

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2023

Once every three years, the Church gives Sunday Mass participants a taste of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. From now until Lent, the Second Reading at Mass will be from First Corinthians. These excerpts will do no more than give a slight taste of First Corinthians, an Epistle from which I think we should drink deeply.

First Corinthians is one of the earliest writings of the New Testament. Putting together statements in the Epistle itself with statements in Acts of the Apostles, we can quite reasonably suppose that it was written in the Spring of 56 A.D. That means that First Corinthians was written only 26 years after the events of the Lord Jesus Christ's Death and Resurrection. Twenty six years. To many of us here, 1997 does not seem long ago at all. We can recall events of 1997 quite clearly. First Corinthians shows us what the Christian Faith was like within easy living memory of the earthly Life, Death, and Resurrection of the Lord.

I think we can read First Corinthians as written to us. All of Sacred Scripture is intended for the instruction of all Christians, always and everywhere. This Epistle was written to a quite particular local church in a quite particular situation. In some ways, however, the problems of that local church are very much like the problems of the American church today. In some ways, the world around that local church was like the world around the American church today.

Corinth was not the Washington D.C., New York, or Los Angeles of the Roman Empire (Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, respectively), but it was wealthy and prosperous by typical ancient world standards, just as the USA in general is wealthy and prosperous by typical modern world standards. The Corinthian Church was surrounded by a society with a lot of money, just as the American Church is surrounded by a society with a lot of money. Corinth was sports crazy. Every other year it hosted the Isthmian Games, in which athletes from all over the Roman Empire vied with each other in foot racing, chariot racing, jumping, discus throwing, javelin throwing, boxing, wrestling, and mixed fighting. People came from all over the Roman world to watch these games, making the Isthmian Games one of the premier social and tourist events of the Empire. More sinisterly, Corinth hosted some of the biggest gladiatorial combats outside Rome. Sports, both innocent and guilty, were part of the cultural air around the Corinthian Church. Surely, sports, in both noble and corrupt forms, are part of the cultural air around the American Church. Corinth had a reputation for hard nosed, ruthless business dealings. We have to admit that America has a reputation for hard nosed, ruthless business dealings. Part of Corinth's economy was human sexuality reduced to a profitable business enterprise, in the form of large scale prostitution. Part of America's economy is human sexuality reduced to a profitable business enterprise, in the form of large scale pornography. All in all, the Corinthian Church had to live and work in a morally and spiritually challenging environment. All in all, the American Church has to live and work in a morally and spiritually challenging environment. What St. Paul said to the Corinthian Church is good for us American Christians to hear.

The Corinthian Church had a diverse membership, as does the American Church. In the Corinthian Church there were wealthy people, poorer free people, and slaves. In the American Church there are wealthy people, poorer people with some property of their own, and wage slaves with no property at all, subsisting desperately from paycheck to paycheck. In the Corinthian Church there were Greeks and Jews. In the American Church there are people whose families have been in America for a while, and there are also immigrants and children of immigrants. Its diversity posed challenges for the Corinthian Church. Its diversity poses challenges for the American Church. In this respect what St. Paul said to the Corinthian Church is good for us American Christians to hear.

St. Paul had founded the Corinthian Church in 51 A.D. Five years later, that church was already falling apart. St. Paul made it clear in chapter 11 of First Corinthians that he intended to visit Corinth in person, but he needed Corinth's church to hold together long enough for him to get there and help them sort things out, and he wrote his Epistle to assist them in doing that. A lady member of the Corinthian Church named Chloe was, apparently, so trusted by St. Paul that he accepted what he heard from her messengers as an accurate description of the Corinthian Church's ills. From Chloe's messengers he learned that:

1. There were bitter divisions within the Corinthian Church
2. There was outrageous sexual immorality within the Corinthian Church
3. Members of the Corinthian Church were suing each other in secular courts.
4. There was blatant heresy within the Corinthian Church, denying the basic Christian doctrine of the physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ.
5. There was extreme sloppiness in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.
6. There was chaotic and disruptive behavior at public worship.

Now, the American Church is several centuries old, not an infant church. Still, in too many ways the American Church is much like the Corinthian Church. It seems to be on the verge of falling apart. Until the Lord Jesus sends us an Apostle to help us sort things out, we must, with the Lord's assistance, hold the American Church together. To do so means facing the fact that we have pretty much the same problems as the Corinthian Church had.

1. There are bitter divisions within the American Church
2. There is outrageous sexual immorality within the American Church
3. Segments of the American Church do not hesitate to sue each other in secular courts (episodes of dioceses taking each other to court are so disgraceful that I grind my teeth in pure shame)
4. There is blatant heresy within the American Church, denying basic Christian doctrines such as Jesus Christ being the sole Savior and Redeemer of the human race
5. There is extreme sloppiness in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist
6. There is sometimes unnecessarily disruptive behavior at public worship (whatever your devotion might move you to do, make sure that it causes no disruption to the people worshipping with you)

Yet again, it seems that American Christians can benefit from what St. Paul said to the Corinthian Church.

Of all St. Paul's Epistles, First Corinthians was the one most often quoted by early Christian writers, and for good reason. The problems that plagued the Corinthian Church are the problems that will plague any local church as soon as it lets down its spiritual guard. The American Church does not have its serious ailments because it is unusually corrupt. It has its ailments because these ills will afflict any local or regional church as soon as it becomes spiritually careless. The devil will take advantage of the spiritual carelessness of Christians to sow seeds of division, sexual immorality, litigiousness, heresy, irreverence, and disruptive behavior. In First Corinthians, St. Paul confronted these problems candidly, but also charitably. His letter was confrontational, in the sense that it said exactly what the problems were, and stated quite firmly that they must stop. Yet his Epistle was also charitable, full of confidence that the members of the Corinthian Church could do better, and, with God's help, would certainly do better. In addition to naming and shaming the problems, St. Paul offered good advice on how to start solving them. The advice that St. Paul, under divine inspiration, offered to the Corinthians he also, under divine providence, offers to American Christians. We should read St. Paul's words, and pray with them.

St. Paul was deeply concerned for the Corinthian's struggling church. We are, or should be, concerned for America's struggling church. St. Paul's response was to restore peace and harmony, not by making political deals, but by calling everyone back to Jesus Christ. In St. Paul's footsteps, we should seek to restore peace and harmony, not by making political deals, but by calling everyone back to Jesus Christ.

What St. Paul saw in the Corinthian Church was a community that, due to divisions, sexual immorality, habitual litigation, heresy, sloppiness in Liturgy, and disruptive behavior in worship, no longer looked like a Christian family, but like the pagan society around it. Underneath those visible problems, and causing them, St. Paul discerned two invisible problems, poisonous attitudes that needed to be cured. These were pride and selfishness.

The antidote St. Paul offered to pride was simply listening to the Gospel. Put down your opinions, don't argue, and just listen to what God has to say, through the Gospel of Christ and through the Cross of Christ. Listen to the Gospel, look at the Cross, and be thankful for your blessings.

The antidote St. Paul offered to selfishness was holy Love, the sort of love that is sometimes translated as "Charity". In the entire First Epistle to the Corinthians, the most beautiful passage is from Chapter 13, in which St. Paul reminded the Corinthians that "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not Love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all Faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not Love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not Love, I gain nothing" Love is the supreme commandment of the Lord Jesus, and the highest virtue of the Christian. St. Paul told the members of the Corinthian Church that the Love that comes from Jesus Christ is the only thing that can break

humanity's misery producing selfishness, and enable people to break through sin and enter eternal life.

A spiritually sensitive observer looking at today's American Church might well see what St. Paul saw in the young Corinthian Church. The observer might well see a church with good in it, but also with potential to fall apart completely. He, or she, might well see a church that, due to divisions, sexual immorality, compulsive litigation, heresy, sloppiness in Liturgy, and disruptive behavior in worship, no longer looks like a Christian family, but like the confusedly secular world around it. A truly wise observer would likely discern, under these visible problems, the two poisonous invisible attitudes of pride and selfishness.

In that case, the antidotes are found in First Corinthians. As always, the antidote to pride is listening to the Gospel, looking at the Cross, and counting our blessings. In matters of the Spirit, even the most highly educated are only learners; and all Christians learn by listening to the Gospel. In matters of the Spirit, more wisdom comes from looking at the Cross than thinking deep thoughts. The Gospel and the Cross teach us how richly we have been blessed in Jesus Christ. That awareness of being blessed, far beyond our deserving, inclines us to live in peace with our neighbors.

As always, the antidote to selfishness is Charity, or holy love. Charity shows us how to use our Christian freedom to build up ourselves and others, rather than tear down. Charity teaches us to notice and care for the poor and weak. Charity teaches us to worship God reverently. It is Charity, and Charity alone, that builds the Church into the truly living, active, and effective Body of Christ.

Read First Corinthians. Read to learn what the American Church, with God's help, needs to do in order truly to be renewed. Like every troubled regional church down through the two millennia of Christianity, the American Church is ill mainly because Charity, the love of God and neighbor, has grown cold. Praying with St. Paul in First Corinthians, let the renewal of the American Church begin with the renewal of your own holy Love. When that sacred fire is ignited, all spiritual ills are healed.

Learn that:

"Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I thought like a child, reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see as in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall be understood fully, even as I have been fully understood. So Faith, Hope, and Love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is Love"

And that Love will conquer all things.

