

Apostle Paul and the Conflicts in Corinth

The 'weak' power of *agape*

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The young community of Corinth was in conflict due to factions, opposing viewpoints and a diversity of tasks and charisms that clashed with one another. Sophia University Institute (Loppiano, Italy) scholar Gérard Rossé discusses the challenges faced by the early community. Rather than imposing his authority, the apostle Paul guided the community toward responsibility as modeled by the Crucified and Risen One, and thus towards love-agape.

Divisions and factions

The First Letter to the Corinthians offers an excellent window into life in the early Corinth community and various kinds of internal conflicts. After opening verses of greeting and thanks, Paul focuses on a first problem: 'It has been reported to me that there is quarrelling among you. What I mean is each one of you says: "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas" ...Is Christ divided?' (1 Cor 1:11ff).

How does the Apostle react to these internal divisions? He doesn't enter into discussion nor ask who is right or wrong. J. N. Aletti writes: 'He does not focus on content, but (rather) the worm gnawing into their wisdom and the contradiction they are living, because it leads to pride, lack of charity and disunity that threatens to undermine the ecclesial fabric'¹.

Paul explains the logic of the cross of Christ, which alone allows for an escape from the merely human reasoning at the root of the debate: The need for self-affirmation that fosters division. In addressing the conflict in the community, he writes: 'While there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving in an ordinary human way?' (1 Cor 3: 1, 3). What is lacking in the Corinthians is 'the mind of Christ' (2:16), the logic of the Crucified who is the source of true wisdom. In other words, emerging disagreements showed a logic out of conformity with the crucified Jesus. It was also a logic out of harmony with their vocation as baptized Christians, called to 'die' with Christ (see Rm 6: 2ff.).

From this baptismal reality, Paul derives a Christian way of living, a 'Paschal' ethic. It is paradoxical and can be summarized as: *Life in death, power in weakness*. The baptized bear in themselves the mark of the Crucified one whom God resurrects. Thus, the 'new man or woman' grows in the believer.

This same logic is also in Paul's apostolate: '...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.' (2 Cor 4:10). 'I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive (words of) wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.' (1 Cor 2: 1ff.), etc.

Through mutual love and inserted into Christ's death, the community actualizes the presence of the Risen One. But if instead disharmony prevails, then Christ's presence, too, is 'divided', disfigured and is visibly unrecognizable.

Strong and weak

Rivalry between various factions in Corinth was not the only division. Without mentioning the situations of immorality (1 Cor 5-6) or discrimination among believers based on social inequality (1 Cor 11), a serious case surfaced around meat being sacrificed to idols and then sold in the market (1 Cor 10: 23ff.; Rm 14). Aware of the freedom derived from the Gospel, the 'strong' – the scrupulous believers not daring to eat meat consecrated to pagan gods -- were judging the 'weak'.

Paul does not argue against the freedom of the 'strong' because they are right. In fact, he counts himself among them (see Rm 15:1), but he is also quite aware that the weak are truly weak, and the Apostle rebukes the strong instead. Even if the freedom derived from the Gospel is precious, it is not the core of the Gospel. In fact, Paul writes: 'Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up' (1 Cor 8: 2). He does not ask the strong to correct the weak. Rather he asks the strong to make themselves weak with the weak. This is how one lives the freedom won for us by Christ.

In his Letter to the Romans, he states clearly: 'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves' (Rm 15:1). Christian freedom consists in limitless love (see Gal 5: 13). Paul synthesizes the originality and paradox of this concept of freedom: 'Free from all,' without constraint by anyone, 'I have made myself a slave to all' (1 Cor 9: 19). And he also writes elsewhere, 'I have become all things to all men' (1 Cor 9: 22). This is the quality of a love able to open itself to solidarity and therefore to the universal.

The "Law of the Spirit": *Agape*

We are also dealing with key points of Pauline ethics: the importance of *agape* as divine gift internalized by the Holy Spirit in the heart of believers, and the fundamental role of the same Spirit. A Christian is guided by the Spirit and invited to walk according to the Spirit (Gal 5; Rm 8: 4). Paul uses the expression, 'law of the Spirit' (Rm 8: 2), to mean the law is the same Spirit moving a believer and concretized in *agape*. It is a personal mandate of the heart revealed by the Crucified One.

The apostle Paul clearly accepts the importance of *agape* in every believer as a part of growth in human-spiritual maturity. Remember his reproach of the Corinthians: 'I could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were unable to take it.' (1 Cor 3, 1-2). Still, even if Paul criticizes their infantilism in the faith, he treats them as responsible adult persons. Although he is seen as exhorting them forcefully at times, he never orders them nor tells the readers what precepts of the Law are to be put into practice.

It is not by chance that the Apostle never presents Jesus as 'legislator' nor refers the community to the Master's teaching. Instead, he orients them to Christ's actions as *kenosis*, to his 'lowering' that reaches its climax of faithfulness in the moment of death on the cross out of love for humankind: 'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich'. (2 Cor 8: 9); 'Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself' (Phil 2: 5ff.) etc.

For Greeks, the criterion for evaluation is rational logic, for Jews it was the Law, and for Christians it is *agape*: "I pray that your love (*agape*) will grow more and more in knowledge and every kind of tact, so that you may always discern the best..." (*Phil* 1:9ff.).

Differences and rivalries

Another conflict faced by Paul in the Church of Corinth gave him an opportunity to clarify that the believer's spiritual development and personal maturity best occurred in the ecclesial context: by bringing about the unity constitutive of the Church in communion. The conflict arose from inevitable differences and rivalries because of multiple functions within the community. In 1 Cor 12-14, Paul addresses a Church where there is not only an abundance of diverse charisms—gifts of the Holy Spirit for ecclesial life—but the same charism could also be given to many believers, forcing the Apostle to put order into the assembly. Do not prophesy or speak in tongues all together but take turns! (See 1 Cor 14: 26, 40). Negative judgments and disagreements were not lacking in the Church.

How does Paul respond to this conflictual situation? He gives the greatest importance to strengthening the Corinthians' awareness of the Holy Spirit as the divine mover and source of their unity through being inserted into the one Body of Christ. This challenging situation among the Corinthians explains Paul's unusual insistence on the importance of the Holy Spirit as the divine source of communion and guarantee of their diversity. Interestingly, in 1 Cor 12: 1-13, Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit eleven times, with seven of these prefaced by the phrase: 'the one and/or the same Spirit.'

Obviously, the Christian—and so, ecclesial—reality originates in the divine Uni-Trinity. It generates the community as the local expression of the one Church, the Body of Christ. Paul expresses this in 1 Cor 12: 13: 'In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' Similarly, he also uses the same formulation, 'Jews or Greeks, slaves or free', in Gal 3:28, when speaking about overcoming all forms of discrimination. Instead, in the text we are discussing, Paul uses the phrase to affirm the existence of pluralism in the one body.

Ecclesial unity, then, is not the result of human effort but is a gift asking to be put into action by the members of the community. P. Agaessi writes: 'the Church is not the result of Christians' fraternal love for each other but rather the source...Fraternal communion is not due to the initiative of Christians already made holy, it comes from Christ's action and presence in all. It is he who gathers together, uniting them in himself and with each other.'²

Unity precedes diversity, but it also requires it. Taking inspiration from the apology of Menenius Agrippa,³ Paul develops the well-known example of the body and its members (1 Cor 12: 12). He begins: 'Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, although many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (1 Cor 12: 12). You would expect it to conclude, 'so too the community.' But here, Paul brings together the community's social aspect with its sacramental and Christological dimensions mentioned earlier in speaking of the Eucharist as sacrament of unity. It is the One in many (see 1 Cor 10: 16ff.).

Paul wishes to emphasize another point as well: the Spirit's gifts are not primarily aimed at personal sanctification but in 'building up' the community. This is important for instilling in members an ecclesial and communitarian awareness necessary for overcoming innate tendencies toward selfishness. Personal growth occurs through a necessary gift of self, so

that the Christological face of the Church becomes manifest. The more the Apostle insists on this ecclesial dimension, the more we can note his frequent explicit references to the issue of usefulness or building up of the Church: 1 Cor 12: 7, 21, 25; 14: 3,4,5,12,17,19, 26. All should help in this building up of the Church (see 1 Cor 10: 23). For Paul, no one is useless or to be thought of as simply passive. Charisms are not gifts reserved only for the hierarchy or founders of religious movements.

'The *Pneuma* and his charisms need to lead and keep ecclesial structures together in an increasingly harmonious community.'⁴ It's because of this that in all his letters there is a constant appeal for the divine gift of *agape* to be lived as the basis for overcoming a community's diverse internal conflicts.

Agape: principle of unity within diversity

It is not by chance that Paul inserted the so-called '*hymn to love*' (1 Cor 13) precisely at the heart of his discussion on charisms. *Agape* is the 'still more excellent way' (1 Cor 12: 31) not only in overcoming jealousies and community rivalries but characterizes the fulfillment of the community itself.

Although perhaps composed on another occasion, the "*hymn to love*" is useful as a unifying element relative to charisms and consequent conflicts that can arise among community members due to their diversity and multiplicity. R. Penna sums this up well: 'Concretely, in the context of an exhortation to harmonious co-existence and even cooperation between various Church charisms (chapters 12-14), Paul inserts this in order⁵ to speak of a still more excellent way (12: 13b). He says that if the nature of charisms represents an element of differentiation in the Church (and sometimes diversification), then *agape* is instead the cementing, unifying factor.'⁶ Thus *agape*, as the principle of unity in relation to diversity, has a two-fold function: 'On one hand it brings diversity back to unity; on the other hand, it also accomplishes a diffusing of unity in diversity.'⁷

Paul's strategy in conflict situations

In conclusion, I would emphasize Paul's strategy for convincing his Corinthian readers to overcome conflicts. He did not give orders nor impose his will. Rather he spoke convincingly to foster agreement around a responsible way of behaving, even if this did not preclude treating the Corinthians as immature believers, acting as "carnal," incapable of the solid food of the "spiritual" wisdom of *agape*.

Both Jesus and Paul used images from daily life (parables) or from nature. The intention is the same: To gain acceptance of a logic that seems illogical according to ordinary common sense. It is the logic of the God of Jesus.

The metaphor of the physical body developed in 1 Cor 12: 4-21 is clear and applied to the ecclesial reality. There it becomes obvious that unity requires a necessary multiplicity and diversity of functions/charisms, each of which is useful in 'constructing' the Church.

Then, with 1 Cor 12: 22ff., there is a comparison that speaks to the varying appreciation of members of the body – and thus the inequality between them. Some are weaker or lowlier, while other members are seemingly more honored and respected but all are equally necessary. In fact, 'the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable' (1 Cor 12: 22ff.).

Paul re-introduces a different framework of values by this notion of 'weakness'. There is the weakness of the Crucified One, Risen by the power of God (2 Cor 13: 4) and the personal experience of strength in weakness (2 Cor 12: 9ff.). Then there is the apostolic weakness that makes room for the Spirit's action (1 Cor 2: 3-5); the weakness of the power of *agape* that becomes one with those who by education or by nature are weak (see 1 Cor 8: 7ff.); God's characteristic choosing of the weak in order to act or reveal himself (1 Cor 1: 28); and the Apostle's consistent action of making himself weak with the weak (1 Cor 9: 22).

Thus, weakness becomes a positive factor according to faith's scale of values, as Paul concludes in 1 Cor 12: 24-27: 'But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy. Now you are Christ's body and individually parts of it.' The 'weakness' of *agape* as the power to instead 'make ourselves one' with a brother or sister is fundamental in overcoming conflicts. The focus is on its constitutive, underlying identity: The presence of the Risen One as source of ecclesial unity.

¹ 'Sagesse et Mystère chez Paul,' in *La Sagesse biblique de l'Ancien au N.T., Lectio Divina* 160 (Cerf: Paris, 1995), p. 363.

² *Commentaire de la Première Epître de S. Jean*, Collana Sources chrétiennes 75 (Paris: Cerf, 1961), p. 363.

³ See Titus Livy, *Storia di Roma II*, 32-33.

⁴ R. Penna, *Paolo, Scriba di Gesù* (Bologna: EDB, 2009), p. 165.

⁵ That is, the 'hymn to love' (ch. 13).

⁶ R. Penna, *L'apostolo Paolo. Studi di esegesi e teologia* (Cinisello Balsamo: Ed. Paoline, 1991), p. 581.

⁷ Y. Congar, *Mysterium Salutis*, vol. 7 (Brescia: Queriniana, 1972), p. 477.