

The Captivity Letters

Four letters are gathered under the title of “Captivity Letters”: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. It is by chance that these four letters are continuous; even if these four letters were written by Paul while in prison, they are not of the same year, nor did he send them from the same prison.

Paul was arrested many times (2 Cor 11:24; Acts 14:29; 16:23). If we speak about his being in prison for any length of time, he may have been imprisoned two times, plus another in “semi-captivity.”

His first stay in prison was undoubtedly in the year 56 A.D., in Ephesus, from where he had sent to the Philippians a letter whose authenticity did not raise any doubts.

His second stay, well documented in Acts 24–26, was in Caesarea on the premises of the Roman administration. Paul stayed there for two entire years and from there, he was taken to Rome (Acts 27–28).

His third stay was in Rome. In Acts, we are told that it lasted two years after which Paul was probably acquitted (Acts 28:30). In reality, Paul enjoyed a certain freedom and he was even lodged in a private house (Acts 28:16).

With a lot of probability Paul was executed between the years 64 and 66 A.D., during Nero’s great persecution. A wrong interpretation of 2 Timothy 1:17 led some to think that Paul was again in prison in Rome before his execution.

Therefore, it was either in the years 58–60 A.D., in Caesarea, or in the years 60–62 A.D., in Rome, that Paul would have written the letters, showing him as a prisoner, to the Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. Many reasons suggest that these letters were written in Caesarea.

Numerous biblicists question Paul as the author of the letters to the Ephesians and even to the Colossians. There are arguments for that although the aspects of these letters in favor of their authenticity are equally numerous. As the hypotheses attributing these letters to a disciple of Paul from the following generation showed their weakness, new theories had to be created as contradictions appeared.

The letters to the Ephesians and Colossians are intimately linked and the same topics are dealt with in both letters in the same way. Therefore it is impossible that one letter be authentic and not the other. On the other hand, how could a forger convince the Church to accept these letters as written by Paul? It is clear that if the churches received these letters so early and without questioning it is because the churches of Ephesus and Colossae, necessarily well informed, would not have accepted them unless they were Paul’s. Then we have the short message to Philemon that everybody accepts as Paul’s; but this is inseparable from Colossians: see Colossians 4:9 and Philippians 24–26.

In some people’s view, the style and content of the letters differ too much from Paul’s previous letters to have been written by him. However, as they read through, they are constantly forced to recognize words and ideas that are typically Paul’s. How sure are we that an author is always going to speak in the same manner and keep the same style? Who can say that Paul could not say anything new after he had written Romans and Corinthians?

It is clear that the author of the letter to the Romans is no longer the same Paul as in the first letter to the Thessalonians. In addition, after Romans, two major changes were to affect Paul. On one hand, Paul decided to leave for Rome and the West since he believed that he had completed his apostolate in Asia Minor and Greece. On the other hand, Paul was going to experience years in prison.

Under guard, in Caesarea, even though he was treated humanely and well (Acts 24:23), Paul did not live like a lord and his chains impaired his apostolic activity. Paul now looked at people and institutions differently and it is here that something more than a theological revision took place: it was a spiritual change of setting. Instead of accumulating contradictions with a simplistic solution, claiming that all the captivity letters were written by a forger, we could ask ourselves what else Paul had to discover, which is precisely what emerges in these captivity letters.

Access to Fulfillment

In simple terms, we might say that, up to that time, Paul had kept the vocabulary and the images of the God of the Old Testament. God the monarch established in heaven, God the judge who welcomes all to his heaven or the one who condemns. In the commentary on Romans, we have said that *justification* primarily consists in a recreation of the human person by God. Yet, we cannot deny the juridical aspect of this justification. Whether it is a question of the relations between God and human-kind, or the struggle between good and evil, Paul is always thinking within the juridical setting of the rabbis. In addition, the aggressive language is manifest. A rereading of the first letter to the Thessalonians, will show that the violence of the language corresponds to the persecutions that Paul was enduring on the part of the Jews. That violence was also in Jesus' language, a popular preacher's language that did not, in any way, diminish the mystery of God but always presented it through these images.

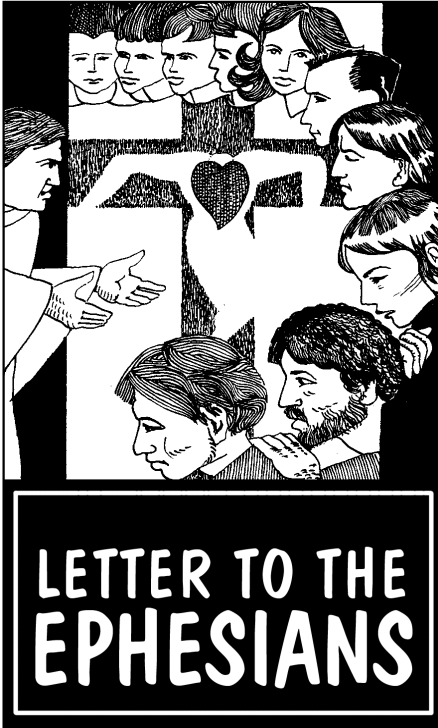
It was within this legalistic and Jewish setting (we dare say: biblical) that the discovery of God as Father and the experiences of the Spirit occurred, combined with Paul's creativity and interior presence. These experiences had softened up the austerity and the violence that may have been in the religion of God as king and judge and joy was prevailing in the expectation of the Lord. These new feelings, the fruits of the Spirit, continued to go hand in hand with ancient images that contained a good measure of violence. The most notorious passages are in 1 Thessalonians and also in 2 Corinthians 11:13 and Galatians 2:4.

God is Spirit. Although Paul knew it, he had not yet become fully aware of it. The day he "realized" that God is not the one "who had the right to rule over our lives" (as some put it), he understood better the way that Father looks at human beings. His encounter with the religions of Asia Minor had probably prepared Paul's new conversion. Paul did use some terms common in the region of Ephesus but changed their meaning. Was Paul thinking only of fighting them or did he discover in them a certain way of conceiving the relations of God and the universe?

Eternity is very much present in Ephesians and Colossians. In the beautiful hymn of Ephesians 1:1-14 the eternal praise of divine grace is everywhere and *predestination*, already found in Romans 8:28, took its place in the divine nature. All suggests a divine mystery liberated from rights, obligations and laws. What appears now in Paul more prominently is a God present in everybody and everything (Eph 3:14-20).

In those years, the expectation of the Day of the Lord was running out of steam and the God of Paul was going to be situated in a radiance that the wrath of God could not reach, there where all humans could be saved (Eph 3:8 and 1 Tim 2:4). Greater than ever, Christ assumed the long history that was just beginning. Paul saw himself as being caught up in a cosmic adventure in which, despite his insignificance, he had been needed for eternal praise. Paul, a prisoner, was entering into the depth of the mystery of redemption that was lavished, from Christ, on all those who loved him, and even in his chains (Eph 4:1; Col 1:24).

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Should we speak of a “letter” of Paul? It does not contain any news or personal message to a specific community. Like the letter to the Romans, it is an exposé on faith and the salvation of the world. Was it a kind of circular letter intended for the churches of the Ephesus region? Instead, should we accept testimonies according to which this letter, written at the same time as the epistle to the Colossians, was meant for the Laodiceans (Col 4:16)?

As we are told in Acts (Chaps. 24–26), Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea between the years 58–60 A.D. He thought that his apostolate in the East was over and he had been arrested as he was getting ready to leave for Rome, the capital of the empire. A few months earlier, he had written the letter to the Romans, a brilliant presentation of the work of salvation, when the news he received from Ephesus prompted Paul to elaborate a new presentation of the divine work. There were new religions springing up in the Roman province of Asia and soon

they would spread to Rome. To the extent that these religions claimed to be offering everyone a way of salvation, they were challenging Christ as the sole savior of humankind.

Christians had to be given a broader vision of the hope of which they were the bearers. Where is humankind going? Is Christ the only Savior? These are questions we have to confront more insistently every day insofar as these past few years have seen a type of “mass movements” on the part of very diverse people. Those who want to dominate can only succeed if they appear to be speaking for the majority. Is there a way and a hope for human beings? From his prison, Paul responds to us.

This letter to the Ephesians is parallel to the letter Paul sent to the Colossians at the same time. The same messenger took it to the two communities at the same time as the note for Philemon (Col 4:2; Phlm 2). Paul takes up again and develops God’s plan that he said he had understood in a revelation. At the core of this revelation we have Christ, the Firstborn of God and the world has been created for new Human Beings, a single family in Christ. From now on, every Christian is urged to live this call to a holy and responsible life.

Some people think that Paul is not the author of this letter. How could he have spoken so impersonally to a community where he had worked for over two years, approximately from 55 to 57? As we have said, the letter was not addressed to the Christians of Ephesus but rather to communities in the valley of the Lycus River: Hierapolis and Laodicea that Paul had not personally evangelized.

Others think that the questions raised are more suited to a time after Paul. Or

when they see that, compared to Paul's previous letters, his style has been renewed, they imagine that someone else wrote those letters. However, all the theories run into enormous obstacles. When one is aware of the very low level of Christian literature immediately after the death of the apostles, it is difficult to think that a letter of such theological conviction, such doctrinal richness and so typically "Pauline" in every page, could have matured in someone other than Paul, even if that someone, Tychicus (Eph 6:21) or Timothy (Col 1:1), assisted in writing it.

- 1**¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God,
to the saints in Ephesus, to you, who share Christian faith:
² receive grace and peace from God, our Father, and from Jesus, the Lord.
- ³ Blessed be God, the Father of Christ Jesus our Lord,
who, in Christ, has blessed us from heaven, with every spiritual blessing.
- ⁴ God chose us, in Christ, before the creation of the world,
to be holy, and without sin in his presence.
- ⁵ From eternity he destined us, in love,
to be his adopted sons and daughters, through Christ Jesus,
thus fulfilling his free and generous will.
This goal suited him:
⁶ that his loving-kindness, which he granted us in his beloved
might finally receive all glory and praise.
- ⁷ For, in Christ, we obtain freedom, sealed by his blood,
and have the forgiveness of sins.
In this, appears the greatness of his grace,
⁸ which he lavished on us.
- In all wisdom and understanding,
⁹ God has made known to us his mysterious design,
in accordance with his loving-kindness, in Christ.

Rom
1:1;
Acts
9:13

Gal 3:14

Jn 17:24;
1P 1:20;
1Jn 3:1

Rom
8:29;
Jn 1:12

Gal 1:13;
Rom
3:24

Rom
16:25

• **1.3** This first page of the letter to the Ephesians is the best comprehensive expression of the Christian mystery in the Scriptures. It also serves to balance Paul's great presentation in his letter to the Romans, which could appear to center God's work in the tragedy of sinful humanity. The Letter to the Ephesians, like the Gospel of John, speaks of a re-creation of the world whereas the Letter to the Romans used more juridical terms: debt and reparation for sin.

Blessed be God! Usually Paul starts his letters with praise and thanksgiving. Here, however, the prayer is unusually lengthy: Paul gives thanks and at the same time proclaims God's *mysterious plan*, which he understood through a revelation (3:3).

God chose us in Christ (v. 4). Note the expression *in Christ* on which we have commented in 1 Corinthians 1:4. Every creature comes from God through his Son in whom God contemplates his own riches, and on whom he pours his love. We are as God has loved us, and we are in him, in some way, from the beginning.

In creating us free, God knows that our freedom is fragile: it will be difficult for us to give him a filial response. How can we return to God, at the heart of his mystery, without dying to ourselves? All history must necessarily be a continual death and resurrection, for nations as for persons. So Divine Wisdom foresaw that the Son would be in our midst, with his cross

and his resurrection, to show us the love of the Father who has called us (v. 5). And of course, wherever the Son is, the Spirit will be given (vv. 7 and 13).

Many Christian authors have spoken as if, in the beginning, God created man without considering his possible fall and that Christ only came to save the lost sinner. This is not what Paul says here: from the beginning the coming of Christ and the gift of the Spirit together with the laws of life and the course of history are mysteriously linked with the order existing in God himself.

From eternity he destined us in love (v. 5). Here we recognize what Paul has affirmed in Romans 8:29-30. We cannot omit the word "predestination." Many have used this word in the past in a different way from Paul's. While Paul shows the Father's decision to pour on created sons and daughters the infinite love which is lived within God, these preachers later spoke of a God who decides freely (and even capriciously) who will, and who will not, be saved. On this subject see "PREDESTINATION" in Romans 9.

It is impossible for us to understand how we can be free if we are known by God in eternity. It is not for that reason that we should share the doubts and anguish of those who believe they are subjected to a destiny or a fearsome "will of God." In reality, we are "subject" to love and blessings (cf. v. 3) that await our response (see commentary on Rom 9).

Mt 1:15;
Gal 4:4;
Col 1:16

¹⁰In him, and under him, God wanted to unite,
when the fullness of time had come,
everything in heaven and on earth.

Dt 7:6

¹¹By a decree of him, who disposes all things,
according to his own plan and decision,
we, the Jews, have been chosen and called,

Is 46:10

¹²and we were awaiting the Messiah,
for the praise of his glory.

1Thes
2:13;
2Cor
1:22;
Acts
2:33

¹³You, on hearing the word of truth,
the gospel that saves you,
have believed in him.
And, as promised, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit,

Rom 5:5

¹⁴the first pledge of what we shall receive,
on the way to our deliverance, as a people of God,
for the praise of his glory.

Paul does not speak of condemnation of anyone: he only affirms that God gives proof of a special love for those he calls to become members of Christ.

Many Christians are shocked when told they have received more than others, that in no other place have people been gifted with truth as they have, and they think: would it not be more honest and more humble to accept that all religions have their own truth? Yes, in a way all have some truth, but to doubt this unique grace that is to know God in Christ, is to deny the entire revelation of the Scriptures. See on this subject the note "The three sayings of God" in Genesis 12.

The Beloved (v. 6) is always the first for God and for us the desire to be "saved" cannot be the basis of our faith. It would be just as egoistic as practicing one's religion in order to enjoy good health. The Son has revealed to us the Glory of the Father and how he returned to the Father. He wished to draw us out of our egoism, even our religious egoism (Jn 17 and Phil 2:9).

In Christ we obtain freedom, sealed by his blood (v. 7). This does not mean that Christ shed his blood to make amends to his Father offended by sin, as if God were resentful as we often are, and as if his dignity were offended. Paul is referring to a biblical law: the emancipation of slaves used to be signed in blood (Ex 21:6).

His mysterious design (v. 9). Actually Paul says: *this mystery*; this term designated at the time a decision or a secret doctrine. Here Paul speaks of the plan of God the Creator: a plan rooted in the mystery of the three divine Persons. We know that from God the Father proceed the Son and the Spirit, and from him they

receive his very divinity, the three being only one God. Besides this communication and this effusion of life in God, *before the creation of the world*, God the Father wished to communicate his riches, beyond himself, to created beings. It is there that we have the beginning of all human history. God willed that *sons and daughters* (v. 5) multiply around his only Son and in him, be capable of receiving his Spirit and returning it to him. They would return to him at the end of history, forming one body (v. 10).

Sealed with the Holy Spirit (v. 13). The Jews were branded, "sealed" in the flesh by the circumcision ritual that showed they belonged to God. Christians, on the other hand, had received the Holy Spirit who acted in them: from the Spirit come faith, hope and love, the many forms of service, the gift of knowledge, miracles and healings. These gifts are the most obvious proof that they have become children of God. These gifts are only a foretaste of all the marvels that God has in store for us.

Paul distinguishes something like two insights: God's plan in eternity (vv. 1-10) and its realization in time (vv. 11-14). The last two stanzas correspond to two stages in sacred history:

– *We have been chosen and called* (v. 11). Paul speaks for himself and in the name of the Jewish people chosen to be the people of God.

– *You now...* (v. 13). Here Paul means the pagan people like the Ephesians, whom he is addressing. And so, the fullness of time had come, that is to say the time of the Gospel proclaimed to the entire world so that everyone could receive the gifts of the Spirit.

This page clarifies some essential points of faith.

God has put all things under the feet of Christ

Col 1:9 • ¹⁵I have been told of your faith and your affection toward all the believers, ¹⁶so I always give thanks to God, remembering you in my prayers.

Jn 17:3; 1Jn 5:20 ¹⁷May the God of Christ Jesus our Lord, the Father of glory, reveal himself to you, and give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that you may know him.

¹⁸May he enlighten your inner vision, that you may appreciate the things we hope for, since we were called by God.

May you know how great is the inheritance, the glory, God sets apart for his saints;

¹⁹may you understand, with what extraordinary power, he acts in favor of us who believe.

Col 2:12; 3:1; 1P 3:22 Phil 2:9 ²⁰He revealed his almighty power in Christ when he raised him from the dead, and had him sit at his right hand in heaven, ²¹far above all rule, power, authority, dominion, or any other supernatural force that could be

named, not only in this world, but in the world to come as well.

²²Thus has God put all things under the feet of Christ and set him above all things, as head of the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him, who fills all in all.

Ps 8:6;
1Cor
15:24;
Col 1:8

By grace you have been saved!

2 • ¹You were dead, through the faults and sins. ²Once, you lived through them, according to this world, and followed the Sovereign Ruler who reigns between heaven and earth, and who goes on working, in those who resist the faith. ³All of us belonged to them, at one time, and we followed human greed; we obeyed the urges of our human nature and consented to its desires. By ourselves, we went straight to the judgment, like the rest of humankind.

Col 2:13;
Jn 12:31;
2Cor 4:4

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, revealed his immense love. ⁵As we were dead through our sins, he gave us life, with Christ. By grace, you have been

34:6;
Rom 5:8
2Tim
2:12

• 15. *I have been told of your faith and your affection.* Paul delights in the faith of the Ephesians but, above all, he prays they may have hope that must be the source of their dynamism. He describes the stages of hope this way: *to know the Father; to appreciate the inheritance set apart for his saints; to understand the power of God to bring us to the realization of these hopes.*

It is this hope that cracked open the immobility of ancient societies. Paul lived in a world where hope was considered an illness. Any project to transform humanity was taken as an illusion, and so the hopes of a nascent science were quickly smothered. Believers, on the contrary, lived the experience of a resurrection. In Christian countries appeared the certainty of a common destiny of humanity (the word "humanity" was non-existent at the time). People were beginning to be seen as persons in a truer way and it was this that set history in motion, never to return. How astonishing to see in our world so many Christians who believe, but who have very little hope: are they not the ones who carry the hope of the world?

Far above all power (v. 21). In Paul's days, neither Jews nor Christians doubted that the world was governed by supernatural powers,

"angels." They called them: *Rulers, Powers, Authorities, Dominion*, and Paul was saying to them: all these Powers are inferior to Christ. In our days we express ourselves differently. Nevertheless, we see the universe subject to the laws of nature, to the forces of matter and of life. It is also subject to obscure forces: collective prejudices, vice and fanaticism. These ruled the world, preventing the emergence of humanity, until the coming of Christ: see Galatians 3:23.

God has put all things under the feet of Christ (v. 22). This means the same as the words of our creed: "Jesus is seated at the right hand of God." It means that in rising, Christ, the God-Human became the First in the universe. *All things under his feet* except humankind.

Paul adds: "He made him head of the Church" (v. 22). Christ acts differently in two areas: in the world, where he is the invisible center in charge; in the Church, of which he is the head, where he can show the riches of his Spirit.

• 2.1 The path of humans without Christ leads to death.

We obeyed the urges of our human nature and consented to its desires (v. 3). There is no need to seek a clearer affirmation of what we

saved! ⁶And he raised us to life, with Christ, giving us a place with him in heaven.

⁷In showing us such kindness, in Christ Jesus, God willed to reveal, and unfold in the coming ages, the extraordinary riches of his grace. ⁸By the grace of God, you have been saved, through faith. This has not come from you: it is God's gift. ⁹This was not the result of your works, so you are not to feel proud. ¹⁰What we are, is God's work. He has created us, in Christ Jesus, for the good works he has prepared, that we should devote ourselves to them.

Christ is our peace

• ¹¹Remember, that you were pagans, even in your flesh; and the Jews,

who call themselves Circumcised (because of a surgical circumcision), called you Uncircumcised. ¹²At that time, you were without Christ, you did not belong to the community of Israel; the Covenants of God, and his promises, were not for you; you had no hope, and were without God in this world. ¹³But now, in Christ Jesus, and by his blood, you, who were once far off, have come near.

¹⁴For Christ is our peace; he, who has made the two people, one; ¹⁵destroying, in his own flesh, the wall—the hatred—which separated us. He abolished the law, with its commands and precepts. He made peace, in uniting the two people, in him; creating, out of the two, one New Man. ¹⁶He destroyed hatred and reconciled us

2Cor
5:17

Col2:11;
Rom 9:4

Col 1:21

1The
4:13;
Is 57:19

Is 9:5

Ezk
37:1;
2Cor
5:17

call original sin. Paul does not speak of a fault committed before our personal sins, and in addition to the sins we are responsible for. It is a flaw easily seen in the human condition and in all our acts; it is the liabilities of our life insofar as God has not taken us in hand.

The account of Genesis (Chaps. 2–3) has placed in the past this “original” sin, as well as creation. It is a way of speaking proper to Hebrew culture. In fact both our creation by God (v. 10) and our revolt against him are a part of our daily reality.

He raised us to life with Christ (v. 6). Actually an authentic conversion is experienced as a resurrection. Paul is saying more: nothing can stop God's merciful plan. He sees beyond time and has already raised us with Christ. We are seated with him in heaven, that is to say, assured of victory.

• 11. Another aspect of the human condition without Christ: death goes hand in hand with divisions. Before Christ, humanity was divided and people did not know our common Father. Since they were not mature enough for a quick unification in the true faith, God took that into account when he began to prepare for Christ's coming. He chose a people and to avoid their being contaminated by the errors of the pagans, he separated them through a law that forbade their living together with other people (see Mk 7:14 and Acts 10:1). So there was in the Jerusalem temple, far from the Sanctuary, a patio open to the pagans and another one, near the Sanctuary reserved for the Jews, and a wall between the two. There came a time when this

dividing line became a sign of all the barriers that Christ was going to destroy.

He taught them to share life with non-Jews, forbidden until then. Christ, put on the cross by Jews and pagans, overcomes the hatred of all by a love that forgives and, once risen, gathers all people to himself.

Thus, just as the cross is made of two pieces, one vertical, towards heaven and the other, horizontal, towards the earth, so peace goes in two directions: towards God and towards others. *He has made the two people one... and reconciled us both to God* (vv. 15 and 16). These are the two sides of only one thing, because human violence is the other expression of our inability to meet God.

Christ united them, that is to say, whether we like it or not, the Gospel will destroy all differences between people. No matter how much segregation emerges in our societies, our laws and our institutions will collapse perhaps through violence, but better by being discredited through the sacrifices of their victims.

In one Spirit. It is only through the Spirit that each one has communion with others. Often, unity among people means one party, one ideology, one religion. Imposed order destroys both the one who accepts it and the one capable of silencing his adversaries.

Unity in the Church is not uniformity: the believers are not of one mold. It is not a question of having the same options regarding human problems; we have the right to differ in our view of faith provided that we accept all that the Credo contains. The Spirit enables each person to be true to himself and to continue “in

both to God, through the cross, making the two, one body.

¹⁷He came to proclaim peace; peace to you who were far off, peace to the Jews who were near. ¹⁸Through him, we—the two people—approach the Father, in one Spirit.

¹⁹Now, you are no longer strangers or guests, but fellow citizens of the holy people: you are of the household of God. You are the house, ²⁰whose foundations are the apostles and prophets, and whose cornerstone is Christ Jesus. ²¹In him, the whole structure is joined together, and rises, to be a holy temple, in the Lord. ²²In him, you, too, are being built, to become the spiritual Sanctuary of God.

God's inheritance is for all

3 • ¹For this reason, I, Paul, came to be the prisoner of Christ, for you, the non-Jews. ²You may have heard of the graces God bestowed on me, for your sake. ³By a revelation, he

gave me the knowledge of his mysterious design, as I have explained in a few words. ⁴On reading them, you will have some idea of how I understand the mystery of Christ.

⁵This mystery was not made known to past generations, but only now, through revelations, given to holy apostles and prophets, by the Spirit. ⁶Now, the non-Jews share the inheritance; in Christ Jesus, the non-Jews are incorporated, and are to enjoy the Promise.

This is the Good News, ⁷of which I have become minister, by a gift of God; a grace he gave me, when his power worked in me.

⁸This grace, was given to me, the least, among all the holy ones: to announce to the pagan nations, the immeasurable riches of Christ, ⁹and to make clear to all, how the mystery, hidden from the beginning, in God, the Creator of all things, is to be fulfilled.

¹⁰Even the heavenly forces and powers will now discover, through the

communion" with the community. This is how the "new creature" is born: not as the work of politics or of any ideology, but as the work of God, since we are dealing with a *new creation* as Paul says.

You are of the household of God (v. 19). In biblical language this means: to belong to God's family. From there, Paul moves on to another image: *you are the household*, namely, the true Temple of God. The community of believers form the Temple, or better, is being transformed into the Temple of God.

This imposing vision of the Church and our unity in the Church will perhaps astonish many Christians of today who are usually more aware of their responsibilities towards the world than towards our antiquated Church. Yet, of what Spirit shall we be bearers, and shall we do this work if we are not supported by a community? Solidarity with those who share our options and our culture cannot replace participation in the Christian community. There are probably many things in the Christian community we are not happy with. However, it would be a bad sign if we were unable to recognize in it the truth that is missing in our non-Christian friends, and without which we would lose our reason for living.

- **3.1 Prisoner of Christ.** Paul writes this let-

Rom
16:25;
Col 1:25

1Cor
15:9;
1Tim
1:15

1Cor2:7;
1P 1:12;
Rom
11:33

ter from his prison in Rome, but he does not say: prisoner "for the cause" of Christ. He is prisoner of Christ, for he cannot escape from Christ's continual hold on him, nor from the apostolate that God has destined for him (1 Cor 9:16).

Paul emphasizes what he has meditated on in jail, what seems most new in the work of Christ: this is the "mystery," or God's plan calling all people to become a single body, without any racial distinctions. Jesus proclaimed this equality (Mt 20), but the early Christians needed several divine interventions before they were convinced (Acts 10).

The heavenly forces... (v. 10): see commentary on Galatians 3:23 and Ephesians 1:21. We would not be distorting Paul's thinking by saying that multinational directors, presidents and the great of this world are going to discover the true face of God, who manifests his glory in his poor and his saints (2 Thes 1:10), through the Church.

How fitting it would be to also express in poetry the wonderment of all nature, in discovering what God's power has achieved after billions of years. Paul believes he is approaching the end, and we as well in this century where events move faster and faster, and we discover every day new signs of human awareness at a world level.

church, the wisdom of God in its manifold expression, as the plan is being fulfilled, ¹¹which God designed from the beginning, in Christ Jesus, our Lord. ¹²In him, we receive boldness and confidence to approach God.

¹³So I ask you, not to be discouraged at seeing the trials I endure for you, but, rather, to feel proud because of them.

• ¹⁴And, now, I kneel in the presence of the Father, ¹⁵from whom, every family in heaven and on earth has received its name.

¹⁶May he strengthen in you, the inner self, through his Spirit, according to the riches of his glory;

¹⁷may Christ dwell in your hearts, through faith;

may you be rooted and founded in love.

¹⁸All of this, so that you may understand, with all the holy ones, the width, the length, the height and the depth—in a word, ¹⁹that you may know the love of Christ, that surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled, and reach the fullness of God.

²⁰Glory to God, who shows his power in us, and can do much more than we could ask or imagine; ²¹glory to him, in the Church, and in Christ Jesus, through all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

We shall become the perfect creation

4 • ¹Therefore, I, the prisoner of Christ, invite you, to live the vocation you have received. ²Be

• 14. *And now I kneel...* without further delay. Paul moves from his presentation to prayer. Such is the way of the interior person (v. 16) who is not satisfied with thinking about God or talking about him as if he were an object. The Spirit preserves in him the awareness of this Presence that gives him life. As St. Teresa said: "I carry the heart of my God and the God of my heart everywhere."

The Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth has received its name (v. 15). Our time has greatly devalued "the Father" with the obsession of an authority that would smother the personality of its children. This is not Paul's way: he marvels before the One who alone is from all eternity. The Father is the source of the divine being, from him comes the order and the mystery of the divine persons. From him the universe draws its riches. Paul, speaking of the common destiny of all the people, recalls that each one of them, *every family*, has received its name from the Father, which means its identity and its dignity.

Certainly we must recognize that the word *Father* no longer has the same meaning as in Paul's time, when father was given a greater authority and respect. Once woman found her rightful place in the family and in society we are inclined to speak of "parents" rather than of "father." Yet it is not by chance that God revealed himself in a culture—that of the Hebrews—where God was a masculine figure. Indeed they had already passed the primitive culture in which the woman was the center of the family and the religion subsequently gave highest place to a female divinity. Among the neighboring people gods and goddesses went

together. So God could have revealed to them with diverse faces, but this he did not do. Even if Scripture states that in God are all the riches of paternal and maternal love (Is 49:14), it keeps to the word *Father*. In so doing it insists on the liberty and initiative of God in all that he does: the universe and we ourselves have not come from God as a spontaneous "emanation", as naturally born from the bosom of the all-powerful divinity. Everything was a lucid and creative decision.

Therefore, the family, with parental authority, is the basis of society, and *fatherhood* is also seen in the Church: the succession of bishops, with the authority of the hierarchy not dependent on people's votes, is part of the divine order in the Church. A society which does not acknowledge fathers and which scorns marriage, as well as "spontaneous" churches, are devious structures.

The love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge (v. 19). Paul is certainly thinking of the love Christ has shown and continues to show him personally even in proportion to his trials. The knowledge and experience of this love surpasses all that could ever be imagined. We shall not find it through books and study or transcendental meditation. It will be freely given to us, on God's initiative, on the way of love of which Christ made himself the model and the center.

• 4.1 Here, Paul returns to an important problem in communities where the style was still very free, we might say very charismatic, since the community counted on the unpredictable action of the Spirit through the charisms of different members. It is necessary that all in

Heb
4:16;
10:19

1:17;
Mt 11:25

Jn
14:23;
Flom
8:11

Col 2:2;
1Cor 13

Col 2:9

Phil
1:27

humble, kind, patient, and bear with one another in love.

³Make every effort to keep, among you, the unity of spirit, through bonds of peace. ⁴Let there be one body, and one Spirit, just as one hope is the goal of your calling by God. ⁵One Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God, the Father of all, who is above all, and works through all, and is in all.

⁷But to each of us, divine grace is given, according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore, it is said: *When he ascended to the heights, he brought captives and gave his gifts to people.*

⁹*He ascended*, what does it mean, but, that he had also descended to the lower parts of the world? ¹⁰He, himself, who went down, then ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things. ¹¹As for his gifts, to some, he gave to be apostles; to others, prophets, or even evangelists; or pastors and teachers. ¹²So, he prepared those who belong to him, for the ministry, in order to build up the Body of Christ, ¹³until we are all united, in the same faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Thus, we shall become the per-

fect Man, upon reaching maturity, and sharing the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴Then, no longer shall we be like children, tossed about by any wave, or wind of doctrine; and deceived by the cunning of people, who drag them along into error. ¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth, in love, we shall grow in every way, toward him, who is the head, Christ. ¹⁶From him, comes the growth of the whole body, to which a network of joints gives order and cohesion, taking into account, and making use of, the function of each one. So, the body builds itself, in love.

Put on the new self

¹⁷I say to you, then, and with insistence I advise you, in the Lord: do not imitate the pagans, who live an aimless kind of life. ¹⁸Their understanding is in darkness, and they remain in ignorance, because of their blind conscience, very far from the life of God. ¹⁹As a result of their corruption, they have abandoned themselves to sensuality, and have eagerly given themselves to every kind of immorality.

• ²⁰But it is not for this, that you have followed Christ. ²¹For, I suppose,

their own vocation work for the building up of the one body. Paul enthusiastically names all that we have in common through Christ and the action of the Spirit. It is not merely a temple that is constructed (see Chap. 2:19-22); it is the *Body of Christ*, of the *Perfect Man*, the mature one, in which Christ expresses his fullness.

Jesus of Nazareth lived humbly until his death only once, but having been made the Head of humanity through his resurrection, he suffers everywhere; he works in every field of human activity; gives his life in every possible way; he gathers in himself every form of love, and lives the whole diversity of human existence in the person of his members.

Then no longer shall we be like children (v. 14). Paul suggests that the Ephesians are still children, at least from time to time, when they allow themselves to be influenced by some trend of opinion. He invites them to become a mature community, capable of being led by the

truth, and of building itself up through love. We too should ask ourselves if we have really gone beyond the time when the "faithful" constantly waited for others to think for them, guide them and push them.

• ²⁰. *The old self and the new self* (vv. 22, 24). This image of Paul opposes two kinds of life that co-exist in every society and in a certain sense, in each of us. Conversion has not installed us in a state of perfection; even if we are at peace with God in a very real sense (Rom 5:1) unity is not in us. We experience temptation and struggle; our decisions both small and great lead us in one of two directions, either the old self hopelessly ruined and a slave of selfishness, or a person transfigured by love.

The self according to God (v. 24). God created Man in his image, but the one who is truly this image is the risen Christ, conqueror of sin and of death. Here, as elsewhere in Scripture, Man is both Christ and humanity at the same

1Cor
10:171Cor
8:6;
12:4

Ps68:19

Phil 2:7;
Jn 3:13;
1P 3:191Cor
12:28;
14:26

Col 1:28

1Cor
3:1;
14:20Rom
1:16

that you heard of him, and received his teaching, which is seen in Jesus himself. ²²You must give up your former way of living, the *old self*, whose deceitful desires bring self-destruction. ²³Renew yourselves, spiritually, from inside, ²⁴and put on the *new self*, or *self*, according to God, that is created in true righteousness and holiness.

Col 3:9

Rom 12:2;
Gen 1:26;
Lk 1:75

Zec 8:16

Ps 4:5

Acts 20:34;
1Thes 4:11

Jas 3:10

1Thes 5:19;
Is 63:10

²⁵Therefore, give up lying; let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

²⁶*Be angry, but do not sin*: do not let your anger last until the end of the day, ²⁷lest you give the devil a foothold.

²⁸Let the one who used to steal, steal no more, but busy himself, working usefully with his hands, so that he may have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Do not let even one bad word come from your mouth, but only good words, that will encourage when necessary, and be helpful to those who hear.

³⁰Do not sadden the Holy Spirit of God, who you were marked with. He

will be your distinctive mark on the day of salvation. ³¹Do away with all quarreling, rage, anger, insults and every kind of malice: ³²be good and understanding, forgiving one another, as God forgave you, in Christ.

Imitate God

5 • ¹As most beloved children of God, strive to imitate him. ²Follow the way of love, the example of Christ, who loved you. He gave himself up for us, and became the offering and sacrificial victim, whose fragrance rises to God. ³And, since you are holy, there must not be among you, even a hint of sexual immorality, or greed, or any kind of impurity: these should not be named among you. ⁴So, too, for scandalous words, nonsense and foolishness, which are not fitting; instead, offer thanksgiving to God.

⁵Know this: no depraved, impure, or covetous person, who serves the god 'Money,' shall have part in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶Let no one deceive you with empty arguments,

Mt 5:48
5:25;
Ps 40:7;
1Jn 3:161Cor 6:9;
Heb 13:4

Col 3:6

time, and it is each one of us at our place in the "Body." All that we admire in Christ is also for our benefit.

The white garment that adults put on at baptism denotes the change of life that they are beginning. This renewal may also take place after a retreat or when God unexpectedly makes us abandon a routine Christian life devoid of ambition. Then we *put on Christ* with rediscovered faith.

Paul immediately points out some of the moral requirements of this daily renewal: frankness, sobriety, cleanliness of language and imagination. Christian faith does not allow us to live in a carefree way, as did the oriental religions in the time of Paul. There much was said about renaissance and knowledge of mysteries, but nothing about the slavery of sex and the evil of social life.

Old self, new self correspond with other expressions of Paul: "according to the flesh" or "according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:5); "children of darkness" or "children of light" (Eph 5:8); "slaves of sin" or "persons free in Christ" (Gal 5:1).

Do not sadden the Holy Spirit (v. 30). It is

easy to understand this expression if we think of the sadness we feel each time we reject a good idea, a desire to do better: sadness of the "Holy Spirit" who suggested it in the first place, sadness of our own spirit, for it knows what we have lost.

• **5.1** Here are a few elements of a new way to live, as was already shown in the previous verses.

To imitate God (Rom 5:6-11) who loves everyone, the good and the bad (Mt 5:48). In a more tangible way we have a model in Christ, the Son of God, who gave himself out of love for us, as the way, the light and life.

Reject all that is shameful (v. 12) and that can only be done in the dark. It is true that much that was shameful has become normal today for many people: will it be so for a person who often seeks light and looks for it in the face in Christ? The witness of one Christian who lives in light (and still more of a community) is enough to condemn what has been taken as normal (v. 13).

To be more sensible and responsible in our lives. *Because these days are evil* (v. 16): that

for these are the sins which God is about to condemn in people, who do not obey. ⁷Do not associate with such people. ⁸You were once darkness, but, now, you are light, in the Lord. Behave as children of light; ⁹the fruits of light are kindness, justice and truth, in every form.

¹⁰You, yourselves, search out what pleases the Lord, ¹¹and take no part in works of darkness, that are of no benefit; expose them instead. ¹²Indeed, it is a shame even to speak of what those people do in secret, ¹³but as soon as it is exposed to the light, everything becomes clear; and what is unmasked, becomes clear through light. ¹⁴Therefore it is said:

“Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, that the light of Christ may shine on you.”

2Cor
4:6;
6:14

Jn 3:20;
Is 26:19;
60:1

¹⁵Pay attention to how you behave. ^{Col 3} Do not live as the unwise do, but as responsible persons. ¹⁶Try to make good use of the present time, because these days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

¹⁸Do not get drunk: wine leads to levity; but be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Gather together to pray, with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing, and celebrate the Lord in your heart, ²⁰giving thanks to God, the Father, in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord, always, and for everything. ^{1Thes 5:18}

Husbands, love your wives

• ²¹Let all kinds of submission to one another, become obedience to Christ. ²²So wives, to their husbands, as to the Lord. ^{1P 5:5}

means that if we are unable to judge, choose, make a personal decision, the very current of daily events will keep us in mediocrity or will lead us to evil. Everything changes when a believer, a couple, a group “awakens” and takes daily or weekly time out to discover what is God’s will for them, in the time and circumstances in which they live.

Do not get drunk (v. 18)! We need stimulants; there is nothing wrong in experiencing a sort of trance to the point of feeling happy and relaxed when ice is broken and tongues untied. Scripture has praise for wine. It is impossible, however, to experience at the same time the ecstasy that comes from the spirit and that which is the effect of alcohol, drugs and dangerous diversions. We must constantly make choices.

Sing and celebrate the Lord in your heart, giving thanks (v. 19)! Experience the comfort of the Spirit and find it in a community gathering.

• 21. In the passage 5:21–6:9, Paul more or less repeats what he wrote in the letter to the Colossians (3:18–4:1). Here he has so much on his mind on the role of Christ as head of redeemed humanity that he will develop in an unexpected way the meaning of marriage.

So wives to their husbands (v. 22). It is not Paul who in the name of God demands that the wife be submissive: it is the society of the time that required it. And Paul says: “Let all kinds of submission become obedience to Christ.”

So, even if Paul’s way of speaking reflects the culture of his day with regard to marriage,

there is no reason to scorn his teaching in support of feminism. There have been and there are different cultural models regarding the relationship between husband and wife. In our time the models differ in the economically developed countries from those of the Third World, for the middle and lower classes. What is still better, it is each couple that should find its own balance and the taking of initiatives according to the natural authority and the capacity of each one.

In any case, whether one partner makes a decision or follows it, neither will feel superior or inferior since the ideal for both is to “make oneself slave” (Mk 9:35). Paul says: *The husband is the head* but being the head is not the same as being the boss. Think of Christ: he has authority since he is the truth of God (which the husband is not to his wife); Paul however prefers to show him as the savior of his partner baptized humanity.

Paul points out what is essential in conjugal love when he recalls the word of Scripture: *a man shall leave...* (v. 31). He applies this word to the union of God with humanity in Christ, the Beloved (Mk 2:19). For marriage contains a mystery, that is a divine treasure which cannot be understood before the coming of Christ. When it is said that marriage is a “sacrament,” that does not mean primarily that there is a Church ceremony: it signifies that through marriage and the couples who live a life of love “according to Christ,” the mystery of the love of God is manifested among humankind. That is, in our midst, the sign of a Covenant that God

²³The husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of whom he is also the Savior. ²⁴And as the church submits to Christ, so let a wife submit in everything to her husband.

²⁵As for you, husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her. ²⁶He washed her, and made her holy, by baptism in the word. ²⁷As he wanted a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any blemish, but holy and blameless, he, himself, had to prepare, and present her to himself.

²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives, as they love their own bodies. He, who loves his wife, loves himself. ²⁹And no one has ever hated his body; he feeds and takes care of it. That is just what Christ does for the Church, ³⁰because we are members of his body.

³¹Scripture says: *Because of this, a man shall leave his father and mother, to be united with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*

³²This is a very great mystery, and I refer to Christ and the Church. ³³As for you, let each one love his wife as

himself, and let the wife respect her husband.

Children, parents, servants and masters

6 • ¹Children, obey your parents, for, this is right: ²*Honor your father and your mother.* And this is the first commandment that has a promise: ³*that you may be happy and enjoy long life in the land.* ⁴And you, fathers, do not make rebels of your children, but educate them, by correction and instruction, which the Lord may inspire.

⁵Servants, obey your masters of this world with fear and respect, with simplicity of heart, as if obeying Christ. ⁶Do not serve, only when you are watched, or in order to please others, but become servants of Christ, who do God's will, with all your heart. ⁷Work willingly, for the Lord, and not for humans, mindful that the good each one has done, ⁸whether servant or free, will be rewarded by the Lord.

⁹And you, masters, deal with your servants in the same way, and do not threaten them, since you know that they, and you, have the same Lord,

made with humanity, as the husband with his wife: a covenant of love, fidelity, fruitfulness.

He gave himself up for her (v. 25). Christ finds us in our sins and he takes charge of us, even to the ultimate consequences: he gives his life to purify us. This is the way to show the main quality of Christian love, which is faithfulness. The self-gift of the spouse is permanent and from that moment on, each will do his best to save the other, that is, to help the other grow and be better. The perfect couple is not the one that lives without problems and accepts mediocrity, but the two who compel each other to give their best.

He washed her and made her holy by baptism in the word (v. 26; see Jas 1:18-21 and Jn 15:3). If the ritual of baptism is important, what is even more important is for us to welcome the word of God that gives us life.

Many young people flee marriage, partly because they fear a risk (total fidelity is indeed a way of losing one's life: Mk 8:35), partly be-

cause they consider that their love is their own business. Paul shows that Christ's love for us, however personal it may be, never forgets his love for all those who make up his body. It is an example: married Christians are invited to have their place in the transformation of the world through the radiation of their love and their service to others.

• **6.1** Paul reminds children that God asks for obedience, and parents that they must not neglect their duty as educators (see commentary on Sir 30:1-2). Parents have the difficult task of leading their children to true freedom, teaching them first to obey a law, to serve rather than be served, to share rather than demand. Later, they will show them how to follow the calls of the Spirit, well beyond what is considered good or bad all around them.

Paul reminds the slave of his nobility. Let him live without servility: this is the first step toward genuine liberation.

Col
3:16;
1P 3:1;
1Cor
11:3

1:4;
Tt 3:5;
1Cor
6:11;
2Cor
11:2;
Rev
21:12;
19:7

1Cor
12:12

Gen
2:24;
Mt 19:5

20:12;
Col 3:
20-21

Pro
13:24

Col 3:22;
Tt 2:9;
1P 2:18;
Rom
6:15

who is in heaven, and he treats all fairly.

Be strong in the Lord

• ¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord, with his energy and strength. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, to be able to resist the cunning of the devil. ¹²Our battle is not against human forces, but against the rulers and authorities and their dark powers, that govern this world. We are struggling against the spirits and supernatural forces of evil.

¹³Therefore, put on the whole armor of God, that, in the evil day, you may resist, and stand your ground, making use of all your weapons. ¹⁴Take truth as your belt, justice as your breastplate, ¹⁵and zeal as your shoes, to propagate the gospel of peace. ¹⁶Always hold in your hand, the shield of faith, to repel the flaming arrows of the devil. ¹⁷Finally, use the helmet of

salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, that is, the word of God.

¹⁸Pray, at all times, as the Spirit inspires you. Keep watch, together with sustained prayer and supplication for all the holy ones. ¹⁹Pray, also, for me, so that when I speak, I may be given words, to proclaim bravely, the mystery of the gospel. ²⁰Even when in chains, I am an ambassador of God; may he give me the strength to speak as I should.

²¹I also want you to know how I am and what I am doing. Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will tell you everything. ²²I am sending him precisely to give you news of us and comfort you all.

²³May peace and love, with faith from God, the Father, and from Christ Jesus, the Lord, be with the brothers and sisters. ²⁴And may his blessing be with all who love Christ Jesus, our Lord, with undying love.

2Cor
6:7;
10:4

1Thes
5:8;
Is 59:17
Heb
4:12;

Rev
1:16

Col 4:2;
Lk 18:1

Rom
15:30;
Phil 1:14

2Cor
5:20

Col 4:7

• 10. Paul has said what he had to say. What does his invitation to be strong mean, when he takes his examples from military life? Is it because he feels the Christians of Ephesus are not sufficiently strong? See verses 18-20: Paul invites them, without saying it, to compare their situation with his. Free or slaves, most of them were people of modest means of the cities near Ephesus. Subjected for a long time to the Roman Empire that imposed peace on them, they were free of serious problems. They were not rich but they were able to content themselves with little. Under a Mediterranean sky they had abundant light and

a friendly, natural environment. They found the faith at a time when it cost them little; what would they do the day the Empire became an obstacle and when suddenly they would be classed a bad lot, responsible for all that was wrong?

This is why Paul warns them: peace is only provisional, for the demon is waiting for his hour (vv. 11 and 16). Paul asks them to persevere in prayer: the only effective arms against evil are those that Christ has left us: truth, faith, the word of God... and if they believe they have found salvation, let them exert themselves to evangelize others.