

Judicatory Panel Presentation for the 50th Annual Assembly of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference, held March 2nd & 3rd, 2020, Baton Rouge
By Sister Miriam MacLean

When I was asked to speak about the topic – Visioning for Unity, Striving for Justice, I was very happy to be able to take some time to reflect on this topic. These two ideas – unity and justice are extremely important to me. I have always heard the Lord's words in the Last Supper discourse, praying that they all may be one, as He and the Father are one very seriously. Unity is not just a nice idea – it is something we must work toward – but what this looks like has often alluded me. Surely, theological discussions, reasoned discourses, and unceasing prayer are a part of what can increase unity – but they seem to still leave us wanting in fulfilling our Beloved Lord's command.

This is where I think the idea of Justice can be and often is useful. While unity seems difficult to attain, striving for justice, may be a bit more within our grasp. Seeking justice together provides a common ground upon which unity can be developed. I can think of very simple examples of this. Perhaps you have been involved in what the Sisters often call work projects – here in Louisiana, those work projects often consist of recovering after disasters, working together, sweating together, suffering together—working toward a common goal, trying to restore what was lost, and provide what is needed, in short, working together for justice. For me, this work together helps to remind us of our common humanity, our shared goals, and lays the groundwork for a possible conversation about what is motivating us? Why are we here? A conversation about Why we are doing this work? Of course, like anything, having a place to engage in relationship first seems a much more effective starting point for a deeper conversation about unity. Common work and a common goal toward which we strive together for justice allows us to taste the experience of unity

in a way discussion alone cannot. I know, as Director of Catholic Charities of Southwest Louisiana, I am very grateful for opportunities that I have had to share in unifying projects especially with the Methodists and Baptists – but even in our neighborhood, there is a small Church next to us, and they will often bring us food, offer their help, answer my phone calls when I have concern – these are all important things that help to lay the groundwork for unity.

Of course, there are so many other ways that striving for justice can help bind us together—caring for the imprisoned, the migrant, the unborn, the oppressed. These are all ways in which our shared belief helps us to grow in unity.

I would like to go a step further though, it is not just WHAT we do that helps us to become more unified but it is much more importantly the reason that we are doing it. Sometimes, I think it is easy to lose sight of why we are doing something. To give a simple example, two people digging a ditch may seem unified on the surface but if one is providing for irrigation and the other is trying to hide contraband, there is not a true unity. As a social worker, I have met very many good people, people who are striving for what they understand to be just, but they are acting simply out of what I would call a secular humanism—people who strive to uphold the dignity of people, but without regard for God. As Christians, the goodness in people surely is one motivating factor, but it is not the primary motivating factor.

I am not a theologian, just a social worker – so I lay no claim on the higher sciences, but as a Religious Sister and someone informed about my faith, I would like to argue that it is our Baptismal calling that makes our striving for justice unique. At Baptism, we receive the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and literally the very LIFE of God in us – God dwells in us because of our Baptism. And, in fact, when we are doing good works as Baptized Christians, it is actually this very life that

is acting in us, so we can say with Saint Paul “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” This then means that all of our actions are a very participation in and sharing the life of God. This common Baptism is the true source of our unity. It is our challenge to constantly be motivated by this desire for union with the Lord that then impels us to be of service to our neighbor. Justice for us is not only to arrive at a balance of goods and services in this life, but to seek also eternal life for ourselves and those we serve. The ultimate justice that brings true peace and dignity to every man and woman is to be just before God, and this is given by Christ.

It is my hope that as we pray unceasingly for unity, and we strive toward justice, that we are able to engage in those difficult conversations rooted in Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. May we find in Him the source of Unity and the motivation for every action. Being new to the LIC, I look forward to getting to know each of you and engaging in dialogue toward an ever increasing unity.

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