

## 2010 Sophia Award



On Sunday, February 14th 2010, Washington Theological Union honored the Rev. Donald Senior CP, STD with the Sophia Award for excellence in theological scholarship contributing to the ministry of the Church. Fr. Senior's lecture following the award presentation was entitled: "Don't Pull Up the Weeds (Matthew 13:29): Biblical Wisdom on Seeking Communion in the Midst of Division". This lecture is forthcoming in *New Theology Review*.

### **"Don't Pull up the Weeds" (Matthew 13:29) Biblical Wisdom About Seeking Communion in the Midst of Division**

Tucked into the parable discourse in chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel is Jesus' intriguing story of the weeds and the wheat. After having sown good seed in their master's field, the hired hands are shocked to find weeds growing among the wheat. "Where did these come from?" they ask their master in amazement and disappointment. "Do you want us to go and pull the weeds out?" "No," the master advises, "let both of them grow until the harvest."

Although a number of interpretations of this parable are possible, most commentators on Matthew's Gospel agree the story reflects the fact that in Matthew's own community there was some degree of division and acrimony as it spanned a period of great transition from its strong roots into Judaism and its entry into the Gentile world; it was in fact a "mixed" community, composed of good and less good, of lofty ideals and all too human fractures and acrimony. Matthew transmits Jesus' wise and humane advice: be patient, be tolerant and forgiving, learn to live in a complex and imperfect world, let both weeds and wheat grow until the end.

While the context in which Matthew's Christian community lived are surely different from our day, nevertheless we, too, face not unrelated questions of transition and identity that lead some to propose that we pull out the weeds for the sake of theological and ecclesial harmony, and that we opt for a field that only has healthy wheat, our kind of wheat of course. Why should we as Christians strive to talk to each other? Why should we care? Why not politely retreat to opposing camps within the church? Why expend heartache and the possibility of failure in trying to seek dialogue and communion with those who may think and act differently than we do? The answer to this, I think, ultimately lies at the heart of the Christian message—in our very notion of the Christian mission in the world. And here in a great school of theology

that is preparing a new generation of priests and lay ecclesial ministers to lead the Church, I would like to offer some biblical reflections on the need for dialogue and communion in the midst of diversity and tension.

Some years ago I read a novel by Barbara Gordon whose mood and content have stayed with me. It was entitled, "I'm Dancing as Fast As I Can" and was about the struggle of a very successful executive for network television. She had reached to the pinnacle of her career as a major executive but suddenly under the impact of a frantic pace and extraordinary pressures her life began to fall apart—a shattered marriage, a terrible falling out with her daughter, and unaccustomed setbacks and loss of purpose in her work. Gradually she sank into a deep depression, literally locking herself away in her apartment, afraid to come out, nearly suicidal. The novel—which was based on a real story—deals mainly with this woman's struggle to put her life back together. One key moment came when in an excruciating bout of panic she told her doctor that she literally did not know how to live anymore—she was afraid to step out of her bed. The doctor said, "You do know one thing very important—you know how to breathe." And he asked the woman to be still for a moment and listen to herself breath—breathing in and breathing out.

Years later, after a long steep climb to put her life back in order, the woman recalled that moment as a turning point for her. She **did** know how to breathe, taking in life-breath and letting it out. The vital exercise that keeps a human being alive.

That fundamental act—breathing in and breathing out—is an image for what I am going to reflect with you about for a few moments. As we all know this is a turbulent time for our world and for the church. In the midst of great vitality and blessing all around us, there is also much pain and loss. We appear to be deeply divided on many issues sacred to us all: our liturgy, our mode of governance, some of our teaching, and so on. The Vatican is conducting a pastoral visitation of women religious communities and that is causing anger and anxiety in many quarters. The scandal of sexual misconduct that has shaken the church and raised profound and fundamental questions about its moral leadership, continues to experience aftershocks.

Coupled to all this, for some time now, many people who work in the church feel themselves caught in a more subtle undertow: diminishment of numbers, budget cutbacks, uncertainty about the future, a low grade depression that suppresses hope on the part of many and puts people in a survival mode. We, too, may feel we are dancing as fast as we can.

In turbulent times such as these, it is important to sink beneath our tensions and to retrieve our most profound and fundamental inspirations and ideals. As Christians, I believe, we can do nothing more fundamental than to recall the depth and beauty of the mission entrusted to us by the Risen Christ. Extending Christ's presence into the world—in all of its beauty and depth, with all of its grace and transformative power, with its balm of reconciliation and

peace--this is the primary call of every Christian. John Paul II has noted that every Christian "...has the prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity, as it is announced in scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history. This is the plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity." Mission in its deepest and broadest sense is truly, in the Pope's words, a plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity and indeed of the creative world in which humanity thrives.

It is a truism but let us repeat it here: every form of Christian life must take its inspiration from the life and mission of Jesus and to get our bearings that is where we should turn.

Breathing in and breathing out...that primal human work is also a metaphor that I think applies to the mission of Jesus. One of the ways I have come to think of his ministry is something like the work of breathing—a drawing in of life into a vital center; the extending of life to the farthest boundaries of reality. A gesture similar to an embrace, reaching out and drawing in. The more I have stood back from the gospels, the more I conceive of Jesus' mission in terms of these two related gestures that become one fluid movement and characterize the fundamental elements of Jesus' ministry: reaching out and drawing in. Both gestures were compelled by the deepest convictions and religious instincts of his life and his vocation: reaching out in a wide embrace of the whole expanse of Israel, including those on the margins; drawing in the entire community—washed and unwashed—into a communion of life that gives glory to God.

One of my favorite New Testament passages is that of Matthew 11:18. You recall the text where Jesus confronts his opponents, playing back their hostile words, "'We piped you a tune and you did not dance, we sang you a dirge and you did not wail.' For John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, and you said he is insane. But the Son of Man came eating and drinking and you say, 'Behold a wine bibber and a glutton, a lover of tax collectors and those outside the law.' Yet Wisdom is proved by her deeds."

Implicit in his opponents' hostile response is a tribute to the two characteristic gestures of Jesus I spoke of. "A lover of tax collectors and those outside the law" – a sign of Jesus' extraordinary outreach beyond the boundaries. Jesus was committed to restoring Israel to God, hence, in a spirit of compassion, he sought out also those who lived on the margins of the community, those on the fringe, the "lost sheep" of the house of Israel—the "weeds" if you like. And, at the same, time this "wine bibber and glutton" drew in the lost to the vital center where he would break God's bread with them. Here we see tribute to the inclusive meals so characteristic of Jesus' mission as portrayed in the gospels.

Both of these gestures—reaching out and drawing in—are fundamental to the gospel portrayal of Jesus. No contemporary study of the historical Jesus would deny the fact that Jesus had extraordinary rapport with those on the margin, with those who were isolated and al-

ienated without the social context of first century Palestinian Judaism. Think, for example, of the gospels' emphasis on Jesus' commitment as a charismatic healer. All one has to do is read the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel to see in such raw and powerful detail—Jesus healing from sunup to sun down, the doors jammed with the sick who come to him as if drawn by some magnetic force. Healing, then as now, is not only physical transformation—and Jesus was surely dedicated to that—but healing also involves the dissolving of isolation and exclusion which the sick in traditional societies, but also in our own, characteristically experience.

Or Jesus' eye for the socially marginalized: Levi at his tax collector's post, the centurion in Capernaum, the Canaanite woman, blind Bartimaeus by the roadside, Zaccheus in his sycamore tree. It is also clear from the Sermon on the Mount and other sayings and parables of Jesus that he was convinced that those devalued by others were themselves capable of heroic virtue. Jesus had great faith in the capacity of the human person for holiness and greatness. Even though suffering from violence, one could seek to be a peacemaker; even though abused, one could seek reconciliation; even in a culture of lies, one could speak the truth; even in a world of indifference, one could truly serve those in need.

There is no doubt that the historical Jesus reached out beyond the boundaries and there is also no doubt, I believe, that this provocative outreach was grounded in his own experience of the God of Israel as one whose reach was not confined to the boundaries of Israel but reached beyond those boundaries. Jesus, it seems, opened his mind and heart to the occasional Gentile as well. As a devout Jew Jesus did not frequent Gentile territories nor did he conceive a mission to the Gentiles as his primary mission as one called to restore Israel, but when confronted with one of God's children in need, even if a Gentile, he apparently responded with compassion—setting the foundation for what the early community would ultimately feel compelled to do, to reach beyond Israel in the name of Jesus. Jesus earned and gloried in the judgment of his enemies: “a lover of tax collectors and those outside the law.”

And then there is the dimension of his drawing in—clearly an important way of understanding the Jesus of history is not that he came to found a church in the sense of establishing a completely new entity apart from the community of Israel. The “church” was already there, the **qahal** of God, the “assembly” or “ecclesia” of Israel. Jesus, rather, saw as his God-given vocation the restoration of Israel, the breathing of new life and a deeper sense of community into the people created by God and sealed with the Sinai covenant. So Jesus in a burst of wonderful irony and God-given optimism would call his ragtag and vulnerable band of disciples the “twelve” and promise them that one day they would sit on the thrones of the tribes of Israel.

And here surely is the inner meaning of the extraordinary meals that seem to have been characteristic of the ministry of Jesus. Meals with Levi and his friends, meals with Simon the Pharisee, meals with the crowds on the hillsides, meals with his disciples, meals with his Bethany friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus. The ideal meals that are described in his parables—

wedding feasts in which the invitations extend to the highways and by-ways, royal banquets groaning with food and seeking guests, meals at which strangers would come from east and west to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Passover meals drenched with poignancy and longing.

The early community would see these gospel meals as evocative of God's feeding the people in the desert with manna and with quail, and as a sign of the Eucharists to come. In each case, they signified the ultimate meaning of Jesus' mission as a gathering of Israel, as an inclusive communion of all the children of God, as a sign of the ultimate communion in joy and praise and abundant vitality with the God of Israel who, in the vision of Isaiah 25, would set a banquet on Sion and feed the people with choice meats and beautiful wines, taking away the cobweb of death and drying the tears from every face. Luke draws on precisely this vision of Israel brought to reality in the mission of Jesus and given the force of the Spirit through his death and resurrection—thus is born the post-Easter Jerusalem community where all share in common, of one heart and one mind, with no one in need, breaking bread in their homes and singing for joy in the temple of God.

The mission of Jesus, understood in these terms of outreach and drawing in, of inclusion and communion, of reconciliation and peacemaking would lead ultimately to his death and give meaning to the cross as an act of profound love. Jesus died because of the way he lived.

Thus the characteristic notes and deep patterns of Jesus' ministry—his reaching out and his drawing in—can ultimately be traced to Jesus' own experience of the God of Israel. A God whose transcendent beauty reached far beyond the boundaries of Israel's imagination and far exceeded it hopes. The God of Israel was also the God of the nations. A God whose unconditional forgiving love and startling compassion were more than any human heart could grasp. This God was the ground of Jesus' being and the foundation of his mission. The Spirit-driven intuition of the early community would enable it see that Jesus not only revealed this God through his ministry but that Jesus himself—in his very being—embodied this divine reality.

Here we touch on another intuition of the church's teaching about mission and about community that has come to the fore in our times, namely that the ultimate theological and biblical foundation for mission and community is the very life of God, indeed the mystery of the Trinity itself. God embodies the mission impulse—reaching out in self-transcending love—love as an incredible, irrepressible abundance emanating from the very relational being of God, love surging out into the act of creation, love extending into the life of a people and their history. And a love whose ultimate intent is to draw all creation into the unfathomable beauty and vitality of God's own being—to create reconciliation and communion among all living things.

Here is the ultimate life-act: breathing out and breathing in; reaching out and drawing in. This divine rhythm of life is the ground of all of the church's mission and its interior life.

That dynamic tension between identity and outreach, between community and mission, between particularism and universality arches through the entire Bible, including both testaments. Israel caught throughout its history between its sense of election as God's own special people, concerned with the demands of the covenant to build a community of justice and compassion—and yet wondering about the “nations,” those peoples who were also children of Abraham and somehow destined to be part of God's ultimate embrace. Election and outreach. Community and mission. Breathing in and breathing out.

Our focus here is on the community side of the equation: Striving to build up the body of Christ. Learning to reconcile in the midst of our differences; forging bonds of mutual respect and understanding and, indeed, love among the members of the Church. Let me for a moment or two reflect on a couple of key dimensions of the New Testament that deserve our attention when considering the urgency of forging community across our differences.

Right at the outset, we should note that the early community—not unlike our church today—was not an ideal or perfect community. This is one of the important and beautiful realities we should keep in mind when thinking about the church and the whole issue of division and the need for dialogue. Surely the gospels do not present the first disciples of Jesus as ideal types. They are often confused or indifferent to Jesus' teaching. One of them would betray him, the leader would deny he knew him, his closest followers would fall asleep as he grieved, and all of them would flee the scene at the moment of Jesus' greatest need. The list could go on but you get the picture.

In the Acts of the Apostles Luke, in the same vein, does not hesitate to portray the community stumbling out of the gate immediately after the ascension of the Risen Christ and the dramatic descent of the Spirit. Yes, we have those beautiful ideal summaries of the Jerusalem community united in prayer and friendship, of one heart and one mind, sharing all things in common and with no one in need. But there is also the turbulence of Annanias and Sapphira who lie to the community and suffer dramatic consequences. Or the hot-headed Paul and the fear he engendered in the community after his conversion. Or the dullness of Peter and the leaders of the Jerusalem church when the Spirit of God draws the Gentile Cornelius into the community; or the dispute between Greek and Hebrew speaking factions about the distribution of goods in the community; or, a wonderfully human example, the bitter fallout between Paul and Barnabas and John Mark--the breakup of the first team ministry of the early church! And what about the constant dissension that rumbles through Paul's letters in his conflict with various factions in Galatia and Corinth—not to mention his dramatic confrontation with Peter in Antioch over table fellowship with Gentiles.

No, the church of Jesus Christ right from the start was not ideal but real, a field of wheat and weeds. The same is true today—the Church is a flawed community of human beings seeking unity through the power of the Spirit but always falling short.

The same wonderful Scriptures that gives us such a realistic—and ultimately comforting—picture of the struggles of the early church also brings us to some images that can sustain us in our efforts to build community. These “master symbols” – texts that can inspire and instruct us—are vitally important. These master symbols or texts are rooted in the example and spirit of Jesus but take a different shape in the circumstances of the early Church. Let me quickly cite just two of them for our reflections on community in the midst of division—one a passage from Matthew’s Gospel and the other the example of Paul the Apostle.

### **Matthew’s “Community Discourse” (chapter 18)**

My first choice is the community discourse found in chapter 18 of Matthew’s Gospel.

Many contemporary interpreters of the Gospel of Matthew believe that the community for which the gospel was composed was located in cosmopolitan city of Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire and found there was a mix of Gentiles and a sizeable Jewish community. As we noted earlier for this predominantly Jewish Christian community of Matthew it was a time of substantial transition and no little tensions. Both Paul in his description of his dispute with Peter about table fellowship in Galatians 2:11-14 and Luke’s account of the delegation that is sent to determine the situation in Antioch in Acts 10:19-26 testify to some of the tensions within the community over the issue of incorporating Gentiles into the predominantly Jewish Christian community there.

Matthew’s church appears to have been a divided community on the brink of a new moment in salvation history: with some very concerned about retaining their rich Jewish heritage and therefore fearful about a precipitous turn to the Gentiles; others, however, impatient to move out into new territory to a people willing to bear the new fruit of the gospel—their frustration not unlike that of Paul the Apostle who found himself in conflict with the “pillars” of the church as he called them who were perceived to be moving too slowly and hesitantly.

Jesus is portrayed as the supreme teacher in Matthew’s Gospel and the narrative movement of the gospel is accordingly punctuated with great discourses—the Sermon on the Mount, the mission discourse, the parable discourse, the apocalyptic discourse—and of significance for our topic, the community discourse of chapter 18.

Here the evangelist gathers key sayings and parables of Jesus to form a word portrait of the life of his community. Two great parables form the bulk of the discourse: the parable of the lost sheep which ends with exhortation, that just as the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to seek out the one sheep that goes astray, so the leaders of the community should realize that it is not the will of the Father than a single little one, or weak and troubled member of the community, should be lost. And the other, the parable of the merciless servant—prompted by Peter’s ques-

tion: how often should I forgive my brother or sister? And Jesus tells the story of a royal household where a steward who owes a tremendous debt—10,000 talents—more than the national debt—is forgiven when he pleads with his master for compassion. Asking for more time to pay off this impossible debt he is in fact forgiven it all. But then the same servant goes out and throttles a fellow servant who owes him but a few cents—less than a day’s wage. And when that poor wretch asks for more time, too, this hard-hearted servant who has learned nothing from his experience of mercy has his fellow servant and his whole family thrown into prison until he should pay it. Saddened by this spectacle the rest of the household reports the merciless servant to the master and he is given a severe and deserving judgment—thrown into the dungeon where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! The point of the story: So it will be with you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Compassion, forgiveness, care for the weak and defenseless—this is the entire content of this discourse on community. Sandwiched into between these two telling parables of Jesus, Matthew adds a very pointed segment detailing how disputes are to be handled in such a community: if one sins against you, go and seek to reconcile with that brother or sister. If you are unsuccessful, bring a couple of other community members and seek to hash it out. If that fails then bring the matter before the whole assembly. If that fails, too, then the recalcitrant and destructive member is to be separated from the community but still remains an object of restless compassion and outreach—treat him as you would a tax collector and sinner.

Definitely a field of wheat and weeds here! The profound reminder about the need for a limitless supply of compassion and concern. The capacity for forgiveness that is required. The common sense to deal with intractable disputes. Here is the model of ecclesial community we should not forget. One is to talk to one another: with care, with words of forgiveness, with prudent counsel, with unending concern.

## **The Example of Paul**

Finally, let me turn to Paul, the great apostle and founder of churches throughout the Gentile Mediterranean world. Paul, we know from his writings, was a man of great passion. Paul's passion was undoubtedly a product in part of a naturally fiery temperament. No even-tempered phlegmatic would express in a public letter the hope that those who proposed circumcision for his Gentile converts would have the knife slip in their own case--or begin a letter to a prominent church with the address: “O Stupid Galatians!” Paul, I fear, may not have been easy to live with--perhaps it is no accident that his ministry was primarily an itinerant one. The community that he knew the best and where he lived for some time was Corinth--and we all know that Paul had his troubles with the Corinthians and they with him!



But it is equally clear that the sustaining fire of Paul's passion came from the intensity of his commitment to Christ and his devotion to the Christian communities formed in the name of Christ. It was this that drove him in his ministry and from this came his preaching and his theology.

Paul as confident leader and non-possessive collaborator.

At a time when we are concerned about Catholic identity and when we find deep divisions in our Church, I think we can learn something from Paul, too. It does not take a reader of Paul's letters very long to see that this was a man with a fairly robust ego. Paul was very conscious of his role as an "apostle of Jesus Christ" and cites it frequently. It marks the beginning and the conclusion of virtually every letter he wrote. When his apostolic authority was under attack--as it was in Galatians and II Corinthians--his responses leave no prisoners.

But it would be a dreadful misunderstanding of Paul and his ministry to think of him (as has sometimes been the case) as some solitary colossus standing astride the early church or as a "lone ranger," moving fearlessly and alone across the map of the Mediterranean world, planting the seed of the Gospel without dependence on or connection with others. This image is false and our evidence is Paul's own testimony. One of the most remarkable and important insights we have gained into Paul in recent times is that he operated within an extraordinary network of co-workers. Paul apparently never traveled alone; he hands out the title "co-worker" liberally throughout his letters, and even his letters themselves are collaborative pieces, all but two of them are explicitly co-authored.

The famous concluding passage in Romans 16 is one of the best sources of evidence for this collaborative and inclusive spirit of Paul and has become one of my favorite New Testament texts. As Paul concludes a letter to a church he has never visited, but one that obviously had great importance to him, he signs off his letter with a series of greetings to Christians at Rome that gives a breathtaking insight into the range of his contacts and his non-possessive spirit, as well as testimony to the mobility and networking of the early Christians themselves:

"Phoebe, the Deacon" (as Paul calls her, not "deaconess"), at Cencreae, the port of Corinth, who must have been visiting Rome—perhaps even carrying Paul's letter to that community, a woman the Romans are urged to receive as a saint because she has been a helper and good friend to Paul.

Prisca and Aquila, whom Paul calls my "co-workers in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks"--the Jewish Christian couple from Rome who had already moved to Corinth and formed a house church before Paul arrived and who made it possible for him to have any success in that major city of the Empire.

The list goes on: Junia and Andronicus; another couple whom Paul calls "apostles"--throwing translators into a dither for centuries, leading them to call Junia "Junias," even though this masculine form doesn't exist in Greek--apostles whom Paul says were "in Christ" before him.

Epaenetus, the first convert to Christ in Asia. Greet Mary who has worked very hard among you. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, my co-worker. Greet the family of Aristobulus. Greet those wonderful workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother--who is also mother to me. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas. Philogous, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints--Paul warms to his topic--Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the Churches of Christ greet you.

Paul runs out of breath and out of room as this incredible list of more than perfunctory greetings to friends and fellow workers pours out of him at the close of the letter. Twenty-nine Greek and Jewish names (10 of them women), drawn from nobility, freedmen and slaves.

But more important still, Paul's sense of collaboration is not simply a personal style or imposed by necessity but flows as well from the deepest experience of his faith and his theological convictions, from his vision of the Gospel, rooted ultimately in his image of the God who gathered all people, who was the God of Jews and Gentiles. A conviction that spills over into Paul's consistently collaborative images of the church as a body of many members, as a profusion of gifts welded into one Spirit, as an array of many instruments and materials fashioned into one living temple of God. The building up of the community of the church was his restless apostolic goal and he knew that every gift, no matter how brilliant, was subordinate to the gift of charity and the bonding of the community.

Thus Paul, the restless apostle to the Gentiles, also spent his energy trying to forge Christian communities characterized by forgiveness and compassion. Paul despised factionalism: "Let there be no divisions among you, but be united the same mind and in the same purpose" he pleads with the Corinthians. Throughout his letters he counsels his fellow Christians to guard their speech, to avoid provocative angering words and instead speak with grace and kindness. The various gifts of the Christians were to be orchestrated into the one body of Christ, animated by one reconciling Spirit. The least members of that body were to be the most honored and there were to be no divisions in that body so that the parts may have the same concern for one another—"so that if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy." (I Cor 12). A body in which the preeminent gift was charity. I truly believe that when Paul spoke of the church as the "Body of Christ" the image Paul had in mind was not the perfectly toned body that was the ideal of Greco-Roman culture but the Crucified body of the Son of God who had absorbed suffering and weakness that all might live in reconciliation and forgiveness.

Paul, in fact, characterized his whole mission as a “ministry of reconciliation”; “All this, Paul says, “is from God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor 5).

Paul's own theology of weakness put the ultimate check on the temptation to possessiveness about one's status or authority. Paul's own evident physical disability, his wrong headed persecution of the church early in his life when he had been so sure of his convictions and his moral prowess--all of these experiences had taught Paul his own moral fragility and led him to find his strength, paradoxically, in his own weakness because where he was weak, God was strong.

That memory of Paul is needed now. We need confidence in our apostolic vocations, but need to hold them in a non-possessive way. Collaboration is not a passing fad nor can it be theological dressing for expediency. It is an expression of the Gospel. Paul knew that and lived it. Do I need to remind any of you that you, too, work in a church where more than ever before in our history we will need to work alongside others in deep mutual respect and with a common sense of purpose, if the church is to be renewed and our mission sustained. In reflecting on a “spirituality of dialogue” John Allen cited as the first characteristic that of “epistemological humility”; that is, none of us know everything; we can't and should not try to control everything, we are all seeking to find the truth and no one possesses it completely. I think Paul, who saw himself as an earthen vessel, would have agreed.

Allow me to cite one final characteristic of Paul. I am convinced from reading Paul's letters that he was a man who suffered greatly from his ministry, at the same time it was the consuming passion of his life. Paul began his ministry with bold plans, some of them bordering on the audacious. He lets us know in Romans 15 and through hints in other parts of his correspondence that his intent was to move around the rim of the Mediterranean world, planting Christian churches and so igniting the Roman world that eventually all the Gentiles would turn to Christ, which in turn would stir the jealousy of the rest of Israel, all of the Jews would then turn to Christ and Christ, with Paul's assistance, would hand the world triumphantly over to God.

Not bad! But Paul's apostolic dream would never be fulfilled in his lifetime and in many ways still elude us. And for Paul this was a great source of anguish, particularly the fact that he was unable to inspire his own beloved fellow Jews to accept Christ.

But Paul's heart was broken not just by the dreams that never took flesh but by the constant drumfire against the few things he had been able to build. I think that Paul never saw his vision of a law-free Gospel for the Gentiles fully accepted. Truth squads seemed to have stalked his steps, questioning his orthodoxy, turning the heads of his converts to a different understanding of the church, planting doubts about his apostolic authority.

Paul's anguish and frustration come to rolling boil in a famous passage from 2 Cor 11: As if on some blue Monday, Paul's patience breaks and out comes a torrent of frustration and pain--directed not at the leaders of the synagogue, or at the threats of Roman officials, but at his own fellow apostles and the leaders of his own communities:

"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? All right, he says, I will talk like a madman--I am a better one, with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"

Ever ask someone on the wrong day how they are feeling--and they actually tell you...? Paul was no plaster of Paris saint; no abstract role model. He lived at a time when his vision of the church was very much in doubt; I don't think he ever lived to see it secured. And there must have been nights in Corinth or Thessaloniki, or Ephesus--surely in Jerusalem or during house arrest in Caesarea and Rome--when he wondered if he was on the wrong track after all--maybe thoughts like these have passed through the walls of your school or your parish or your home?

But, at the same time, Paul managed what every great pastoral leader has done. Paul held tightly to his hope. I love the passage in chapter eight of the Letter to the Romans. Paul the cosmic doctor seems to ease on to the examination table the body of humanity, this groaning mass of creation. As he reviews the drama of salvation, Paul puts his ear to the heaving chest of the world and decides that the moans and groans he hears coming from the children of God and even from creation itself, are not death pangs but birth pains--the moans and groans of the Spirit leading all of the created world to God.

Paul never let go of his foundational experience of faith: the love of the Crucified Christ for him was the pledge of God's unbreakable covenant, of God's unceasing redemptive love for the world: "Can anything separate us from the love of God?" Paul asks.

It is a question wrung from the heart of a minister of the Gospel, of one called to mission, of an adult who has lived in the church from the inside and who still refuses to be undone by its scandals and frustrations, one who had lofty ideals of community but also knew the sad

realities of divisions and conflicts, one, in effect, who knew the reality of suffering and yet nourished great hopes.

"Nothing," he says in the most soaring passage of his letters, "nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 9:38-39).

When today we are legitimately concerned about Catholic identity and the unity of the Church, we should not forget how much in the mission of Jesus and in the various early Christian texts that speak of community, the notion of reconciliation comes to the fore. The ultimate destiny of the human family, indeed of creation itself, is seen as a cosmic reconciliation—with death dissolved, all enmity and pain erased, with all creation in harmony and all human beings bonded in love, a love that in the Johannine vision that equals that of the mutual love for the Father for the Son. This breathtaking vision drives the Christian impulse to proclaim the Word and to form community.

In a world as fractured as our own, in a country and a culture that so prizes individualism and where so many feel solitary and lonely, this notion of the Christian mission as a mission of reconciliation takes on new urgency. The ultimate witness of any authentic Christian community today may be the fundamental witness that it is possible for human beings of different cultures, races, generations, economic status and perspectives to live together without killing each other. Christian communities are, in the words of Pope John Paul II, counter-cultural "signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony."

Our biblical heritage—proclaimed through Israel and its history, embodied in the person and mission of Jesus, carried forward in the mission of Paul and other early Christian men and women, and captured in Matthew's Gospel and in the Church's enduring tradition, reminds us that the boundaries of the Christian horizon can never be content with those drawn by national or cultural or ideological interests. The Word of God is expansive and inclusive, reaching to the ends of the earth and to the corners of our universe. And communities formed in that Word, however fragile they may be, are called, in a world filled with alienation and violence, to give witness to the healing Word of Christ, that such virtues as a spirit of forgiveness, genuine humility, a commitment to dialogue and mutual respect, and, ultimately, love are truly possible. Weeds and wheat can grow together in our field.

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