

## Pachomius Father of Cenobitic Monasticism and Isidore, model for Lay Brothers of the Trappist Order.

The Gospel is incredibly simple. The Gospel can get terribly complicated. If someone wandered into the monastery wanting something to read to find out what being a Christian means, we might hand him the Bible. All 1000 pages. They might get through Genesis, but could get hung up on the part about talking snakes, Abraham the father of faith being willing to murder his son, or Jacob, who was a downright scoundrel. However, if they persist, there is Moses with all his obsessions with tassels on this robe and a tent for God that had to be made just right. Then there are all the dietary rules about preparing food and eating and not eating. If this would not be enough to stop him, then he might shutter in discovering that not doing some of this stuff right could result in being stoned to death.

No wonder that when Paul attempted to communicate with Gentiles about what this Christian thing was all about, he did not hand them the Old Testament. Instead, he attempted to do a summary, and even managed to do so with one word. All the laws and prophets are summed up in the one word "love." Was that just a Pauline oversimplification? Not really, for when Jesus was asked to summarize his approach to life in one commandment, he did: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength." A one-word summary - love. Simple.

Yet when one takes the Golden Rule, which is Jesus' second commandment as how to apply love, it gets more complex. "Love you neighbor as yourself." However, we can love ourselves selfishly, possessively, or even jealousy. In fact, most friendships are a matter of mutual blackmail. "I won't tell you your faults if you won't tell me mine, and we'll get along just fine." The problem is even deeper. We do not even love ourselves. Self-hatred is a leading problem in therapy. If we were honest, we would have to admit, "if you really knew me, you wouldn't like me." Therefore, we spend a lifetime trying to be someone other than who we are. The leading heresy of our time is the belief that "you can't love others if you don't love yourself." Well we do not, and we cannot. "If you can't love yourself, who can you love?" The answer? Nobody.

Therefore, the first rule of being a Christian is this: our actions are to be rooted in love in order to create love. The dilemma is that we cannot. Therefore, we need a second dimension. This is where today's gospel comes in. "Love one another as I have loved you." Love is not unique to the Christian - but love as Christ loves is. In addition, what is it like? Jesus says it plainly. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Therefore, it was that "you did not choose me, but I chose you" - to be my friends. Amazingly, Christ has chosen us with a love so

deep that he died for us. That is the healing we need. We cannot love until we have been loved - and in Christ, this has happened. While we were yet sinners, says John, Christ died for us.

That gives us two principles for being a Christian. 1. Our actions are to be motivated in love for the sake of creating love. 2. Love is possible by loving as we have been loved. However, there is one more dimension needed - how to translate such love concretely into practice. Today's epistle reading from Acts provides the clue. Should the Gentiles observe all those dietary and detailed Jewish rules? The Church's decision was "no," but equally important is how it was decided. They explained in this way - "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." Another translation says, "It was the decision of the Holy Spirit with us." Christ does not abandon us in the task of putting love into practice. He sends the Holy Spirit. Love in practice means openness in each moment to be Spirit-led. That was how it was for Jesus, and how it is to be with us - led by the Spirit in each second, hour, day, week, month, year -- life.

Therefore, there would seem to three dimensions to being a Christian:

- The principle of love.
- The example of Christ.
- The guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Put that way, the Gospel may be simple after all.

May 15, 2009