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The Seventh Ecumenical Council

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

At the beginning of chapter 3 of the Epistle to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul speaks of himself as "the prisoner of Christ for the sake of you Gentiles." I believe that this designation, which could easily be passed over as an "aside" in the course of the Apostle's argument, points to an experience at the heart of that argument.

Here is what we have in the early chapters of Ephesians: Paul elaborates a theology of the Church, in which both Jews and Gentiles are united as "a holy temple in the Lord, . . . a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21-22). In the Church, these Gentiles "are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (2:19).

This is the literary setting in which Paul refers to himself as "the prisoner of Christ for the sake of you Gentiles." Why make this remark at precisely this point? In what sense is Paul "the prisoner of Christ for the sake of you Gentiles"?

The historical context, I suggest, not only explains Paul's comment, but it also indicates its integral place in the theme he is developing.

This is the historical context: Paul writes from Caesarea, where he has been consigned to prison by a Roman governor, Felix, who leaves him there---without a formal charge---for two years (Acts 23:35; 24:27; 25:26-27).

During these two years (summer of 57 to autumn of 59), Paul had ample time to recall the circumstances of his arrest: He came to Jerusalem bringing financial resources to relieve the poverty of the Jewish Christians there (Acts 24:17; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). To protect the transfer of these resources, and also to represent the local churches that provided them, certain Gentile Christians accompanied him. Their number included "Sopater of Berea . . . Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia" (Acts 20:4).

Just prior to embarking on this trip---during the three months he was a guest at the house of another Gaius in Corinth (Acts 20:3; Romans 16:23)---Paul had elaborated on the propriety of this gift of the Gentile Christians to their Jewish brethren back in Jerusalem: "But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things" (Romans 15:25-27).

Trouble started soon after his arrival in Jerusalem. When the non-Christian Jews learned he was in the city, they kept a close-eye on him and his Gentile companions (Acts 21:22). Seeing him with Trophimus of Ephesus (whom we remember from the list of his companions in Acts 20:4), they presumed Paul had introduced this Gentile into the Temple precincts reserved for Jews (21:29). This was the basis of the accusation that landed Paul in prison.

Such are the circumstances that now prompt Paul to describe himself as "the prisoner of

Christ for the sake of you Gentiles." Had he not brought them---these people who "were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12) . . . had he not brought them to be "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (2:19), Paul would certainly not be confined to this prison cell at Caesarea.

As he sits here, reflecting on those events, Paul now perceives in the exclusion of Trophimus from the Jewish precincts of the Temple a symbol of the alienation reconciled by Christ. That "wall of separation" (2:14) comes to symbolize for the Apostle the division removed by Christ's reconciling death on the Cross (2:15-17). Theologically speaking, Christ had destroyed that wall.

Just prior to the trip to Jerusalem, Paul described the insertion of the Gentiles into Israel in terms of branches grafted onto a native tree (Romans 11:16-24), and he intended his trip to Jerusalem---accompanied by Gentiles---to demonstrate the significance of that engrafting. Now, as a direct consequence of this effort, Paul finds himself "the prisoner of Christ for the sake of you Gentiles." Here is one of many instances in which it is impossible to separate Paul's theology from his life.

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