

Homily 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2026

'Enrichment through Diversity'

In my philosophy studies I enjoyed the works of Plato. Two phrases of the great man stand out: 'The greatest knowledge is the knowledge of not knowing.' and 'Unity in the multiplicity.' The latter has very much fashioned my thinking in as diverse areas as Ecumenism to the richness in the diversity of ethnicities present in our communities and society at large. This richness in diversity was celebrated when I was headmaster of a large secondary school in Hertfordshire. The Annual Agape* was held in the Summer Term each year and students and their parents were invited to provide a dish from their ethnic origin for a shared picnic buffet which followed the outdoor celebration of Mass. Entertainment during the meal was provided each year by dance troupes or choirs from different countries: Nigeria, Spain, The Philippines etc. 'Enrichment through Diversity' and 'Unity in Multiplicity' were the aim, and the results were clear to see with as many as 50 different nations celebrating their cultures/traditions and in doing so, enriching the school community.

In today's First Reading from Isaiah, a Persian King, Cyrus**, is especially important because the prophet names a Gentile whom God would use to accomplish a specific purpose: "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please." (Isaiah 44:2) "This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus..." (Isaiah 45:1). Thus, Cyrus is the Persian ruler whom Isaiah portrays as God's chosen instrument to end Israel's exile and facilitate the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple. Cyrus though from a different nation would enrich the salvation history of the Jewish Chosen People.

In today's Gospel from St Luke Jesus uses another Gentile to make a point about the true meaning of his Kingdom. The Jewish Religious Leaders attempt to trick Jesus. They ask, "Teacher, tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Knowing their hypocrisy Jesus does not question Caesar's authority but, aware of their malice, asks "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus thus enriches his proclamation of The Kingdom whilst acknowledging the authority of Caesar, The Roman Emperor.

Today we celebrate 100 years of Mission Sunday. The courage and bravery of tens of thousands of missionary priests, sisters, brothers and laity have enhanced The Catholic Church by 'making disciples of all nations.' The diversity of nations has enriched The Church and brought unity in its multiplicity. However, using The African Church as a case study, Fr Paul Uche Nwobi (in his book, 'Poor Formation as A Principal Factor to the Crisis in Priesthood Today' pp180ff, 2023) a Nigerian priest, adds a word of caution and a dose of reality to this. He pleads that the African Church indeed be allowed to fully express its culture and traditions rather than become yet another casualty of colonialism, a mere extension of a European Ecclesial Model of Church. Fr Lawrence Lucas in his book 'Black Priest White Church' *** says that this issue of institutional racism within The Catholic Church must be addressed lest we lose much of the richness Africa can potentially contribute to The Universal Church.

How stunningly enlightening is that.

*The **Agape meal** was a communal meal shared by early Christians as an expression of Christian love, fellowship, equality, and unity in Christ. The word agape (Greek: ἀγάπη) means love, particularly the self-giving love associated with God and the Christian community. The meal belonged to the social and religious life of the early Church and is closely associated with the Lord's Supper, although the precise relationship between the two varied across time and place.

1. Biblical foundations

Several New Testament passages provide important evidence for understanding the Agape meal.

Acts 2:42–47 — Fellowship and the breaking of bread

The first believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. They shared their possessions and ate together with gladness and generosity.

Significance: The meal expressed the practical unity and generosity of the Christian community.

1 Corinthians 11:17–34 — The Lord's Supper

Paul rebuked the Corinthian church because some members ate their own food without waiting for others, while some went hungry and others became drunk.

Significance: A Christian meal contradicted the gospel when it reproduced social divisions rather than demonstrating unity in Christ.

2 Peter 2:13— The love feasts

Jude refers to certain people as blemishes at the believers' love feasts (Greek: agapais).

Significance: This is one of the clearest New Testament references to gatherings known as love feasts.

2. What happened during an Agape meal?

Although practices differed between Christian communities, the meal generally involved several important elements:

Sharing food: Believers brought food and ate together as members of one spiritual family.

Fellowship: The gathering strengthened relationships and encouraged mutual care.

Prayer and thanksgiving: Meals were often associated with prayer and the Christian practice of giving thanks.

Care for the poor: Sharing resources provided a practical way to support poorer members of the community.

Remembrance of Christ: In some communities, the meal was associated with the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.

The meal was not simply a social occasion. It expressed the theological conviction that those who belonged to Christ were members of one body and should care for one another.

The Agape meal in the post-apostolic Church

The Didache — Late first or early second century

This early Christian manual contains prayers of thanksgiving over the cup and broken bread, instructions for Christian gatherings, and teaching about community life. It provides valuable evidence for early Christian meal and Eucharistic practices, though the precise relationship between its ritual and a full Agape meal remains debated.

Ignatius of Antioch —Early second century

Ignatius emphasised the Eucharist as a sign of Christian unity and ecclesial communion. His writings help illustrate the growing importance of the Eucharist as a distinct, recognised act of Christian worship.

Tertullian — Late second and early third century

In Apology, chapter 39, Tertullian describes Christian love feasts involving prayer, Scripture, singing, and charitable giving. He stresses their moderation and generosity, challenging hostile accusations about Christian gatherings.

Over time, in many Christian communities, the Eucharistic celebration became more distinct from the larger communal meal. Changing church practices, concerns about disorder, and practical considerations contributed to this development. The Agape meal nevertheless continued in some settings and has been revived in various Christian traditions.

5. The theological significance of the Agape meal

The Agape meal communicated several central Christian principles.

1. Christian unity

The meal demonstrated that believers belonged to one family in Christ. Differences in wealth and social status should not determine who received food, honour, or fellowship.

2. Equality before God

The problems at Corinth show that a communal meal could expose inequality as readily as it could overcome it. Paul's criticism in 1 Corinthians 11 teaches that the Church must not humiliate poorer members while claiming to celebrate Christ.

3. Practical charity

Christian love was expressed through tangible actions: feeding the hungry, sharing possessions, welcoming others, and supporting those in need.

4. Fellowship with Christ

The meal was connected, in various early Christian settings, with remembrance of Jesus, thanksgiving, prayer, and the community's identity as his body.

5. A witness to the surrounding world

A community that shared resources across social boundaries offered a visible demonstration of the Christian teaching to love one's neighbour.

6. A key lesson from 1 Corinthians 11

Paul's rebuke of the Corinthian Christians is especially significant. Their gathering contradicted its own spiritual purpose because some had plenty while others went hungry.

His argument is that the Lord's Supper cannot be properly honoured when fellow believers are treated with contempt.

The principle is clear: **a meal intended to express Christian love becomes a contradiction of the gospel when it tolerates selfishness, exclusion, or disregard for the poor.**

Conclusion

The Agape meal was an important expression of the early Church's communal identity. It brought believers together around food, fellowship, prayer, generosity, and—in many contexts—Eucharistic worship. Its precise form varied, but its central ideal was consistent: Christians were called to make the love of Christ visible in the way they treated one another.

For further study, begin with **Acts 2:42–47, 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, Jude 12, and Tertullian's Apology, chapter 39**. Read together, these passages illuminate both the promise of the Agape meal and the challenges involved in living out its ideal.

****Cyrus The Gentile**

Cyrus was a **Persian king**, usually identified as **Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great)**, who ruled the Persian Empire in the 6th century BC. In the **Book of Isaiah**, he is especially important because Isaiah names him as someone God would use to accomplish a specific purpose: "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please." (Isaiah 44:28) "This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus..." (Isaiah 45:1)

Why is Cyrus significant?

Cyrus conquered Babylon in **539 BC** and subsequently allowed the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. This corresponds to the decree described in (**Ezra 1:1–4**) What makes Isaiah particularly striking is that **Isaiah names Cyrus before Cyrus's rise to power**. (Isaiah 44:28–45:13) presents Cyrus as God's instrument for:

- releasing the Jewish exiles,
- allowing Jerusalem to be rebuilt,
- permitting the temple to be rebuilt,
- and demonstrating that Israel's God controls the course of history.

Cyrus himself was **not an Israelite**. Yet Isaiah calls him God's "**anointed**" (mashiach, traditionally translated "messiah") in (Isaiah 45:1) because God appointed him for this particular task.

Babylonian captivity: in simple terms: **Cyrus was the Persian ruler whom Isaiah portrays as God's chosen instrument to end Israel's exile and facilitate the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple.**

*****Black Priest/White Church**

Fr Lawrence Lucas examines the racism experienced by Black Catholics within the predominantly white Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Drawing on his own experiences as a Black priest, he argues that the Church, despite preaching Christian

equality and brotherhood, often perpetuates the racial discrimination found in wider American society.

The main arguments are:

Institutional racism: Lucas argues that racism is embedded in the Church's structures, leadership and practices, rather than being limited to the prejudices of individual members.

Education and racial identity: He explores how Catholic schools can reinforce white cultural values and make Black children feel that their own identities and heritage are inferior.

Exclusion of Black Catholics: Black members of the Church face barriers to equality, representation and leadership, including within the priesthood.

The contradiction between Christian teaching and practice: Lucas highlights the gap between the Church's message of love and justice and its failure to confront racial discrimination effectively.

The need for reform: He calls for meaningful institutional change, greater Black representation and a Church that actively challenges racism rather than merely preaching against it.

Central message

Lucas's central argument is that **the Catholic Church cannot genuinely claim to practise Christian equality while tolerating racism within its own institutions.** He challenges the Church to examine its own conduct and recognise the dignity, experiences and leadership of Black Catholics.

The book is both a personal account and a critique of institutional power, linking religious faith with the wider struggle for racial justice.