

Party of Christ or Church of Jesus Christ?

I beg you; brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree in what you say. Let there be no factions; rather, be united in mind and judgment. I have been informed, my brothers, by certain members of Chloe's household that you are quarreling among yourselves. This is what I mean: One of you will say, "I belong to Paul," another, "I belong to Apollos," still another, "Cephas has my allegiance," and the fourth, "I belong to Christ." Has Christ, then, been divided into parts? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Was it in Paul's name that you were baptized? Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel—not with wordy "wisdom," however, lest the cross of Christ be rendered void of its meaning!

1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

The reading... from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is almost disconcertingly up-to-date. Paul is speaking, of course, within the Corinthian community of the time and is trying to awaken its conscience to see all the ways in which it contradicts true Christian existence. But we immediately realize that this reading is not only about the problems of a Christian community of the distant past but that what Paul wrote then captures our own situation here and now. As he speaks to the Corinthians, Paul is speaking to us, and he puts his finger on the wounds of our life as Church today. Like the Corinthians, we too run the risk of fragmenting the Church into a factional strife in which every contestant develops his own idea of Christianity. In this way the rightness of one's own position becomes more important than God's claim on us, than being right before him. Our own idea conceals from us the word of the living God, and the Church disappears behind the parties that grow out of our personal opinion. The similarity between the situation of the Corinthians and ours cannot be missed. But Paul does not intend simply to describe a situation; rather, he speaks to us in order to rouse our conscience and to guide us back to the true totality and unity of Christian existence.

We must ask him, then: Just what is it that is false about our attitude? What must we do in order to become, not the party of Paul or of Apollo or of Cephas or even a party of Christ, but the Church of Jesus Christ? What is the difference between a party of Christ

and his living Church? Between a party of Cephas and the right fidelity to the rock upon which the house of the Lord is built?

Accordingly, let us first attempt to understand what is actually taking place in Corinth and which constantly threatens to repeat itself anew in history because of the ever-recurring temptations to which man is exposed. We could perhaps briefly sum up the distinction that is meant here in the following statement: When I advocate a party, it thereby becomes *my* party, whereas the Church of Jesus Christ is never *my* Church but always *his* Church. Indeed, the essence of conversion lies precisely in the fact that I cease to pursue a party of my own that safeguards my interests and conforms to my taste but that I put myself in his hands and become his, a member of his Body, the Church.

Let us try to elucidate this point in somewhat greater detail still. The Corinthians see in Christianity an interesting religious theory that answers to their taste and their expectations. They choose what suits them, and they select it in the form that pleases them. But when one's own will and desire is the decisive criterion, schism is a foregone conclusion, because there are multiple and opposing varieties of taste. A club, a circle of friends, a party can grow from such an ideological choice, but not a Church that overcomes antitheses between men and unites them in the peace of God. The principle by which a club develops is personal taste; but the principle on which the Church is based is obedience to the call of the Lord as we see it in the Gospel: "He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Jesus" (Mt 4:21f.).

This brings us to the crucial point. Faith is not the selection of a program that is to my liking or the joining of a club of friends in which I feel understood but is a conversion that transforms me and my taste along with it, or at least makes my taste and my wishes take second place. Faith penetrates to an entirely different depth than can be attained by a choice that pledges me to a party. Its power to change is so far-reaching that Scripture designates it as a new birth (cf. 1 Pet 1:3, 23).

We find ourselves before an important insight that we must continue to deepen somewhat further, inasmuch as it touches upon the hidden heart of the problems with which we are

occupied in the Church today. It is difficult for us to conceive of the Church otherwise than according to the model of a self-governing society that attempts to organize itself in a way that is acceptable to all its members by mechanisms of majority and minority. We have difficulty understanding faith otherwise than as a decision for a cause that I like and to which I therefore wish to lend my support. But in all this we ourselves remain the sole actors. *We* make the Church, we try to improve her and to arrange her like a comfortable house. *We* want to offer programs and ideas that appeal to as many as possible. That God himself becomes active, that *he* acts is something that we no longer take for granted in the modern world. But precisely by making this assumption, we follow in the footsteps of the Corinthians: we confuse the Church with a party and faith with a party program. The circle of what *we* do and are remains closed.

Perhaps we are now a little better able to comprehend what a turnabout faith entails—to grasp the re-versal, the con-version that it contains: I acknowledge that God himself speaks and acts; I recognize the existence not only of what is ours but also of what is his. But if this is true, if we are not the only ones who choose and act, then everything changes. Then I must obey, then I must follow him, even when he leads me where I do not wish to go (Jn 21:18). Then it becomes reasonable, indeed, necessary, to let go of my own taste, to renounce my own wishes and to follow after him who alone can show the way to true life, because he himself is the life (Jn 14:6). This is what Paul means by the cruciform character of discipleship, which he underlines at the conclusion of the reading as the answer to the Corinthian party system (10:17): I abandon my taste and submit myself to him. But it is in this very way that I am set free, because the real slavery is imprisonment in the circle of our own wishes.

We understand all of this even better when we regard it from the other side, not from our own point of view, but from that of the acting God himself. Christ is not the founder of a party and not a religious philosopher, a fact to which Paul emphatically draws attention in our reading (1 Cor 10:17). He is not someone who thinks up for himself all sorts of ideas and recruits adherents to them.

The Letter to the Hebrews characterizes the entrance of Christ into the earthly world with the words of Psalm 40: Sacrifice and oblation you desired not; you have prepared for me a body (Ps 40:7; Heb 10:5). Christ is God's very living word who has become flesh for our sake. He is not only one who speaks, he himself is his own word. His love, in which God gives himself to us, goes to the very end, to the Cross (cf. Jn 13:1). When we say Yes to him, we do not merely choose ideas but put our life in his hands and become a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

This is why the Church is not a club, not a party, not even a sort of religious state within the secular state, but a body—Christ's body. And this is why the Church is not of our making but is constructed by the Lord himself when he cleanses us by Word and sacrament and thus makes us his members. There is, of course, a great deal that we ourselves must organize in the Church, because she is deeply immersed in very practical human matters. It is not my intention to support any false supernaturalism here. But what truly makes the Church the Church cannot come from our own willing and deciding; it cannot come "from the will of the flesh or from the will of man" (Jn 1:13); it must be from him. The more we ourselves do in the Church, the more uninhabitable she becomes, because everything human is limited and is in opposition to other human realities. The Church will be all the more the homeland for man's heart, the more we listen to God and the more what comes from him is of central importance in her: his Word and the sacraments he has given us. The obedience of all toward him is the guarantee of our freedom.

All of this has very important consequences for priestly ministry. The priest must attend carefully lest he build his own Church. Paul himself examines his conscience downright anxiously: How could people go so far as to create a Pauline religious party out of the Church of Christ? He assures himself and, therefore, the Corinthians as well, that he has done everything in his power to avoid attachments that might obstruct communion with Christ. He who converts under Paul's influence does not become an adherent of Paul but a Christian, a member of the one Church common to all, which is ever the same "whether Paul, or Apollo or Cephas" (1 Cor 3:22). Whether the former or the latter: "You are Christ's and Christ is God's" (3:23). It is worth the effort to reread the whole passage and

to examine meticulously what Paul has written on this point, because it brings to light the essential core of the priestly office with a clarity that surpasses every theory and tells us in practical terms what we have to do and not do. “What is Apollo, what is Paul? Servants, through whom you have believed.... I have planted, Apollo has watered, but God has given the increase. Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything—but rather the one who gives the increase: God. He who plants and he who waters are one... we are coworkers of God; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor 3:5-9).

In Protestant Churches in Germany, there was and is the custom of announcing on the bulletin board who is celebrating the service and preaching the homily. Such names often stand for religious parties: everyone wants to attend the service of his own camp. Unfortunately a similar use is now beginning in Catholic parishes; but this means that the Church is disappearing behind parties, that ultimately we are listening to human opinions and no longer heeding the common Word of God that transcends us all and whose guarantor is the Church. Only the unity of the Church’s faith and her authority, which is binding on each member, assures us that we are not following human opinions and adhering to self-made party groupings but that we belong to the Lord and are obeying him.

There is a great danger today that the Church will disintegrate into religious parties that rally around individual teachers or preachers. And if this is so, what was true then is true once more: I am Apollo’s, I am Paul’s, I am Cephas’, and we end by making even Christ into a party. The norm of priestly ministry is the selflessness that submits itself to the measure of Jesus’ word: “My doctrine is not mine” (Jn 7:16). Only when we can say this in all truth are we “coworkers of God” who plant and water and thus become partakers of his own work. When men appeal to us and oppose our Christianity to that of others, this must always be a motive for us to examine our conscience. We proclaim, not ourselves, but him. This requires our humility, the cross of discipleship. But it is precisely this that frees us, that enriches and enlarges our ministry. For when we proclaim ourselves, we remain ensconced in our miserable “I” and draw others in to share our billet. When we

preach him, we become “coworkers of God” (1 Cor 3:9), and what could be more magnificent and more liberating than that?

Let us ask the Lord to give us a renewed perception of the joy of this mission. When he does, the word of the prophet will once again prove true in our midst as well. This is the word that is always fulfilled when Christ walks among the nations:

The people who live in darkness have seen a great light... We rejoice in your nearness, just as they rejoice at the harvest, as they shout for joy when they divide the spoils (Is 9:1-2; cf. Mt 4:16).

Amen.