

"Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity." (Psalm 133:1, RSV)

Studying and living at the seminary is not easy, but one thing is certain: seminary life provides a unique opportunity to live with people who love God, who share the same faith, and who have a desire to serve Him. Because we share such things in common, we may even feel a closer bond to people here than we do to our blood relatives. Friendships begun and nurtured here will last a lifetime. After graduation, we may keep in touch with fellow students and keep them in our prayers. All of this is a gift to treasure.

But even at the seminary, seeds of competition and one-upmanship, so much a part of our culture and educational experience, can play havoc and undermine any sense of cohesion. Is it possible to rise above? If we instead accept each other's strengths, cover each other's weaknesses, and decide to create a bond of unity, we are positioning ourselves to further the mission of Christ and His Holy Church in our broken world. Our willingness, or lack thereof, to transcend our pride either furthers or diminishes our effectiveness in proclaiming the Gospel.

I have seen first hand the benefits of Orthodox clergy setting aside their egos to work, pray, and play together. As a parish priest, I once belonged to an Orthodox Christian clergy association that emphasized cooperative efforts among churches of various jurisdictions in three neighboring towns. One year, we priests, with our parish communities, decided to hold a common Divine Liturgy in the county's large sports arena. Three thousand people attended, a one hundred-voice choir sang, and the common collection was donated to feed the hungry. We also combined our Vacation Church School programs and celebrated Memorial Liturgies together during Lent. In our adult education classes, participants from any neighboring parish were welcome. Within that group, brother clergy reached out to hurting brother clergy who yearned to be transparent without fear of retaliation, retribution, or ridicule. "How good and pleasant it is...."

In other church settings, however, such counsel was rare. Often, one brother priest turning to another—whether for help with difficulties within his own family or the parish family—was interpreted as weakness. "Whom can I trust?" was the complaint I heard more often than not.

Sadly, I have also witnessed clergy meetings where you could cut the tension in the air with a knife; deanery meetings where each pastor tried to outdo the next with glowing reports of his "success" (even though the opposite was true), and brother clergy undermining each other's plans. At Divine Liturgies of diocesan assemblies, I have seen clergy literally screaming at each other across the altar, arguing whether to end Divine

Liturgy according to normal parish practice or to include Psalm 33.

The Internet, specifically within Orthodox forums, at times, has exacerbated disunity. Brothers have been mocked and derided—or mock and deride—“in the name of truth.” They play into the hands of the demon that initiates these actions: insidious backbiting, lack of care, competitiveness, and tearing down instead of building up. True, Internet chatter has rightly exposed darkness that needed to come to Light; but sin must be healed in a way that does not beget further sin.

While at seminary, let’s address our natural tendency to “go it alone,” while dreaming of our own future fiefdom. Let’s begin addressing our tendency to undermine others in order to puff up ourselves. Let’s begin, perhaps, one relationship at a time, to cut down pride and to build up brotherly unity. Let’s suspend judgment and correct a brother with love. Let’s unlearn the ways naturally buried in our hearts for the sake of the Gospel.

The Apostle Peter modeled for us gracious acceptance of correction, when the Apostle Paul admonished him. The apostles modeled for us loving forgiveness when they received the denier Peter back as the head of their small community. St. Cyprian, although adamant regarding his position, modeled peaceful and civil discussion for us when he addressed the difficult question of re-baptizing heretics. In his opening address to the Council of Carthage in AD 256, he stated:

....each of us should now openly express what each one thinks about this question, judging no one, and not rejecting anyone from communion, should that person have another view.

Neither Peter, the apostles, nor Cyprian allowed pride to obstruct the work of the Gospel or to destroy unity among the brethren.

Our Lord desires our unity: among clergy, between clergy and laity, and among brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to learn, here at the seminary, how to surrender our pride so that our Lord’s prayer may take effect:

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As you sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world....I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved me. (John 17)

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