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**Paul in the thick of his ministry**

**3. The minister of the new covenant as a  
minister of the Spirit**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is not easy in the brief space of a day to get into the exercise of spiritual reading, because it requires listening, tranquillity and no rush. Still it is worth trying to throw off our daily cares and anxieties for a while.

So let us put ourselves in a mood to listen to another passage from the Second Letter to the Corinthians, by praying: *"Lord, grant me to listen to your word and give me the strength of your Spirit as it reveals itself to me through the words of Scripture, the Apostle's experience, the truth of your covenant that comes to me today. Virgin Mary, who by the angel's annunciation were lifted out of your daily life to confront God's great action, help us attain a state of inner detachment, peace and unhurry, to enable us to savour the word of your Son."*

I leave it to you to re-listen briefly to chapter 1 of 2 Corinthians on which we meditated before, reflecting on the relation between suffering and comfort in the ministry and then on misunderstandings in the ministry.

The text we are going to read today starts with 2 Cor 2: 12, when Paul begins to tell what has been happening to him: "When I came to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia" (vv. 12-13).

At this point instead of going on to relate what happened in Macedonia Paul has another outburst and begins reflecting on the glory of his ministry in a long monologue. He only resumes the narrative in chapter 7 verse 5: "For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest but we were afflicted at every turn - fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus."

In his monologue the Apostle anticipates all the news about the Corinthians that Titus will give him, giving him the certainty that his ministry is valid. He begins the section thus: "Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph" (2:14) and ends it with these words: "I am filled with comfort. With all our affliction, I am overjoyed" (7:4).

### **READING OF 2 COR 3:3-11**

Thinking over the whole passage, I have picked out two key parts, on which I would like to reflect with you. They are the ones in which Paul speaks of his ministry as a ministry of *the new covenant* (3:3-11; 5:18-20).

"You, Paul, feel so strongly this inner certainty that supports you in trials, solitude and the bitter experiences of the ministry, a certainty of being a servant of the new and lasting covenant. Obtain for us, who by the Father's mysterious plan, through our priestly ordination have also become servants of this covenant, the grace to share in some of your certainty and trust in your ministry."

This is the grace we ask for during this spiritual reading.

The Apostle writes:

*And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to*

*be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

*Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendour that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as this was, why should not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendour? For if there was splendour in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendour. Indeed, in this case, what once had splendour has come to have no splendour at all because of the splendour that surpasses it. For if what faded away came with splendour, what is permanent must have much more splendour.*

Here we have a description of the characteristics of the old covenant and the new. As always when he offers great syntheses, Paul proceeds by antitheses, opposing realities which in fact are experienced one after the other. We should accept his antitheses but in a way that will enable us also to grasp the synthesis between them.

### ***Characteristics of the old covenant***

This covenant "drawn up in ink", "carved in letters on stone" is the covenant of the "letter that kills", "dispensation of death", "dispensation of condemnation". These are negative features but let us remember that in other contexts Paul states the ancient covenant was glorious too, and had a positive meaning and scope. In our passage he stresses its negativity compared to the new covenant.

\* *Drawn up in ink* means that the ancient covenant was written in books, there is something bookish about it.

\* *Carved in letters on stone*, the tablets of Moses, which have the force of a material law promulgated without giving the strength to fulfil it. So it has an external persuasive force.

\* *Letter that kills*. We should not take this too tragically. The letter that kills means a prescription that condemns any one who does not fulfils it, a prescription with punitive sanctions, like all human laws based on sanctions.

\* Therefore it is a *dispensation of death*: If you do not do this, you will be punished and if you do not fulfil certain important requirements of the law you will be punished by death. The Mosaic law had capital punishment and instilled fear by it.

\* *Dispensation of condemnation* precisely because it is based on its power to condemn any one who transgresses it.

Paul declares that fundamentally the effect of the ancient covenant was not to change human hearts. No human law requires conversion, no human law can demand that we act from love. Human law, including ecclesiastical law, requires us to behave in a specific way and imposes sanctions for disobedience. Thus it offers a certain external inducement to comply but people are not changed from within.

So the Apostle's criticism is correct, although of course it is a bit one-sided because he is considering the legal structure of the Old Testament in its rigid legalism, without going any deeper. This systematic denigration of the ancient covenant shows Paul's profound awareness of the newness of the new.

We can share this awareness with him:

"Paul, obtain for us the grace to share in your consciousness of the new strength of your ministry."

### ***Characteristics of the new covenant***

This is written "with the Spirit of the living God" "on tablets of human hearts". It is not a covenant of the letter but of the "Spirit who gives life"; it is so "glorious" that the glory of the old covenant, which also existed, loses its splendour in comparison; the new is "lasting".

\* *Covenant of the Spirit* means that its force does not derive from external commands but from God's immediate presence; the Spirit is God making himself present without intermediaries in the human heart. The new covenant's first characteristic is that God himself instructs, moves, warms, fills the heart with enthusiasm and good will.

\* So now we understand its second characteristic: *tablets of human hearts*. It is a law founded on spontaneity, not a superficial or emotional spontaneity but one which springs from so deep that it is God's action within us. It is really a new legal system, the "law of the Spirit".

\* *Spirit that gives life*: it nourishes, makes us grow, promotes humanity. Whereas the external law leaves the human being unchanged (at most concerned with the carrying out of particular external acts), this law gives life and makes people grow.

\* It is *glorious*. By this word we may understand all this covenant's joy, splendour and deep happiness.

\* It is *permanent*. The covenant establishes a lasting wedding between God and humanity. Because of it humanity can say: "You are my God, I am yours and you are mine."

Thus it is a *covenant* creating a union between humanity and the divinity that makes humanity possess God and vice versa. It establishes an identity between humanity and God by which everything is held in common between them, apart from the difference of nature. The creature remains a creature and the Creator remains the Creator, but all the rest is common. So the identification takes place of which Paul speaks: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). The deification which is the aim of all religious life takes place. During a recent trip to India I was struck by the yearning for the divine that pervades the whole of Hindu culture. It gives rise to extraordinary religious forms and extremely meaningful prayers. I wondered: What is authentic in this longing to fuse with the divine dominating the spirituality of hundreds of millions of human beings, so that they bear hardship, privation, exhausting pilgrimages, in search of this ecstasy?

I think I can answer by returning to the theme of the covenant. They are yearning for the fusion with the divine guaranteed and assured by the covenant, as the Kingdom of God, eternal life, heavenly banquet, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, that is God's direct action in human hearts, transforming and deifying.

Perhaps we can understand Paul's statement: the old covenant was only a shadow, whereas the new is the full reality. Both theological and moral fullness. Theological because humanity becomes divine and God becomes human.

In Christ this covenant has its physical seal, humanity and divinity are present distinctly but united in the unity of the Word. In Christ we share in this unity with the divine that is characteristic of the human nature of the Son of God, without confusion but with perfect unity.

The new covenant means being in Christ, it is the Holy Spirit in us, it is eternal life starting as of now, it is the Kingdom. When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom he means that event by which God takes possession of humanity and makes it his own, by an extraordinary and permanent act of power.

## MEDITATION ON THE PASSAGE

Having tried through our reading to understand how the Apostle sees and experiences the new covenant, let us ask ourselves: What does it mean for us in practice to be servants of the new and lasting covenant? Do we really feel we are ministers of it? Is this how we live?

### ***Servants of the old covenant***

Let us start by trying to define what it means to be servants of the old covenant or the law, following Paul. Reflecting on our passage I said to myself: It is true we are servants of the new covenant, but we are also still partly servants of the old. If we defined ourselves only in relation to the new covenant, leaving the old aside altogether, we would be mistaken. That is typical of some charismatic or extremist movements.

The best formula is therefore St Thomas's: "Lex nova *principaliter* in Spiritu Sancto consistit," the New Testament law consists principally in the Holy Spirit, that is, in this newness of life. Principally, but on a secondary level the New Testament law also acknowledges a certain legal system. The important thing is that this is subordinate to the newness of the Spirit, which has pre-eminence and primacy.

So being servants of the new covenant means asking ourselves: Do we really have clear ideas about the primacy of the Spirit and the subordination to it of the legal system, necessary though that is in any real human situation?

Covenant of the law - as we have already partly said - means a way of living and exercising our ministry based on precepts and commands; on morality, that is, ordinary ways of behaving well, customs and habits. These habits and customs are sanctioned by a legal system and inform a culture. In this the old covenant system shows its humanity and truth.

\* *Precepts*, commandments: you must do this and not that; if you do this you do right, if you do that you do wrong.

\* *Customs*, habits: going to Mass on Sunday, saying morning and evening prayers, keeping the laws of the Church, the ten commandments.

\* *A legal system* made visible by Canon Law including punishments which are mild today but still remain (excommunication, exclusion from the community, non admission to the sacraments).

\* A whole *culture* in so far as it constitutes a kind of invitation to certain behaviour.

We see this system of the old covenant at work in so many communities. Once it was the prevalent system. You went to Mass on Sunday, you ate fish on Friday, you fasted on prescribed days, you went to Confession and Communion once a year, then you had the same habits in daily life. This is an important force which we cannot ignore.

But Paul says it is secondary to the law of the Spirit. I have the impression that sometimes we think of ourselves above all as priests, servants of the laws, customs, habits, to maintain them and keep them going. If this is still the first duty of our ministry then we are servants of the letter. Paul's words need to hit home to us.

When we believe that rules and regulations are the most important things we are servants of the old covenant. For example, I have the impression that sometimes requests come to me to be more of a servant of the old covenant, that is, to put more stress on the force of laws, uses and threats . to gain more obedience.

Being a servant of the old covenant means believing that true salvation lies in the punitive social system, that what counts is to force people by means of an appropriate legal system, to do good.

### ***Servants of the Spirit***

Let us try to define servants of the Spirit, of the new covenant.

Some people might think, on the basis of some of Paul's sayings, that the ministry of the Spirit is a charismatic ministry, relying on fiery oratory ,signs, miracles, cures. Today within Christianity there are groups who interpret the ministry of the Spirit as the power to overwhelm people by preaching, make them weep, pierce them to the heart and create waves of enthusiasm by means of miracles. Or else a ministry relying strongly on visions, inner voices, revelations. In all this there is some truth because it is typical of the ministry of the Spirit to shake people up inside, to make their hearts shudder with joy.

However such an interpretation is totally inadequate because it risks turning the ministry of the Spirit into mere emotionalism and sentimentality.

So, if it is not just a charismatic ministry, what is the ministry of the Spirit?

We could say that it is the ministry of the working of grace: it announces the Gospel in a way that convinces hearts. Vatican II belongs to this wave: no threats, no anathemas, no excommunications, but strong convictions. However if we rely merely on the mechanical efficacy of the Gospel words, we are not yet fully into the ministry of the Spirit, because experience teaches us that even the words of the Gospel can fail: the seed is sown but it can be trampled, pecked up or choked.

Whoever thinks to be able to exercise the ministry of the Spirit as a ministry of the efficacy of the word of the Gospel or the bible, has not yet grasped the full truth, but only some aspects of it.

So what is the truth of the ministry of the Spirit? I cannot explain it in words because, being of the

Spirit, it is the power of the Spirit at work in us. Paul constantly repeats that he lives this ministry, that this ministry is glorious and gives him certainty even in defeat, solitude and bitterness. He feels this ministry but he does not succeed in explaining it. Perhaps we can get help from a few points describing the ministry of the Spirit and a few of its consequences.

### There are three points:

1. **A great awareness of *inner freedom*.** The ministry of the law or the letter is based above all on social conventions; we create adequate conditions and people will behave well. The ministry of the Spirit puts freedom to grow first, the inner freedom of people to be respected and loved, as God respects and loves them.
2. **The ministry of the Spirit means *inwardness*,** that is, that every person is called by God, is loved and invited to set out on a way of love and grace. So it is an educational ministry: through affection, understanding, conviction based on the inwardness of the person and not simply on their externals and social and legal conditions.
3. **It is a ministry that above all requires *faith*:** believing that God is there to act and save and we are his collaborators. St Paul expresses it clearly in this letter when he speaks of himself as "working with you for your joy" (2 Cor 1:24) and referring to God he says, we are "working together with him" (2 Cor 6: 1). The minister of the Spirit exhorts people not to receive God's grace in vain and to recognize that it is God who acts and saves, not them.

After looking at these characteristics, let us consider the consequences of the ministry of the Spirit, based on Paul's autobiographical description:

- (a) **The first consequence is a certain sense of ease;** it is not a ministry that is tied down, encumbered, tense, bewildered, but relaxed. Because it is the ministry in which I allow the Spirit himself to act in me, who also acts in others, and to whom I try to unite myself in a spontaneous and natural way.
- (b) **It is a ministry of joy,** whose fundamental characteristic is joy. Even if it is a joy that is born from sufferings, that suffers in the trials of the ministry.
- (c) **It has a firm trust in God's action.** It is not withdrawn into itself, sad, lamenting, catastrophic, pessimistic, but a ministry with hope.

As you can see, this is rather an ideal description of the ministry to which we must aspire. We feel ourselves quite distant from really being ministers of God's glory, but we are growing towards it precisely because God's glory is manifested firstly in us. It is a ministry to which we must constantly try to measure up.

### ***A road to travel***

Naturally there is no opposition in practice between ministry of the law and ministry of the Spirit. When we have recognized and established the primacy of the Spirit, we must also recognize the importance of the law. In fact, for this purpose Paul writes all the second parenetic part of his letters, in which he gives orders, suggestions, makes demands and threats. But he does it always under the primacy of the ministry of the Spirit: laws and prescriptions are the consequence of how we ought to be because of the marvellous transformation God has worked in us. We are passionately exhorted to conform ourselves to it, because the truth is this salvation, this reign of God in us.

It would be interesting to re-read all Jesus' moral teaching in this light too. It is very demanding, very rigorous, often very precise in its demands, provocative: do not resist evil, if anyone hits you turn the other cheek, if any one asks you to go one mile go two, if anyone asks for your tunic give your coat too, sell what you have and give the money to the poor. It is a demanding ethic but sustained by the power of the Spirit, the dynamic of the Kingdom of God. God has taken possession of the human heart and enabled it to act accordingly.

The ministry of the Spirit never demands anything unless it has first given the power to do it, unless it has first indicated the possible ways of acting.

In comparison, our ministry appears imperfect, weak, still bound to a more legalistic rhythm rather than the rhythm of the Spirit's power. It is a pilgrimage we must make as Church, it is a way the Lord has shown humanity and which humanity can only go along gradually.

We can kneel in front of the Lord present in the Eucharist and ask him in contemplation:

*Lord, how far am I along this road, in my personal ministry, in my inner persuasion?*

*Do I feel the ministry of the Spirit rules me, guiding and giving life to all the ministry of law which is also part of my responsibility?*

*Do I feel the ministry of the Spirit rules in our Church, in our way of doing things?*

*Isn't it perhaps true that we are often slaves to behaviour that show the dominance of the ministry of the letter?*

In asking the Lord these things, obviously we should not become discouraged if we find we are far from the ideal, because discouragement indicates that we have fallen back into the ministry of the letter and thinking that we can get there by our own strength. The ministry of the Spirit means trusting in the power of God's Spirit to transform us.