholic" position. [See, for example, " [An Open Letter to Mr. Gerry Wells in Defense of Gerry Matatics](#) "]

The battle raged for several years while Matatics remained in full communion with Rome. Then in early 2005, Matatics embraced a view known as *[sedevacantism](#)*, which is the opinion that no legitimate pope has occupied the Holy See since the death of Pius XII. Ostensibly, this involves a kind of auto-excommunication. According to Dave Armstrong (himself a lay Catholic apologist), when Matatics renounced the current pope,

he incurred *latae sententiae* (automatic excommunication), based on cc. 751 and 1364 of the Code of Canon Law. The first states: the aforesaid canons defines schism as "refusal of subjection to the Roman Pontiff, or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him". The second states that the penalty for is automatic excommunication.

Matatics, of course, still considers himself a Roman Catholic—a truer Catholic than those who accept Vatican II. The ironic thing is that virtually every pope for the 450 years before Vatican II would have much more in common with Matatics than with Keating in their respective opinions about the Mass. (So much for *semper eadem*.)

And Matatics is not the only Roman Catholic apologist to wage a public feud with Keating. Robert A. Sungenis [is still at it](#) .

Such feuds are symptomatic of several larger conflicts within the Catholic Church. Keating is a "conservative Catholic," whereas Sungenis is a "traditionalist." The Roman Catholic Church is home to vast [differences of opinion about the Marian doctrines](#) , [confusion about supposed Marian prophecies](#) , [disputes over canon law](#) , and other deep-seated disagreements about important doctrines. Various [factions](#) and [sects](#) operate within the walls of the Catholic Church, waging [polemic battles as lively and intense](#) as any that ever took place between Protestant denominations.

Add into that mix the scores of [radical](#) or [liberal priests](#) who blend their peculiar doctrinal and political preferences into the Catholic system, and you have a chaos of varying opinions that is at least equal to that of even the most variegated Protestant denomination.

The simple fact is that there is really no more *unity of agreement* among Roman Catholics than there is among Protestants. Even with an "infallible interpretation" of Scripture, it seems, the Roman Catholic track record on true spiritual unity is as bad as, or worse than, that of the Protestants.

How much "unity" can there be, for example, between, say, [Father Andrew Greely](#) and [Mother

[Angelica](#) (to name two of America's best-known Catholics)? Greely is a liberal priest and novelist, who once said on "Larry King Live" that he believes the Catholic Church eventually will not only ordain women as priests, but also elect a woman as pope. Mother Angelica is a traditionalist Franciscan nun who has used her televised talk show to criticize other Catholic leaders, including Cardinal Richard Mahoney, for their non-traditionalist stance on liturgical matters.

Do Catholic critics of Protestant denominationalism seriously imagine that *their* Church embodies a pure, visible, organizational, and spiritual unity comparable in any way to the unity within the Trinity?

In fact, with so many who profess loyalty to Peter's chair waging battle among themselves over church politics and key points of truth, it should be painfully obvious to all that Roman Catholics are really no better able to agree on their own Church's "infallible interpretation" than Protestants have been able to agree in exhaustive detail on the meaning of Scripture itself.

Clearly, an external, organizational unity cannot guarantee the kind *spiritual unity* Christ was praying for. It would be a serious mistake, and a serious blow to *real* unity, to imagine that the answer to our denominational division is the abandonment of denominations altogether, and the union of all who profess Christ into one massive worldwide organization where we affirm only what we all agree on. No real agreement whatsoever would be achieved through such means, and thus we would have no more *true* unity than we already enjoy. Meanwhile, the cause of truth would suffer a severe blow, and that would ultimately prove fatal to *all* genuine unity.

But the unity Scripture calls us to is a unity in truth. Paul wrote, "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). He did not counsel the Corinthians to grasp for a superficial unity by setting truth aside and embracing an organizational unity without regard to sound doctrine. Nor did Paul order them to abandon their differences and simply place a blind and implicit trust in his apostolic magisterium. He was urging them to work through their differences and strive to achieve unity in both heart and mind. Such unity is possible only when people are themselves in union with Christ. "For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16).

That is precisely the kind of unity Christ was praying for. There is nothing superficial about it. It is a unity of spirit. It is a unity in truth. And that is why, in the context of his prayer for unity, Christ also prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17).