



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

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INTRODUCTION

Corinth was a thriving port of Greece with an opening to the Mediterranean Sea. It sprawled beneath a thousand foot mountain and had the importance of being the center of the Pan-Hellenic Festival. It was also a center of immorality, prostitution, and idol worship, and had more slaves than citizens.

Corinth had a small Jewish colony. Paul admits that he went there in "fear and trepidation" (1 Corinthians 2:3), about the year 50. The Jewish Christians at first listened to Paul but later rejected him (Acts 18:1-8). But not before he had met the valuable and holy couple, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who had been cast out of Rome with all the Jews in an edict by the emperor Claudius. Aquila and Priscilla may have been Christians then. They were tent-makers as Paul was and soon invited Paul to live with them. Their home then became a Christian meeting place.

This great Apostle was unique in the spread of the Faith; his brilliance, his ardent nature which served Christ and His cause with utter devotion;

his letters which sparkle with fire and with love; and his amazing expressions are forever remembered in the Church and its liturgy. Careful and impetuous at the same time, his words flowed to his secretaries and to countless Christians and tireless apostles after him. This St. Paul is Christ's thirteenth Apostle and a very fortunate thirteenth, for he is a founding Apostle of many churches of the Roman empire. Paul nurtured each by his letters as he has Christians of all later generations, as he is nurturing us now.

Paul's first letter to the converts of Corinth is very important to the Church. In correcting and teaching the varied levels of society that made up the Church of Corinth, Paul left us brilliant clarifications of what Christian freedom is and what its limits are for our lives, of what Christian marriage, divorce, re-marriage, or celibacy means for the followers of Christ. He then gives a beautiful explanation of the Lord's Supper, which is thought to be the earliest written account of Our Lord's words of consecration, when he says, "I received from the Lord what I handed on to you..." (1 Corinthians 11:23ff). He follows this with teaching full of light for us on "Spiritual

Gifts,” which includes the unique image of the Christian Community that we call the Church, as a human body with all its members a part of a whole, and adding to the whole an indispensable role of its own. Paul ends this masterful teaching of what the Christian faith means with a final section on the special future for faithful Christian lives: the glories of our resurrections.

Paul writes this important letter from Ephesus, on his third missionary journey, in the winter of 53-54. We can see the city boy in the great apostle; he goes to the cities, the centers of population.

I. THE CHRISTIANS OF CORINTH (1 Corinthians 1-2)

A. Greeting (1 Corinthians 1:1-9; 2).

Even in his greeting Paul is teaching them who they are: “consecrated in Christ Jesus,” meaning set apart, a “holy people” joined to all who call on the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:2). He gives God a thanksgiving for them, mentioning wonderful gifts that he sees in them. These are usual openings of a letter, but here they uplift the Corinthians who have a number of disorders in their Christian community and are about to be lovingly but sternly corrected.

B. Factions Among the Members. Paul is quite concerned about this. Some claim they belong to Apollos; other to Paul, some to Cephas (Peter’s Hebrew name), others to Christ! This may have originated with the one who baptized them as though they were disciples of that one. Paul tells them that the first thing they needed was to be “united in mind and judgment.” The groups also seemed to be following “wisdom” according to popular “philosophers.”

“Only we ourselves know our innermost self; only the Spirit of God knows what lies in the depth of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11). We have that spirit. Therefore, we recognize the gifts he has

given us and we speak in “words taught by the Spirit.” A natural man “can not accept what is taught by the Spirit of God,” but “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:14, 16).

Do we realize that we are “taught by the Spirit of God”? Ask yourselves: Have I the mind of Christ? How does this happen? How can we tell?

II. INFANTS IN CHRIST (1 Corinthians 3:1-23; 4:1-21)

A. The People and Their Ministers. What Paul calls “immaturity,” “people of ‘flesh,’” “a natural condition” and “still at the human level” (1 Corinthians 3:1-4), may very well describe some of us. In choosing one of the ministers whom God sent to them, and claiming him as their teacher, his converts at Corinth are forgetting (as we do) that these messengers are only God’s co-workers, and the Corinthians (and us) are God’s cultivation, His building. Yet they somehow saw God’s ministers as in a competition (1 Corinthians 3:5-15).

Rather than taking pride in themselves on their chosen teacher, Paul advises them to see Christ’s ministers in reality: “as at the end of the line, doomed to die in the arena” (1 Corinthians 4:9). And that is what the Apostles all did, with the exception of John who outlasted being boiled in oil, as tradition tells us; he is classed as a martyr. Paul goes on to describe the life of an Apostle (1 Corinthians 4:11ff) and to beg them to be imitators of him.

B. Temples. Paul’s creative imagination causes him to express one of his inspired, unforgettable lines:

“Are you not aware that you are the temple of God, And that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:17)

Do we believe this? Paul is not writing to saints here, and as we read, we know that he is speaking to us from the pages of our Bible. “The temple of God is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:17). Looking at our worldly wisdom and boasting of it makes us, says St. Paul, “fools.” Be realistic, he says, and see that “all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” The real truth about us is a magnificent fact and no one can take it from us but ourselves.

III. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM AND ITS LIMITS (1 Corinthians 5:6 - 6:11)

A. Freedom from Sin (1 Corinthians 5-6ff). The community Paul is concerned about evidently had written to him about several matters, which were also reported to him by “Chloe’s people” (1 Corinthians 1:11). Paul takes up each of these questions in this letter.

These Jewish Christians had learned that the Gospel freed them from the Law. Some even claimed “I am free to do anything.” Paul’s concern in the letter is to explain that freedom also calls us to a responsibility, which will cost us something in personal decisions on options, which brings us accountability to the freedom of others. Freedom from sin in the members of Christ is their greatest responsibility, their greatest witness. But this is seriously misunderstood among the Corinthians.

1. Incest Within the Community (1 Corinthians 5:1ff). The Christian who “was living with his stepmother” should have caused grief to the community, and a decision made “to get rid of the offender” as one does old yeast, “for they should all be ‘fresh dough.’” Instead they were boasting of their acceptance of such a Christian among them, even though he was publicly living immorally; this was their idea of Christian freedom. A true Christian freedom, says Paul, “has freedom to separate itself from vice” in one who

bears the title “brother.” Thus Paul is not speaking of isolation from the citizenry of Corinth, but from “a brother who openly is immoral, or covetous, an idolater, an abusive person, a drunkard, or a thief” (1 Corinthians 5:11).

What would Paul say about Christian communities—churches—today? He tells us: “expel the wicked one from your midst” (a Deuteronomy quote—13:6), an accepted, tolerated sin in a community soon spreads to the young and to the old; it becomes casually announced as news reports; TV dramas are frequently favorable or accepting and the sinner receives sympathy.

But it was not the incest that was Paul’s main concern; it was the “Corinthians’ arrogant boasting” (1 Corinthians 5:6), of setting aside a most sacrosanct moral prohibition of both Jews and pagans (Morrows, Paul and His Letters). It was as if the committing of it was “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” in the name of Christian freedom of the law.

2. The Limit to Freedom. Paul teaches in this chapter “the responsibility of the individual sinner to the community, the responsibility of the community to itself... to cast out the leaven of evil” (Morrows, chapter 5, p. 117). This is rather a strange teaching to us in our modern society, and yet Paul lived in a pagan culture in a number of ways like ours. Paul’s decision here was adopted by the Church and is still a Catholic doctrine which we call “excommunication”—such an obvious unrepented public sin excommunicates a Catholic from the Church—automatically. Literally, he or she is out of communion with the Lord and with the faithful members. If necessary for the good of the Church, the bishop, as Paul did in his letter, may need to report the fact in case of publicity and scandal. A further understanding of responsibility for those who were “washed, sanctified... justified in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, is that they bear a burden of responsibility

to every single member of that community; also, the Christian community has a responsibility toward the world to be true to its beliefs in every aspect of its belief within the world. That is why Paul is so strong here.

3. Another Limit to Freedom. In lawsuits before pagans, Paul considers that “accepting as judges... those who are not members of the Christian community, is disastrous for you” (1 Corinthians 6:1-4). It shows distrust of other Christians and damages the unity in the Church. He quotes Jesus’ commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you” and then he lists the “unholy qualities” they once had which should have ended since “you have been washed, consecrated, justified in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

4. Sexual Immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). When laws of the nation accept as good, standards out of accord with the Church teaching, that “does not mean that they are good for me... I will not let myself be enslaved by anything!” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Paul notes that the “body is not for immorality, it is for the Lord. God, who raised up the Lord, will raise us also... Can’t you see that a man joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her?... The fornicator sins against his own body... We are bought at the price of the Lord’s blood: (1 Corinthians 6:1-18). Many, many young Americans who have gone through a home that is not “churched” and a public school system, do not know that the Bible (their only religious resource) teaches total opposition to sexual intercourse outside lawful marriage “Everybody does it” is their moral guide.

IV. MARRIAGES FOR CHRISTIANS

Becoming Christians brought the Corinthians some problems and questions about the effect on several marriage situations and on celibacy and

virginity. Added to this was the evident belief of Paul and his converts that the Parousia—the Second Coming of Christ—was to be soon, in their lifetime. Since it did not, each generation down to and including his, has been aware that it might be in their lifetime. This possibility has brought many a Christian to fidelity to his faith. So the world has lived in a long, long Advent since Paul brought so many to Christ. His teaching here is the Church’s teaching and the Word of God to us.

A. The Married and the Unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:1-7; Matthew 19:3-12; 1 Timothy 5:14-15). Paul’s very first statement is negative indeed. “A man is better off having no relations with a woman” (1 Corinthians 7:1). It sends us back to the wonderful story of God’s creation of man and woman in Genesis, and His command to them:

God created man in his image,
In the divine image he created him;
male and female he created them.
God blessed them, saying:
“Be fertile and multiply...” (Genesis 2:24)

But remember, Paul is writing from a belief in a Parousia in his generation. Yet, he gives teaching on marriage here.

B. Conjugal Relationship (1 Corinthians 7:2-9). Though God’s plan for marriage was that as co-creators with Him to people the earth through the family, the Fall of Adam and Eve brought rebellion and sin into sexual relationships, along with all other sinful deeds. Because of this immorality, Paul teaches his Christians that each husband has his own wife, and the wife her own husband. These were to fulfill their marital duties to each other, since (and here is a statement of the strong bond to each other) “a wife does not belong to herself but to her husband, and the husband does not belong to himself but to his wife” (1 Co-

inthians 7:3-4). The two should not deprive one another, unless by “mutual consent, in order to devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

We learn two important realities in marriage here: the important of mutual agreement on sex, and the importance of their spiritual life through prayer which unites each one to the spirit of God.

Wise Paul, celibate though he is, continues, “Then return to one another, so that Satan may not tempt you in your lack of self-control” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

C. Separation (1 Corinthians 7:10-12).

To the already married, Paul gives a command that is the Lord’s (1 Corinthians 7:10): “A wife must not separate from her husband. If she does, she must either remain single or be reconciled to him. Similarly, a husband must not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:1-11). The command of Christ that Paul refers to is in Mark 10:2-11a, a very strong teaching of Jesus and still the Catholic teaching on divorce and remarriage. To divorce and marry another is “adultery” says Christ.

Through the centuries as now, the Church has dealt with cases where separation was a necessary solution to protect life and peace. A marriage valid from the beginning, however, and declared so by the church, cannot be dissolved, but separation is permitted by Christ’s representative, with good reason.

Annulment: An annulment is a declaration by the church that a valid marriage never existed. The marriage vows, for a Catholic, were always made in the Sacrament of Matrimony.

D. A Believer Married to an Unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). If the unbeliever is willing to live with the believer, the marriage must not be broken in divorce. Right here are two remarkable teachings, one a tribute to the grace

within a Christian: “An unbelieving husband or wife is consecrated by the believing partner; otherwise, the children should be unclean; but, as it is, they are holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14).

However, and here is an important teaching of the Church which comes from 1 Corinthians 7:15-16, “If the unbeliever wishes to separate, let him do so. The believing husband or wife is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15). This is called the “Pauline privilege” (the freedom to remarry). Paul bases his opinion on this to the fact that this Christian has not been called by the gift of celibacy, but to the married life. An abandonment by one who disbelieves in a partner’s faith and refuses to live with the partner, leave the Christian called to marriage in an unjust situation, “an enslaving situation, deprived of marriage because of the Faith.” Paul’s carefulness in stating what are the Lord’s words and what is a deduction by Paul are both included in the New Testament: God’s word. This rare situation is accepted by the Church.

V. THE UNMARRIED

A. Other Possibilities (1 Corinthians 7:28). To us, Paul’s comment seems strange: “Should you marry, you will not be committing sin.” But those who do, will have sorrows in this life! Paul is leading his people to know that they “will have trials in this life; they will be better prepared if they detach themselves from life’s responsibilities “for the world, as we know it, is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31). Actually, Paul’s term here—“the unmarried” means men and women who have bound themselves to total sexual abstinence. Today, however, we usually mean “celibacy”—living without sexual union. Many unchurched unmarried and married, today, however, live with “sex-partners,” a term casually referred to in speech or print, but which is totally opposed to a right use.

B. Celibacy. To Paul, to be free of all worries such as a married man or woman has, “will help you to devote yourselves entirely to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:35). One can see in these lines a Paul that truly loves and lives entirely for the Lord; he comes back and back to the calling he has; there is no doubt that Paul’s happiness is in God. Paul and his writings add so much to Jesus’ (Matthew 19:12b and 29) preaching on this.

However, the two states of marriage or virginity for God’s sake, are right and good since they are gifts from God; calls from Him to live His plan for each of us. “To sum up,” Paul concludes,

“the man who marries... acts fittingly; the one who does not, will do better” (1 Corinthians 7:38).

Dedicated celibacy or virginity anticipate the life of glory after the resurrection (Matthew 22:30). “When people rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but live like the angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25).

Note: In this study we will not touch on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 or 1 Corinthians 9, when Paul speaks about food previously offered to idols and whether or not to eat it and when. Paul speaks of his rights as an Apostle. We will go from Chapter 8 to Chapter 10 on the Eucharist.

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