

St. Paul: Saturday Session Nineteen: Transformation in Christ 2

Theosis=God makes us into Himself

Paul emphasized the surpassing love that Love reveals in Christ. One striking emphasis is: ***We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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.*** Rom 14-7-8 [New Revised Standard Version] What an extreme life this is, to live unto the Lord. We do this because the Lord lived unto us. He poured Himself out for us on the cross.

Greater love than this no man has, John 15.13. God's extreme love for us prompts our extreme love for Him. This Love is extreme compared to tepid love, or affection, or practical manipulation that passes for love every day. Christ-Love is real. It is God Himself. We fall short of Love. But Love draws us ever closer to Him, as we walk with Him through life. Walking with Him means following Jesus, living in the Mystical Body, animated by Love. Paul is fully alive to this reality, and growing in Love every moment. Love challenges us to emerge from our cocoon into the fullness of Christ-life.

Paul expresses it in some detail in the previous verse 6: ***Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.*** Whether we observe, or eat or fast, we do all in the Lord. This is how we know that we belong to Jesus, that everything we do is done: with, for, in, by, and of Him. This is life in Christ, living Him. This is the Mystical Body alive and well in us as we progress toward God. God's love bursts through our finite limits, and unites us infinitely with Himself, the Infinite. If we agree with Him, if we second His motion, then He takes us to Himself. This is transformation in Christ. This is *theosis*. God is totally for us, so we are totally for God. Fr. Spicq frames it well: Christian life consists in loving Christ with the charity given by God, 83. [*Agape in the New Testament*, Vol 2]

Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ. Eph 6:23-24. This concluding prayer emphasizes the source of love and faith. This Source is the Trinity, which is Undying Love Itself. Jesus reveals Undying Love in the Flesh. If we let Christ transform us, then we follow behind Him, usually some distance behind. So we participate partially, with varying love for our Lord. Undying Love urges us on to extraordinary love. If we agree, we grow in Love. Therefore, Paul's wish comes true. The peace, charity, faith and grace he wants for the Ephesians flourish for every one who accepts Undying Love. If we accept these gifts, we can respond to these four surpassing ways to exist. Notice how they go together. There is no peace without charity, which doesn't exist without faith, which is His grace, or gift to us. As usual, Paul sees the whole whole-ly, and selects excellent words to describe that unified vision. It's a streaming clarion call.

Spicq unpacks this stream of words for us. These show some specifics of transformation, or *theosis*, 83. "Peace, the fruit of reconciliation, Rom 5:1, includes peace with God as well as peace among the brothers. It is the tranquility of the soul that possesses all the goods of salvation; it is the result of the gathering together of all creation in Christ, Eph 1:10." This neatly summarizes one of Paul's main themes in this epistle. A peaceful person is a striking contrast to most of us! Consider that for a moment. Paul accepts what Jesus gives: ***Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,*** Jn 14.27. Love provides peace as His gift to all who freely accept it. If we accept, we do not invent peace; we do not create peace. We accept Christ's gift of peace. Then we have the real thing. All this is very clear to Paul, who spurts out a verbal version of that clarity for us here. Naturally, the verbal version is not as clear as Paul's vision. We grow as we go into God.

Spicq says of the second requested gift, 83: "Charity is the actualization of this gift of God and Christ. In this text, especially, charity must not be restricted to God's love for us, or to our love for God, or to fraternal charity. Pauline *agape* includes all these objects; it is God's own charity in which the Christian participates, in order to love God and his neighbor. By his participation, he 'walks in love', Eph 5:2. In wishing them 'love with faith', St Paul intends to bring out the completely original character of Christian love. It is supernatural, as we would say today, not only because it presupposes faith, but also because it is an enlightened love, taking its inspiration from the knowledge faith gives. It is aware that God's charity exists first, and therefore the believer's charity is a *redamatio*, a return to love awakened in him by God's love, Gal 2:20, so that he displays his gratitude in the service of his neighbor, especially in a husband's manifestation of love for his wife, Eph 5:25-33. Faith produces all the fruits of the Christian life by *agape*, Eph 1:15; Gal 5:6. 'Charity with faith' is an active, living faith, or, better, it is a love which is divine in its source, pure in the heart of the Christian, and boundless in its objects and acts. It can be known and possessed only through the Gospel message; it must be exercised with constant reference to the example and will of God and Christ, Eph 5:1-2." What a wonderful world of meaning!

It's a mind-full of thoughts. It's a great way to say that the Christian is transformed in Christ. If we follow Jesus we love with His love, with Love Himself. Unless we accept this gift of *agape*, Christ-love, we are not with Him. If we accept this gift, then we love with Undying Love. This is indeed a "completely original" kind of love. It's not created. It's Infinite, Eternal, Divine. That's why we call it supernatural, or above nature. If we accept Love Himself, He will love in us in His Divine way. This Love transforms us in Christ. This is *theosis*. This is much more than "completely original", but it certainly is that. No wonder Christians are so different from others. No wonder they can give witness, as martyrs, in every century. No wonder so many of them were martyrs to Nazi and Communist killers in that slum of a century just passed. No wonder they reached around the world, "boundless in objects and acts", like Mother Teresa of Calcutta. No wonder they inspired millions, like John Paul II. No wonder they can speak peace to Palestinians, like Benedict XVI.

Having accounted for peace, charity and faith, Spicq turns to grace, 84. “The ‘grace’ of verse 24 is both the love in which God permanently envelops the Christian, and the gift that infuses the love. It is the common action of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in favor of the Jewish and Gentile converts who are on the way of final salvation in the Church, Eph 2:5-8. In St. Paul’s greeting they are identified by their attachment to Christ, not by their objective adherence to the faith: ‘Grace be with all those who have a love undying for our Lord Jesus Christ’, v 24. The Christian loves the Savior who has brought him peace. His charity is obviously a religious consecration; it joins him to the Lord as a slave is joined to his master, Mth 6:24. Because charity proves itself in open acts and devotes itself without calculation, it can be considered a ‘profession’ of Christianity, 1 Cor 16:21. The convert is more than a believer who acknowledges Jesus as the Lord. He is a lover who commits himself to love forever. He ‘loves in love’.

“St. Paul used the phrase *en aphtharsiai* to modify ‘love’. The phrase shows that love is permanent and faithful – as in classical Greek – even though the word *aphtharsia* is not easy to translate. It appears seven times in the New Testament, all in St. Paul’s Epistles. He uses it to refer to eternal life, which is the reward for good works perseveringly accomplished by the just, Rom 2:7. It is peculiarly the condition of glorified bodies freed from corruption, 1 Cor 5:42; 50; 54; their incorruptibility is one of the supreme gifts of the Gospel, 2 Tim 1:10. Because whatever is incorruptible is unchangeable, *aphtharsia* describes everlasting, blessed life in God’s presence. The most nearly parallel text is Wis 6:19: **Love means the keeping of God’s laws; to observe his laws is the basis for incorruptibility; and incorruptibility aphtharsia makes one close to God.** In our text, *aphtharsia* has this eschatological meaning. It characterized the Christian’s love for Christ, which is faithful here on earth, and lives forever in heaven, 1 Cor 13:8; 13.”

Paul sees much more than we understand. So Spicq’s account expands our comprehension ever more into what Christ reveals. Indeed, His love is Love Himself. It is incorruptible, quite different from vagrant love. No wonder it transforms us into Christ, Who is God, causing *theosis*. Spicq identifies the word Paul uses to convey this vast meaning. It carries great meaning because, 85: “...Rom 2:7 and 1 Cor 15:42 [link this word] with honor and glory. Moreover, in our text it does not refer to things, but to a living love. St. Paul wants to show the character and condition of love which is imperishable because it is victorious, impervious to the trials and ravages of time. An undying love cannot be destroyed or damaged by difficulty or suffering. It endures, whatever the cost may be. It lasts as long as courage; it is as strong as death; in the end, it will triumph.” Strong as death is the phrase from Song of Solomon 8:6. Other Old Testament themes converge in this word because, 85: “In this sense, *aphtharsia* expresses *agape*’s quality of spirituality. The Septuagint had spoken of ‘the imperishable spirit of God, the lover of souls’, Wis 13:1, and ‘the imperishable light’, Wis 18:4. The Book of Wisdom declared: ‘God formed man to be *imperishable*; the image of his own nature he made him’ 2:23; it presented incorruptibility as the reward of spotless souls. Consequently spiritual and divine charity must be an exceedingly pure love.”

Thanks to Spicq, we penetrate beneath the surface of Paul’s words, to grasp more of their meaning. Because God’s love is Infinite, we will never finish probing into Love. It will be our eternal delight. To our amazement, we begin probing here on earth, and will continue forever. We see that the most important message from the Old Testament foretells human destiny, each soul incorruptible with God. Given our great attachment to matter, our very own flesh, we need all the help we can get to escape its limits. Pure love is the very best experience we have of eternal activity. God shares His very being, Love, with us, purifying our notion of love. Pure Love shining through Christ inspires us to accompany Him. As we “walk” along faithfully with Jesus, His Love transforms us. This *theosis* launches us into incorruptible love. So powerful is Love Himself, that He makes us into Himself. If we allow Him, He springs us from material limits into incorruptibility. His resurrection is the observable event that shows love to be more powerful than death. His overcoming of corruptibility fuels our love-fire. Because no image can compare to Love, we shift from one: incorruptibility, to the other: imperishable light. To complete the circle, God made us in His image, and perfects us in His image by *theosis*.

Where does all this transformation in Christ go? Paul avers: **From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.** 2 Tim 4.8. In Paul’s time, crowns meant much more than they do today. Our term is “success”. Crown or success puts the finishing touches to victory, celebrating a great achievement. The greatest of all achievements is allowing God to make us into Himself: *theosis*. Righteous people remain faithful to Christ’s gifts, and allow Him to transform them entirely into God Himself. The Lord Jesus Christ is the inerrant judge, Whose decisions are Justice Himself. We translate the Greek word *agapan* as “longed for”. This stands for loving in the sense of high esteem, appreciation, and preference, Spicq 86-87. Our ultimate desire is for God, Who is our ultimate reward, our complete happiness. “That day” is the Second Coming of Jesus. We love to see that coming because we love Jesus. Being one with Him is our purpose. Some people call it our “existential” reason, because it’s our reason to exist. God created us, or made us exist, so that we could exist divinized at One with the One. Love Himself freely gives Himself to us. He gave visibly in Jesus Christ, for 33 years on earth in tangible form, then in the Mystical Body, still visible and tangible, but dispersed among His followers, who are “walking” with Him towards ultimate transformation. Though Love is free, it is so appealing that it commands our response. Hence Christ said: **I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.** Jn 13:34. See: Jn 15:12;17; 1 Jn 3:11; 3:14; 3:23; 4:7; 4:11; 4:12; 2 Jn 1:5