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CHARITY NEVER FAILETH;... FOLLOW AFTER CHARITY. II.

Fr. Ralston's sermon for Quinquagesima continued. In part one he outlined the place of the Hymn to Charity in 1 Corinthians 13, in between the discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14. ...

CHARITY NEVER FAILETH;...

FOLLOW AFTER CHARITY.

II.

This compounds the mystery: for the hymn does not once mention Jesus by name. Is it not very strange that the two most famous, most celebrated utterances in our religion, do not—either of them—mention Jesus by name or call him Christ? Neither the Lord's Prayer, given us by Jesus himself, nor this hymn to charity, which precisely reflects him and is about him, mentions our Lord as himself. What can this mean?

In the instance of the hymn to charity St. Paul has been writing of those who call upon the name of the Lord—"Jesus, Jesus": some of them with more self-indulgence and enthusiasm than understanding and discretion. And then, in this more excellent way, he speaks of charity alone. It is as if he were offering an illustration of Jesus' own words: "not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father..."

St. Paul passes from the particular to the universal. The final test of the presence of the Spirit, who always bears witness to Jesus, is love. Jesus is the charity of God, love pure and simple.

I want us very much to understand this. Here is chapter 12: a discussion of the Church as Christ's body. Here is chapter 14: an ordering of the Church's actual life in peace and coherence. And between these two discussions, each of them particular, concrete, and practical, comes the absolute universal, in which Jesus' name is not once mentioned as such, in which life in Christ is described as charity, love itself.

Another place where the particular passes into the universal is in St. Matthew's Gospel. Just before his Passion, Jesus gives us the parable

of the last judgment. People are there who never knew Jesus or even have heard of him. They are astounded when he bids them come to him and calls them blessed. But the divine judge, who is the King, is also the Son of Man, and no child of earth who has in any way ever participated in charity is foreign to him. Inasmuch as you did it—to anyone at all—you did it to me. "Come, ye blessed."

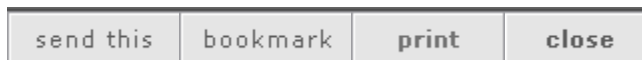
Love recognizes itself in those who have loved. My own beloved friend and teacher, Charles Harrison, at Sewanee, told me that his mother, in her last conscious moment, and knowing that she was on the very verge of death, responded to him as he sat by her bed. He asked her if she was afraid. She said "Why, Charles, of course not. You see, I've loved people."

One wishes this story was all there was, and one would prefer that Jesus' parable of the last judgment stopped with "Come, ye blessed." But it does not. For there are those who have denied love and have lived as strangers to charity. To them the Son of Man, who is the King, the judge and the Lord of life and death, says: "Depart from me," for you did it not. It will not help you on the last day either to call upon Jesus or to claim ignorance of him. If there is a touch of the divine charity in you, Jesus will know it. If there is not, he will know that, too. And by the presence or the absence of love we shall all be judged.

St. Paul's counsel remains true to Jesus. There is only one way: "Follow after charity."

To be continued...

The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr.



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