

OUT OF MANY, ONE

November 2020

I am writing this just a couple of weeks before the 2020 US Election, watching a divided, toxic scene devolve into a result that will likely please very few. In the midst of a pandemic in which science and the common good are being challenged by ideology and convenience, headway toward a solution is maddeningly slow. I find myself wondering what resources there are for a person of faith to navigate this disconcerting season.

At the founding of this nation our forbearers chose as its motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” “Out of Many, One.” Imperfect in reality, the phrase, none-the-less, had a hopeful ring. Rooted in its then divided present, it saw the possibility that the people could become “one” as they moved forward together.

The capacity to move from “me” to “we” is the mark of a healthy community. There is always a tension between common cause and common good: focus on common cause alone requires agreement, but risks ideology that leads to rigidity; focus on common good alone requires some compromise in which there is a risk that the individual feels unheard or left out. The “me” of a healthy community always honors each individual person. The “we” of a healthy community is always inclusive.

When nations, or communities, or families are deeply divided, the movement towards unity, or oneness, is hard work! One has to make the choice to do it, put in the time and energy to do it, all the while believing that can and must be done.

The great hymn of faith, hope, and love (often read at weddings) was actually written to squabbling people in a divided church. Calling them “The Body of Christ,” the Apostle Paul writes: “God has so arranged the body, giving greater honor to the inferior members, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” [I Cor 12:24-26] He celebrated their diverse gifts and showed to them the “still more excellent way” of faith, hope, and love. It was this vision that secured their future.

We are at a crossroads. Divided as we are, we can still emerge as one people resolved to celebrate each other’s gifts and seek the common good. Out of many, one! People who choose to do the hard work. People who put in the time and energy to do it. People who truly believe that it can be done.

But it is not assured. It really depends on whether we are willing to move from “me” to “we,” or whether we “double down” and retreat to our own separate enclaves. The pandemic makes this choice critical. The spread of the virus is taking a toll on our lives, on our livelihoods, and on our very spirits. The “me generation” has failed us. It is time to pull together. “Out of Many, One” is a pathway to the future. We owe that to the generations who will follow!