

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Part One - How to Be One

Every Sunday in the creed we affirm that we believe in “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” What does this mean in real life? Too often we treat the creed like one of those terms of agreement you have to click on before they will let you on to a website. We rattle through the creed dutifully, not giving it too much thought.

The creed is not just an intellectual formulation of our faith. Every word in the creed has a practical application to our lives. The creed is not simply a centuries old list of dogmas we affirm with a nod of the head. The creed doesn't just tell us what to think, it tells us how to think and therefore how to live. The creed is not a dead document, but a springboard to a more vibrant spiritual life.

Our society is riddled through with false philosophies that contradict our Catholic faith. The creed gives us clarity. It helps us analyze these false ways of thinking. The false philosophies are not something we adopt consciously. Instead, they are a set of assumptions that lie at the root of our secular society, and then filter through every aspect of our lives. We are influenced by these false beliefs constantly through advertising, and through all the media messages we receive from the multitude of secular sources every moment of our waking lives.

Through four articles over the next few weeks, I'll be exploring twelve different “ism's”-- twelve false foundational philosophies that are woven into our popular culture. These twelve false philosophies infect many of our decisions as Catholics. We've sucked up the secular culture without even knowing it, and we think things through from a worldly point of view. We make decisions and take actions based not on a deeply Catholic way of thinking, but on a secular mindset. Lent is a time of reflection and repentance, so these articles may help us turn toward God in a new and profound way during Lent.

The twelve “ism's” are gathered into four groups of three, and these twelve false philosophies are countered by the four marks of the Church: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

The first of the false philosophies which underlies our society is syncretism. A person is syncretistic when he gathers his beliefs from a range of different sources. The syncretist follows a pick 'n' mix philosophy. His belief system is a hotch potch in a hot pot. It's a melting pot of information picked up on the web, some insights from his education, a smidgen of religion here, some pop psychology, stuff picked up in travels, popular ideas from TV and new media. The syncretist rejects any unified and integrated belief system--picking up ideas and abandoning them as they seem attractive at the time.

Syncretism is linked with the second “ism”-- Individualism. Individualism exalts the individual over any authority structure, institution or belief system. The individualist is the sole arbiter of what is beautiful, true and good. The assumption undergirding individualism is that every person's judgement is just as valid as the next person's. No one, therefore, has a right to tell anyone else what to do. Because there is not greater authority to decide what is wrong, no one must judge another. Judging others is perceived as intolerance, and for the individualist this is

the worst sin.

Think of these three “ism’s” as three sisters. Sister Syncretism is a fat and lazy girl who simply takes on whatever belief system seems attractive at the time. Sister Individualism is a strident campaigner for her own rights and her own independence against all authority structures. The third sister is a sweet and attractive girl. She is called Sister Sentimentalism.

Sister Sentimentalist decides everything according to her emotions. She wants everything to be nice, and wants everyone to feel good. She doesn’t want anything nasty to happen. The sentimentalist is ‘saddened’ when things are harsh and intolerant. With such a longing for happiness and light, the sentimentalist seems the sweetest of the sisters. However, when things don’t go her way (especially when someone makes an objective judgement) Sister Sentimentalist can become strident like her sister the individualist.

These three secular “ism’s” are determined by one shared attribute: all three elevate individual judgement over all authority. Therefore, the three ugly sisters are countered by knowing and living the truth that the Catholic Church is “One.”

Syncretism is replaced by a unified teaching authority that draws all truth together, sifts through it, discerns error, teaches truth, and organizes it all in one integrated belief system. The unified teaching authority of the church draws each individual into a harmonious grouping--valuing each individual as an eternal soul, but also calling each individual into one, integrated Body of Christ in the Church. Being “One” in the church also subordinates sentimentalism. Our emotions and feelings are important, but they are secondary motives for our actions and beliefs. Unity or “being One” brings our strong, but unreliable emotions into their proper relationship to the unified truth.

How do we turn away from syncretism, individualism and sentimentalism to be “One”? We do so through our daily submission to the unified authority of the church. We are encouraged to study and understand other belief systems and draw good things from them, but we do this while constantly learning more about our own unified faith.

Being One means that our individual lives and emotions are harnessed to a greater, unified cause. To be One we are constantly subjecting our own individual beliefs, desires and goals to the greater unity of the Catholic Church.

Critics might say that this turns us into religious zombies--simply going along in mindless obedience to the will of our overlords. Not so. It is within true unity that we link our own individual lives to something far greater and older and better, and through this transaction our lives open out and we participate in God’s greater plan for the world.

What are the practical ways to become “One”? Praying the Divine Office unifies us with all other Catholics who are praying with us each day. Most of all we become “One” as we worship together at Mass. Mass is the place where we are unified in the mystical Body of Christ. It is there that we see the church being One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, and it is there that we join

our lives in that same unity.

Your Pastor,
Fr. Longenecker