

**November 28, 2004**  
**Second Sunday of Advent**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the Apostle Paul lists faith, hope, and love as the triad of things that "abide," he takes care to assert, "the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). This superiority of love within the standard Pauline triad seems noteworthy in two ways.

First, there is the stark fact that Paul accords the supremacy to love, not faith. Let me suggest that if Paul had not made this point explicitly, there is reason to suspect that certain later readers of his epistles might have concluded, "and the greatest of these is faith." My speculation here is justified by the plain fact that some of Paul's later readers really did attempt to condense his teaching on justification by coining the expression "faith alone." Pressed on the point, of course, those same students of Paul explained that real faith, living Christian faith, necessarily includes love. Love, thus, is subsumed into their full definition of faith.

This explanation is not without merit, I suppose, but "faith alone" still seems an unwarranted and improbable way of expressing Paul's thought on the matter. Why "faith alone"? Why not recognize, rather, that faith is subsumed into love and say "love alone"? Would this not arrive closer to Paul's own thought? Unless I am mistaken, he never claims that "faith loves all things." He emphatically does assert, however, that "love believes all things." What else can this mean except that real Christian love—agape--includes faith?

Without suggesting that living faith and true love can really exist apart, I think a recognition that "the greatest of these is love" would prompt us not to regard love as subsumed into anything else, not even faith. I would not insist on this point, except that Paul himself appears to do so when, by way of hypothesis, he speaks of faith without love: ". . . and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (13:2). That is to say, Paul is able to conjecture a faith separate from love, whereas he never supposes a love without faith.

In summary, then, a reliable adherence to the Apostle Paul's teaching on the matter would prompt us to avoid theological expressions that obscure the truth that "the greatest of these is love."

Second, the supremacy of love among the three that "abide" lays the basis for yet another triad: faith, hope, and patience. In Paul's thought these three become, as it were, aspects of love. That is to say, "love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (13:7). It is love that believes, love that hopes, love that endures. The other three are contained in love.

The insertion of patience in the context of faith, hope, and love is hardly unexpected. In fact, when Paul elsewhere expressed his standard triad, he sometimes spoke of

patience in the context of it (Romans 5:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4).

In addition, patience occasionally replaces hope in Paul's triad. Thus, he says that Timothy has emulated his faith, love, and patience (1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 3:5), and he directs that the elders in Crete must be "sound in faith, in love, in patience" (Titus 2:2). This insertion of patience in place of hope is consonant with Paul's belief that the two go together (Romans 8:25; 15:4; 2 Corinthians 1:6-7). It is ever a matter of "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation" (Romans 12:12).

With respect to love, Paul clearly thought it inseparable from patience, as when he prayed that the Lord would direct the hearts of the Thessalonians "into the love of God and into the patience of Christ" (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

All aspects of the life in Christ are correctly assessed in the light of love, because God's love is the font and source of all things. This is specifically true, moreover, of faith, hope, and patience. The modern world, failing to understand what Christian agape means, and substituting for it a vague, sentimental benevolence, takes a dim view of faith, hope, and patience. These are accorded scant attention. Indeed, sometimes they are mentioned only to be execrated.

In this respect, Goethe's Faust appears a thoroughly modern man when, on the point of selling his soul to the Devil, he exclaims, "Fluch sei der Hoffnung! Fluch dem Glauben, Und Fluch vor allen der Geduld! - Cursed be hope, cursed be faith, and above all, cursed be patience!"

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