

Spiritus Christi, a regrettable loss of family

Most readers of the *Catholic Courier* are aware that in 1998 a large number of parishioners from Corpus Christi Parish in Rochester broke away from our community and founded their own independent church. Three years later, I remain deeply saddened that Spiritus Christi has left our church by severing their relationship with me and by repudiating the pastoral authority of our Holy Father, John Paul II, the Bishop of Rome and the guarantor of the unity of the great church.

Although saddened, I was not surprised by their decision. It is consistent with the practice they had gradually adopted to make on a congregational level decisions that pertain to the wider church and, in most cases, to the formal teaching authority of the church. I think of such examples as appropriating to themselves the authority to decide who will minister the sacrament of reconciliation, who will be ordained, how people will be initiated into our faith community, how to determine norms for Eucharistic hospitality and who are apt candidates for the sacrament of matrimony.

For a while after the painful split of 1998, this "New Community of Faith" described themselves as being within the Catholic family, differing from us on this point or that, but representing themselves as another completely acceptable expression of our faith tradition. And, unless I misunderstand, they also took the position that they were merely leading the way, that one day — when we caught up — we would be rejoining them. Such a view omits something very deep in our tradition — communion with the local bishop and, through him, with the great church throughout the world. Moreover, the ordination to take place later this month at the hands of a Protestant bishop, which is a public and formally schismatic act, seals by action what Spiritus Christi has declined to put into words.

along the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

This rift is not about justice, nor is it a question of who has the brighter ideas or the greater degree of courage. It is about being family, sharing the faith, continually striving to know and live that faith, being as open as we can to deeper conversion to which our God continually calls us.

Spiritus Christi has chosen to leave our family. I regret that decision. It is not easy to say goodbye to family. I am also sorry that its members have cut themselves off from a tradition that allows us to grow and change, to struggle with tough questions, to engage in family quarrels and still hang together for the long journey.

As Bishop of Rochester, I have a responsibility to promote and ensure to the best of my ability strong bonds of faith and charity within our local church and between our local church and the great church. That means, among other things, that I have the obligation to teach the faith in its fullness and, with you, continually to grow in the knowledge and love of our faith.

As we celebrate the gift of our faith and do our best to proclaim it, we do so trusting that the Spirit of the Risen Christ ensures that the church will preserve in its integrity the fullness of God's gracious offer of salvation in Christ.

That promise does not preserve the church — or any one of us — from the possibility of sin

or error. We know from a review of history and the acknowledgement made by the Second Vatican Council that we are a pilgrim church, always in need of reform. For contemporary reminders of this truth, we need look no further than to the example of Pope John Paul II, who often has acknowledged and asked pardon for mistakes the church has made in the past.

The promise does mean that we rightly place our trust in the legitimate teaching authority of the church, which by the promise of Christ has preserved his saving message in its fullness.

When Spiritus Christi broke bonds of communion with us they rejected that authority and the great gift it offers of keeping us connected with the fullness of the revelation of Christ. I have no sure idea where that decision will lead Spiritus Christi in the future. My intuition is that they will one day recognize the serious and negative impact of the rupture they have caused between themselves and the Catholic tradition. I can say for sure that I cannot imagine how our community could possibly keep our Catholic identity and integrity without visible bonds of communion with the great church.

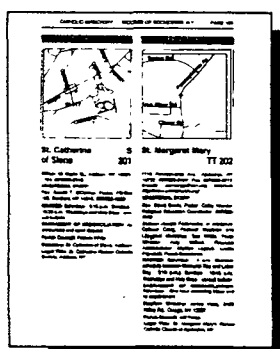
The issue, dear friends, is a family issue, a matter of communion of faith and charity. It is about who we are to one another, how we grow together, and how we deal with the faults of others and our own personal and corporate shortcomings. I know that you will be deeply sensitive to this situation and do all that you can to strengthen the bonds of faith and charity that make us one with each other and with the greater church.

Please pray with me that, one day, we will welcome Spiritus Christi back to our family of faith; and that, even in this experience of division, we may find new life and grow in love for one another.

Peace to all.

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