

August 21, 2005
The Apostle Thaddeus

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

What prompted St. Paul to write the Epistle to the Philippians?

The most obvious motive, I suppose, was his desire to thank that congregation for its recent gift (Philippians 4: 10,18). One of their number, Epaphroditus, who had been visiting Paul, had just recovered from a recent illness and was on the point of returning to Philippi. To Paul this seemed an excellent opportunity to write the Philippians a letter for Epaphroditus to carry along with him (2: 25-30).

Was there something more? After all, Paul does mention the activities of heretics (3:2). Were there heretics at Philippi, as there were in Galatia? Probably not, I think. In fact, when the Apostle does condemn these heretics, there is nothing to suggest that they were *Philippian* heretics. On the contrary, Paul was obliged to tell the Philippians *about* them: "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ" (3: 18).

Yet, as we read through this epistle, we sense that maybe things are not entirely fine at Philippi. Although there appear to have been no doctrinal problems there, something urges us to think that there were difficulties of another sort. We suspect that the underlying problem at Philippi, if there was a problem, had to do with what we may call "conflicting personalities."

This would explain the emphasis on respect, humility, and mutual forbearance in this epistle. "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit," Paul writes, "but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (2:2-4). This explanation would account for Paul's lengthy citation from an early Christian hymn about self-emptying in 2:5-10.

The question is answered for us, finally, in the final chapter, where Paul writes, "I implore Evodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord" (4:2). Ah, at last. These were the "conflicting personalities" of the Philippian church. This is what Paul had been getting at all along.

Three things, I suggest, may be noted of this exhortation to Evodia and Syntyche.

First, even though the conflict between these two ladies apparently provided an impulse that prompted Paul to write this epistle, it is a fact that he left the matter aside until this closing chapter. Had Paul begun Philippians along the lines of Galatians ("I marvel that you are turning away so soon . . . O foolish Galatians"), the first chapter might have started, "Okay, Evodia and Syntyche, let's get one thing straight. There will be no more of this useless bickering. Do we understand one another?"

Had Paul taken his cue from John the Baptist, Philippians might have started, "Evodia and Syntyche, you brood of vipers, who has showed you how to flee from the wrath to come?" Paul, had he followed the model of Jude, might have begun, "Evodia and Syntyche, there are spots in your love feasts, you are late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots." Or, if Paul had been reading about Elijah at the time, poor Evodia and Syntyche would likely have heard, "You two! How long shall you falter between two opinions?" There are a great many ways in which Paul could have approached this problem.

As it was, however, Paul first laid the groundwork for his exhortation by asserting more general and universally applicable principles about humility, obedience, and mutual service, as we have seen. That is to say, Paul did not approach the particular question directly until he had established the basis on which it could be addressed and settled.

Second, it may have been the case that Paul was reluctant to name these two women in public. His explicit exhortation to them, after all, would be terribly embarrassing. Paul's words would leave the ladies no cover, no room for equivocation or retreat, and perhaps Paul felt reluctant to take such measures. I have never met a pastor who enjoyed singling people out by a public reprimand, and it would not surprise me to learn that Paul would have preferred to avoid it

Is this the reason why he seems to have had such a hard time bringing this epistle to a close? Paul seems ready to finish about halfway through ("Finally, my brethren"--3:1), but goes on to add two whole chapters, not mentioning Evodia and Syntyche until he had nearly run out of other things to say.

Third, when Paul finally does name Evodia and Syntyche in the fourth chapter, he makes clear, by example, a useful pastoral rule--namely, that public sins, such as give scandal to a congregation, are not private matters of the sort covered by Matthew 18:15-20. On the contrary, public sins are subject to public censure and may require public repentance. In the end, Paul decides to call Evodia and Syntyche to public account. They

are reprimanded even as they offended--in the sight of the Church. Indeed, the Church has been reading about it for nearly two thousand years!

©2005 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php