



## PAULINE MORALITY: THOUGHTFUL WORSHIP

**Reflexion by Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, S.J.**

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We know there are various kinds of letters people write. For example, there are formal business letters. Also, there are letters to thank Aunt Ellen for the birthday present she sent. And letters kids write home from camp asking about the dog and closing with a plea that mom and dad “send more money”.

Today, even with faxes, telephones, the internet and text-messaging, people still write all sorts of “letters”: to the editor of the newspaper, birth announcements and party invitations, sympathy notes and so on. Each type of letter has its own style, form and message.

Since letters were just about the only kind of communication possible in the ancient world, letter-writing then was a great skill. And various formats that letter-writers could use were carefully worked out. Scribes, too, who took dictation, had an important hand in the final shape of the letter written and sent. We shall return to this in a later presentation.

Historians have found a great variety of letter “types” from the Greek and Roman period. Though it had changed over the centuries, the structure of the informal “letter” to friends and the structured “epistle” had several points in common:

[A] The opening, which consisted of the name of the writer and that of the recipient, followed by a wish for (spiritual) health and well being (see Romans 1:1-7).

[B] A thanksgiving to God/the gods, which at times hinted at the main ideas in the letter (Romans 1:8-15).

[C] The body or subject-matter, which indicated the main purpose of the letter (Romans 1:16-11:33).

[D] Requests or exhortations by the writer to the recipient, which, in Paul's letters, often dealt with personal morality (Romans 12:1-15:13).

[E] Closing remarks, which could take on various forms and mention greetings and other plans (Romans 15:14-16:27).

Two central features in Paul's letters and epistles are sections C, which we might designate the doctrinal aspect [“God has turned sinners displeasing to Him into disciples of Jesus, set free by the Paschal Mystery and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit”] and D,

which we might call the hortatory part [“brothers and sisters, now that you are set free by Christ, here is how you are to live”] and the transition between the two.

In Romans, Paul continues along his theme that people are not to see themselves as earning their salvation from God, but, instead, receiving it as an unmerited but free gift. They are to let themselves be led by God’s Spirit into living a life that is “spiritual” or intelligent, that is, “mindful worship”. Paul sees the Christian moral life as a “liturgy” lived out in each one’s life.

Thus, the final chapters of the Epistle to the Romans (12:1-15:13) spell out the principles underlying a Christian's ethical life. The whole of the follower of Christ's life must be characterized as thoughtful, spiritual worship (the Jerusalem Bible interprets this as worshipping God “in a way that is worthy of thinking beings”). In other words, there is to be no dichotomy between Sunday worship and the daily life Christian disciples lead the rest of the week.

God's many “mercies” are to be the motivation for one's ethical behaviour. In fact, God's activity on our behalf, in providing Jesus' death and resurrection to establish peace and reconciliation, actually has made a Christian man or woman's ethical conduct possible.

Ritual sacrifices, in which animals died to make atonement, are no longer necessary in the divine-human relationship. Instead, Christians are to offer their bodies (“present your bodies”) as a living act of self-sacrifice. That is, their entire selves as human beings is to be made completely available to God as a living sacrifice; this oxymoron describes the only gift that followers of Jesus can make that is truly pleasing to God. By describing Christian life as thoughtful worship, Paul says there is a “divine logic” extending more widely than human reason.

All Christian behaviour, then, is to be “transformed”, guided by this divine perspective (“by the renewing of your minds”). The opposite of this outlook is the human wisdom absorbed from the world's perspective that Christians are to shun (“do not be conformed to this world”)—that is, do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you.

To consult the divine vantage-point is the only way to discover “what is the will of God” and to know “what is good and acceptable and perfect”—what it is that God wants. In saying this, Paul showed himself totally at one with the proclamation by Jesus in the gospel, when he preached the way of the cross and resurrection as “divine things” not “human things”.

*Next month: Philippians and the Self-emptying of Jesus*