

**We will all be Changed by the Victory of our Lord Jesus Christ
(1 Cor 15:51-58)**

**Homily delivered by Fr. Dr. Wilfrid Okambawa, SJ
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“Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Cor 15:51-58).

Introduction

This passage seems not to deal directly with the theme of unity, but rather with the theme of our resurrection in relation to the Lord's resurrection. However, since resurrection as change of mind and body and as their reunification with God against what sin and death have separated, we are not only at the core of what can further Christian unity, but at its main ground.

We shall see this in two parts: First through the exposition of the passage and secondly by reflecting on how we can be changed today.

EXPOSITION OF THE PASSAGE

Mystery of resurrection and Christian unity

Paul presents his teaching on the resurrection as a mystery. Now, the Greek word *mysterion* does not correspond exactly to the meaning of the English word ‘mystery.’ The English word evokes something secret, obscure and inexplicable, but the Greek word means rather something ineffable, a reality so deep, so tremendous and fascinating that we are dumb in the face of it. Hence, Paul uses the word mystery to express the ineffable visible sign of salvation. (The Latin uses ‘*sacramentum*’.) There are many kinds of mysteries: the one of Christ himself (Eph 3:4), the one of the Gospel (Eph 6:19); the one of faith (1 Tim 3:9) and the one of Christian religion or Church (1 Tim 3:16). Resurrection is therefore a sacrament of life, while the vocation of the Church in the world consists in being the living and visible sign of body of Christ. Yet, in telling us the mystery of the resurrection, Paul is not telling us myths (1 Tim 1:3-4). As resurrection is a mystery so is ecumenism, the future of Christian unity. Is it not a sign of salvation that Protestants and Catholics can be together here and now to worship the same and unique Lord Jesus Christ, when we know that, forty years ago, intermarriage was not even allowed?

Sleep as death

The contrary of the sign of salvation is death, the sign of damnation and perdition. Since Christians are in the perspective of the resurrection, Paul can say: “We shall not all sleep”. The word ‘sleep’ is a euphemism for death. Death is the main problem of religion. All religions are nothing but an attempt to manage the problem of death. Now death is separation, disunion and division. A group that is divided is a dying body. Many are asleep today though they seem to be alive. We may sleep through addiction to alcohol, sex, drugs, money, consumerism, substances that act in our culture as sleeping pills. Many religions have disappeared, yet if we are there then we have been made for change, that is for resurrection and eternal life.

The last trumpet

The trumpet is the sign of the last day, a symbol of the last things. However, this Last Day will be the day of the great change, the day of the resurrection of all human beings. The last Day is not the end of the world but the end of one world and the beginning of a new and better one. Hence, the ambivalence of the trumpet: it is bad news for the world of evil and Good News for the world of righteousness. For us believers, the Last Day will be a day of victory and consolation: the long process of the great change of our lives will be completely achieved on that Day. The perspective of the Last Day should be for real believers an opportunity for conversion and decision. When we know that the time is short, we will live more profoundly the present time as the time of God.

Perishable and immortal

Resurrection is the oldest human dream. Every resurrection is a kind of immortality, but every immortality is not a resurrection. The immortality of the soul is not the resurrection of the body. Reincarnation is not resurrection of the body. Immortality in the African tradition is conceived of as a passage from this world to the village of the ancestors rather than as radical change of body and soul. The change from perishable to imperishable, from mortal to immortal is a necessity of nature, which strives to preserve herself for this as we see it in the Gospel of John (Jn 12: 24). The resurrection is not just the repletion of the old but is a qualitative change with an increase of productivity.

Victory and assurance

The resurrection is victory of love over hatred and death, of grace over sin. The victory of Christ is the victory of the Father. Yet, this victory stands in dialectic tension between the 'now' and the 'then of the Last Day'. If not, it would be the end of history. Now we are still in the course of history and we should not try to escape its constraints and struggles. In Christ, every Christian enjoys already by anticipation the final victory of Christ.

HOW TO BE CHANGED TODAY?

The two pillars of the NT

We can be changed today only as far as we allow Christ and His Holy Spirit to conform our mortal individual bodies as well as our mortal institutional ecclesial bodies into the likeness of his immortal body. However, we can achieve this only as we participate in his death and resurrection that are the two pillars of his life as well as of the entire New Testament (Gal 2:20-21). The statement of Paul in this passage expresses the spirituality of communion with Christ; it is as important as the doctrine of justification by faith. For true Christians, to live is to die for Christ's sake and to die for Christ's sake is to live. If only we could nail down on the cross all the particular factors of division in our churches, Christ would be all in each one of us.

The couplet of death and resurrection of Christ has become the axis, the gravity center of our whole life. Consequently, Paul protests before the Corinthians his pride in Christ, affirming: "I die every day! ,,,," (1 Cor 15:31-32).

There is no Christianity apart from the cross and resurrection of Christ. There is no authentic Christian life without this. If death is the truth of natural human existence, then the life of the resurrection is the truth of Christian life, a life that is constantly called to liberation, conversion and service.

Liberation from all attachments

Our divisions are so strong and powerful that they seem to keep us in the captivity of sin and death. This is the reason why we are in need of salvation, understood as liberation from all kinds of attachments and bondage, as well as in need of change (Jn 12:25). The way to unity is the way of the cross leading through death.

Our divisions cannot bear witness to the Christian freedom to which we are called, but rather they show that we are still in the bondage of sin and death. Yet, Christ has come in the world where he died and rose again so that he might set us free (Gal 5:1).

Change as conversion

It is regrettable that we commonly understand conversion more in the sense of a change of confession or of religion. Conversion in the Christian understanding is first of all a change of mind, a change of heart, whereby we turn from our ways of death and darkness to the way of God's life and light. The core of the teaching of Jesus is a call to change.

The final goal of the process of our change, or conversion, is the formation of the new human being in the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 4:16-5:4). Our change is a renewal of our whole being that is at bottom a recreation. Yet this process is worked out in a dialectic of suffering and of joy, of life and of death.

We become Christians through baptism, a sacrament of love and communion with Christ (Gal 3:27-29). If we really allowed the Spirit to convert us, the divisions between Catholics and Protestants, blacks and whites, rich and poor would disappear; we would all be one in Christ.

Believe me, sisters and brothers, it is easier to convert someone into our church than empowering him or her to be changed in the likeness of Christ. Therefore,

I am not asking you to change to become a Catholic!

I am not asking you to change to become a Protestant!

But the Lord is asking all of us to change, to become one with Him, one like Him.

It is easier to send a human being to the moon than to empower him to change his heart.

Service and reward

Our work for Christian unity is a ministry of the highest rank. Ecumenism is not a facultative occupation reserved for some elite Christians: it is an imperative for anyone who claims to believe in Christ, a service to God as well as a service to humanity (Jn 12:26). And our service will be rewarded.

More than mere action, the service of unity is a service of prayer. (Jn 17:20-21) The service of unity is a service of faith that has an apostolic, revelatory value. We have here a spirituality of communion and of unity.

Spirituality of unity and service

The mysteries of faith and resurrection bring Paul to beg the Ephesians to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph 3:1). Humility and love pave the way for Christian unity. Unity is the work of the Spirit and anyone who lives in the Spirit must constantly seek and achieve unity of his or her inner being, with his or her brothers and sisters and with God. He or she will then reach out to peace; peace is the synonym of unity as well as its result.

We are called to be changed. This is a continuous process that will end only with our death and will be completely revealed on the Last Day. Hence, Paul says to the Galatians: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!" (Gal 4:19).

Conclusion

In the line of the prayer of our Lord for unity (Jn 17:1-26), we should pray constantly for unity and peace between our religious communities. Meanwhile we should keep on working for this unity by avoiding attitudes, words and actions that lead to division. Let us pray: "God of peace make us the servants of the unity of your Church and of humankind. God of peace, make us the ministers of your peace." Let us sing no more songs of disunion and war! Rather, let us sing only the song of love and peace.

However, we strongly hope that on the Last Day, the prophecy of the Seer will be accomplished, for all Christians will be changed and will be singing a new song before God.(Rev 14:3-5). This new song will be sung by new hearts that have been changed from hearts of stones into hearts of flesh. The song will be sung on a new earth, under new heavens and in the new Jerusalem, “where there will be no temple, for God and the Lamb are its temple “ (Rev 21:22). Though the number of the elect is limited, they will in fact be uncountable. The new song will be a symphony of unity, love and peace, of which our songs, even the “Ode to Joy” of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, are only a pale prelude.