

September 15, 2002

The Sunday after the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the apostle Paul appointed St. Timothy to be the bishop at Ephesus in the mid-50s, he sent the young pastor a series of wise pastoral directions. He told him, for example, to "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:13). He urged Timothy to "fight the good fight of faith" (6:12) and to "reject profane and old wives' fables" (4:7). He warned him to "observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing from partiality" (5:21). He exhorted him to "be an example to believers in word, in conduct, in love" (4:12), and so on. Paul instructed Timothy, in short, with many pieces of wise counsel.

Of all Paul's exhortations to Timothy, however, my own favorite is, "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities" (5:23). Yes, as I think over the matter yet again, this is my favorite.

What sort of man was Timothy? Well, we know what Paul thought of him. He told the Macedonians, "I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state" (Philippians 2:19), and went on to speak of his "proven character" (2:22). Indeed, Paul refers to Timothy as "our brother" (2 Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; Philemon 1), "as a son with his father" (Philippians 2:22), and "my faithful son in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 4:17). Paul addresses him, moreover, as "son Timothy" (1 Timothy 1:18), "Timothy, true son in the faith" (1:2), and "Timothy, a beloved son" (2 Timothy 1:2).

Paul knew that Timothy had been raised in a devout, believing family (2 Timothy 1:5), where he was trained in the Holy Scriptures (3:15). Still young, Timothy had joined Paul's company during the second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3) and remained with him through the ensuing years, carefully following his "doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra" (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

Along the way Paul found that he could entrust Timothy with important responsibilities in the ministry. The young man had

not been a missionary even a year before Paul sent him from Athens to Thessaloniki for a needed pastoral visit (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5). Later, from Ephesus, Paul sent Timothy to visit the Macedonians (Acts 19:22; Philippians 2:19-23) and the quarrelsome, spiteful congregation at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10). It was to Timothy, finally, that Paul wrote the last letter of his life, asking him to "be diligent to come to me quickly" (2 Timothy 4:9).

It is arguable, however, that the whole New Testament contains not a single verse that tells us more about Timothy than 1 Timothy 5:23: "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities." Here we gain a genuine insight into the young man's character. This verse informs us, first, that Timothy, throughout his many labors, also suffered from poor health. It also indicates that Timothy was an ascetical man, whose self-denial and mortification were sufficiently austere to raise the concerns of even so disciplined an ascetic as Paul. Timothy, in short, lived a life of mortified habits and self-control, even to the point of endangering his health.

It seems ironical that Paul was obliged to exhort Timothy to "ease up" on the asceticism, because we suspect that Timothy was deliberately modeling himself on what he beheld in Paul. Was this not the same Paul who wrote, "I discipline [literally 'give a black eye to,' hypopiazō] my body and bring it into subjection" (1 Corinthians 9:27) and spoke of himself as "in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" (2 Corinthians 11:27)?

These apostolic examples of self-discipline illustrate the importance of ascetical striving in the Christian life. Emulating Christ our Lord, whose forty-days fast in the wilderness provided the model for the Christian Lent, believers recall that He placed fasting along with prayer and almsgiving in the Sermon on the Mount. In the life in Christ, fasting and mortification of the flesh are not optional. Jesus never said, "If you fast . . ." but rather "when you fast" (Matthew 6:16-17). In the case of Timothy, we learn of these things by what Paul believed to be his excessive zeal in the matter.

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