

Saint Paul and the Christian Life **Ephesians 4, 17- 5, 20.**

In our meditation upon Saint Paul and the sacramental life, we reflected upon the passage in his Epistle to the Romans also found in the Roman Canon that describes the effects of the Eucharistic sacrifice in the transformation of the believer.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be reformed in the newness of your mind, that you may prove what is the good, and the acceptable, and the perfect will of God.

This is a good place to begin in order to understand the Christian Life or the moral life of the Christian. For Saint Paul, the Christian's behavior, or the moral life, is not the result of personal effort alone. In fact, it is the emphasis upon external works, for instance the minute and man-made rituals surrounding the observance of the Mosaic Covenant, not the Covenant itself—the Ten Commandments--that he calls “dead”. This does not mean that we put no effort into virtuous actions. Nor does it mean “faith alone” without good works. In a book about the Apostle, E. P. Sanders wrote,

Paul...thought...that good deeds should flow naturally from life in Christ. In Romans 8, 4 the wording is strikingly passive: ‘that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.’ Paul...thought that people who were in Christ were a ‘new creation’ and that they lived in the Spirit. More strongly, they had become one person in Christ Jesus (p. 62).

We can see the passive words in the passage from Romans, “be reformed”, “be not conformed”, as well. It is the active “presenting”, “Offering” that places us in union with Christ Who then through His grace transforms and shapes us into His image, the image of one redeemed.

If we look at Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, especially Chapter 4, verse 17 to Chapter 5, verse 20, we find a wonderful exposition of how we are to live. It is like a formation manual. There are typical Pauline themes and images that make concrete the goal and the path. I have looked at Adrienne von Speyr's commentary on these verses to help give a contemplative approach to their meaning. First of all, the interiority and the exteriority (in other words, “mind and heart,” “body”) of the human person is not divided and set against each other. There is an integration, a wholeness in the Apostle's teaching. Our minds must be enlightened by divine Truth while our external actions, body, must conform to it, not to the works of darkness. The Christian must be directed by the Lord and not his own desires. The image of “the old man”, the sinful self, must be overcome, it must perish. We must make a break from our past. The way of “natural” man cannot bring about goodness because of “ignorance” and “blindness.” Our cooperation in all of this is key. Putting on “the new man” means that our lives reflect God's holiness and justice. This is not just for the self, but for the whole Body, the Church. The holiness that radiates from a life given to God is a very strong Pauline theme. Our lives have effects, for good or for evil, in hidden yet real ways.

Saint Paul calls us to reflect the Trinitarian communion, the manifestation of the love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The sins of anger, malice, blasphemy and evil speech grieve the Holy Spirit. These transgressions manifest pride, division, selfishness and violence; they do not express the deep love and communion between the Divine Persons that the Christian shares in the life of grace.

The sacrificial aspect of the Christian life mirroring the Sacrifice of the Mass, “an oblation...an odour of sweetness” is never far from Saint Paul’s mind. He immediately begins to speak of that which is the opposite. Fornication, impurity of all kinds, and covetousness—all make the self the center of everything which then cuts off the communion with God and makes one solitary, alienated. Idolatry is a deeply spiritual sin that must be burned away, it must be forsaken. Otherwise, God’s light cannot enter the human heart. There cannot be both light and darkness; one must choose.

The last section we are considering is a list of exhortations to continue the struggle against evil. This is the real challenge of living our Christian commitment every day. The continual effort requires our immediate attention so that we will not live “as the pagans”. And we know that we, also, live “in evil days.” We must redeem the time, as the Apostle exhorts, so that the Good News of the Gospel of Christ may be present in the world.

There is a particular aspect of the Christian life that I would like to expand upon in light of Saint Paul’s teachings and the present day. This is the area of anxiety and suffering. Saint Paul deals with this in a particular fashion, the way all the saints have done and do, but in considering the difficulties of living a Christian life today, there are several important realities that will give us strength and insight.

With the help of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s development of this theme in his book, “The Christian and Anxiety,” I would like to present some points for reflection.

We live affected by sin: we are born with original sin and we commit personal sins. This rupture with what we were originally meant to be like causes us to experience anxiety, fear and emptiness, to one extent or another. To the extent that we live a life of faith, hope, and charity, we leave the “old man” and walk in the light as “the new man.” Much of our anxiety is due to sin, or as von Balthasar says, “a lack of faith.” Because we cannot see God or experience Him in the way that we were meant to experience Him, we have to return to Him through faith—trusting even when we cannot see. This personal commitment to God is made fruitful in Christ Jesus, His Son, Who became man in order to make this encounter possible. Leaving the anxiety of our sins, our lack of faith, and entering into the “joy of the Lord”, intimacy with Him in faith, hope and love, does not mean leaving anxiety behind. Anxiety is part of life here because it reflects the absence of God in one way or another. Von Balthasar insists, contrary to philosophers of the Enlightenment, that this anxiety is NOT because we experience our finitude, our limitations. It is because God is meant to fill us, to be our very center. When we are in sin or have not grown in the life of God with generosity, this anxiety is our own fault. However, in growing in the life of God we begin to experience anxiety with the Lord, the

Lord's own anxiety that He took upon Himself in order to go to the very depths to reveal His love and obedience. This is the "kenosis" or "emptying" that theology speaks of in terms of the Incarnation. It is also the complete oblation of Jesus in His sacrificial death on the Cross and His "Holy Saturday experience" where He experienced in His human soul the complete abandonment of the Father, which von Balthasar calls "Godforsakeness." As we experience this Christ-anxiety, we experience joy. This is the difference between the two anxieties. Our own anxiety is self-centered and cannot help us. The anxiety of the Lord that we share when we go outside of ourselves in love is fruitful. In von Balthasar's book on Georges Bernanos, a French novelist and Catholic, he quotes Bernanos, one who suffered from every kind of anxiety throughout his life,

As if faith were an inexhaustible source of consolations, which render us insensitive to the miseries of this life, and even to its simple frustrations, while it is rather a crown of thorns that makes us participate—quite of in spite of ourselves, alas!—in the very Holy Agony!

The article from which this quote comes is by Jacques Servais, S.J., the rector of Casa Balthasar in Rome, a house of discernment and formation based in the teaching of von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr..., entitled "Restlessness and Anxiety" in a recent issue of *Communio*. He writes,

Joy characterizes the fundamental and permanent mood of the Christian. "May you evermore rejoice!" (1 Thess 5,16). For him, in effect, existence is not at all a being—towards—death, an existence in "care"; it is a being for life: eternal life, in the afterlife and already here and now. Suffering and mourning are not banished from this life. "I pour out joy to overflowing in your distress" (2 Cor 7,4). "I find my joy in the suffering that I endure for you" Col 1,24) Saint Paul never tires of repeating. Far from supplanting suffering, this joy, which has its source explicitly in the Lord (Phil 1,18, 25 et passim), is ready at every moment to receive the trials that are given to it for the benefit of the Body that is his Church. Chasing anxiety from his unbelieving heart again and again, the Christian thus makes known to the world, by means of his wholly God-centered life, the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ" (p. 242).

The Apostle Paul, in particular, saw suffering as a means to "know Him by the power of His resurrection" (Phil 3,10). Carlo Cardinal Martini has written, "Paul desires to know Jesus by entering into a mysterious, even physical communion with his sufferings"(p. 84, "The Testimony of Paul"). This demonstrates the earlier point that to the Apostle, the mind, heart and body are a unit. To love and to know Jesus, we must suffer with Him. And the Cardinal indicated further on in this section entitled, the Passio, or Suffering of Paul, that he "lays more stress on moral sufferings, above all loneliness. This aspect is the one which most closely links our own passion to those of Christ and Paul" (p. 87). We find in 2 Tim 4, 9-11 and 14-16 a description of Saint Paul's progressive abandonment, an Epistle written near the end of his life. We can also read in the Acts of the Apostles 21-28 about the sufferings that lead up to his arrest and journey to Rome .

I think this particular passage will sound familiar to everyone present. Cardinal Martini, referring to the former verses from 2 Timothy, stated, “Paul realizes that he is no longer in complete command of himself, no longer able to be optimistic and enthusiastic; ...he has to reckon with fatigue and the accumulation of his worries and disappointments” (p. 89). Yet this joy in the midst of affliction, anxiety, pain or abandonment that is the sign of “being in Christ” comes in the next verses. “But the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me...and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.” Saint Paul shared in Christ’s passion in a great spirit of faith and for the Church. He gives us an example to live with fidelity, peace and joy in the midst of sufferings and darkness. We, also, may leave behind anxiety due to sin and embrace the Lord in faith, hope and love, in order to experience the Agony of Jesus, a fruitful and life-giving exchange.