

A “Spiritual Reflection,” “Conference” for the NSW Knights of the Southern Cross on the theme of living in unity as Christian Brothers/Knights – Saturday 9 May 2026
By Fr Julian Belich

The spiritual conference today is about living in unity as brothers, and about that clear sign Jesus gives us: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35) These are simply my rambling thoughts shared with you for discussion – something to ponder, to test, to challenge, to affirm – on the theme our State Chairman, Br Eamonn Dare, has put before us: unity within the Order, fraternity, and leadership through example.

I should say at the start that I feel a bit like a beginner chess-player trying to talk about grandmaster strategy. I enjoy chess, I have played for years, I know the moves and I can enjoy a friendly game, but I am very much a beginner. If you asked me to commentate on a world championship, I would be lost. That is how I feel about unity and charity. I love the “game” of Christian life and leadership, but I am not a grandmaster in love. I am learning like everyone else. So what I offer here are simple reflections from that beginner’s point of view, not a grand theory.

1. A hall of mirrors: faith and perspective

Sometimes in a restaurant or hotel you suddenly see yourself in a mirror, and then realise it is not a simple reflection. It is a reflection of a reflection, bouncing between several mirrors. For a moment you are disoriented and you see yourself from an angle you never normally have. It is as if, briefly, you are taken outside your fixed, usual point of view.

In the life of faith, especially in community, the Lord sometimes does something similar. By grace He lets us see ourselves, our Order, even the wider Church, not only from inside our own head, but from His perspective and from the perspective of our brothers. We realise how locked into our own angle we can be – our history, temperament, branch loyalties, wounds – and yet we are privileged, now and then, to step outside that and glimpse how vast the field really is.

Into that wider view, we hear again the Scriptures our State Chairman has put before us about unity and love.

2. Brothers in unity: oil and the dew of Hermon

We are given two short texts:

- “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1, RSV)
- “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35, RSV)

Psalm 133 does not just tell us unity is good; it shows us what it is like. It says unity is like the precious oil poured on the head of Aaron the high priest, running down on his beard and onto the collar of his robes. It is a picture of something rich and generous – oil poured out, not just a few drops. It has a scent; you can notice it. Unity is meant to be like that among us: noticeable, something you can “smell” and “see”.

Then the psalm says unity is “like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion.” (Psalm 133:3) Mount Hermon is a high mountain in the north of the Holy Land. Because it is high and catches moist air, it gathers snow and heavy dew. In an arid, dry land, dew is quiet but very important. It appears in the night and gently soaks the ground, keeping plants alive and green.

The psalm imagines that kind of rich, refreshing dew falling all the way down on Zion, around Jerusalem in the south. In other words, unity among brothers is like that dew: it comes down from above, it is gentle, it does not make a lot of noise, but it brings life. It keeps things from drying out. It reaches across distance and difference.

So when we hear, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity,” we can picture:

- The oil on Aaron: unity as something consecrating and joyful, poured out generously by God.
- The dew of Hermon on Zion: unity as something that quietly refreshes and keeps us alive, falling on all of us together even when we are scattered.

In John 13, after washing the disciples’ feet and giving the new commandment, Jesus says: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” That is our “dew of Hermon” as Christians: love that may be quiet, but which others can feel and which keeps the ground of our community green.

3. The Catechism: charity as the bond of unity

The Catechism asks why the Church is one and answers that the Church is one because of her source in the Trinity, her founder Christ, and her soul, the Holy Spirit. It then speaks of the “bonds of unity”: “Above all, charity, which ‘binds everything together in perfect harmony’,” together with the profession of one faith, the common celebration of divine worship, and apostolic succession. (CCC 815)

So the first and deepest bond of unity is charity – supernatural love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Structures, constitutions and procedures matter, but they are there to serve this deeper bond; they are not a replacement for it.

The Catechism also notes that although someone may remain “in the bosom of the Church,” if he does not persevere in charity he is “indeed in the Church in body but not in heart.” (CCC 837) That is a quiet warning for us: we can be Knights on the roll, present at meetings, wearing the badge – but if charity is lacking, unity remains only external. So real unity in the Order begins with hearts converted to charity.

4. St Thomas Aquinas: goodwill, charity and doing good

St Thomas Aquinas helps us put some clear language around this charity. He says charity is a friendship between human beings and God, by which we love God above all and our neighbour “for God’s sake.” (Summa Theologiae II-II, q.23, a.1) Charity is a habit God places in our will, by which all our other virtues are ordered towards Him; it is the “form” and “mother” of the virtues. (II-II, q.23, a.8)

When he asks what it means “to love” in this way, he recalls Aristotle’s insight that to love is “to will the good of another,” and this is called goodwill. (II-II, q.27, a.2) Goodwill is that first movement when we truly want another person’s good. Charity, Aquinas says, takes that goodwill and, by grace, deepens it into a steady friendship in which we share in the other’s good in God. (II-II, q.27, a.2)

He also teaches that beneficence – doing good for someone – is one of the outward acts of charity. (II-II, q.31, a.1-2) Love is not just a feeling or an idea; it moves the will into concrete action.

So unity among us is built out of a few simple elements:

- I sincerely will my brother’s true good (goodwill).
- By grace, that goodwill becomes a firm friendship in Christ (charity).
- That friendship moves me to real acts of support, patience, service and forgiveness (beneficence).

That is our “dew”: small, steady drops of charity that keep the ground of our fraternity alive.

5. Yes Minister and Fawlty Towers: funny, but close to home

If we want to see where unity can go wrong in a way that makes us smile, we can think of *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*. Think of Sir Humphrey. He is always polite, always says “Yes, Minister,” but often quietly steers things back to what he and the Department wanted all along. The language sounds like agreement and unity; the reality is quiet resistance and control.

There is a temptation in Church life, and in an Order like ours, to do something similar. We say the right words – “yes, Father,” “yes, Brother,” “of course we’ll consult” – but inside we may be holding tightly to our own plans, our own group, our own way. Outwardly it looks like unity; inwardly there can be division.

Fawlty Towers gives another picture. Basil is officially the leader of the hotel, but he is often tense, easily irritated and quick to over-react. He lets his frustration spill out on everyone around him. Guests become problems to be dealt with rather than people to be welcomed. Small misunderstandings turn into major scenes because of pride, fear and a lack of self-knowledge.

We laugh at Sir Humphrey and Basil because they are exaggerated, but if we are honest, we might see a bit of them in ourselves on a bad day. An honest question for each of us: in my leadership as a Knight, am I sometimes closer to Sir Humphrey – outwardly agreeable, inwardly resisting – or to Christ, who simply says “yes” to the Father and washes feet? Closer to Basil, tense and sharp, or to a calm father who sees the person before the problem? St Thomas would say that charity properly orders our loves: we put God first, then the common good, then our own preferences. (II-II, q.26) That is the opposite of Sir Humphrey’s quiet self-interest and Basil’s constant self-concern.

6. Marcus Aurelius: expecting difficult people, remembering one family

Even a pagan like Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations*, has some wisdom we can “baptise.” He writes that each morning he expects to meet people who are meddling, ungrateful, arrogant or difficult, and then reminds himself that they are his relatives, sharing the same human nature, and that he cannot be truly harmed by them if he keeps his own soul in order.

Marcus Aurelius speaks of the world as a kind of city where we are all citizens working together and warns against living as if we were cut off from the whole. He insists that we focus on what is in our power – our own thoughts, choices and reactions – and leave the rest.

For us, that might mean:

- Accepting that we will sometimes meet brothers who irritate us or disagree strongly with us. That is normal human life.
- Remembering that they are still our brothers in Christ, part of the same Body and the same Order, even if they are hundreds of kilometres away on a Zoom screen.
- Taking responsibility for what is in our control: listening well, speaking calmly, being ready to forgive, praying for them by name.

The Catechism says charity “binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (CCC 815) Marcus’ insistence on governing my own inner reactions can help that charity, not replace it, but support it.

7. Negotiation and the “stairway” of charity

Psychologists and professional negotiators sometimes talk about a “behavioural change stairway” – a kind of ladder in serious negotiations. They describe five steps: **active listening, empathy, building rapport**, then influence, and only then behavioural change. If you skip the first steps and jump straight to “influence” – telling people what to do – you usually get nowhere.

That is just good human psychology, but it also looks very much like charity in practice. Imagine if, in a difficult discussion at State Council or in a branch:

- We began with listening: we let the brother finish and we check that we have heard him correctly, even through a Zoom microphone.
- Then empathy: we try to see why this issue matters to him – his local situation, responsibilities, pressures.
- Then rapport: we acknowledge what we can honestly agree with in what he has said.
- Only then do we move to influence: offering our own view and seeking a common decision.

That is not manipulation; it is a human way of doing what Aquinas calls beneficence and what Jesus calls love. It respects the dignity of the other person as more than just an obstacle to our plans.

8. A Summary and an invitation to share

In short, combining everything all together:

- Unity is a gift from above, like oil and dew – something God pours out that refreshes and consecrates us.
- The clear sign of being a disciple is not success or cleverness but love for one another. (John 13:35)
- Charity means willing each other's good, in Christ, and doing something concrete about it – especially in how we speak, listen, forgive and lead.
- We all have a bit of Sir Humphrey and Basil in us, and we are invited, slowly, to become more like Christ washing feet.
- Unity grows when each of us takes responsibility for our own reactions and choices, even on Zoom, and asks for the grace to see the brother as a gift, not an opponent.

I will finish there, simply by saying: these truly are just my rambling, beginner's thoughts. I would really value hearing yours – your own experiences of unity or disunity in the Knights, moments when you have seen “the dew” of fraternity at work, your insights from Scripture, from your branch, from your prayer. What helps you to live that line/instruction of Jesus: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”? (John 13:35, RSV).