Romans Class 8

Notes

by Harry Linsinbigler

Romans 12-14

ch and vs.

--12.1 "Present your bodies a living sacrifice." Many have wondered what the 50th Psalm (51st Masoretic) is referring to when it says "then they shall offer young bullocks upon Thine altar." The priest also makes mention of this with reference to the oblation. St. Augustine says that it refers to us offering ourselves as sacrifices unto Christ who is the true and everlasting Sacrifice, which gives all sacrifices meaning. "A broken and a contrite heart Thou will not despise." Thus, we offer ourselves and all that is ours, including the earthly gifts on the altar which are truly God's in the first place and merely on loan to us. Hence "Thine own of thine own, we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all, and for all."

--12.3 Whenever we call ourselves the greatest of sinners we can truly mean it. For all are consigned under sin. And the closer one is too God, the worse sin becomes in that we should know better. Our sin is greater than that of the wretched sinner who does not know God. Therefore, the more we are apt to say that we are the greatest of sinners, the closer to God we are and the worse the sin within us and the more it counts against us because we have the greater knowledge and should know better and act all the better. The good news is that the more we confess and recognize ourselves to be sinners the more we move into sainthood. But God has allowed this paradox so that we may remain humble, so that the last will be first and the first, last.

--12.5 In the Body of Christ, we are all "members of one another," and though many comprise one.

--12.6 We all have gifts and must use them

--12.10 Do we see our parish, diocese (or even, as is the case in America, our Pan-Orthodox "region") as being filled with "brotherly affection"?

--12.16 "Live in harmony with one another" and don't dissociate from some just because they are not as of high estate, or of different social class. This is conceit and is not accepted by God nor by the order of the Church.

--12.17,21 Don't repay evil for evil but rather "overcome evil with good" (12.21)

--12.20 It is clear that at the time of this writing that St. Paul had the words of Jesus as recorded by the Evangilists fresh in His mind, for there are quite a few near-direct quotes.

--13.1ff Paul expands upon the principle of rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. St. Paul expressly says here that the governing authorities are established by God. It is for this reason that we pray for them so much in the Litanies of Orthodox worship. Many criticize Orthodox worship for being so repetative, instead of noticing the preoccupation of Orthodox worship with being obedient to recognizing expressing active and prayerful concern with the priorities established by God as expressed in Scripture.

--13.2 It is for this reason that certain civil accusations can incur canonical penalties.

--13.4-5 The government does not "bear the sword in vain," but is the servant of God to "execute His wrath upon the wrongdoer." This is a very important verse with regard to the death penalty in defending the Orthodox Church's practice through much of history. The execution of the state's authority upon the violent criminal is seen by St. Paul as being equivalent to "God's wrath" upon the evildoer.

--13.8-10 Love is the fulfilling of the law. St. Irenaeus says that faith and the understanding of the mysteries and all else is void and empty of meaning without love. It is certainly the pinnacle of virtues. "Love makes man perfect" says St. Irenaeus. "As in the law, therefore, and in the Gospel, the first and greatest commandment is, to love the Lord God wit hte who heart, and...to love one's neighbor as one's self; the author of the law and the Gospel is shown to be one and the same." He goes on to say that God "certainly has promulgated particular laws adapted for each; but the more prominent and the greatest commands, without which salvation cannot be attained, He has exhorted the same in both." (Against Heresies, 4.12.2,3)).

--14.5 "One man esteems one day upon another...let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." St. John Chrysostom sees this as giving us a message about fasting. He says that St. Paul here makes the specifics of days a matter of "indifference," which can be equated with the "doubtful matters" that St. Paul elseware in the book of Romans urges against. "For it is not unlikely that some who fasted were always judging those who did not...And so also he said 'let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.' And in this way he released those who kept the observances out of fear, by saying that the thing was indifferent, and he removed also the quarrelsomeness of those who attacked them, by showing that it was not a very desirable task to always be making trouble about these things" (Rom.Hom. 15.5). Hence, the general command to fast (i.e. the ascetical fast) applies, but it is according to ability in conjunction, as much as possible, with the calander or the day. This was especially applicable since the calander and fasting practices were not solidified yet, and so there was a call for more tolerance since at this point it was almost completely a matter of personal discression. Now, of course, the days are planned more strongly and on a more common basis (although, throughout the history of fasting, it has never been absolutely uniform. Even today the "Slavs" and the "Greeks" have differences, though much more subtle than the regional differences in earlier times). Thus, the uniformity of fasting practices did away with some of the temptation to quarrel about which day to fast and which not: the Church selected these through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, there are still those things which are subject to personal discression, and that is the general and universal point here, even though specific applications might change as history changes.

But not all things are subject to our individual persuasion of mind. Some things are in the realm of opinion, but not doctrine, which is in the realm of absolute truth. For St. John Chrysostom says in the same homily "Let us not therefore apply the phrase, 'Let every man be persuaded in his own mind' to all subjects. For when he is speaking of doctrines, hear what he says, 'If any one preaches to you any other gospel than that which you have received, let him be anathema.'...he had been speaking of fasting [and not of all subjects]."

--14.6 With regard to fasting or not fasting, "the thing requisite is, if this person or the other is acting for God's sake, the thing requisite is if both terminate in thanksgiving. For indeed both this man and that give thanks to God [in different manners]. If they both give thanks to God, the difference is no great one." (St. John Chrysostom, Rom. Hom. 15.6). "For it is not the eating which makes the man unclean, but the intention with which a man eats" (Rom.Hom. 16.20). St. John makes it clear in an earlier passage that mortification refers to mortification of the works of the flesh, not to the detriment of the body. "let us keep continually mortifying it in its works. I do not mean in its substance--far be it from me--but in its inclinations towards evil doings." He says that it indicates the virtuous struggle to avoid being a "slave to pleasures" (RomHom 8).

In his work *On the Priesthood*, St. John has this to say: "Prayer and fasting, vigils and sleeping on the ground are a great help to someone shut up in a cell and concerned only about his own soul. But when a man is distracted by such a huge multitude and inhertis all the private cares of those who are under his rule, what appreciable help can these practices contribute towards their improvement, unless he has a healthy, robust soul?...for it would not harm the common life of the Church if a prelate should neither starve himself of food, nor go barefoot, but a furious temper causes great disasters both to its possessor and to his neighbors. There is not threat from God against those who omit these ascetic practices, but those who are wrathful without a cause are threatened with hell and hell fire" (3.12).

--14.20,21 "Do not for the sake of food undo the work of God..." Tertullian (3rd c.) has this to say on these verses, that "The apostle reprimands those who 'bid to abstain from meats;" but he does so from the foresight of the Holy Spirit, precondemning already the heretics who would enjoin perpetual abstinence to the extent of destroying and despising the works of the Creator; such as I may find in the person of a Marcion, a Tatian, or a Jupiter...Two weeks of xerophagies in the year (and not the whole of these--the Sabbaths, to wit, and the Lord's days, being excepted) we offer to God; abstaining from things which we do not reject, but rather defer" (On Fasting ch. 15). Xerophagy refers to 'dry' eating where the food is simply prepared and the quality of the drink is correspondant to that of the eating. Hence it is the sign of heretics either to reject fasting altogether or to insist upon it so strictly that one shows himself to despise the works of the Creator by destroying the body. Thus the Church has always stood against those groups (ancient and new) which had an extreme asceticism and despised the creation, just as it has always rejected those who completely reject the Spiritual duties.

The early Fathers from the late 2nd century distinguished between the "dry diet" xerophagy fast (belonging to a fast) and a full meal which is "rich and carefully prepared" belonging to a feast (On Fasting was written around 208 AD and Tertullian makes this distinction based upon an earlier tradition). Hence, fasting is turning away from the sin of Adam, who fell because he "yielded more readily to his belly than to God, heeded the meat rather than the mandate, and sold salvation for his gullet!" (On Fasting ch 3).

--14.21 St. John Chrysostom says about this verse "Again, he requires the greater alternative, that they should not only not force him, but even condescend to him [i.e. come down to his level for his sake]. For he often did thid himself also, as when he circumcised (Acts 16.3), when he was shorn (Acts 18.18) and when he sacrificed that Jewish sacrifice (Acts 21.26).... And what are his words? 'It is good not to eat flesh.' and why do I say flesh? if it is wine, or any other thing of the sore besides, which gives offence, refrain, for nothing is so important as your brother's salvation...hence St. Paul says 'it is good not to eat flesh,' not because it was unclean, but because the brother is offended and is weak" (Rom.Hom. 26.21).

--14.22 What is St. Paul talking about here? "Here he seems to me to be giving a gentle warning to the more advanced on the score of vanity...and...even if no man see [your faith], you are able to be happy in yourself" (St. John Chrysostom, Rom.Hom. 16.22). But St. John warns that it does not mean that we are to hide our faith, but rather we are to hide anything that can make any of the brethren who are weaker in the faith feel belittled; but that general confession of faith we must proclaim boldly to the glory of God. And so we are not to seek recognition for our 'great faith,' but rather to hide what can cause a weaker brother or a neighbor who lacks faith to stumble with vicious envy, and in such cases to be content with the gift we have been given within ourselves, not provoking them to anger because they do not have it. In terms of those who are of a reasonable strength in the faith, it is not a concern or an issure, for they are reasonable.

--14.23 Anything by which our brother can stumble away from the Christian faith we must avoid, "For if it were a grievous act of iniquity to throw down a church [building], much more so is it to do so to the spiritual temple. Since a man is more dignified than a church [building, temple]: for it was not for walls that Christ died, but for these temples." (Rom. Hom. 16). St. John Chrysostom is not saying here that the temple/church building is not holy, but rather that when our flesh is merged with that of Christ, we become attached to the one who is Holy in a manner that a building, even the holiest of buildings, can never be. For the purpose of the altar is to offer that sacrifice which will go into the people, not simply to stay on the altar or in the Church, but to carry Christ in us out to the world as temples of the living God. Christ died for us, "not for walls." On the other hand, we tend to think of the building as always holy in a way that we are not because the building does not sin, and thus cannot defile itself. But this still shows the greatness of the human being, for Christ became man to deify matter, and thus it is only through man that the rest of the universe can find its restoration.

How then is the church building so important? The church building finds its importance and magnificence in this: that therein is the collection of the people and clergy and thus the Church building becomes the temple, the container, of the one true Church in each Eucharistic locality meeting communaly with God whereby they are unified fully and mysteriously in the Sacrament of the Church.