



Sermon on the Mount ~Carl Bloch

St. Paul's Letter to the Romans is his great treatise on the grace of Christ and especially on the *power* of this grace, on what this grace accomplishes in the hearts of those who have received it and strive to live according

to it. And it would seem that the teaching of this Letter consists not only in what St. Paul writes, but also in the *order* in which he writes it. He spends the first 11 chapters of the letter speaking about the life of grace in believers, especially with the view of making manifest the *power* of this grace. And it's only after this, in chapter twelve, that St. Paul begins to exhort his readers to *accomplish* the works of grace in their lives. Chapter twelve is where St. Paul begins his great appeal to the Christians to "present their bodies as a living sacrifice" ... he exhorts them "not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of [their minds], that [they] may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect". So, in other words, the actual life of grace in the soul, the experience of grace and one's personal

encounter with Christ as the author of this grace all come *before* the exhortation to live this grace. The very high standards of moral living that the Christian faith demands flow from something *prior* to those demands. This

EXHORTATION FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

was a frequent theme in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI who often cautioned the faithful about reducing Christianity to a kind of moral code. The life of faith is not, in essence, a moral code, rather, it consists above all in a transformation of the soul by means of grace and life in Christ. One does not possess the ability and the power to live out the high standards of Christian life if one hasn't come to know Christ and His grace.

Perhaps this way of reducing Christianity to a kind of moral code and stressing the moral demands of the faith in a way that loses sight of the need for grace is something that especially came out of the Jansenist influence in the Church. I think one of the reasons for the great popularity of St. Therese of Lisieux's autobiography and spirituality was that she was em-

phasizing a way to God that was really a return to this proper order. In effect she was teaching that the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) have a priority over the moral virtues (justice, temperance and fortitude) in the life of a Christian. If we place our focus on growing in faith, hope and charity (in other words, on a deeper union with God and Christ) then we will find in these virtues the power to live out the moral demands of the faith. So this is the first point: that the message of St. Paul also consists in the very fact that chapter 12 comes after chapters 1 – 11 and not before them.

And now I would like to offer a few reflections on some of the exhortations that we find in verses 9 – 21 of chapter twelve. This is the part of the chapter where St. Paul has series of short and pithy exhortations on living the Christian faith that give us a beautiful description of what the power of Christ's grace in action actually looks like in real life.

He begins this section with the short but very powerful phrase: "Let love be genuine". The Greek word translated as "genuine" could literally be rendered as "unhypocritical". The word "hypocrite" in Greek means "actor", as in someone who acts on a stage. So St. Paul is implying that it is possible for us to love as if we were just putting on an act. We can say and do all the things that a loving person would do, but we really don't bear a genuine good-will for others in our hearts. We can outwardly do what appears loving without actually caring about what is actually good for others. It is easy for us to serve others in a way that looks to our own self-interest or self-aggrandizement. As one commentator put it: "It is difficult to express how ingenious almost all men are in counterfeiting a love which they do not really possess". On account of our fallen nature, we are prone to use people for our own purposes, to manipulate them. When we manipulate people, our love is not genuine. Genuine love requires that we desire what is *truly* good for others, not what only *appears* to be good. So our love is not genuine if we confirm people in ways that will not lead them to God. And so one can see how this little phrase constitutes a whole program of life.

And then St. Paul goes on to say: "Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good". The word for "hate" in the Greek is very strong. It could be translated as to *loathe* or *abhor*, to *hate violently*. And the word for "hold fast" is likewise very strong. It has the sense of clinging tightly to something or to cement together. In God's presence there can be no compromise with evil. Evil can have no place in God. If our love is going to be genuine and not degenerate into a kind of sentimentality we must, in loving, hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good. In exhorting us to hold fast to what is good, St. Paul is pointing out the need for patience and perseverance, and he is implying that there are many things in the world that can draw us away from the good. The good that we are trying to achieve is an arduous good, one that is often only obtained after many years of hard struggle. Since the good we are after is supernatural in nature, it is true that God is the principle author of this good and He can bring a soul to the heights of virtue in a short time. And sometimes we see that He does this in saints like Therese of Lisieux or the children of Fatima. But it appears that for most of us we come to a closer union with God and a higher degree of virtue only after a very long, hard and painful struggle. The virtue of tenacious perseverance is one that is not held in high esteem in our day. The prevailing attitude of the culture is such that everyone wants to see results right away and if they don't, they go on to something else.

Next St. Paul says: "Love one another with brotherly affection". What is translated here as "love" and "brotherly affection" are both words that refer to the kind of love that one will find in the family: *philotorgoi* is the word for love and *philadelphia* the word for brotherly affection. So St. Paul is encouraging the Christian community to have among themselves the kind of love that you find in family life which is the strongest kind of human love that there is – the kind of love that you find between parents and children and between brothers and sisters. The bonds of love among Christians are meant to be as strong, or even stronger than, the bonds of family love. The kind of

union that is brought about in the Mystical Body of the Church by means of God's grace in the soul actually causes a union that is much more intimate than the bonds of blood. The Church is the family of God and family affection is meant to reign among the members of the Church.

Then St. Paul goes on to say: "Outdo one another in showing honor" — that is, have a genuine esteem for the good qualities of others and manifest that esteem. We can show honor in various ways but perhaps the most common way is through our speech. We honor others by what we say to them and about them to others, just as we dishonor people by our speech. And it is really not that difficult to distinguish good words about others from evil words. We just have to look at where our words lead, whether to building others up or tearing them down, whether they serve to make us look better or whether they serve the glory of God and our neighbor. Showing honor to others would be directly contrary to a kind of disregard, scorn or contempt for others. If our thoughts are full of disregard, scorn or contempt for others, then it is not likely that we will find ourselves honoring them in our speech. It seems that it is a kind of common disease of our souls to fix our attention on the faults and shortcomings of our brothers which lead us to despise them in our hearts.

A bit further down St. Paul says: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep". The ideal of Christianity is not the same as the ideal

of the Stoics — our goal is not some kind of cold impassiveness. The more we grow in grace the more human we become and the more we feel ourselves to be one with other men especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, so that we consider their triumphs and joys to be our own and their failures and sorrows to be ours as well.

And so that is a little reflection on just a few of these short, pithy exhortations that St. Paul offers in the second half of this letter. It is the kind of passage that we might be accustomed to pass over quickly and take for granted, but it is, in fact, a very rich text and one that presents us with a very attractive ideal. Wouldn't you want to live in a community where the whole spirit of the community was animated by these precepts, where everyone was taking them as their ideal? And if you found a community where they were actually put into practice it would be a community that would give a tremendous witness to the Catholic faith and the truth of its claims. Of course, the whole point of St. Paul's epistle is that these great goods are not something that men can just get together and try to achieve by their own efforts, it's not a project that we can decide that we want to realize on our own. They are fruits of the Spirit, fruits of the working of God's grace in the soul and so the way to obtain them is by trying to grow in ever closer union with the source of this grace.

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