

Last Sunday the Church started St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and will continue with that letter for the second reading for Sundays for some time. Pope St Clement also wrote to the Corinthians so maybe this is a good opportunity to consider his letter and talk a little more about the ancient city of Corinth.

Pope St Clement I was the 4<sup>th</sup> pope of the Church, serving from about 88 to 97 A.D. He knew and associated with both St Peter and St Paul. He was a very loyal son and servant of our Lord and His Church. During his reign as pope, the Church in Corinth (an ancient Greek city – also visited by St Paul) wrote to him about problems they were having. His letter answering them is still extant today, and in fact forms part of the Office of Readings for the Liturgy of the Hours. Pope Clement begins his letter by acknowledging the problem they are experiencing – sedition (insurrection, rebellion) against the Church. His letter reflects his commitment to our Lord, his great wisdom and holiness, and his great sympathy for the Church in Corinth. As such, it might be helpful to consider parts of it since the Church is experiencing a similar sort of sedition today.

Recall that St Paul, in his letters to the Corinthians, reprimanded them a number of times and in rather strong terms at that. As one of our seminary Scripture instructors explained, this was in part due to the fact that all kinds of “characters” – a good number of ill-repute – traversed Corinth. Corinth was a sort of trade route in ancient times and so the Corinthians were exposed to all kinds of “spiritual infections,” let's say. Perhaps Paul's words were heeded by at least some, however, because Clement begins by praising the Corinthians: “Moreover, you were all distinguished by humility, and were in no respect puffed up with pride, but yielded obedience rather than extorted it, and were more willing to give than to receive.” That alone is worth dwelling on, allowing it to settle in our minds and thus have an effect on how we think, speak, and act. It is in accord with the very frequent message of Scripture: to remain both firm and yet also humble, perhaps especially in the face of opposition and ridicule.

St Clement goes on to reiterate their situation: “Every kind of honor and happiness was bestowed upon you, and then was fulfilled that which is written, My beloved ate and drank, and was enlarged and became fat, and kicked (Deut 32:15). Hence flowed emulation and envy, strife and sedition, persecution and disorder, war and captivity. So the worthless rose up against the honored, those of no reputation against such as were renowned, the foolish against the wise, the young against those advanced in years. For this reason righteousness and peace are now far departed from you, inasmuch as everyone abandons the fear of God, and has become blind in His faith, neither walks in the ordinances of His appointment, nor acts a part becoming a Christian, but walks after his own wicked lusts, resuming the practice of an unrighteous and ungodly envy, by which death itself entered into the world.” It is worthwhile to also let these words, of our good and holy forefather from of old, settle in our minds. He is saying (to us as well) that this is bound to happen when you strive to follow our Lord. Remember that Scripture says: sin entered the world through what??...through the *envy* of the devil. This happened from the beginning and it will continue until the end of the world. In the face of such trials, there is almost always a strong temptation to turn back – to negotiate and compromise, to go along to get along, to say something like: oh well, maybe it's not so bad, or: well, I guess that's just what everybody is doing today. Notice that he refers to those who envy and rile up sedition in very clear and strong language – as worthless, for example. This is an exhortation to resist the temptation to follow suit, otherwise you too will become worthless. The message of our Lord, repeated by our good and holy forefather is: Do not be afraid, hold firm. Our Lord cannot be overcome.

I think one of the more striking statements that this saint and pope (the one speaking on behalf of our Lord) makes is this: “We should rather give offense to stupid and foolish men, puffed up and taking pride in their boastful speech, than give offense to God.” It reiterates not to be drawn into this hideous pride leading to sedition – it makes a person “stupid and foolish.” See it for what it is, see the truth, the reality of it, and don't respond in like manner. “Consider, beloved, how the Lord keeps reminding us of the resurrection to come,” Pope Clement went on to say. Bear in mind, he is saying, that this trial will pass and if you remain unblemished, if you hold firm, you will know exaltation beyond comprehension. It cannot be otherwise because our Lord said so.

In this letter, Pope St Clement I is teaching an invaluable and necessary lesson – how to endure and suffer through times filled with a spirit of sedition against the Church. One of the things he is saying, then, is keep your mind fixed on the end, and there are only two final ends for every human being – either Heaven or hell. Don't trade your eternal destiny for an illusion of glory, an illusion put forth by men puffed up with themselves. "He is a liar and a thief, a murderer from the beginning," our Lord warned us – warning us precisely so that we might choose wisely, so that we can be forever united with Him in eternal peace, happiness, fulfillment, and glory. If we lose sight of that – of the final end – we will give way to temptation, we will lose.

Let us return to the point that in this letter Pope Clement is teaching how to be, the mindset one needs, how to respond when living amidst a popular spirit of revolt against God, against what is right and good and true. What is the main thrust or central message of his letter, the message that takes up the vast majority of this 23 page letter (23 pages with a normal 12 point font and 1-inch margins), that which recurs over and over again in this letter? Well, what is the spirit of sedition? What does it flow out of? It is, as already alluded to, a spirit of self-exaltation, of placing judgment on God, of being a god unto myself, of self-righteousness, of unrepentance – in short, a spirit of pride. Not surprisingly, then, what Clement exhorts most of all, over and over again, with numerous examples and in numerous ways is: humility and repentance:

"Let us therefore, brethren, be of humble mind, laying aside all haughtiness, and pride, and foolishness, and angry feelings; and let us act according to that which is written (for the Holy Spirit says, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, neither let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glories glory in the Lord, in diligently seeking Him, and doing judgment and righteousness), being especially mindful of the words of the Lord Jesus which He spoke teaching us meekness and long-suffering. For thus He spoke: Be merciful, that you may obtain mercy; forgive, that it may be forgiven to you; as you do, so shall it be done unto you; as you judge, so shall you be judged; as you are kind, so shall kindness be shown to you; with what measure you measure, with the same it shall be measured to you. By this precept and by these rules let us establish ourselves, that we walk with all humility in obedience to His holy words. For the holy word says, On whom shall I look, but on him that is meek and peaceable, and that trembles at my words?"

Our good and wise holy forefather knows well the effect of original sin and the inclinations it leaves us with. If we simply follow those inclinations, allowing them rather than our mind enlightened by truth, to control us, then we will almost certainly fall into one of three things: wrath, bitterness, hatred; or, depression, hopelessness; or fear, and thus yield way; giving into any of these is submitting ourselves to evil at grave risk of our eternal life. This is precisely what he is warning us against. In doing so, we easily see that he is simply serving the Lord, repeating the exhortations of the Master Himself. Depression or hopelessness, as well as being controlled by fear, stems from a lack of trust. Facing those temptations, we must ask ourselves: do I really want to say: no, Lord, I cannot trust You? I can only trust "the world?" I do not believe that a good end that can come from this trial, I do not believe in your goodness? Can we not instead say: Father, I know that you are good; I do not understand everything, but with Your grace, I will trust in you and hold firm to the end, come what may? Anger, as we have said before, is not always sin; it is meant to drive back an immediate threat of evil. But such an anger does not linger and fester, it does not become hatred or bitterness or hard feelings or vengeful, much less lead to self-righteousness. These are the effects of original sin – I have these inclinations as well. Each of us must be conscientious about them and willingly and consciously choose against them; when they approach, we have to give a firm and unrelenting NO. They are invitations from hell and can only lead to hell. Bear firmly in mind the goodness of our Lord, His infinite power, that it is impossible, *impossible*, for Him to be overcome, and then respond as the ancient Israelites: as for me and my household, we will follow the Lord. I hope to see you in Heaven (meaning first – I hope I get there myself)! Ah how glorious and good it will be.

*God bless you. Fr Kuhn*