

God Grant Us The Grace To Be One

"Gone is the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female-you are all one in Christ Jesus!" I had read that passage from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians or heard it read 100 times: a beautiful thought, an ideal to strive for, a vision of the way it ought to be, but far from reality. For the distinctions between Jew and Greek, male and female, smart and dumb, healthy and sick are there. You can't get away from reality. That's the way life is.

Then a couple of years ago I heard a talk by scripture scholar Father Eugene LaVerdiere. He was explaining the differences between the Old and New Testaments. He noted how regularly the word *blessing* is used. People wished each other the "blessing" of God. And God rewarded with a blessing those, such as Abraham, who had faith. But in the New Testament, said LaVerdiere, the operative word isn't *blessing* but *grace*. Just about every one of Paul's epistles, including the one to the Galatians, opens with a prayer for "grace".

What's the difference? it's this, said LaVerdiere: *blessing* means the full development of one's potential - good health, long life, a big family, personal achievement, concern for others, the respect of the community. But the *grace* Paul talks about and wishes on his people is something else, something above and beyond the realization of human potential. It is the recognition that we are all one. Not that we should try to be like one or hope that some day we can get together and act like we're one. No, said LaVerdiere, echoing Paul, it's the knowledge that we are already one.

I have wondered about that ever since. What if it's true? What if that's the way things really are and the illusion is our separateness? What if that's the way God sees us? Thinking about it puts a new light, I have found, on so many of the things Jesus said about the vine and the branches, about what you do to the least of the brethren you do to me, about the first coming last and the last first.

Of course, my mind boggles when I try to get it around this concept. I have to face the fact that I am treading on dangerous ground. This idea of oneness isn't unique to Christianity; in fact, it's found quite explicitly in many of the Eastern religions - unity with humanity, unity with nature, unity with God.

There's a kind of inescapable link in the real world, Hindus and Buddhists seem to say, that we ignore at our own peril. In much of traditional Christianity we've managed to quiet that troublesome emphasis by stressing the idea of individual salvation over everything else and looking at the unity concept as an interesting metaphor, or worse, as a command to act as though we were all one.

But what if this isn't a metaphor at all? What if the vision of Jesus, echoed by other religious prophets, isn't some kind of mystical idealism but an accurate portrayal of the bigger picture, an insight that the rest of us grasp only dimly at best?

I think about a living creature. Looked at from a narrow perspective, each atom is a discrete, separate entity spinning along at a relatively huge distance from its fellow atoms and apparently independent and self-sufficient.

Then there's the big picture. We realize each tiny, far-flung little critter is in fact a codependent dance with a billion or so of its partners, all of which go to form, say, a ladybug. Of course, the individual atoms don't have minds (as far as we can tell). They aren't tempted to operate according to their own self-important designs and go off on a fling. And so the little bugger functions smoothly and efficiently.

Mass on Sunday is one of the places I explore these implications because it's there that

we are gathered in grace, it's there we listen to variations on the same theme, it's there the Eucharist keeps reminding us that we who receive the one body of Christ are ourselves one body.

I have a good parish for testing all this in practice because there's a lot of variety, a lot of differences. We have Anglos, Hispanics, and blacks. We have white collar, blue collar, and no collar. We have raving liberals and hidebound conservatives. We have tiny babies (a whole new crop this year) and some old "geezer" who can hardly get around. We have a contingent of the mentally disabled, some of who occasionally wander the aisles during services.

And I think (or pray) we are all one. I am no better, no more worthy, than that enormously heavy man across the aisle or that woman who recently left her husband or that child with cerebral palsy two pews in front of me. It doesn't make any difference because we are all one.

When the homily is especially long or boring, I can go off on mind trips speculating on how the world might run if the human family understood this and lived it in a practical way. There would be little or no violence because people would recognize they are only injuring themselves.

There would be little or no poverty (except for the voluntary kind) because folks would see the insanity in amassing great sums of wealth - that would be like clogging one's arteries with plaque when good sense requires that the life-giving resources circulate through the whole body, keep it moving, and there will be plenty for all.

There would be no such thing as homelessness since no one would leave part of his or her body outside, subject to the elements. The environmental movement would be everyone's business since we are but one creature, and the whole earth is, in fact, our home. Racism and sexism would be obsolete concepts relegated to history books.

The handshake of peace is an opportunity to express this mystery, a symbol that is more than a symbol. It's a chance to look another person in the eye and acknowledge that we are more than fellow churchgoers, more than kinfolk. We are each a unique, mutually supportive part of one body.

Ah, but here's where the going gets rough. What if the lady in the pew in front of me doesn't reciprocate? What if I turn around and come face-to-face with the guy who rambles on incessantly at parish committee meetings and drives me crazy?

I feel a certain tensing up of my facial muscles as my mind, like an evil calculator, starts making comparisons, forming judgments, recalling old grudges. But in church I can hold this under limited control if I keep turning off the switches.

And I believe many others, sensing the deeper mystery here, are doing the same thing - looking strangers in the eye, grasping hands, and greeting one another like long lost sisters and brothers. To be sure, some find the handshake of peace artificial and phony: why don't they just leave us alone! But that's missing a big point of the faith. We are not alone; no man or woman is an island; we are our brother's and sister's keeper. The idea is not all that obvious, and that's why we have to keep rehearsing it.

Then we have the rest of the week when maintaining the vision seems nearly impossible and utterly impractical. What could I have been thinking about? We live in a world that operates on the basis of differences - that's just the way it is. The whole capitalistic system is founded on getting ahead, ahead of the other guy. Our courts and legal system are grounded in the idea of establishing that the other party is wrong and we are right.

Even our sports (especially our sports) have one ultimate goal: to beat the opponent, to

establish the difference between two contenders.

I teach at a university now engaged in a massive project to position ourselves out front academically - ahead of the other schools with which we compete. Competition is healthy; it keeps the adrenaline flowing; it's as American as motherhood, apple pie - and drive-by shootings. Hmmm.

So I start all over again, and the questions come back. Maybe the so-called way it is, in reality, is the way it isn't, and that's why the world is so screwed up. Could it be that we spend most of our waking hours operating under a delusion, a massive, worldwide hallucination of separateness? Is it possible that our willingness to embrace that delusion, to advertise it, to export it, to pass it on enthusiastically to the next generation is the real original sin, the foundational sin at the root of all others? And have we been taking that insistent declaration in the New Testament about our being "one in Christ Jesus" too loosely, to metaphorically, too denominationally?

If it's true, then church time, appearances notwithstanding, is valuable time. For that's when we are invited to contemplate the elusive reality that undergirds our common life on this earth. Meanwhile, I'll keep trying to see through the misleading appearances, even if it's only partial, temporary sight - like looking through a glass darkly.

-By Robert McClory, journalism professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois and author of *Turning Point* (Crossroad, 1995). From U.S. Catholic magazine, November 1995 issue. Reprinted with permission from the author.