

January 15, 2019

Greetings Brothers and Sisters,

Christ is among us!

I would like to reflect on a passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians namely 4:1-16. I would like to emphasize three ideas: Firstly, Christ is the source of Spiritual gifts for the Church, the content of these gifts, and thirdly the purpose of these gifts.

In 4:1-3 Paul encourages the Ephesians to live "a life worthy" of their "calling . . . with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This "unity" is essential because everything we do circles around oneness. In verses 4-6 we read: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all".

Oneness is important to keep in mind because immediately Paul is going to introduce the plurality of gifts but he insists that we as members of the Church, though having different individual gifts, should be led by "love" in our eagerness "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

In verse 7 Jesus is shown as the source of Spiritual blessings. We read that "grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. What is this measure? How large is this gift? What does it encompass? In verses 8-10 we are taught that Jesus is the inexhaustible source of blessings for the Church. Jesus "ascended on high" and "led a host of captives, and he gave gifts" to his people. Jesus went out to battle, won the war against sin and death, and took captives and distributed the spoils of war to his people. Before he "ascended" he first "descended." Notice this text does not simply mention "the earth" but that he "descended into the *lower parts* of the earth." Again, notice that Paul does not leave us with just the phrase "on high" but rather that Jesus "ascended *far above* the heavens." The Lord Jesus descended to the "lower" and then ascended to the "far above." When the Scripture uses the phrase "heaven and earth" it means everything. The two poles encompass all. Paul pushes this idea to the extreme by the words "lower" and "far above." By means of this language Paul emphasizes the reach of Christ; there is nothing and no place beyond his beneficent reach. The reason he ascended and descended thus was to "fill all things." His grace is therefore not limited by anything or any place. He is the inexhaustible source of gifts for his Church while simultaneously uniting all things in God.

In verse 12 Paul mentions some specific gifts Jesus has bequeathed to the Church: "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers..." In other places Paul will write about other gifts, for example in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11. But in this text he mentions the most fundamental. He mentions "apostles" and "prophets," these individuals who have been given the gift of apostleship and prophethood are foundational. Earlier in Ephesians Paul wrote: "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone . . ." (Eph. 2:19-20).

From these two groups comes the teaching of God which forms the basis of everything we as members of the Church are commanded to think and to do. Without the Prophetic and Apostolic teaching, we have no firm ground on which to stand, to say nothing of walking. This teaching is found and enshrined in the Old and New Testaments. To get a strong sense of what an appropriate relationship to Scriptures looks like please read Psalm 119. This essential and foundational gift has Jesus in the exalted place of “being the cornerstone.” Jesus is the beginning and the end of the Church's teaching.

The Apostles and Prophets, though not present, have left God's teaching in the “Scriptures.” In the absence of the Apostles and Prophets as individuals the Lord has given the Church “pastors and teachers.” These two are connected. The first emphasizes the notion of a shepherd and the second emphasizes the food that the shepherd feeds the flock of Christ. In fact, these two are inseparable for the pastor/shepherd feeds the flock with the word of God. To hear and do the will of God as presented in the Scripture is the true diet of a believer.

What is the purpose or the end to which Jesus gives out his inexhaustible resources, these gifts to the Church? At the end of this section, in verses 11-16, Paul writes:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

The goal of Christ's gifts is ministry i.e. service to others. This is everyone's responsibility, not just the pastors and teachers. They have the function “to equip the saints.” Where are the tools found to do this equipping by the pastors/teachers? In his letter to Timothy the pastor and teacher Paul writes: “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Scriptures provide the necessary tools, and so they teach us how to think and act according to God's will.

At the beginning of these words the idea of unity and oneness was mentioned. The gifts God gives are meant to equip God's community so it thinks and acts the way Christ does. Christ alone is the model and goal of our lives in the Church. We are seeking union with God through Christ. Have we arrived? No! Do we still need “teaching,” “reproof,” “correction,” and “training in righteousness?” Yes! We must continually be equipped “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ . . .” Our lifelong commitment as Christians is to grow and mature in our relationship to Christ as we learn to minister and serve others in the Church as it “upbuilds itself in love.”

Christ is the source of good gifts; the teaching of Christ is the foundational gift, and this teaching is given for the work of ministry to this world so we may reflect his image. May God help us to serve our community in his Name!

In Christ,
Fr. Herman