

February 17, 2013

Third Sunday After the Lord's Presentation

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Theology and Experience

In 1 Corinthians 2:6-15 St. Paul declares what I take to be the subject matter of Sacred Theology; that is to say, the knowledge of ta charisthenta—"the things freely given." Paul writes, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God." The expression, "things freely given," is plural, ta charisthenta.

In the context of First Corinthians 2 these "things freely given" pertain to Paul's reference just a few verses earlier: "we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery." For Paul, "the wisdom of God"—Theou sophia—is God's redemptive design, which is concealed in the logos tou stavrou, the "word of the Cross."

The expression, "things given us freely by God," indicates a cognitive plurality in the wisdom of God. That is to say, in the proclamation of "the word of the Cross," it is necessary to employ various words and concepts to designate aspects and dimensions of the "wisdom of God." The proclamation is discursive. Paul goes on: "These things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit—en didaktois Pnevmatos—comparing spiritual things with spiritual." This exercise of reflection on the "things given us freely by God," the charisthenta, I take to be the ministry of Sacred Theology.

The words employed in this reflection are given by the Holy Spirit. Paul proceeds to argue the point by citing the Prophecy of Isaiah: "For 'who has known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him?'"

Paul answers, "But we have the mind of Christ." Paul, who up to this point has been speaking of the Holy Spirit as the source of God's wisdom, now suddenly speaks of Christ. He does this, I presume, under the influence of Isaian text he has just cited. This text asks, tis egno noun Kyriou—"Who has known the mind of the Lord"?

For Paul the Lord is Christ. The mind of the Lord is the nous Christou. Paul's shift of emphasis here strikes me as very important. The whole task of

reflection on the wisdom of God in a mystery is dependent on the nous Christou. What does Paul mean, nous Christou?

To address this question let me start with St. Jerome's Latin translation. Jerome does not render nous here in its usual equivalents, mens or intellectus, but with the word sensus. Jerome, whose classical education in Greek was equal to that of the Greek Fathers themselves, was sensitive to the nuance of this expression in the context. His understanding of the verse is very significant. Whereas the terms mens and intellectus—"mind" and "intellect"—denote the faculty of thought, the word sensus indicates rather the experience of the thinker. It means "perception" or even "manner of thinking."

That is to say, Jerome understands the word nous in this verse to refer to Christ's own experience of knowing. This, says Paul, the gift of Holy Spirit. Those who have the nous Christou, the sensus Christi, perceive "the things freely given us by God" in the way Christ perceives them. Believers enter into—and share—Christ's perception of the divine gifts.

What is it that Christ shares with us by the gift of the Holy Spirit? To address this question, I propose to go to his own words in Matthew 11:27: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

Sacred Theology is traditionally spoken of as reflection on the content of Divine Revelation. This concept is, I suppose, formally correct. It seems to me necessary, however, to say something further; namely, Sacred Theology must include the experience, the sensus, of Revelation. In other words, there is no what of Revelation apart from the event of Revelation. What is revealed must not be separated from the experience of its revealing. Sacred Theology must embrace—yes, even begin with—the experienced reception of Christ's own knowledge of the Father.

This means that Holy Scripture, which is the stuff of Revelation, is not simply a record of what was divinely disclosed in the past. It is the energetic Word—the Son's communicated knowledge of the Father—in the here and now. Sacred Theology is communion with God in His present and living Word.

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