

Pentecost XVII

Beloved in Christ,

Over the past few Sundays the epistle readings have placed before us St Paul encouraging us to enter more deeply into an authentic spiritual, interior life. Most particularly he has urged us on to works of the spirit as opposed to those of the flesh. Today's reading continues in the same vein.

Incarcerated because of his preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he sends a warning from his prison cell to the faithful at Ephesus, and indeed, to the church everywhere across time and space. "Walk worthy of the vocation to which you have been called."

That vocation is, before all else rooted in the fullness of its internal source and sustenance: Jesus Christ, *incarnate* in the order of material creation, born for the life of the world. It is Jesus Christ, model and fountain of all grace who is both the inspiration, and perhaps more importantly, the means for the true realization for which we have been given life at all.

St. Paul warns us to maintain a behavior which is worthy of our calling. Above all it is the

interior assimilation of the supernatural gifts of faith, hope, and charity, cause and effect of all other virtues, chief among which is that of humility. From the divine life which faith plants within us arises all the rest of the virtues by which we live as Christians in our daily contact with the world around us. Among these, as Paul names are those of mildness and patience – the support of others by the charity by which Christ lives in us and, through our good works, is extended towards others. Our calling nurtures a spirit of unity from which springs the *peace of God*, in truth that elusive harmony of life and conscience which escapes the grasp of every purely human effort and understanding. To behave “according to our calling,” is, therefore, no vague sentiment put to us by Paul, but a moral imperative for our faith to operative and true.

Charity, so essential to the Christian vocation is what moves us in our love of God to a generosity of spirit towards others. On the one hand it bids us avoid criticism and condemnation; it directs us be silent when tempted to speak ill of others, ridicule, humiliate them by remarks or personal judgments. It avoids involving ourselves in the sovereign affairs of others. Such critical behavior, which passes as we all know too well as

typical of human conduct, is in fact the bad fruit of fallen nature, compounded by habits of personal sin. In truth, as Paul says, true charity results in the bond of peace which prevails among those of genuine good will.

In the same vein Paul also bids us to live according to our hope. There is so much in the world around us, or rather, the disintegrating social order in which we all live – there is so much which gives positive proof that we are assuredly *not* the source of our happiness or salvation, that we should rely the more readily upon the hope which God gives us, as our faith professes. In confessing supernatural hope with our lips, we need to bring forth its fruits by a daily behavior that is in line with what we say.

In today's Gospel account, the Pharisees were, as was so often the case, seeking to draw the Lord into a trap of their own devising. So they asked Him which was the greatest of the commandments? In a penetrating response Jesus responds by saying the greatest commandment was to love God – which they claimed they did - but added that there was a second just like the first, a commandment which the Pharisees certainly did not practice: the love of neighbor. Why is this second commandment like the first? It is because,

in the practical order of human conduct, this second commandment of loving one's neighbor is the reflection in our common life with others in the world in which we live is the means by which we concretely show forth our love of God Who lives beyond our touch our material existence.

This relationship between God and our neighbor is a sign of the Incarnational love of the divine Trinity. When you gaze into a mirror and see the reflection your face, that image can not exist without *you*, since you and it are, in a manner of speaking, the same thing. Jesus says that if we claim to love God there is a natural consequence: that we must recognize the presence of Himself in others as well as in ourselves. We must love both if we say we love God, for loving God requires our loving what He loves, and loving ourselves and neighbor arising from our being made in the image of the source of all love. When, in fact we do not fulfill this second commandment, neither do we fulfill the first. And this point is made when Jesus says, "Not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father."

The practice of our Christian faith is not, then, simply an intellectual confession of doctrine we believe: it is, rather, an economy of grace by which

we live more rightly ordered towards God and neighbor according to its principles. It is the *incarnation*, the living out in the activities of our present world what God teaches us we must do. It is characterized by what Paul calls, elsewhere, a *caritas non ficta*: a true love: for God, and for neighbor for the love of God; a *supernatural, self-dying, self sacrificing love* which is *non ficta*: not put on, but truly operative, and driven by true motives. This charity is infused in us at Baptism, augmented by grace, aided and nurtured by Christian conduct, and eventually become more and more deeply established in the habits of our faith and daily life.

Beloved the motivation for loving *one another*, then, is firstly rooted in God and, secondly, in our recognition that we are all made in His image. If this be so, we must see in one another – despite the veil of sin which obscures that image in us all – we must see in one another Christ Himself. For He, our Head, continues to live, following upon His ascension into glory. He continues to live in this present world in the “flesh” of His Body the Church. And the Church is comprised of its members, the whole of humanity. And why is that? It is because everyone without exception is either a member of the Church formally, or stands in relation

to it as a potential subject of so doing. Thus we are bid by faith to love one and all, even our enemies – and all this Christ has done and shown us to do by His divine example.

It is through this love we bear for others that we most surely show we love God with our “whole heart, soul, mind and strength.” And reason demonstrates that the contrary is also true: if we do not love one another, not only will the bond of peace be absent – as was the case with the Pharisees – we reveal, in fact, that we do not really love God either. And if this be the case then we can not truly enter the Kingdom of God – even were we to possess faith sufficient to move mountains.

“Brethren, walk worthy of the vocation in which you are called.” It is a very great consolation to know that all Scripture - the great collection of words spoken by the one Word which is Christ – finds its exegesis through its interior harmony. Elsewhere Christ says, “God requireth not the death of a sinner, but that he be converted and live.” And, “I have come, that you might have life in abundance.” God knows the assimilation to ourselves of grace and true conversion is a lifelong process. Let us never be discouraged because we have not adequately lived up to this vocation to which we are called. Rather, let us

come again and again to this throne of grace which is always ready to pardon, with humility, generosity of spirit, and patient in our struggles. It is by showing Him hearts which are seeking to truly love Him: that our love for Him is for the possession of Him, that we are pleasing to Him. To such hearts He grants an increase of grace, and the strength needed for persevering in the world in which we are living.

This is what is truly meant by living in the spirit. By so doing it will bring when God will, to a share in the vision of Him in the glory of that world which is yet to come.