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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Who can read the epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians and not come away with the distinct impression that it was written in a hurry and by an angry man? Probably composed within a year or two of the much longer epistle to the Romans, Galatians deals with nearly the same matter. Both contain the heart of Paul's gospel, his presentation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, and so both proclaim that in Jesus God has acted definitively to save his people. In Jesus, and especially in his death and resurrection, God has reconciled us to himself. Jesus' offering of himself on the cross is the new covenant that can never be broken, whose power brings the forgiveness of sins and establishes us once and for all as a people holy and acceptable to God. This righteousness, or justification, that we now possess does not come by our obedience of the old Mosaic law – generations of people trying and failing to live up to the law have at least demonstrated that our being righteous before God cannot be gained in that way – but by faith, our complete reliance on what the grace of God has accomplished in Christ Jesus. Sacramentally, our baptism is our entrance into Christ's dying and rising, and the Eucharist is both our proclamation of his death and resurrection and our most intimate sharing in it.

While all of this can be found in both Galatians and Romans, the former work has an edge and an urgency that the longer epistle lacks. In Galatians, Paul does not coolly and calmly compose a summary of his gospel. On the contrary, he is writing angrily and hurriedly, trying to put

a stop to something that is going on in the churches of the province of Galatia, something that if it is allowed to continue will, he knows, gut the gospel and bring about the utter collapse of the churches there. In the middle chapters of this relatively short letter, Paul identifies as the source of the problem “false brethren... who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (2:4). These “false brethren” were converts to Christ from among the Jews, who were insisting that all Christians, just like all Jews, must follow the Mosaic law in its totality, including dietary rules, the observance of the Jewish fasts and feast days, and the practice of circumcision. Thus they joined faith in Christ to observance of the Law so as to make Christian faith dependent on and secondary to the Law. In their false gospel, salvation depended on the Law, which Jesus had proclaimed and presented to the people pretty much the same way that all the prophets had done before him.

For Paul this was sheer lunacy, and madness of a particularly dangerous sort. The Law was a gift from God, good and holy and necessary, but its true and chief value was that it lighted the way to Christ, in whom alone was the grace of God fully effective to save. To make Jesus just another prophet, one who called the people back to obedience to the Law, amounted to a denial of Christ and a turning away from the fullness of the mystery of God that was revealed in him. It was, in effect, another gospel, and one that would make short work of the true gospel of Je-

sus, which both liberates us from sin and death and frees us from the burden of a Law that cannot save but that can only convict us of sin.

When you are in a hurry, you use whatever shortcuts you can, and when you are writing in a hurry, you use poetic symbols and images to get the point across in a more condensed and concentrated way. In the epistle to the Galatians, Paul finds his way through his argument by frequent references to the cross and crucifixion.

Jesus himself had made it clear that the cross was not only his fate, but also the fate of each and every one of his disciples. Right after the profession of faith of Peter, Jesus had told them all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Mt. 16:24-25). In Galatians, Paul will make the identical point, insisting that the cross of Christ is also his cross and, by extension, the cross of all who receive the gospel in faith.

Paul has no use for a gospel of salvation that works by a doctrine of substitution that would involve us in the crucifixion only as interested bystanders, people who will benefit from what happens on Calvary but who basically watch it from a distance. Paul’s doctrine is not so much one of substitution (he died in my place so that I do not have to die), as it is one of participation (he died and his greatest gift to me is a sharing in his death and resurrection).

The apostle expresses his participation in the death of Jesus in startling language. “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20). By negative references to the Law both before and after this verse, Paul makes it clear that his salvation, and ours, does not come from any system, not even the divinely instituted Law, but only through this encounter with and participation in the person and work of Christ: “For I through the Law died to the Law, that I might live to God... I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness were through the Law,

then Christ died to no purpose” (2:19,21).

This faith, of course, is not purely and only an affair of the mind and the heart, as if all we needed to do is be firmly convinced that Christ has saved us. Faith, to be real, must be complete and concrete, and for us human beings, nothing is complete and concrete until it emerges from us and expresses itself in words and deeds. And just as Paul in Galatians 2:20 cannot refer to his faith without also referring to the love of Christ, so too for us faith and love are inextricably bound together. To believe in Jesus, the one who shows us that God is love, is to love him and to be filled with the grace that enables us to fulfill his new commandment, that we love one another as he has loved us (John 15:12-17).

This faith and this love do not leave us as we were before. Paul, in the verse already quoted, indicates this by saying that although he is still alive and breathing – he lives yet in the flesh – his life is now a life of faith, totally fixed on and guided by the Lord Jesus who loves him and gave himself up for him. Speaking of himself and every believer, Paul says later in the epistle that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (5:24). The things that used to excite him and the things he used to want are no longer operative in him. They have been done to death, and even if some of their effects have the annoying and unfortunate habit of yet clinging to him, they no longer animate or define him. His life is so different that he can speak of himself as having already died, as being now a new man, so powerful is the transformation wrought in him by the cross. At the end of the letter he expresses this, and again the language is startling: “Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (6:17). The English word *marks* translates the Greek word *stigmata*, and is a clear reference to the marks of crucifixion inflicted on the body of Jesus in the course of his execution: the nail marks in the hands and feet, and the gash in the side from the soldier’s lance. It is not at all likely that Paul meant that his flesh was actually peppered with wounds that looked and behaved like those of Christ crucified. In his second letter to the Cor-

inthians he had used almost the same language for all who share in the ministry of the Church, saying that we are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (4:10). Still, Galatians 2:20 and 6:17 suggest to a certain kind of imagination the real possibility of a literal, in the flesh *stigmata*, a being crucified with Christ so intense that it not only sears the soul and reveals itself in the acts of love, but also shows up visibly, physically in the person’s body.

It would take more than a millennium before a man would appear with that kind of love and that kind of imagination, and when he did, it was only at the end of his life that it all came together. Two years before he died, Francis of Assisi made a retreat alone on Mt. Alverna and before it was over he received an extraordinary vision, even for him. As described by Bonaventure in his *Legenda Major*, it was “a seraph with six wings, fiery and bright, coming down from the heights of heaven. With most rapid flight it bore down upon the place where the man of God was, halting in mid-air. Between the wings appeared the likeness of a crucified man, whose hands and feet were extended in the form of a cross and were nailed to it. Two wings were raised above the head, two were extended in flight, and two wings were still, covering the body.”

The vision left Francis confused. Angels have no bodies, nor do they suffer any pains. And the angel looked like a man, but which man? What did it mean? Bonaventure then says that God enlightened Francis so that he knew that the vision told of his own future, and that he would be completely transformed into the image of the crucified Christ, not by a martyrdom of the flesh but by the setting on fire of his spirit. The vision and revelation left in his heart a wondrous burning, and shortly thereafter the marks of the crucifixion of Jesus began to appear on him. In the palms of his hands and on the tops of

his feet, the flesh blackened like a scab and became tough and round, like the heads of nails. And on the other side, the flesh grew out in short, sharp projections, like the points of nails that had pierced through the hands and feet. In his side a gaping wound appeared as if he had been stabbed, and blood often flowed from it that stained his habit and his trousers. He remained like this until his death in 1226.



On October 4, 1262 in Paris Bonaventure preached a sermon on the feast of St. Francis. “How is it,” he said, “that we, wretched as we are, have such cold hearts that we are not prepared to endure anything for the Lord’s sake? Our hearts neither burn nor glow with love. Ardent love is a quality of the heart, and the stronger this love burns in a person’s heart the more heroic and virtuous are his deeds. Do you desire to imprint Christ crucified on your heart? Do you long to be transformed into him to the point where your heart is aflame with love? Just as iron

when heated to the point where it becomes molten can take the imprint of any mark or sign, so a heart burning fervently with love of Christ crucified can receive the imprint of the crucified Lord himself or his cross. Such a loving heart is carried over to the crucified Lord or transformed into him. This happened with St. Francis. Some people express surprise that when the stigmata of Christ’s passion were to be imprinted on St. Francis, a seraph was sent to him. Surely none of the seraphim was crucified! But the seraphim are the angels whose name comes from “burning flame.” Thus, what this detail tells us is that St. Francis was aflame with love when the seraph was sent to him. The cross or sign of the cross imprinted on his body symbolized his love of Christ crucified, and by the flame of that love he was totally transformed into Christ.”

According to Bonaventure, here, as in everything else, Francis was the extreme case, the one who by the grace of God did most perfectly what every Christian is given to do. All who be-

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