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First Lent Sermon 2018

“DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD”

(Rom 12:2)

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

In a society in which everyone feels called to transform the world or the Church, this word of God breaks in inviting people to transform themselves: “Do not be conformed to this world.” After these words we would expect to hear, “but transform it!” Instead it tells us, “Transform yourselves!” Transform the world, yes, but the world that is within you before thinking you can transform the world outside of you.

This word of God, taken from the Letter to the Romans, introduces us to the spirit of Lent this year. As has been the case for some years now, we will dedicate this first meditation to a general introduction to Lent without entering into the special theme of this year, because of the absence of part of the habitual audience who are committed elsewhere for the Spiritual Exercises.

I. Christians and the World

Let us first take a look at how the ideal of detachment from the world was understood and lived out from the beginning till our day. It is always useful to take into account the experiences of the past if we want to understand the requirements for the present.

In the Synoptic Gospels the word “world” (*kosmos*) is almost always understood in a morally neutral sense. In its *spatial* meaning, “world” indicates the earth and the universe (“Go into all the world”). In its *temporal* meaning, it indicates the present time or “age” (*aion*). It is with Paul, and even more with John, that the word “world” takes on a *moral* dimension and most often signifies the world as it became after sin and fell under the dominion of Satan, “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4). This is the meaning of “world” in Paul’s exhortation that we began with and in the almost identical exhortation of John in his First Letter:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. (1 Jn 2:15-16)

Christians never lost sight of the fact that the world in itself, despite everything, is and remains God’s good creation, a creation that he loves and came to save, not to judge: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

The attitude toward the world that Jesus proposes to his disciples is contained in two prepositions: to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. “Now I am no more in the world,” he says, addressing the Father, “but they are *in* the world. . . . They are not *of* the world, even as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:11, 16).

In the first three centuries, the disciples were quite conscious of their unique position. The “Epistle to Diognetus,” an anonymous writing at the end of the second century, describes the perception that Christians had of themselves in the world:

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. . . . They follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them [to die]. They share their meals, but not theirwives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us very briefly summarize what followed. When Christianity became a religion that was tolerated and soon after even protected and favored, the tension between Christianity and the world tended inevitably to subside since the world had become—or at least was considered to be—a “Christian world.” Then we witness a double phenomenon. On the one hand, groups of people, desiring to remain the salt of the earth that did not lose its savor, fled from the world, even physically, and withdrew to the desert. Monasticism was born under the banner of a motto that goes back to the monk Arsenius: “*Fuge, tace, quiesce*,” “Flee, be silent, be still.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

At the same time, the pastors of the Church and some of the more enlightened people sought to adapt the ideal of detachment from the world for all believers, proposing not a physical but a spiritual flight from the world. St. Basil in the East and St Augustine in the West were familiar with Plato’s thinking, especially in the ascetic form it had taken with his disciple Plotinus. In this cultural atmosphere, the ideal of flight from the world was alive. It was related, however, to a flight that was vertical rather than horizontal, so to speak, a flight upward and not toward the desert. It consisted in raising oneself above the multiplicity of material things and human passions to unite oneself with what is divine, incorruptible, and eternal.

The Fathers of the Church, with the Cappadocians in the lead, proposed a Christian asceticism that responded to this religious need and adopted its language without, however, ever sacrificing the values of the gospel. To start with, the flight from the world that they recommended is a work of grace more than it is human effort. The fundamental step is not at the end of the road but at its beginning, in baptism. It is therefore not reserved to a few educated people but is open to all. St. Ambrose wrote a short treatise called “Flight from the World,” addressed to all the neophytes.[[3]](#footnote-3) The separation from the world that he proposes is above all *affective*: “Flight,” he says, “is not to depart from the earth but to remain on earth, to hold to justice and temperance, to renounce the vices in material goods, not their use.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This ideal of detachment and flight from the world will, in diverse forms, accompany the whole history of Christian spirituality. A prayer in the liturgy summarizes this in the saying, “*terrena despicere et amare caelestia*”:“to despise earthly things and to love heavenly things.” (The same prayer in modern liturgy says: “to use with wisdom earthly things, always oriented to the heavenly goods”)

2. The Crisis of the Ideal of “*fuga mundi*”

Things changed in the period prior to ours. With regard to the ideal of the separation from the world, we went through ~~a “critiquing” phase,~~ a period in which that ideal was “criticized” and looked at with suspicion. This crisis has distant roots. It begins—at least on the theoretical level—with Renaissance humanism that revived interest and enthusiasm for worldly values, at times with a pagan cast. But the decisive factor of the crisis is seen in the phenomenon of the so-called “secularization” that began in the Enlightenment and reached its peak in the twentieth century.

The most evident change concerns precisely the concepts of “world” and “age.” In all of the history of Christian spirituality, the word “*saeculum*”has had a connotation that tended to be negative, or at least ambiguous. It meant the present age that is subject to sin, as opposed to the future age or eternity. Within a few decades, its meaning underwent a transformation until it took on a decidedly positive significance in the 1960s and 1970s. Some titles themselves of the books that emerged during those years, like *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* by Paul van Buren and *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox, highlighted this new optimistic meaning of “*saeculum*”and “secular.” A “theology of secularization” was born.

All of this contributed, however, to fuel an exaggerated optimism about the world for some people that does sufficiently not take into account its other face—the one which is “under the evil one” and is opposed to the spirit of Christ (see Jn 14:17). At a certain moment the traditional idea of flight “from” the world was substituted in the minds of many (including clergy and religious) with the ideal of a flight “toward” the world, that is, worldliness.

In this context some of the most absurd and delusional things that have ever come under the name of “theology” have been written. The first is the idea that God himself becomes secular and worldly when he lays aside his Godhead to become man. This is the so-called “Theology of the Death of God.” There also still exists a balanced theology of secularization in which secularization is not seen as something opposed to the gospel but rather as its product. However, that is not the theology we are talking about.

Someone has commented that the “theologies of secularization” referred to above were nothing but apologetic attempts meant “to furnish an ideological justification for the religious indifference in modern man”; they also fit with “the ideology that the Churches needed to justify their growing marginalization.”[[5]](#footnote-5) It soon became clear that this was a blind alley. In a few years almost no one was talking about the theology of secularization, and some of its very promotors distanced themselves from it.

As always, to reach the bottom of a crisis becomes an occasion for going back to the “living and eternal” word of God ~~and asking it questions~~. Let us listen to Paul’s exhortation again: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We already know from the New Testament which world not to be conformed to: it is not the world created and loved by God and not the people in the world whom we must always go out to meet, especially the poor, the downtrodden, and the suffering. “Blending in” with this suffering and marginalized world is, paradoxically, the best way of “separating” ourselves from the world because it means going in the direction from which the world flees as much as possible. It means separating ourselves from the very principle that rules the world, self-centeredness.

Let us focus for a bit on the significance of what follows: being transformed in the deep recesses of our minds. Everything in us begins in the mind, with thoughts. There is a wise maxim that says,

Watch over your thoughts because they become words.

Watch over your words because they become actions.

Watch over your actions because they become habits.

Watch over your habits because they become your character.

Watch over your character because it becomes your destiny.

Prior to our works, change must come, then, in our way of thinking, that is, in our faith. There are many causes at the origin of worldliness, but the principle one is the crisis of faith. In this sense the apostle’s exhortation is only repeating Christ’s exhortation at the beginning of his preaching: “Repent and believe”; repent, that is, believe! Change your way of thinking; stop thinking according to the “human way of thinking,” and start thinking according to “God’s way of thinking” (see Mt 16:23). St. Thomas Aquinas was right to say, “The first conversion consists in believing (*prima conversio fit per fidem*).”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Faith is the primary battleground between the Christian and the world. It is through faith that the Christian is no longer “of” the world. When I read the conclusions that unbelieving scientists draw from their observations of the universe and I see the vision of the world that writers and filmmakers offer us—in which God is at best reduced to a vague and subjective sense of mystery and Jesus Christ is not even taken into consideration—I feel, thanks to faith, that I belong to another world. I experience the truth of these words from Jesus: “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!” And I remain amazed in observing how Jesus foresaw this situation and gave us the explanation ahead of time: “You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes” (Lk 10:23, 21).

The “world,” understood in its moral sense, are by definition those who refuse to believe. The sin that Jesus says the Paraclete will “convince the world” of is the sin of not having believed in him (see Jn 16:8-9). John writes, “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith” (1 Jn 5:4). In the Letter to the Ephesians we read,

You he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience (Eph 2:1-2).

The exegete Heinrich Schlier has done a penetrating analysis of this “spirit of the world” whom Paul considers the direct antagonist to the “Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:12). It plays a decisive role in public opinion…, and today it is literally the spirit “of the air” because it spreads itself electronically through the air. Schlier defines “the general spirit of the world” as

the spirit of a particular period, attitude, nation or locality. . . . Indeed, it is so intense and powerful that no individual can escape it. It serves as a norm and is taken for granted. To act, think or speak against this spirit is regarded as non-sensical or even as wrong and criminal. It is “in” this spirit that men encounter the world and affairs, which means they accept the world as this spirit presents it to them . . . . It is their [spirits’] nature to interpret the universe and human existence in their own way.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This describes what we call an “accommodation to the spirit of the age.” That spirit operates like the legendary vampire. The vampire attacks people who are sleeping, and while he is sucking out their blood he simultaneously injects a sleep-inducing liquid into them that makes their sleep sweeter, so that they always sink into deeper sleep and he can suck out all the blood he wants. The world, however, is worse than the vampire because the vampire cannot make his prey fall asleep and can only approach those who are already asleep. The world, on the other hand, first puts people to sleep and then sucks out all their spiritual energy, injecting them with a kind of sleep-inducing liquid that makes them find sleep even sweeter.

The remedy for this situation is for someone to shout in the sleeper’s ear, “Wake up!” That is what the word of God does on so many occasions and what the liturgy of the Church makes us hear again precisely at the beginning of Lent: “Awake, O sleeper” (Eph 5:14); “it is full time now for you to wake from sleep” (Rom 13:11).

3. The Form of This World Is Passing Away

But let us ask ourselves the reason that a Christian should not be conformed to the world. The reason is not ontological but eschatological. We do not need to distance ourselves from the world because matter is intrinsically evil and is an enemy of the spirit, as the Platonists and some Christians writers influenced by them thought. The reason is that, as Scripture says, “the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31); “the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever” (1 Jn 2:17).

All we need to do is stop for a minute and look around to be aware of the truth of these words.

Life is similar to what happens on the tv screen: programs, the so-called viewing lineup, follow each other rapidly, and each one cancels out the previous one. The screen remains the same, but the programs and the images change. It is the same with us: the world remains, but we leave one after the other. Of all the names, faces, and the news that fill newspapers and news broadcasts today, what will remain of them—of all of us—in a few years or decades? Nothing at all.

Let us think about what is left of the legends from 40 years ago and what will remain in 40 years from now of today’s legends and celebrities. We read in Isaiah that it will be “As when a hungry man dreams he is eating and awakes with his hunger not satisfied, or as when a thirsty man dreams he is drinking and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched” (Is29:8). What are riches, tributes, and glory if not a dream that vanishes at daybreak? St. Augustine describes a beggar who had a very lovely dream one night. He dreamed that a substantial inheritance fell into his lap. In the dream he is clothed in beautiful robes; he is surrounded by gold and silver and is the owner of fields and vineyards. In his pride he scorns his own father and pretends not to know him. . . . But he wakes up in the morning and finds that he had been asleep.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Job says, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return” (Job 1:21). The same thing will happen to today’s multimillionaires with their money and to the powerful who make the world tremble at their power. A human being, outside of the context of faith, is nothing but a shape created by a wave on the shore of the sea that the next wave will cancel.

Today there is a new arena in which it is especially necessary not to conform ourselves to this world: images. The ancients coined this motto: “Fast from the world (*nesteuein tou* *kosmou*).”[[9]](#footnote-9) We could apply that today as fasting from the images of the world. At one time fasting from food and drink was considered the most effective and required fast. That is no longer the case. Today people do such fasts for many other motives, especially to maintain a good figure. Scripture says no food is in itself unclean (cf. Mk 7:19), but many images are. They have become one of the favorite vehicles through which the world spread its anti-gospel. A hymn for Lent exhorts us,

*Utamur ergo parcius* Let us use sparingly

*Verbis, cibis et potibus* words, food and drink,

*Somno, iocis et arctius* sleep and amusements*.*

*Perstemus in custodia.* May we be more alert in the custody of our senses.[[10]](#footnote-10)

To this list of things that we should use sparingly—words, food, drink, and sleep—we need to add images. Among the things that come from the world and not from the Father, St. John significantly adds, along with the lust of the flesh and the pride of life, “the lust of the eyes” (1 Jn 2:16). Let us recall how King David fell . . . . What happened to him as he looked down on the terrace of the house next door often happens today in opening up certain sites on the Internet.

If sometimes we are feeling troubled by impure images, either because of our own imprudence or because of the intrusiveness of the world that forcefully thrusts its images before our eyes, let us imitate what the Israelites did in the desert when they were bitten by snakes. Instead of wasting time on fruitless regrets or trying to find excuses in our loneliness and the incomprehension of others, let us look at a crucifix and go before the Holy One. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3: 14-15). May the remedy enter where the poison entered, that is, our eyes.

With these proposals suggested by Paul’s word to the Romans, and above all with the grace of God, let us begin, Venerable Fathers, brothers, and sisters, our preparation for Holy Easter. To celebrate Easter, St. Augustine said, means “to pass from this world to the Father” (Jn 13:1), that is, passing over to what does not pass away! It is necessary to pass *out* of the world so as not to pass away *with* the world. Have a Happy and Holy Lent!

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Second Lent Sermon 2018

“LET LOVE BE GENUINE”

Christian Love

1. The Sources of Christian Holiness

Along with its universal call to holiness, Vatican II also gave specific instruction about what holiness means and in what it consists. In *Lumen Gentium* we read,

The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples of every condition. He Himself stands as the author and consumator of this holiness of life: “Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect” [Mt 5:48]. Indeed He sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might move them inwardly to love God with their whole heart and their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength [see Mk 12:30] and that they might love each other as Christ loves them [see Jn 13:34, 15:12]. The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God’s gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received. (*LG* 20)

This is all summarized in the formula, “perfect holiness” is “perfect union with Christ” (*LG* 50). This vision reflects the Council’s general concern to turn to the biblical and patristic sources, going beyond the scholastic formulation that was dominant for centuries in this area as well. It is now a question of becoming aware of this renewed vision of holiness and applying it to the Church’s practices in preaching, in catechesis, in the spiritual formation of candidates to the priesthood and religious life, and—why not?—in the theological vision which inspires the praxis of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints as well.[[11]](#footnote-11)

One of the major differences between the biblical vision of holiness and the scholastic vision is that virtues are based not so much on “right reason” (Aristotle’s *recta ratio*) as on the kerygma. To be holy does not mean following reason (it often leads to the opposite!), it means following Christ. Christian holiness is essentially christological: it consists in the imitation of Christ and, at its height, in “perfect union with Christ,” as the Council says.

The most complete and most compact biblical synthesis of holiness based on the kerygma is the one outlined by St Paul in the exhortation section of the Letter to the Romans (chapters 12-15). At its beginning the apostle lays out a comprehensive vision of the path for the believer’s sanctification—its essential content and its goal:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

We meditated last time on these verses. In the forthcoming meditations, we will start with what follows in the Pauline text and fill it out with what the Apostle says elsewhere on the same topic. In so doing, we will try to highlight the salient characteristics of holiness, which are called “Christian virtues” today and which the New Testament defines as “fruits of the Spirit,” or the “works of light,” or “the mind which was in Christ Jesus” (see Phil 2:5).

Starting in chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans, all the main Christian virtues, or fruits of the Spirit, are listed: service, charity, humility, obedience, purity. These are not virtues to cultivate for their own sake but are the necessary effects of the work of Christ and baptism. The section begins with a conjunction that is itself worthy of a treatise: “I appeal to you therefore. . . .” The apostle’s “therefore” indicates that everything he will say from this moment on is only the consequence of what he has written in the preceding chapters on faith in Christ and on the work of the Holy Spirit. Let us reflect on four of these virtues: charity, humility, obedience, and purity.

2. Genuine Love

Agape, or Christian charity, is not one of the virtues, it is the foremost virtue; it is the form of all the virtues, the one on which “all the law and the prophets depend” (see Mt 22:40; Rom 13:10). Among the fruits of the Spirit that the apostle lists in Galatians 5:22, we find love listed first: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. . . .” Consistent with that, he also begins his parenesis on the virtues in the Letter to the Romans with love. All of the twelfth chapter is a series of exhortations to charity:

Let love be genuine. . . .

love one another with brotherly affection;

outdo one another in showing honor. (Romans 12:9-10)

To grasp the spirit that unifies all these instructions, the fundamental idea underlying them, or better, the “feeling” that Paul has for charity, we need to start with his first exhortation: “Let love be genuine!” This is not one of many exhortations but the matrix from which all the others derive. It contains the secret of charity.

The original word used by Paul that is translated as “genuine” is *anhypokritos*, and it means “without hypocrisy.” This terminology is a kind of indicator light. It is in fact a rare word used almost exclusively in the New Testament to define Christian love. The expression “genuine love” (*anhypokritos*) appears again in 2 Corinthians 6:6 and in 1 Peter 1:22. Peter’s text allows us to understand, with complete certainty, the meaning of the word in question because he explains it with a circumlocution: genuine love, he says, consists in loving each other deeply “from the heart.”

St. Paul, then, with his simple statement of “let love be genuine,” brings the discussion to the very root of charity, which is the heart. What is required of love is that it is true, authentic, and not feigned. The apostle is also here faithfully echoing Jesus’ thinking: Jesus had, in fact, repeatedly and emphatically pointed to the heart as the “place” which determines the value of what a person does.” (see Mt 15:19).

We can speak of a Pauline insight with regard to charity: it consists in revealing, behind the visible and external universe of charity consisting of works and words, another universe that is wholly interior and that, compared to that other universe, is what the soul is to the body. We find this insight again in his great text on charity, 1 Corinthians 13. Everything St. Paul says there, if we study it closely, refers to interior charity, to the dispositions and feelings of charity: charity is patient and kind, it is not envious or resentful; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. . . . None of this directly concerns *doing* good or the works of charity per se, but everything instead leads back to the root of *desiring* the good. Benevolence comes before beneficence.

The apostle himself is the one who makes explicit the difference between the two kinds of charity. He says that the greatest act of external charity (distributing all of one’s goods to the poor) would not amount to anything without interior charity (see 1 Cor 13:3). It would be the opposite of “genuine” charity. Insincere charity is in fact precisely doing good without desiring the good; it is demonstrating externally something that does not correspond to the heart. In this case a person has an appearance of charity that can, at worst, conceal egotism, the search for oneself, the manipulation of another, or even a simple remorse of conscience.

It would be a fatal mistake to set the charity of heart in opposition to the charity of works or to take refuge in interior charity to find a kind of alibi for a lack of actively doing charity. We know how forcefully Jesus (see Mt 25:16ff), St. James (see 2:16ff), and St. John (see 1 Jn 3:18) urge people to do charitable work. We know the importance that St. Paul himself gave to collections for the poor in Jerusalem.

Moreover, to say, “It does me no good,” to give all to the poor if I do it without charity does not mean saying that it does not do anyone any good and is useless. It means instead that it may not benefit “me,” but it can benefit the poor who receive it. It is not a question, then, of minimizing the importance of charitable works but of ensuring a secure foundation for them against self-centeredness and its infinite cunning. St. Paul wants Christians to be “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17) in such a way that charity is the root and the basis of everything.

When we love “from the heart,” it is the very love of God that is “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5) that flows through us. For a human being to act this way is truly deifying. To “become partakers of the divine *nature*” (2 Pet 1:4) means in fact to become participants in divine *action*, the divine action of loving since God is love!

We love human beings not only because God loves them or because he wants us to love them, but also because in giving us his Spirit he has put his very love for them into our hearts. This explains why the apostle states soon after, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8).

We can ask ourselves, why do we “owe” any love to others? Because we have received an infinite measure of love to distribute in turn to our fellow servants (see Lk 12:42; Mt 24:45ff). If we do not do that, we defraud our brother and sister of what we owe them. A brother comes to your door and perhaps asks for something you are not able to give him, but if you cannot give him what he asks for, be careful not to send him away without what you do owe him, which is love.

3. Charity for Those outside the Community

After having explained what genuine Christian love is, the apostle goes on, after his exhortations, to demonstrate how this “genuine love” needs to be translated into action in community situations. The apostle focuses on two situations: the first concerns the relationships *ad* *extra* of the community, that is, with those outside of it; the second concerns the relationships *ad intra* among the members of the same community. Let us listen to some of his recommendations that apply to the first set of relationships, those with the outside world:

. . .

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. . . . If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:14-21)

Never does the morality of the gospel appear so original and different from every other ethical model as it does on this point, and never do his apostolic exhortations appear more faithful and in continuity with that of the gospel. What makes all of this particularly relevant for us is the situation and the context in which this exhortation is addressed to believers. The Christian community in Rome is a foreign body in an organism that—to the extent to which it is aware of its presence—rejects it. It is a minuscule island in the hostile sea of a pagan society. In circumstances like these, we know how strong the temptation is to close in on ourselves, to develop an elitist and grim mentality of an enclave of the saved in a world of the damned. The Essene community of Qumran was living with precisely this attitude at this historical moment.

The situation of the community in Rome described by Paul represents in miniature the current situation of the whole Church. I am not speaking of the persecution of martyrdom to which our brothers and sisters in faith are exposed in so many parts of the world. I am speaking of the hostility, the rejection, and the often deep disdain with which not only Christians but all believers in God are regarded by broad sectors of society, in general the sectors that are the most influential and that determine normal mainstream thinking. Christians are considered precisely to be foreign bodies in the midst of this evolved and emancipated society.

Paul’s exhortation does not allow us to lose even an instant in bitter recriminations and in fruitless arguments. This does not of course exclude giving reason for the hope that is in us “with gentleness and reverence,” as St. Peter recommends (1 Pet 3:15-16). This is an issue of understanding what attitude of heart needs to be fostered in facing a humanity that, as whole, rejects Christ and lives in darkness rather than in the light (see Jn 3:19). It should be an attitude of deep compassion and spiritual sadness, of loving these people and suffering for them, of taking responsibility for them before God—just as Jesus took responsibility for all of us before the Father—and of not ceasing to weep and pray for the world.

This attitude is one of the most beautiful characteristics of holiness in some Orthodox monks. I am thinking of St. Silvanus of Mount Athos. He said,

There are some people who wish destruction and the torments of the fires of damnation on their enemies and the enemies of the Church. They think that way because they have not been instructed about the love of God by the Holy Spirit. The one who has truly been taught instead sheds tears for the whole world. You say, “He is evil, so let him burn in the fires of hell.” But I ask you, “If God gave you a nice place in Paradise and from there you saw somebody you had wanted to be tormented actually thrown into the fire of hell, perhaps then you would be grieved for him, whoever he was, even if he were an enemy of the Church.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At the time this holy monk was living, the enemies were primarily the Bolsheviks who were persecuting the Church in his beloved homeland of Russia. Today that front has been expanded, and there is no longer an “Iron Curtain” in this regard. To the extent to which a Christian discovers the infinite beauty, love, and humility of Christ, he or she can do nothing less than feel a deep compassion and suffering for those who willingly deprive themselves of the greatest good in life. Love becomes stronger than any animosity in that person. In a similar situation, Paul ends up saying he is ready to have himself be “accursed and cut off from Christ” if that would serve to have Christ be accepted by those of his people who have still remained outside (Rom 9:3).

4. Charity *ad intra*

The second great sphere in which to exercise charity, as we said, is in relationships within the community, in particular, in handling conflicting opinions that emerge among its various members. The apostle dedicates all of chapter 14 of Romans to this topic.

The conflict taking place in the community in Rome at that time was between those whom the apostle calls “the weak” and “the strong,” placing himself as part of the second group (“We who are strong . . .”) (Rom 15:1). The first group felt themselves morally bound to observe some of the proscriptions inherited from the Law or from prior pagan beliefs—for example, not eating meat (insofar as it was suspected of having been offered to idols ) and distinguishing between auspicious and inauspicious days. The second group, the strong, were those who, in the name of the freedom of the Gospel, had overcome these taboos and did not distinguish between different types of food and different kinds of days. The conclusion of the discussion (see Rom 15:7-12) makes clear that fundamentally it concerns the ongoing problem of the relationship between Jewish believers and Gentile believers.

The requirements of charity that the apostle is inculcating in this case are of great interest to us because they are the same that occur in every kind of intra-ecclesial conflict, including those that we are experiencing today, whether on the level of the universal Church or the particular community in which we live.

The apostle suggests three criteria to resolve the conflict. The first is for people to follow their conscience. If people are convinced, according their conscience, that they should not do a certain thing, then they should not do it. The apostle writes, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23), “faith” meaning here “good faith”, that is conscience. The second criterion is to respect the conscience of others and to refrain from judging a brother or a sister:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? . . . Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. (Rom 14:10, 13)

The third criteria primarily concerns “the strong” and why they should avoid giving scandal. The apostle goes on to say,

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. . . . Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (Rom 14:14-19)

All these criteria are specific and relative, however, with respect to another criterion that is instead universal and absolute, that of the Lordship of Christ. Let us listen to how the apostle formulates that concept:

He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Rom 14:6-9)

All people are invited to examine themselves to know what is at the heart of their own choice: to see if it is the Lordship of Christ, his glory, and his interests, or if it is instead, in a more or less disguised way, self-affirmation, one’s ego, and one’s own power; to see if it is truly spiritual and evangelical, or if instead it depends on one’s psychological preference, or worse, one’s political opinion. This applies in either case, whether to the so-called strong or the so-called weak. Today we could ask whether the choice is between whoever is on the side of freedom and innovation of the Spirit or whoever is on the side of continuity and tradition.

There is one thing we need to take into account to avoid seeing in Paul’s attitude on this issue a certain inconsistency with his previous teaching. In the Letter to the Galatians he seems much less open to compromise and even shows traits of anger. (If he had to undergo the process of canonization today, it would be hard for Paul to become a saint: it would be difficult to demonstrate the that his patience was “heroic”! At times he “explodes.” However, he was able to say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”[Gal 2:20], and, as we have seen, this is the essence of Christian holiness.)

In the Letter to the Galatians Paul reproves Peter for what he seems to be recommending to everyone, that is, abstaining from displaying one’s own conviction to avoid giving scandal to the simple. Peter, in fact, at Antioch was persuaded that eating with Gentiles did not contaminate a Jew. (He had already been in Cornelius’s house!) But he refrains from doing so now to avoid giving scandal to the Jews there (see Gal 2:11-14). Paul himself, in other circumstances, will act the same way (see Acts 16:3; 1 Cor 8:13).

The explanation is of course not just in Paul’s temperament. Above all, what was at stake in Antioch was much more clearly linked to the essence of faith and the freedom of the gospel than what seemed to be the case in Rome. Secondly—and this is the main reason—Paul speaks to the Galatians as the founder of the Church there, with the authority and responsibility of a pastor. On the other hand, he speaks to the Romans as a teacher and a brother in the faith in order to contribute, he says, to being “mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom 1:11-12).

Here we see the difference between the role of a pastor to whom obedience is due and the role of a teacher to whom only respect and listening are due. This makes us understand that we need to add another criterion to the criteria for discernment already mentioned, the criterion of authority and obedience. The apostle will speak to us about obedience in one of the successive meditations through his well-known words: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment” (Rom 13:1-2).

In the meantime, let us listen to the concluding exhortation the apostle addresses to the Roman community of his day as though it is addressed to us today in any community in which we live: “Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7).

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English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap.

Third Lent Sermon 2018

“Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought”

Christian Humility

The exhortation to charity that we heard from Paul in the last meditation is enclosed in two brief exhortations to humility that clearly refer to each other in such a way as to form a kind of frame for the exhortation on charity. If they are read in sequence, while omitting what comes between them, the two exhortations state,

I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment. . . . Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; never be wise in your own sight.

(Rom 12:3, 16)

These are not trivial recommendations to moderation and modesty! In these few words, the apostle’s exhortation opens up for us a vast domain of the virtue of humility. Next to charity St. Paul identifies humility as the second most fundamental value, the second area to work on to renew one’s life in the Spirit and to build up the community.

In no area more than this one do the Christian virtues appear to form in us “the mind that was in Christ Jesus.” The apostle recalls elsewhere that Jesus, being divine in nature, “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (see Phil 2:5-8). And Jesus said the same thing to his disciples: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” (see Mt 11:29). Humility can be discussed from different perspectives, which we will see the apostle do, but in its most profound meaning humility belongs only to Jesus. The truly humble person is the one who strives to have the heart of Jesus.

1. Humility as Sober Judgment

In the exhortations of his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul applies the traditional biblical teaching on humility to the life of the Christian community. This teaching is repeatedly expressed through the spatial metaphor of “elevating oneself” and “lowering oneself,” the tendency upward and the tendency downward. We can “aspire to things too lofty for us” (see Ps 131:1) either with our *minds*, through excessive curiosity that does not take into account our limitations in the face of mystery, or we can do that with our *will*, striving for prestigious positions and functions. The apostle has in mind both these possibilities, and his words target both the *presumption* of the mind and the *ambition* of the will.

However, in transmitting the traditional biblical teaching on humility, St. Paul gives a motivation for this virtue that is partly new and original. In the Old Testament the motive or reason for humility is that “Toward the scorners [God] is scornful, but with the humble he gives favor” (Prov 3:34; see Job 22:29), and that “Though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar” (Ps 138:6). It was not explained, or at least not explicitly, why God does that, why he “exalts the humble and casts down the proud.” Different explanations can be given for that, for example, the jealousy or “envy of God” (*phthonos* *Theou*), as certain Greek writers thought, or it is simply God’s will to punish human arrogance, *hubris*.

The decisive concept that Paul introduces in his discourse on humility is the concept of truth. God loves the humble because the humble person lives in accord with truth: he or she is genuine, authentic. God punishes pride because pride, even more than arrogance, is a lie. In fact, everything that is not humble in a person is a lie.

This explains why Greek philosophers, who were familiar with and extolled almost all the other virtues, did not know about humility. The word “humility” (*tapeinosis*) always had the predominantly negative meaning for them of baseness, pettiness, meanness, and cowardice. Greek philosophers were unaware of the two cornerstones that would have allowed them to associate humility with truth: the idea of *creation* and the biblical idea of *sin*. The idea of creation is the basis for the certainty that all that is good and beautiful in human beings comes from God, without exception. The biblical idea of sin is the basis for the certainty that all that is evil, in the moral sense, comes from human beings, from their freedom, from themselves. The biblical person is moved to humility by both the good and the evil that he or she discovers within.

But let’s turn to the apostle’s thought. The expression he uses in our text to indicate humility-truth is “sober judgment.” (*sophrosune*) He exhorts Christians not to have a mistaken or exaggerated sense of themselves but to have instead an accurate, sober—we could say objective—estimation of themselves. Paul repeats the exhortation again in v. 16, where “never be wise in your own sight,” finds its equivalent in the expression “associate with the lowly.” With that Paul is saying that people are wise when they are humble and are humble when they are wise.

By humbling himself, a human being comes closer to the truth. “God is light,” says St. John (1 Jn 1:5); he is truth, so he cannot meet a person who is not in the truth. He gives his grace to the humble because only the humble person is capable of recognizing grace. That person does not say, “By the strength of my hand I have done it!” (Is 10:13; see Deut 8:17). St. Teresa of Avila wrote,

I was wondering once what Our Lord so dearly loved this virtue of humility; and all of a sudden—without, I believe, my having previously thought of it—the following reason came into my mind: that it is because God is Sovereign Truth and to be humble is to walk in truth.[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. “What do you have that you did not receive?”

The apostle does not leave things vague or superficial for us regarding this truth about ourselves. Some of his concise statements, found in other letters and that follow this same sequence of ideas, have the power to remove every “foothold” from us and to make us really get to the bottom of things to discover the truth.

One such text asks, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7). There is only one thing that I have not received, one thing that is completely mine, and that is sin. I know and experience that it comes from me, that it finds its source in me, or in any case in human nature and the in the world, not in God. On the other hand, everything else—including the fact of recognizing that sin comes from me—is from God. Another verse says, “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:3).

The “true estimation” of ourselves is therefore for us to recognize our nothingness! This is the solid ground at which humility aims! It is precisely the sincere and peaceful conviction that by ourselves, we are nothing, we can think nothing, we can do nothing. “Apart from me you can do nothing,” says Jesus (Jn 15:5), and the apostle adds, “we are [not] sufficient in ourselves to *think* anything …” (see 2 Cor 3:5). We can use either of these sayings, depending on the circumstance, as a real “sword of the Spirit” to cut off a temptation, a thought, any self-satisfaction. “What do you have that you did not receive?” The efficacy of the word of God is experienced above all when we apply it to ourselves more than when we apply it to others.

In this way we begin to discover the real nature of our nothingness, which is not a pure and simple nothingness, an “innocent nothingness.” We can glimpse the ultimate goal to which the word of God wants to lead us, which is to recognize what we truly are: a *proud nothing*! I am that person who “believes he is something” while I am nothing; I am the person who has nothing that I did not receive but who always boasts—or is tempted to boast—of something as though I had not received it.

This is not the situation just for some people but a misfortune for all of us. This is the very definition of the “old self,” a non-entity who thinks he or she is something, a proud nothing. The apostle himself confesses what he discovered when he went down into the depths of his heart. “I discovered,” he says,” another law in me. . . . I discovered that sin dwells in me. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me?” (see Rom 7:14-25). That “other law,” the “sin that dwells in us,” was for Paul, as we know, self-glorification, pride, boasting in ourselves.

At the end of our journey of interior descent, then, we do not discover humility in ourselves but pride. However, the very discovery that we are radically proud—and that it is our fault, not God’s, because we became proud by misusing our freedom—is in itself humility because it is the truth. Having discovered what lies at the end of this journey, or even only having glimpsed it from afar through the word of God, is a great grace. It brings us a new peace, like a person in wartime who discovers that under his home, without even having to leave it, there is a secure shelter that is absolutely impregnable to bombings.

A great spiritual teacher, St. Angela of Foligno, when she was close to death, exclaimed, “O unknown nothingness! O unknown nothingness! Truly a soul cannot have a better awareness in this world than to perceive its own nothingness and to stay in its own cell.”[[14]](#footnote-14) That saint exhorted her spiritual children to do whatever was necessary to re-enter that cell quickly whenever they had left it for whatever reason. We need to do what some very timid little creatures do who never leave the entrance of their hole so as to be able to reenter it quickly at the first sign of trouble.

There is a great secret hidden in this advice, a mysterious truth that is experienced when we test it. We discover that a cell actually exists that we can truly enter anytime we wish. It consists in the quiet, tranquil thought of being a nothing, a proud nothing. When we are in that cell we no longer see the defects in our neighbors, or we see them in another light. We understand that it is possible, with grace and with practice, to achieve what the apostle says, although it might seem excessive at first to “humbly count others as more significant than ourselves” (Phil 2:3)—we can at least now understand how this could have been possible for the saints.

To enclose oneself in this cell is completely different, though, from closing in on oneself: it is instead opening oneself up to others, to being, to the objectivity of things, which is the opposite of what the enemies of Christian humility have always thought. It is the closing of oneself *to* self-centeredness, not the closing of oneself *in* self-centeredness. It is a victory over one of the evils that even modern psychology judges to be deadly for a human being: narcissism.

Furthermore, the enemy cannot penetrate this cell. One day Anthony the Great had a vision in which in an instant he saw the innumerable snares the enemy had spread out all over the world and groaned, “What can get through from such snares?’ Then I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Humility.’”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The gospel presents us with an unsurpassed model of this humility-truth, and it is Mary. In the “Magnificat” Mary says that God “has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness” [in the Latin Vulgate, *humilitatem*, humility!] (see Lk 1:48). But what does the Blessed Virgin mean here by “humility” (*tapeinosis*)”? It does not refer to the virtue of humility but to her humble *state*, or at least that she belongs to the category of the humble and the poor that her canticle speaks about next. This is confirmed by the explicit reference to the canticle of Hannah, Samuel’s mother, where the same word is used (*tapeinosis*), and it clearly refers there to Hannah’s misery and barrenness, her lowly condition, not to the attitude of humility.

The difference between the virtue and the condition is clearly obvious. How is it possible to think that Mary is exalting her own humility without thereby destroying her humility? How is it possible to think that Mary is attributing God’s choice of her to her humility without destroying the gratuitousness of that choice and making all of Mary’s life incomprehensible, beginning with her Immaculate Conception? To stress the importance of humility, someone has foolishly written that Mary “does not recognize in herself any virtue except humility,” as if in this way we were giving great honor to that virtue rather than causing great harm to it. The virtue of humility has an altogether special status: people who have it do not believe they have it, and the people who think they have it do not. Only Jesus can declare himself to be “humble of heart” and truly be so. This is the unique and unrepeatable characteristic of humility in the man-God.

Did Mary, then, not have the *virtue* of humility? Of course she had it, and she had it to the highest degree, but only God knew it, not Mary. Precisely this, in fact, constitutes the unparalleled value of true humility: its perfume is perceived only by God, not by the one who emits it. Mary’s soul, free from every real and sinful concupiscence, facing the new situation created by her divine maternity, quickly and naturally came to the point of truth—her nothingness—and nothing and no one could have dissuaded her from that.

In this respect the humility of the Mother of God appears to be a unique miracle of grace. Martin Luther has written, “Though she experienced such an exceeding great work of God within herself, yet she was ever minded not to exalt herself above the humblest mortal living. . . . The wondrous and pure spirit of Mary is worthy of even greater praise, because, having such overwhelming honors heaped upon her head, she does not let them tempt her, but acts as though she did not see it, [and] remains ‘even and right in the way.’”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Mary’s soberness is beyond compare even among the saints. She was able to handle the tremendous pressure of this thought: “You are the mother of the Messiah, the Mother of God! You are what every woman among your people would have desired to be!” Elizabeth had exclaimed, “Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43), and Mary responds, “He has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness!” (see Lk 1:48). She submerged herself into her nothingness and “exalted” only God, saying, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Lk 1:46)—the Lord, not the handmaid. Mary is truly the masterpiece of God’s grace.

1. Humility and Humiliation

We should not deceive ourselves into thinking that we have attained humility just because the word of God and Mary’s example have led us to discover our nothingness. Our degree of humility is seen when the initiative moves from us to others, that is, when we are not the only ones to recognize our weaknesses and faults but when others do—when we are able not only to tell ourselves the truth but are also willing to allow others to tell it to us. In other words, our humility is real when we accept reproofs, corrections, criticism, and humiliations. The author of *The* *Imitation of Christ* says, “Many a time it is to our benefit if others know our defects and even reproach us because of them for they thus help us remain humble.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Claiming to put to death our own pride and striking it down by ourselves without anyone intervening from the outside is like using our own arm to punish ourselves: we will never quite hurt ourselves. It is like wanting to excise a tumor by ourselves. There are people (and I am certainly among them) who are capable of saying—even sincerely—every bad thing imaginable about themselves, people who, during a penitential service, make self-accusations with admirable frankness and courage. But if anyone around them begins to take their confession seriously, or if they dare to mention to them a small part of what they said on their own, sparks fly. Obviously there is still a long road ahead to arrive at true humility and humble truth.

When I seek to receive glory from someone for something I say or do, it is almost always certain that the same person seeks to receive glory from me for what he does or says in response. And so we are both seeking or own glory and neither one of us obtains it. And if, by chance, one of us receives it, it is only “vainglory,” empty glory fated to go up in smoke at death. But the result is just as terrible. Jesus even linked the seeking of one’s glory with the impossibility of believing. He said to the Pharisees, “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (Jn 5:44).

When we find ourselves enmeshed in thoughts and aspirations for human glory, let us throw into that mix of thoughts, like a burning torch, the word that Jesus himself spoke and has left us: “I do not seek my own glory” (Jn 8:50). This word has the almost sacramental power of bringing to pass what it signifies and to dispel such thoughts.

The pursuit of humility is a battle that lasts all our lives and touches every area of life. Pride is capable of being nourished by either evil or good and is therefore able to survive in every situation and every “climate.” In fact, in contrast to every other vice, good, rather than evil, is the preferred breeding ground for this terrible “virus.” Blaise Pascal wrote,

Vanity is so deeply rooted in the heart of man that a soldier, a churl, a cook, a picklock, boast and many have admirers; and philosophers expect to have them too; and those who write against them want to enjoy the reputation of writing well; and those who read them want to enjoy the notoriety of having read them; and I, who am writing this, have perhaps the same desire; and perhaps those who will read it.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Vainglory is able to transform even our striving for humility into an act of pride, but with grace we can come out victorious even from this terrible battle. If in fact your “old self” can succeed in transforming your acts of humility into acts of pride, with grace, your acts of pride can be transformed into acts of humility by your acknowledging them—humbly acknowledging that you are a proud nothing. God is thereby glorified even by your very pride.

In this battle God usually comes to help his people with a remedy that is quite effective and unique. St. Paul writes, “to keep me from being conceited because of the surpassing greatness of revelations I received, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me” (2 Cor 12:7). In order for human beings to be kept from “being conceited,” God grounds us with a kind of anchor: he attaches “burdens on our back” (Ps 66:11). We do not know exactly what the “thorn in the flesh” and the “messenger of Satan” were for Paul, but we know very well what they are for us! Anyone who wants to follow the Lord and serve the Church has them. They are the humiliating situations that we are constantly reminded of, sometimes night and day, which recall the harsh reality of what we are. It might be a defect, an illness, a weakness, or a powerlessness that the Lord allows us to have despite all our pleading. It might be a persistent, humiliating temptation and perhaps precisely a temptation to pride! Perhaps it is a person we have to live with, who, despite the good will of both parties, is able to expose our frailty, to demolish our self-conceit.

Sometimes it is something that is even more serious: there are situations in which the servant of God is forced to witness helplessly the failure of all his efforts and to see things that are bigger than he is that make him experience firsthand his powerlessness in the face of the power of evil and darkness. It is especially in these cases that he learns what it means to “humble yourself under the mighty hand of God” (see 1 Pet 5:6).

Humility is important not only for personal progress on the path to holiness, it is also essential for the proper functioning of community life and for the building up of the Church. I believe that humility is insulation for the life of the Church. Insulation is very important and vital for advances in the area of electricity. In fact, the higher the tension and the more powerful the electric current that goes through a line, the more resistant the insulation must be to prevent the current from being discharged into the ground or causing short circuits. Advances in the area of electricity have to be matched by similar advances in the technology of insulation. In spiritual life, humility is the great insulation that allows the divine current of grace to flow through a person without dissipating or, worse, producing the flames of pride and rivalry.

Let us close with the words of a psalm that allow us to transform into prayer the exhortation that the apostles addressed to us with his teaching on humility.

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;

my eyes are not raised too high.

I do not occupy myself with things

too great and too marvelous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,

like a weaned child with its mother,

like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord,

From this time forth and forevermore. (Ps 131)

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English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap.

Fourth Lent Sermon

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities”

1. The Center Thread That Comes Down

In outlining the traits, or the virtues, that should shine in the life of those who are reborn in the Spirit, St. Paul, after speaking about charity and humility, now speaks of obedience in chapter 13 of the Letter to the Romans:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (Rom 13:1ff)

The rest of this text, in which he speaks of swords and taxes, together with other texts of the New Testament on the same topic (see Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-15), clearly indicates that the apostle is not speaking about authority in general and about every kind of authority but only about the civil authority of the state. St. Paul is dealing with one particular facet of obedience that was of particularly interest at the moment in which he was writing and perhaps even to the community to which he was writing.

It was the moment in which, in the heart of Palestinian Judaism, the zealots’ revolt against Rome was developing, which ended a few years later in the destruction of Jerusalem. Christianity was born from Judaism; many members of the Christian community in Rome were converted Jews. The question of whether to obey the Roman state or not was indirectly an issue for the Christians as well.

The apostolic Church was facing a decisive choice. St. Paul, like all the rest of the New Testament writers, resolves the issue in the light of Jesus’ attitude and words, especially his words about tribute to Caesar (see Mk 12:17). The kingdom preached by Jesus is “not of this world,” it is not of a national or political nature. It can, therefore, exist under any kind of political regime, accepting its advantages (like Roman citizenship) but also its laws. The problem, in brief, gets resolved in the meaning of obedience to the state.

Obedience to the state is a result and an aspect of a much more important and comprehensive obedience that the apostle calls “obedience to the gospel” (see Rom 10:16). The strict admonition of the apostle shows that paying taxes and fulfilling one’s duty to society in general is not only a civic duty but also a moral and religious duty. It is a requirement of the precept of love of neighbor. The state is not an abstract entity; it is the community of people who comprise it. If I do not pay my taxes, if I spoil the environment, if I break traffic laws, I harm and show disdain for my neighbor. On this point we Italians (and maybe not only us) will need to add some questions to our examinations of conscience.

All of this, as we can see, is very relevant, but we cannot limit our discussion on obedience only to the aspect of obedience to the state. St. Paul indicates the place for the Christian discussion of obedience, but he does not tell us everything that can be said about this virtue only in this text. He is drawing out the consequences here of principles previously presented in the Letter to the Romans and elsewhere, and we need to search for those principles to have a discussion on obedience that is useful and relevant for us today.

We need to discover the “fundamental” obedience, the obedience from which all other kinds of obedience arise, including obedience to the civil authorities. It is an obedience that applies to all of us—supervisors and subordinates, religious and lay—and it is the most important one of all. It regulates and energizes all the other kinds of obedience. It is not the obedience of a human being to others but of a human being to God.

After Vatican II someone wrote, “If there is a problem of obedience today it is not that of docility to the Holy Spirit—to whom everyone claims a willingness to submit—but rather that of submission to a hierarchy, to a law, to an authority in its human expression.” I am convinced that this is the case. But we must begin with obedience to God and to his Spirit precisely to make possible once again concrete obedience to the law and to visible authority.

Obedience to God is like “the center thread that comes down” that supports a spider’s beautiful web hanging on a hedge. Descending from the top by this thread it produces, the spider constructs a web that is perfect and taut at every corner. Once the spider’s work is finished, this center thread used to construct the web is not removed but remains in place. In fact, the center thread is what holds together all of the spider’s weaving; without it everything collapses. If one of the lateral threads breaks (I tested this once), the spider rushes to quickly repair his web, but if that center thread from on high is broken, then the spider moves on because nothing more can be done.

Something analogous happens with the network of obediences in a society, in a religious order, and in the Church. Every one of us lives within a closely woven network of submission to civil authorities and ecclesiastical authorities—in the case of the Church, to the local superior, to the bishop, to the Congregation of the Clergy or of Religious, and to the pope. Obedience to God is the center thread that comes down: everything is built around it, but it cannot be forgotten after the construction of the whole is finished. Otherwise, everything collapses and people no longer understand why they should obey.

2. The Obedience of Christ

It is relatively simple to discover the nature and origin of Christian obedience: we just need to understand the specific concept of obedience by which Jesus is defined in Scripture as “the Obedient one.” We quickly discover in doing this that the true foundation of Christian obedience is not an idea of obedience but an act of obedience. It is not the abstract principle from Aristotle according to whom “the inferior must submit to the superior” but is instead an event. It is not found in “right reason” but in the kerygma, and its foundation is that Christ “became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:8), and that he “learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb 5:8-9).

The luminous center which sheds light on the whole discussion of obedience in the Letter to the Romans, is Romans 5:19: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” Whoever knows the place that justification holds in the Letter to the Romans can understand the place that obedience holds!

Let us seek to understand the nature of this act of obedience on which the new order is based; in other words, let us try to understand what the obedience of Christ is like. As a child, Jesus obeyed his parents; then as an adult he submitted to the Mosaic Law, to the Sanhedrin, and to Pilate. St. Paul, however, is not thinking of any of these kinds of obedience. He is thinking instead of Christ’s obedience to the Father.

Christ’s obedience is considered to be the exact antithesis of Adam’s disobedience: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19; see 1 Cor 15:22). But who did Adam disobey? Certainly not his parents, the state, or laws. He disobeyed God. At the origin of all disobedience is disobedience to God, and at the origin of all obedience is obedience to God.

Obedience fills all of Jesus’ life. While St. Paul and the Letter to the Hebrews highlight the role of obedience in Jesus’s death, St. John and the Synoptic Gospels fill out the picture by highlighting the place of obedience in Jesus’ life, in his daily activity. “My food, “ Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “is to do the will of him who sent me,” and “I always do what is pleasing to him” (Jn 4:34, 8:29). The life of Jesus is as though guided by a shining path shaped by the words written about him in the Bible. “It is written . . . . It is written . . . .” This is how he overcame the temptations in the desert. Jesus gathers from Scripture the “so must it be” (*dei*) that governs his whole life.

The greatness of Jesus’ obedience is objectively measured “by the things he suffered” and subjectively by the love and freedom with which he obeyed. Filial obedience is exemplified to the highest degree in him. Even in his most extreme moment, when the Father gives him the cup of his passion to drink, his filial cry never leaves his lips: “Abba! My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,” he exclaimed on the cross (see Mt 27:46), but, according to Luke, he quickly adds the words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Lk 23:46). On the cross “Jesus abandoned himself to the God who had abandoned him” (whatever this abandonment by the Father means). His obedience unto death is “the rock of our salvation.”

3. Obedience as Grace: Baptism

In the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul presents Christ to us as the head of the obedient in opposition to Adam who was the head of the disobedient. In the next chapter, chapter 6, the apostle reveals the manner in which we enter into the reality of this event: it is through baptism. St. Paul sets forth one principle above all: if you place yourself freely under someone’s jurisdiction you are obliged then to serve and obey them.

Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Rom 6:16).

Having now established this principle, St. Paul recalls the fact that Christians have actually freely placed themselves under the jurisdiction of Christ on the day they accepted him in baptism as their Lord: “You who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (Rom 6:17-18). With baptism there came a change of masters, a shift of kingdoms: from sin to righteousness, from disobedience to obedience, from Adam to Christ. The liturgy of baptism has expressed all this in its contrasting declarations: “I renounce - I believe”.

Obedience, then, is something essential in Christian life: it is the practical and necessary implication of the Lordship of Christ. There is no Lordship present if there is no obedience on the part of a human being. In baptism we accepted one Lord, one Kyrios, but an “obedient” Lord, someone who became Lord precisely because of his obedience (see Phil 2:8-11), someone whose Lordship is substantiated, so to speak, by obedience. Obedience here does not point so much to subjugation as it does to resemblance: to obey such a Lord means to become like him, because it is precisely through his obedience unto death that he has obtained the name of Lord, which is above every other name (see Phil 2:8-9).

We discover from this that before being a virtue, obedience is a gift, before being law, it is grace. The difference between the two is that the law *tells* us what to do while grace *gives* us the ability to do what we are commanded. Obedience is above all the work of God in Christ that is then held up as a model for believers so that they in turn can express it in their lives through faithful imitation. In other words, we do not only have the duty to obey, but we also now have the grace to obey!

Christian obedience is rooted, then, in baptism; in baptism all Christians are “dedicated” to obedience, and in a certain sense have made that “vow.” The rediscovery of this fact common to all and founded in baptism meets a vital need for lay people in the Church. Vatican II enunciated the principle of a “universal call to holiness” for the people of God (*LG* 40). And since there is no holiness without obedience, to say that all the baptized are called to holiness is like saying that all are called to obedience, that there is also a universal call to obedience.

4. Obedience as a “Duty”: The Imitation of Christ

In the first part of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul presents Jesus Christ to us as a gift to be received by faith, while in the second section—the exhortation section—he presents Christ to us as a model to imitate in our lives. These two aspects of salvation are also present within each of the individual virtues or fruits of the Spirit. In every Christian virtue there is an element of mystery and an element of asceticism, one part that is entrusted to grace and one part that is entrusted to human freedom. It is now the moment to consider this second part, our active imitation of the obedience of Christ, obedience as a duty.

As soon as we try to search through the New Testament for what the duty of obedience entails, we make the surprising discovery that obedience is almost always seen as obedience to God. There is of course also mention of all the other forms of obedience—to parents, to masters, to superiors, to civil authorities, “to every human institution” (1 Pet 2:13)—but they are noted much less often and in a much less solemn manner. The noun “obedience” (*hupakoè*) itself is always used to indicate only obedience to God or, in any event, instances that are connected to God except in one passage from the Letter to Philemon (v. 21) where it refers to obedience to the apostle. St. Paul speaks of obedience to the *faith* (Rom 1:5, 16:26), obedience to *teaching* (Rom 6:17), obedience to the *gospel* (Rom 10:16; 2 Thess 1:8), obedience to *truth* (Gal 5:7), and obedience to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). We also find the identical language elsewhere in the New Testament (see Acts 6:7; 1 Pet 1:2, 22).

But is it possible and does it make sense today to speak about obedience to God after the new and living will of God, manifested in Christ, has been fully expressed and instituted in a whole series of laws and hierarchies? Is it permissible to think that after all this, there still are “new wills” of God that we might need to receive and fulfill? Yes, most certainly! If the living will of God could be enclosed and objectified thoroughly and definitively in a series of laws, norms, and institutions in an established and definite “order” once and for all, then the Church would end up being a petrified Church.

The rediscovery of the importance of obedience to God is a natural consequence of the rediscovery of the pneumatic dimension—alongside the hierarchical dimension—of the Church and of the primacy of the word of God in it. Obedience to God, in other words, is conceivable only when we affirm, as Vatican II did, that “The Church, which the Spirit guides in way of all truth and which He unified in communion in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits. By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse” (*LG* 4).

Only if we believe in a present and specific “Lordship” of the Risen One over the Church, only if we are deeply convinced that today as well, as the Psalm says, “The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and does not keep silent” (see Ps 50:1-2), only then are we able to understand the necessity and the importance of obeying God. It calls for an attentive listening to God who speaks in the Church through his Spirit who illuminates the words of Jesus and of the whole Bible, conferring authority on them and making them channels of the living and present will of God for us.

But just as institution and mystery are not set in opposition to each other in the Church but are instead united, so too we must now show that spiritual obedience to God does not deter obedience to visible and institutional authority. On the contrary it renews it, strengthens it, brings it to life to the point that obedience to human beings becomes the criterion to judge if someone is obedient or not and if his or her obedience to God is genuine. There is an analogy between obedience and charity. The first commandment is to love God, but its litmus test is loving our neighbor. St. John writes, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20). The same must be said about obedience: if you do not obey the superior you see, how can you say you obey God whom you do not see?

Obedience to God generally happens this way. God suddenly flashes something in your mind or your heart about his will for you: it is an “inspiration” that usually comes from a word from God you heard or read in prayer. You feel yourself “challenged” by that word and that inspiration. You feel that God is “asking”’ something new from you, and you say “yes.” If it involves a decision that would have practical consequences, you cannot act solely on the basis of your inspiration. You need to put your call in the hands of your superiors or of those who have spiritual authority over you in some way, believing that if it is from God he will make it known to his representatives.

But what do you do when a conflict emerges between the two kinds of obedience, and the human superior asks you to do something different and contrary to what you believe God commanded you? We only need to ask ourselves what Jesus did in such a case. He accepted the external obedience and submitted himself to men; in so doing, however, he did not renounce obedience to the Father but instead fulfilled it. This was in fact just what the Father wanted. Without knowing it and without willing it, at times in good faith and at other times not, people—like Caiaphas, Pilate, and the crowd—become instruments who fulfill God’s will, not their own.

This rule is not absolute, however. I do not speak here of the positive obligation to disobey when the political authority –as in some dictatorial regimes – asks something clearly immoral and criminal. Remaining in the field of religion God’s will and his freedom may require a person—like Peter before the Sanhedrin’s order—to obey God rather than men (see Acts 4:19-20). But whoever starts down this path has to accept, like every true prophet, dying to himself (and often physically) before seeing his word come to pass. In the Catholic Church true prophecy has always been accompanied by obedience to the pope. Father Primo Mazzolari and Lorenzo Milani are some recent examples of that.

Obeying only when what a superior says corresponds exactly to our ideas and our choices is not obeying God but obeying ourselves; it is not doing God’s will but doing our own. If in the case of a difference of opinion, instead of questioning ourselves we immediately question the superior’s discernment and competence, we are no longer people who are obeying but people who are objecting.

5. An Obedience Always Open to All

Obedience to God is the obedience we can always practice. Obedience to very demanding orders from visible authorities happens only occasionally, perhaps three or four times in one’s life. On the other hand, there are many occasions for obedience to God, and the more one obeys, the more God’s orders multiply, because he knows that this is the best gift he can give, which is what he gave his Son Jesus. When he finds a person resolved to obey, God then takes hold of that life, like someone who takes hold of the helm of a ship or the reins of a carriage. Then God becomes “Lord” in earnest and not just in theory; he becomes the one who “rules,” who “governs,” determining, one could say, the gestures and words of that person moment by moment, the manner in which time is spent—everything.

I said that obedience to God is something that a person can always give. I need to add that it is also the obedience that all of us can give, whether we are subordinates or superiors. It has often been said that a person needs to know how to obey in order to be able to command. This is not just a common sense principle, it also has a theological rationale. It means that the true source of spiritual authority resides more in obedience than in the title or the office that one holds. Conceiving of authority as obedience means not being satisfied only with authority but aspiring to the authoritativeness that comes from having God behind you and supporting your decision. It means moving closer to the kind of authority that sprang from Christ’s actions and made people ask themselves, “What is this? A new teaching with authority!” (see Mk 1:27).

This is a different kind of authority, with real and effective power, not a nominal one; it is an intrinsic power, not an extrinsic one. When an order is given by a parent or a superior who strives to live in God’s will, who has prayed first and has no personal stake to protect but has in view only the good of the brother or of his own child, then the very authority of God acts as a buttress to that order or decision. If a challenge arises, God tells his representative what he said to Jeremiah one day: “Behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls. . . . They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord” (Jer 1:18-19). St. Ignatius of Antioch gave this wise advice to St. Polycarp, one of his disciples and colleagues in the episcopate: “Let nothing be done without your consent, nor do anything without God’s consent.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

This path of obedience to God has nothing mystical or extraordinary about it per se and is open to all the baptized. It consists in “presenting questions to God” (see Ex 18:19). I can decide on my own to take a trip or not, to accept a job, to go visit someone, to make a purchase, and then once I have decided I can ask God to give me a good outcome. But if I love obedience to God, then I do things differently. First I ask God through the simple means available to all of us—prayer—if it is his will for me to take that trip or that job or to make that visit or that purchase. I will end up deciding to do it or not, but in any case it will now be an act of obedience to God and not my own free initiative.

Normally, I will not hear a voice in my brief prayer, and I will have no explicit answer about doing something—at least it is not necessary to have an answer for my action to involve obedience. In so doing I have in fact submitted the question to God, I have stripped myself of my will, I have renounced deciding on my own, and I have given God the opportunity to intervene in my life as he wishes. Whatever thing I now decide to do, relying on the ordinary criteria of discernment, will be obedience to God. This is how to yield the reins of one’s life to God! This is how God’s will penetrates always more deeply into the fabric of one’s existence, enriching it and making of it “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1).

Let us conclude this time as well with the words of a psalm that allows us to transform the teaching the apostle gave us into prayer. On a day that was full of joy and recognition of the benefits of his God (“I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me . . . . He drew me up from the desolate pit” (Ps 40:1-2), the psalmist, in a true state of grace, asks himself how he can respond to so much goodness from the Lord: should he offer burnt offerings and sacrifices? He quickly understands that this is not what God is wanting from him; it is too meager to express what is in his heart. Then comes the insight and revelation: what God wants from him is a generous and solemn decision to fulfil all that God wants from him from now on, to obey him in everything. So he then exclaims,

Behold, I come;

in the roll of the book it is written of me,

I delight to do your will, O my God.

your law is within my heart (Ps 40:7-8)

In coming into the world Jesus made these words his own, saying, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God” (Heb 10:7). Now it’s our turn. All of life can be lived day by day under the banner of these words, “Behold, I come to do your will, O God!” In the morning, at the beginning of the new day, then going to an appointment or a meeting, at beginning of a new task, we can say, “Behold, I come to do your will, O God!”

We do not know what that day, that meeting, that task will hold for us. We know only one thing with certainty: that we want to do God’s will in all these things. We do not know what our future holds, but it is good to walk toward it with these words on our lips: “Behold, I come to do your will, O God!”

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English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap.

Fifth Lent Sermon 2018

“PUT ON THE ARMOR OF LIGHT”

Christian Purity

In our commentary on the exhortations in the Letter to the Romans, we have now come to the passage that says,

The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom 13:12-14).

St. Augustine in his *Confessions* tells us about the part this passage played in his conversion. He had now reached an almost complete commitment to the faith. But there was one thing holding him back: the fear of not being able to remain chaste. He was living, as we know, with a woman without being married.

In the garden of the home he was visiting, in the throes of this interior struggle with tears in his eyes, he heard a voice coming from the house next door, a young boy’s or girl’s voice that kept repeating, “*Tolle, lege*! Take up and read, take up and read.” He interpreted those words as an invitation from God, and having a book of St. Paul’s Letters close by, he opened it randomly and decided to consider the first thing he read as God’s will for him. The passage his eyes fell on was precisely the passage from the Letter to the Romans that we have just read. A reassuring light (*lux securitatis*) shone forth within him that made all the darkness of uncertainty disappear. Now he knew that with God’s help, he could be chaste.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The things that the apostle calls “the works of darkness” in this passage are the same things he defines elsewhere as “desires, or works, of the flesh” (see Rom 8:13; Gal 5:19), and what he calls ”the armor of light” refers to the things that he elsewhere calls “the works of the Spirit,” or “the fruit of the Spirit” (see Gal 5:22). Among the works of the flesh, he highlights sexual dissoluteness with two words (*koite* and *aselgeia*) that are contrasted to the work of light, which is purity. The apostle does not speak in great detail here about this aspect of Christian life. But from the list of vices at the beginning of the letter (see Rom 1:26ff), we know how much importance it has in his eyes.

St. Paul establishes a very close link between purity and holiness and between purity and the Holy Spirit:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things. . . . God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thess 4:3-8)

Let us therefore seek to take up this last exhortation from the word of God, reflecting more deeply on this particular fruit of the Spirit, purity.

1. Christian Reasons for Purity

In the Letter to the Galatians St. Paul writes, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). The original Greek word that is translated as “self-control” or “dominion over oneself” is *enkrateia*. It has a very broad range of meanings. One can in fact exercise self-control in eating, in speaking, in restraining anger, etc. Here, however, as almost always in the New Testament, it means self-control in a very specific personal area, the area of sexuality. We can deduce this from the fact that just above when he is listing “the works of the flesh,” the apostle calls *porneia*, impurity, the thing that is opposed to self-control. (This is the same word from which we get the word “pornography.”)

In modern translations of the Bible, the word *porneia* has been translated at times as “prostitution,” at times as “sexual immorality,” at times as “fornication” or “adultery,” and at times with other words. The basic idea of the word, however, is that of “selling oneself,” of using one’s own body, and thus of prostituting oneself (*pernemi* in Greek means, “I sell myself”). Using this ~~a~~ word to indicate virtually all the manifestations of sexual disorder, the Bible says that every sin of impurity is, in a sense, a prostituting of oneself, a selling of oneself.

The words used by St. Paul tell us, then, that there are two opposing attitudes toward one’s body and one’s sexuality. One is a fruit of the Spirit and the other is a work of the flesh; one is a virtue the other is a vice. The first attitude involves maintaining control over oneself and one’s body; the second instead involves selling oneself or using one’s body, that is, using sexuality for one’s own pleasure, for utilitarian goals that are different than those for which it was created. It makes the sexual act a venal act, even if the gain is not always monetary as in the case of true prostitution, and makes selfish pleasure an end in itself.

When we speak of purity and impurity in simple lists of virtue or vice, without examining the matter more deeply, the language of the New Testament does not differ very much from the language of pagan moralists. Pagan moralists also, Stoics and Epicureans, praise self-control, the *enkrateia*, but only as applied to interior quiet, to impassibility (*apatheia*) and to self-mastery. Purity is governed, according to them, by the principle of “right reason.”

In reality, however, within these two ancient pagan words, there is now a completely new content that arises, as always, from the kerygma. This is already evident in our passage where sexual dissolution is set in significant opposition to, as its contrary, the idea of “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.” The early Christians were able to grasp this new content because it was already a topic of specific catechesis in other contexts.

Let us now examine one of these specific teachings on purity to discover its true content and the true Christian reasons for this virtue, which come from Christ’s paschal mystery. It is found in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. It seems that the Corinthians—–perhaps misinterpreting a statement by the apostle—advanced the principle that “all things are lawful for me” to justify even sins of impurity. The apostle’s response contains an absolutely new motive for purity that derives from the mystery of Christ. It is not permitted, he says, to give oneself to impurity (*porneia*). It is not permitted to sell oneself or to use oneself just for one’s own pleasure for the simple reason that we no longer belong to ourselves; we are not our own but Christ’s. We cannot decide how to use something that does not belong to us: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . You are not your own” (1 Cor 12:15, 19).

The pagan motive is, in a certain sense, turned upside down; the supreme value to safeguard is no longer dominion over self but “non-dominion over self”: “The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor 6:13). The ultimate motive for purity is, therefore, that “Jesus is Lord!” Christian purity, in other words, does not consist in establishing the dominion of reason over our instincts so much as it is establishing the dominion of Christ over the whole person, including a person’s reason and instincts.

This christological motive for purity is made more compelling by what St. Paul adds in the same passage: we are not just generically “of” Christ, like his property or some thing that belongs to him, we are the very body of Christ, his members! This makes everything immensely more subtle because it means that when I commit an impure act, I am prostituting the body of Christ, I am performing a kind of horrible sacrilege. I am committing violence against the body of the Son of God. The apostle asks, “Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?” (1 Cor 6:15).

He quickly adds to this christological motive the pneumatological one which concerns the Holy Spirit: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?” (1 Cor 6:19). To abuse one’s own body is thus to desecrate the temple of God. But if someone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him (see 1 Cor 3:17). To commit impurity is to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Ephes 4:30).

Alongside the christological and pneumatological reasons, the apostle also mentions an eschatological one that refers to the ultimate destiny of a human being: “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power” (1 Cor 6:14). Our body is destined for resurrection. It is destined one day to participate in the beatitude and the glory of the soul. Christian purity is not based on disdain for the body; on the contrary, it is based on the great esteem for its dignity. The Fathers of the Church, in combatting Gnostics, used to say the gospel does not proclaim salvation “from” the flesh but salvation “of” the flesh. Those who consider the body as “an outer garment” destined to be abandoned here below do not have the reason a Christian does to keep it unspoiled.

The apostle concludes his teaching on purity with an impassioned invitation: “So glorify God in your body!” (1 Cor 6:20). The human body, then, is for the glory of God and expresses that glory when a person lives out his or her sexuality and all of physical life in loving obedience to God’s will, which is like saying in obedience to the very meaning of sexuality, to its intrinsic and original nature which is not a selling of oneself but a giving of oneself. Such glorification of God through one’s body does not necessarily require renouncing the exercise of one’s sexuality. In the chapter that immediately follows, 1 Corinthians 7, St. Paul explains in fact that such glorification of God expresses itself in two ways and through two different charisms: either through marriage or through virginity. The virgin and the celibate glorify God in their bodies, but the one who marries also glorifies him provided that each one lives the requirements of his or her own state.

1. Purity, Beauty, and Love of One’s Neighbor

In the new light deriving from the paschal mystery and illustrated for us up to this point by St. Paul, the ideal of purity holds a privileged place in every summary of morality in the New Testament. One could say there is no letter by St. Paul in which he does not dedicate space to purity when he is describing the new life in the Spirit (see, for example, Ephes 4:17-5:33; Col 3:5-12). The basic requirements of purity are specified, from time to time, according to the diverse states of life for Christians. The Pastoral Letters explain how purity needs to be configured in young people, in women, in spouses, in the elderly, in widows, in presbyters, and in bishops. These letters present purity in its various facets of chastity, conjugal fidelity, sobriety, continence, virginity, and modesty.

Taken as whole, this aspect of Christian life determines what the New Testament—and the Pastoral Letters in a special way—call the “beauty” or the “beautiful” character of the Christian vocation that, joined with the other characteristic of goodness, form the unique ideal of “good beauty” or “ beautiful goodness” (in Greek, *kalokagathia*). Christian tradition, calling purity the “beautiful virtue,” has grasped this biblical vision that—despite the abuses and the often one-sided emphases that have occurred—expresses something profoundly true. Purity is in fact Beauty!

This kind of purity is a lifestyle more than it is an individual virtue. It has a range of manifestations that go beyond the specifically sexual sphere. There is a purity of the body, but there is also a purity of the soul that rejects not only acts but also “evil” desires and thoughts (see Mt 5:8, 27-28). There is a purity of speech that consists, negatively, in refraining from obscene language, vulgarity, and silly or suggestive talk (see Ephes 5:4; Col 3:8) and consists positively in sincere and straightforward speech, that is, in saying “yes, yes,” and “no, no” in imitation of the spotless Lamb in whom “no guile was found on his lips” (1 Pet 2:22). Finally, there is a purity or clear-sightedness of the eyes and of one’s gaze. “The eye,” Jesus said, “is the lamp of the body” (see Mt 6:22ff; Lk 11:34). St. Paul uses a very suggestive image to indicate the manner of this new life: he says Christians, born from the Passover of Christ, should be characterized by “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:8). The word the apostle uses here, *eilikrineia*, (from *eile*, splendor of the sun, and *krino,* to discern) contains in itself the image of a “solar transparency.” In the passage we began with in Romans he speaks of purity as “the armor of light.”

Every day people tend to contrast sins against purity with sins against a neighbor and to consider just the sin against a neighbor a real sin. Sometimes people mock the excessive value accorded in the past to the “beautiful virtue.” This attitude is somewhat understandable: in the past morality emphasized the sins of the flesh so unilaterally that it led to real neuroses at times, to the detriment of concern for the duties toward our neighbor and to the detriment of the virtue of purity itself. Because of that, this virtue became impoverished and reduced to something that was almost only negative, the virtue of being able to say “no.”

However, we have gone to the opposite extreme, and people tend to minimize sins against purity in the interest of concern (often only verbal) for one’s neighbor. The basic error here is in putting these two virtues against each other. The word of God, far from setting purity against charity, instead links them closely together. We only have to read the continuation of the passage from the First the Letter to the Thessalonians that I cited at the beginning to realize how these two virtues are interdependent according to the apostle (see 1 Thess 4:3-12). The single goal of both purity and charity is to be able to conduct a life “full of dignity,” that is, integrated in all its relationships whether with oneself or with others. In our passage, the apostle summarizes all this in saying, “let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day” (Rom 13:13).

Purity and love of neighbor represent dominion over self and the gift of self to others. How can I give myself if I do not possess myself but am a slave to my passions? It is an illusion to think that we can combine genuine service to brothers and sisters, which always calls for sacrifice, altruism, forgetting ourselves, and generosity, with a life that is personally disordered, all aimed at pleasing oneself and satisfying one’s passions. It inevitably ends in using brothers and sisters, just as one uses one’s body. Those who cannot say “no” to themselves cannot say “yes” to brothers and sisters.

One of the “excuses” that contributes the most to justify the sin of impurity in people’s minds and to relieve them of all responsibility is that it does not hurt anyone else, it does not violate the rights and freedom of anyone unless, they say, it involves sexual abuse. But apart from the fact that this approach violates God’s fundamental right to give his creatures a law, this “excuse” is also disingenuous in regard to neighbors. It is not true that the sin of impurity ends with the person who commits it. There is a solidarity among all sins. Every sin, wherever and whoever commits it, infects and defiles the moral atmosphere for human beings. Jesus calls this infection “scandal” and condemns it with some of the most horrific words in the whole gospel (see Mt 18:6ff; Mk 9:42ff; Lk 17:1ff). Even evil thoughts that linger in our hearts, according to Jesus, defile a person and thus the world: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication . . . . These are what defile a man” (Mt. 15:19-20).

Every sin erodes values and all of them together create what Paul defines as “the law of sin” whose power over all human beings he illustrates (see Rom 7:14ff). In the Jewish Talmud we can read a parable that illustrates well the solidarity between sin and the harm that all sin, even personal sin, causes for others. “Some people were on board a boat. One of them took a drill and began to drill a hole under his seat. The other passengers, watching him, asked, ‘What are you doing?’ He answered, ‘What business is that of yours? Am I not drilling a hole under my own seat?’ But they reply, ‘Yes, but water will come in the boat and will drown all of us!’” Nature itself has begun to send us ominous protest warnings against certain modern abuses and excesses in the area of sexuality.

1. Purity and Renewal

In studying the history of the origins of Christianity, one can clearly see that there were two principal instruments by which the Church succeeded in transforming the pagan world of that time. The first was the proclamation of the gospel, the kerygma, and the second was the testimony of Christians’ lives, their witness. And one can see how, in the area of life testimony, there were again two things that most amazed and converted the pagans: brotherly love and the purity of the Christians’ morals. The First Letter of Peter already mentions the amazement of the pagan world before the standard of life that was different among the Christians. He writes,

Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you. (1 Pet 4:3-4)

The Apologists, the Christian writers who wrote in defense of the faith in the first centuries of the Church, attest that the pure and chaste manner of life of the Christians was, for the pagans, something “extraordinary and incredible.” In particular, the restoration of the family had an extraordinary impact on pagan society, which the authorities at the time had wanted to reform, but they had been powerless to slow down its disintegration. One of the arguments on which St. Justin Martyr based his *Apology* addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius was this: Roman emperors are concerned about improving morals and the family, and they are attempting to promulgate laws for that goal. However, these laws have been shown to be insufficient. Well, why not recognize what Christian laws have been capable of achieving for those who live by them and acknowledge the help they can also give to civil society?

This does not mean that the Christian community was completely free of sexual disorders and sins. St. Paul even had to deal with a case of incest in the Corinthian community. But such sins were clearly recognized as sins, denounced, and corrected. It was not required to be without sin in this area, as in other areas, but to fight against sin.

Now let us move from early Christianity to today. What is the situation in the world today regarding purity? It is the same if not worse than the ancient situation! We live in a society, in terms of morals, that has fallen back into full-blown paganism and full-blown idolatry of sex. The terrible denunciation that St. Paul makes of the pagan world at the beginning of the Letter to the Romans applies, point by point, to today’s world, especially to the so-called affluent society (see Rom 1:26-27, 32).

Today as well, these things and other worse things are being done, but people try to justify them, to justify every moral license and every sexual perversion provided, they say, it does not harm others and does not infringe on the freedom of others. Whole families are being destroyed and people still say, where’s the harm in it? It is undeniable that certain judgments about traditional sexual morality are being revised and that modern sciences about human beings have contributed to shedding light on certain inner workings and conditionings of the human psyche that remove or diminish moral responsibility for certain behaviors that were considered sinful at one time.

But this progress has nothing to do with the pansexualism of certain pseudo-scientific and permissive theories that tend to negate every objective norm about sexual morality, reducing everything to a spontaneous evolution of morality, that is, a cultural matter. If we closely examine what is being called the sexual revolution of our day, we realize with shock that it is not simply a revolution against the past but is also often a revolution against God and at times even against human nature.

4. Pure in Heart!

But I do not want to linger for too long on describing the situation around us today that all of us already know so well. Instead I would like to discover and transmit what God wants of us Christians in such a situation as this. God is calling us to the same task to which he called our first brothers and sisters in the faith, to “stand against this wild profligacy.” He is calling us to make the “beauty” of Christian life shine again before the eyes of the whole world. He is calling us to fight for purity, to fight with persistence and humility—not necessarily to be immediately perfect.

Today the Holy Spirit is asking us to do something new: he is asking us to bear witness to the world to the original innocence of creatures and things. The world has sunk very low, someone has written that sex has gone to our brains. We need something very strong to break this kind of narcosis and intoxication with sex. We need to reawaken in human beings a nostalgia for the innocence and simplicity that they long for in their hearts, even if those hearts are quite often covered with sludge. I am not referring to the innocence of creation that no longer exists but the innocence of redemption that Christ restored to us and offers us in the sacraments and in the word of God. This is what St. Paul has in mind when he writes to the Philippians “that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life” (Phil 2:15-16). This describes what Paul calls in our passage “putting on the armor of light.”

It is no longer enough to have a purity based on fear, taboos, prohibitions, and men and women avoiding each other as if the other is always necessarily a snare and a potential enemy rather than a “help.” In the past purity was at times reduced, at least in practice, precisely to this combination of taboos, prohibitions, and fears as if this virtue needed to be ashamed in front of the vice instead of the vice being ashamed in front of the virtue. We need to aspire, thanks to the presence of the Spirit in us, to a purity that is stronger than its opposite vice—a positive purity, not just a negative one, that is able to make us experience the truth of this word from the apostle, “To the pure all things are pure” (Tit 1:15), and of this other word from Scripture, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4).

We need to begin with healing the root, which is the “heart,” because everything that defiles a person’s life comes from the heart (Mt 15:18). Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God!” (Mt 5:8). They will truly see, they will have new eyes to see the world and God, clear-sighted eyes that know how to discern what is beautiful and what is hideous, what is truth and what is a lie, what brings life and what brings death—eyes, in brief, like Jesus’ eyes. How free Jesus was to talk about everything: children, women, pregnancy, childbirth . . . . Eyes like Mary’s eyes. Purity no longer consists, then, in saying, “no” to creatures but in saying “yes” to them—insofar as they are creatures of God who have been and remain “very good.”

Let us not deceive ourselves. To be able to say this “yes,” we need to go through the cross because after sin, our gaze on creatures has become clouded; concupiscence has been unleashed in us; sexuality is no longer peaceful and has become an ambiguous and threatening force that drags us away from the law of God against our will. The daily news of abuses and scandals in this field, included among members of the clergy and religious people, are there to remind us of this bitter reality. In the first meditation for this Lent we emphasized one aspect that is particularly relevant and necessary for mortification: the mortification of the eyes. A healthy fast from images is more important today than fasting from food and drink.

Let us conclude by recalling the experience of St. Augustine mentioned at the beginning. After that experience of deliverance, he started praying for chastity in a new way: “Lord, he said, you command me to be chaste. Give me what you ask me for and then ask me whatever you will”. A prayer we can make our own, knowing that in this as in any other field by ourselves we can do nothing.

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English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

1. “From a Letter to Diognetus: The Christian in the World,” Vatican website. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Selections from The Sayings of the Desert Fathers,* trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See St. Ambrose, “Flight from the World” [“*De fuga saeculi*”], 1, in *Seven Exegetical Works*, trans. Michael P. McHugh, vol. 65, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 279-288; see also *CSEL*, 32, 2, p. 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. St. Ambrose, “Isaac, or the Soul,” 3, 6, *Seven Exegetical Works*, p. 14. See also *Exposition on the Gospel of Luke*, 9, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Claude Geffré, “Sécularisation,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 15, 1989, pp. 502ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-IIae, q. 113, a. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), pp. 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See St. Augustine, “Sermon 39,” 5, *Sermons on the Old Testament 20-50*, vol. 2 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990); *PL* 38, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The saying goes back to a non-canonical saying attributed to Jesus himself: “If you do not fast from the world, you will never discover the kingdom of God,” *Gospel of Thomas*, saying #27. See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromati* 111, 15 (*GCS*, 52, p. 242, 2); Alfred Resch, *Agrapha*, 48, *TU*, 30 (1906), p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Translation from the Vatican website, “Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2009.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. *Le cause dei santi.* Sussidio per lo Studium, a cura della Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 3a ed. 2014, pp. 13-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Archimidrite Sofrony, *The Undistorted Image: Starez Silouan: 1866-1938*, n, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Faith Press, 1958), p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, VI, ch. 10, vol. 2, *Complete Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, trans. and ed. Allison Peers (New York: Burns & Oates, Dover, 2002), p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. St. Angela of Foligno, *The Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno (Instructions)*, in *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), pp. 315-316. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. St. Anthony the Great, *Selections from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Martin Luther, “The Magnificat,” trans. A. T. W. Steinhaeuser, vol. 21, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956), pp. 308, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Thomas à Kempis, *The* *Imitation of Christ*, 2, 1, trans. Joseph N. Tylenda (New York: Vintage Classics, 1998), p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Blaise Pascal, *Pascal’s Pensées*, trans. Martin Turnell (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 134; Braunschweig ed., #150. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. St. Ignatius, “Letter to Polycarp,” 4, 1, in The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations, 3rd ed., ed. and rev. trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. St. Augustine, *The* *Confessions of St. Augustine*, 8, 11-12, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), pp. 199-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)