

October 8, 2006

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the personal experiences on which the Apostle Paul reflected long and at depth, perhaps none was more intense than the experience of his conversion. Beginning with those three days of prayer and fasting that separated his baptism from that dramatic encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:8-11), Paul's conscience was obliged to reassess his entire life up to that point.

And what, beginning rather early, did he conclude? His encounter with Christ caused him to perceive that all that had gone before, especially his vaunted zeal for the Mosaic Law, was not only worthless in God's sight; it had provided the means for him to offend God even more. Consequently those things that he had counted as gain in his prior life he now counted as loss for the sake of Christ (Philippians 3:7). He could never again seek righteousness from the observance of the Law, "but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God" (3:9).

What, then, was to be said of the Law? Until the coming of Christ, after all, the Law was the finest thing that God had ever revealed on the earth. What was the historical significance of the Law? What function had it served, both in Israel's history and in Paul's own life?

The Apostle's thinking on this subject developed over the years. During the Galatian crisis in the early 50's, when the Judaizers insisted that Christians themselves were obliged to observe the Mosaic Law, Paul reacted forcefully against their teaching. There was, he believed, a "different gospel" (Galatians 1:6-8). The era of the Law was over. Yet, the function of the Law itself had been positive, he admitted. It had served its purpose in history as "our tutor [*paidagogos*] unto Christ." Until Christ, we had been "kept under guard by the Law" (3:23-24).

However, this was not Paul's last word on the subject. He revisited this question again, several years later, in the Epistle to the Romans, where his treatment of the Law is far more complex and dialectical. Paul came to see that the Law, besides its positive value as "our tutor unto Christ," had also served a negative function. Ironically, it had actually increased man's moral problem. It had made him worse!

Paul's later argument is easily summarized. Man becomes a moral agent, the Apostle argued, only when faced with a moral imperative. Without the Law, man would not be morally accountable. Hence, when there were no commandments that might be disobeyed, sin was lifeless (Romans 7:8). The coming of the Law, however, revived sin, as it were (7:9), thus putting man into the realm of death (7:10; 5:13). That is to say, by means of a very good thing, the Law (7:12), sin brought man to death (7:11).

Writing in this regard, Paul adopted the first person singular to speak on behalf of the human race, which had experienced these transitions in its moral history. The "I" in this long section (7:7-25), then, represents the whole human race--or "everyman"--coming to grips with sin, death, and the Law.

Although the "I" in these verses represents the common human experience--or "everyman"--it would be wrong to assume that Paul is not speaking from personal experience. On the contrary, he knew on his own pulses what it was to offend God. Grievously, indeed, had he done so. He had experienced the moral dilemma described in these verses. Paul was well aware what it meant to be a great sinner, even while meticulously observing the smallest parts of the Mosaic Law (Philippians 3:6; Galatians 1:13-14).

Moreover, the Apostle saw, it was his own strict adherence to the Law that had led him to the most serious sin of his life, the only personal sin on which he ever comments--his bloody persecution of Christians. In Paul's conversion he was made aware, in a way that he could never forget and long would ponder, that his endeavor to achieve righteousness by the observance of the Law had led him into very serious sin.

It was in that experience of his conversion that Paul discerned "another law in my members, working against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (Romans 7:23). It was his very zeal for the Law of God that had occasioned his worst offense against heaven. He had not been doing what he had intended to do (7:15). Sin had taken over his life. He had been acting as a slave of sin. Thus, in his conversion Paul learned the experience common to all the children of Adam--the radical inability to find justification before God without the reconciling grace of Christ. This perception caused him to review critically the dialectical function of the Law in history.

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