

The Rock of Unity

One of the thorny issues in current dialogues between the Vatican and the Anglicans as well as with the Orthodox Churches is the role and authority of the Papacy.

The division among the followers of Jesus is considered a scandal to the gospel, and certainly not the will of Him who prayed that “they may be one even as we are one”(John 17:11). Within the various communions, there is a deep desire for unity among Christians. But perceptions and suspicions about the role and authority of the Papacy appear to be a major stumbling block towards reconciliation and communion among believers.

Tensions and divisions among Christian communities are not new. The records of the New Testament, especially Paul’s letters, show that the first Christian communities had similar experiences. It is also clear that Peter, the first Bishop of Rome, emerged as a very important authority figure in the life of the early Church. His original name was Simon the son of John, a professional fisherman. The name Peter (which means Rock) was given to him in recognition of who he had become. Our gospel today has Jesus conferring on him the name Peter – the Rock on which He would build His Church.

Saints Peter and Paul gave a shining example of how to relate creatively and fruitfully when tensions and differences emerge.

Paul spoke of how he boldly opposed Peter to his face because he was wrong about not eating with the Gentiles (Galatians 2:11). Yet Paul humbly deferred to Peter’s authority even if he disagreed with him.

Peter on his part showed his great regard for Paul, calling him “our esteemed brother, who is dear to us” (2 Peter 3:15), and defended Paul against those out to discredit him.

Peter’s authoritative role certainly played an important part in settling disputes and bringing unity among the various Christian factions.

While Jesus has promised to be with the Church always, our experience of all those who have exercised authority throughout her history shows that many of them have had deep flaws. Even the gospels did not try to gloss over the human flaws of Peter. That flawed characters could occupy the Papal office reveals the glaringly human side of the Church. Yet the Papacy can still function in a very useful role in the service of unity, justice, and truth. For all its shortcomings, the Papacy is a very important gift of the Spirit to the Church.

Langdon Gilkey, an American Protestant scholar, wrote many years ago that the Papacy is the saving grace of the Catholic Church. Whereas the Protestant movement splintered further into many other denominations without some unifying authority, the Catholic Church could maintain its unity and cohesiveness through the Papacy in spite of its many internal difficulties and divisions.

Love it or hate it, the seat of the Rock is here to stay. May our relationship to the papacy be creative and fruitful. Keep in prayer the one who occupies the chair of Peter today.