

THE SORROWFUL LETTER

A reading from Paul's letters to the Corinthians:

**"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
and our brother Sosthenes,
to the church of God that is in Corinth,
together with all those who in every place call on the name of our**

Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

St. Paul wrote three letters to the Corinthians, maybe more. What we call the second letter reads like a fusion of two or more, and at least one additional letter has been completely lost. Paul refers to this lost letter in what we call the Second Letter to the Corinthians.

"I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears,"

That description doesn't really fit the two letters that we have. It's not clear why Paul felt this distress and anguish, because we don't have the letter. But the issue filled Paul with anxiety of soap-opera proportions, so much so that the lost epistle is sometimes called, "the sorrowful letter."

"I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears."

The theory goes that somebody made Paul mad.

"If anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me,"

"If anyone" sounds like Paul is beating around the bush. People thought somebody really did cause pain to Paul personally.

"Not to me, but to some extent -- not to exaggerate it -- to all of you."

Paul says he wrote the sorrowful letter not to vent his own hurt, but because he cared about the church.

"I wrote you with many tears not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."

After a year and half in Corinth, Paul left the community with some undone business. Somebody offended him, and he expected the community to discipline the offender. They didn't.

**"The reason I wrote you was to test you
and learn whether you are obedient in all matters."**

Church leadership was acting like a bunch of weenies. They slapped the offender on the wrist. But now, Paul has had a change of heart after writing the sorrowful letter.

**"This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person;
so now instead you should forgive and console him,
so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."**

Paul no longer parades his own sorrow; instead, he lessens the sorrow of the offender. He's ready to let bygones be bygones.

"So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive."

At least, I think he's ready to let bygones by bygones.

"What I have forgiven,

if I have forgiven anything,

has been for your sake in the presence of Christ."

"If I have forgiven anything -- ." Once again, he's beating around the bush. It appears that the hurt was very deep. Forgiveness didn't come easily.

The church in Corinth was a boiling pot of ecclesial abuses in the liturgy, in ministry, the moral life, and doctrine. Thank God, Paul's letters resolved all those matters, so we no longer have to face such issues in the church. No, quite the contrary. We take perverse comfort knowing that the church is no stranger to the challenges of today.

The committee preparing this conference asked me for a talk about the present, sandwiched insightfully between yesterday's talk on the past and tomorrow's talk on the future. Ed Foley recovered the splendors of true eucharistic belief and Nathan Mitchell will point our way to a new day. The committee shared with me a number of concerns about today's church. I have grouped them under three headings: devotion, diversity, and communion. I will explain the challenges as I see them, place them against the backdrop of the church at Corinth, and make some recommendations so that when the next millennium comes along, maybe we can get somewhere.

First of all, devotion. The greatest badge of honor we used to give a Catholic was an adjective. We called him or her *devout*, a devout Catholic. Someone familiar with mass, rosary, benediction, novenas, and the lives of the saints. It was a lovely compliment, but today, many liturgists fret because all those devout Catholics are getting in the way of prayer.

Catholic devotion is not all bad. It can deepen the spiritual life. Our devotional tradition charts a wondrous history of meaning in the midst of suffering and an emotional engagement that humanizes the academics of belief.

However, some devotional patterns became roadkill on the highway of the liturgical movement. To participate fully and actively in the eucharist, mass takes precedence over eucharistic adoration. If you're going to proclaim belief in life after death, scriptures take precedence over a rosary at a wake service. If our sisters and brothers in other Christian families tell us repeatedly that praying before statues resembles idol-worship, we owe them the respectful hearing due to the baptized. The liturgical movement was absolutely correct to turn our hearts and minds back to the sources, to the mysterious origins of the

liturgy, and to channel our devotional practice to plumb the riches of the eucharist. But our generation now experiences a backlash among some who miss the church's prayer the way it used to be.

Sometimes we're not very helpful. Our best efforts keep people confused. Participation at mass has shifted from devotional exercise to active engagement. But some rituals haven't changed. Our assemblies kneel for the eucharistic prayer. Priests snap a host into 3 parts and then consume it all rather than share it. We use presnapped hosts for everyone else, rather than take the time to break the bread. We use leftover communion breads from the tabernacle at virtually every mass. A communicant stands only for his or her own communion, not for that of the entire assembly. Singing at communion is poor. We tell people that the mass is more eucharist than adoration, but in many subtle ways we promote a privatized spirituality when it comes to communion. First communions run into the same difficulty. We give kids rosaries, missals, and lives of the saints. Priceless treasures, but they turn first communion into a celebration of individual merit and instruct children that their communion is about their private piety, rather than the community's mission.

Periods of adoration, novenas, and devotions to the saints certainly have their place. We need not dissuade people from observing Catholic piety. Good God, the media would suffer apoplexy if Catholics never lit a candle, swung a censer, or wore a fru-fru vestment. How else would they illustrate stories about central Catholic beliefs? And besides, people observing traditional Catholic pieties are very much within the fold. Let's marshal our strength against enemies: tax benefits for the wealthy, businesses that treat employees like merchandise, rogue nations that foster terrorism, the efforts of the Supreme Court to diminish our freedom of religion by limiting prayer from classrooms and even football games. Give me a break. Like there's no liturgy there. Will our coinage be next? Current trends say no, because "In God We Trust" has ceremonial, historical and political meaning, not religious meaning. The freedom of religion, protected by the US Constitution, means you can say something religious in public as long as you don't mean it. My sisters and brothers, we've got bigger fish to fry than whether or not to permit a Tuesday novena or Friday adoration.

We value the presence of Christ in all those who seek divine union. Devotions can profitably subsist within a broader liturgical framework. Our task is to enrich the liturgical life of our people.

Paul faced similar problems at Corinth. You think we've got misperceptions about the eucharist.

“When you come together as a church there are divisions among you.”

Corinthians used to have a kind of potluck with the eucharist every week. But all was not well.

**“When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper.
For when the time comes to eat,
each of you goes ahead with your own supper,
and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.
What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?
Or do you show contempt for the church of God
and humiliate those who have nothing?”**

That’s right. The big issue that landed on the pastor’s desk that day was the size of helpings at the evening meal. And the abuse of alcohol among the faithful.

More problematic, though, was that people struggled with belief in the resurrection. Paul gave it to them straight.

**“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
and he was buried and he was raised on the third day in accordance
with the scriptures,
and he appeared to Cephas (*pronounced SEE-fus*), then to the
twelve.**

**Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at
one time,**

**most of whom are still alive,
though some have died.**

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

(Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

Some doubted there was resurrection at all.

“If there is no resurrection of the dead,

then Christ has not been raised;

and if Christ has not been raised,

**then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in
vain.”**

Based on this belief in resurrection, however, the Corinthians entertained some devotions we regard strange today.

“Otherwise,

**what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the
dead?**

**If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their
behalf?”**

Let’s not go there.

“But someone will ask,

‘How are the dead raised?

With what kind of body do they come?’”

Good question.

“Fool!”

OK, dumb question.

“What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

**And as for what you sow,
you do not sow the body that is to be,
but a bare seed,
perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.”**

And so on. The point is, people had a lot of questions about life after death. Those beliefs developed into devotional practices, some of them questionable, but Paul preached the main belief, absolutely eloquent in its formulation.

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery!

**We will not all die,
but we will all be changed,
in a moment,
in the twinkling of an eye,
at the last trumpet.
For the trumpet will sound,
and the dead will be raised imperishable,
and we will be changed.”**

There were other devotional issues --

**“Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head
disgraces his head.”**

Not quite as eloquent.

**“But any woman
who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled
disgraces her head --
it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved.”**

Having a woman pray out loud or prophesy to the community was not an issue in Corinth. That was fine. Millenary decisions, though, controversies about hats, were huge.

**“For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her
hair.”**

A woman had lots of options here: pillbox, cowboy, jockey, baseball, fur, bonnet, sombrero, Stetson.

**“For a man ought not to have his head veiled,
since he is the image and reflection of God;
but woman is the reflection of man.”**

Whoa! It doesn't say that.

**“Indeed,
man was not made from woman,
but woman from man.
Neither was man created for the sake of woman,
but woman for the sake of man.**

For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head,

because of the angels."

You see what can happen if you let derivative devotional practices govern the theology of your church.

The second issue is diversity. Our parish churches are becoming more and more diverse. And if they're not, we assume there's something wrong with them. People speak different languages; they cherish different ethnicities; they support different political parties or they don't vote at all; some are liberal, others conservative; some doubt the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, others want no part of Protestants or public school children. And somehow, all these Catholics are to gather around one table to share the eucharist.

There are several reasons for the growth of diversity. Many parishes are larger than before. Immigration -- legal and illegal -- continues. Global communication is instantaneous. The mania to merge banks, communication networks, airlines, and food companies drives the marketplace. Everybody's merging except Christians. The media reinforce diversity by presenting two sides of an issue, no matter how small or ill-conceived an opposing opinion is. Electronic bulletin boards, internet sites, televised talk shows and radio shows give people a global forum once reserved for those who actually had something to say. All this brings diversity to the forefront. Although division stokes the media, unity should be the hallmark of Christians.

We recognize diversity now, but we struggle to tame it. How do we worship in more than one language? How do we welcome young children while creating a prayerful atmosphere for adults? Diversity teaches what it is to be human. It opens up our world.

Did Paul face problems of diversity? Oh, yes. Corinth was a sailor's town, where east and west, north and south collided. Corinth was a tough audience. If you could make it there, you could make it anywhere. But the problems of diversity Paul faced concerned the fractioning of Christians.

"It has been reported to me by Chloe's people,"

Chloe's people snitched on everybody else.

"that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

What I mean is that each of you says,

'I belong to Paul,'

or 'I belong to Apollos,'

or 'I belong to Cephas,'

or 'I belong to Christ.'

Has Christ been divided?

Was Paul crucified for you?

Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

"I belong to St. James Parish." "I go to Immaculate Conception School." "I go to Father Smith's masses." "I watch mass on TV." And so on. Divisions continue and we stratify them. This is not Christianity.

It's going to take work. It's going to take more than an occasional piñata, soy sauce at the funeral dinner, or two verses of O Healing River. It's going to take cultural dialogue and a willingness to enter into a different culture. A few years ago a friend of mine moved into an upstairs flat in northeast Kansas City, a part of town settled by Italian immigrants but slowly burgeoning with Hispanics and a variety of Orientals, against some of whom we have waged war. My friend asked his new landlady, who was not what you'd call a well-spoken woman, what she thought of the neighbors. She heaved a conspiratorial sigh, "Well, they're fine," she said, "except for all these Viennese moving in here." Imagine the horror: a ball season, an opera festival, formal gowns, sausage links, whipped cream everywhere. Where do you begin with people?

The most gracious contribution we could make toward diversity is also the most difficult. Learning a language. Americans are terrible at languages. We have a well-earned international reputation. We pass English as the official language legislation to insulate our xenophobia. We even expect foreigners to speak our language when we visit their country. This year, presidential hopefuls are mouthing a few words of Spanish to demonstrate their inclusivity. That's a first. But who would get elected in this country if he or she spoke Russian fluently? Or Italian? Or French? We treat polyglots like freaks. It's bad enough that Roman congregations think Americans don't know foreign languages. Now they think we don't even know our own. This is nothing to be proud of. We claim to be diverse, but we want those who are diverse to live by our preferences. It's not pigmentation that separates us. It's ossification.

Which brings us to the third issue of this presentation, communion. LifeTeen. Marvelous program that has energized a new generation of Christians. Heretical program that has isolated a new generation of Christians. Neocatechumenate. Same problem. Some groups within the church are celebrating their own Sunday eucharist apart from the parish. But the flipside is some groups feel excluded from the eucharist we celebrate on Sunday. We used to like private masses for private occasions. Now, no. We think a 25th anniversary belongs at the parish mass. The same for baptism, first communion and anointing of the sick. It's a good trend. We celebrate the personal events of the faithful in a larger context.

What do you do with small groups who want their own Sunday liturgy? Get to know the people. Get to know every name. Work at building community outside the liturgy. If groups are seeking special attention on Sundays, the Sunday liturgy is not meeting their needs, and they are distancing themselves from the broader community.

Sunday above all should celebrate the relationships that exist all week long. If they don't exist on Sunday, they don't exist on the other 6 days either.

Paul faced two more challenges concerning unity at Corinth. The first would be neuralgic today. How do you pray the eucharist? Imagine a church where in each local community, the eucharistic prayer seemed independent and unrecognizable. To make his point, Paul dropped a name.

"I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you."

A solemn beginning.

**"that the Lord Jesus
on the night when he was betrayed**

**took a loaf of bread,
and when he had given thanks,
he broke it and said,**

'This is my body that is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.'

'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

In this great sacrament of unity we fight over what words to say, who should say them, what elements we use, what posture to assume, how we receive, who may distribute, the worthiness of your current sexual relationship, the status of the church to which you belong, the language to speak -- we fight over everything we can think of. This is our sacrament of unity. We have lost our vision.

Paul gives an example of a different kind of sacramental unity in Corinth as well.

**"As you excel in everything --
in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness,
and in our love for you --**

so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking."

What is the undertaking? And why is he sweet-talking the very people he berates elsewhere? Paul is stumping for money.

"I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others."

The church in Jerusalem is dirt poor. They need help from other Christians. Paul is asking the Corinthians for a handout.

"I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you,

**but it is a question of a fair balance
between your present abundance and their need."**

Eucharist is not about communion between one believer and God. Not even about communion among the assembly. It is those things but it is more. It is about communion with all the parish, all the

neighborhood, all the church, and all the world. If the parish eucharist is splintering, global vision is lacking.

Do you have a food pantry? A job bank? A community in Latin America? When the missionary comes for an appeal, do you tolerate the inconvenience or seek ways to hear more of the story? Are school children involved in global outreach? Do those who spend an hour before the body of Christ in the blessed sacrament spend an hour in service to the body of Christ in nursing homes, hospitals, AIDS hospices, shelters for battered women, as tutors for children, or providing alternatives to drug abuse? If the parish has mission it will have communion.

These are three issues our church faces today: devotion, diversity, and communion. My solutions are simple. Prayer, charity, and service. If the liturgy is not satisfying, the most important gift a liturgist or musician can give the parish is authentic prayer. We must bring the fruit of our prayer to public worship. We cannot be visibly shuffling papers, whispering cues, and generally focusing more on the mechanics of our ministry than on its prayer. When we demonstrate that we have personally incorporated a liturgical spirituality even during the liturgy, the liturgy will slake the thirst for devotion.

The solution to the challenges of diversity? Charity. Jesus said there are two great commandments and they both begin the same way. Love.

**"If I do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

Love never ends."

People who look different, act different, pray different, think different are not aliens. They are the body of Christ and they deserve our love.

Finally, to make communion communion, I propose service. Our churches need a global vision if our communion is to have purpose. We eat not to satisfy our own bellies. We eat for the strength to serve.

**"There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.
For just as the body is one and has many members,**

**and all the members of the body, though many, are one body,
so it is with Christ."**

One last reflection on the sorrowful letter. Paul could have suffered severe distress and anguish, he could have written with many tears about a lot of very critical issues facing the church at Corinth: faithfulness to the eucharist, poverty in Jerusalem, or belief in the resurrection, but not one of these brought him to tears. Instead, it was some dumb guy he got into an argument with, and his frustration that the rest of the church didn't see it his way. Apparently, the church saw something that Paul didn't. The church saw that Paul was being petty. His personal argument was not the biggest issue facing the church, but it was the one that skewered him; it tripped him up until he could write another letter that basically said, "Aw, let it go."

Usually, what impairs our ability to serve the church is not the big questions, but something petty. A decision somebody else made. A disagreement with a coworker, a parishioner, or a member of the family. Not world hunger, not religious freedom, not inadequate health care, not the arms race, but something much less. Paul changed his attitude from the sorrowful letter. He extended forgiveness.

**"We do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan;
for we are not ignorant of his designs."**

Paul needed to make amends with the entire community.

**"Even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it
(though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter,
though only briefly.)**

**Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved,
but because your grief led to repentance."**

The present state of life in the church is good. Faith is alive, dialogue is happening, tradition is rich, creativity is blossoming. But when we liturgists offend, we must also repent for our lack of charity to those who think differently, our deficient vision for the global needs of humanity, our inadequate response to diverse language groups, and for seeking affirmation for ourselves ahead of unity for the body of Christ. Authentic prayer, sincere charity, and selfless service to the needs of the world will remedy any cause for sorrow.

"Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell.

Put things in order,

listen to my appeal,

agree with one another,

live in peace;

and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

**the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with all of you.”
The word of the Lord.**