

# Trinity X

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Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: but all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

This chapter from St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians is one of the most familiar in the New Testament. Sermonizers love it for its opportunity to talk about the value of all of the different things people do in the Church and Christian audiences love it for the same reason. It has the wonderful capacity to make both those in charge of Christian communities feel virtuous, because it allows them to point out the good in others, without interfering with the average member's ability to recognize his own activities in the variety of things that St. Paul describes. While I do not, in any way, want to disagree with that usual reading or with the usual kind of sermon which is preached on this passage, I would like to point out that I think that the usual approach provides only a preliminary understanding of what St. Paul is really getting at. I think that the central meaning in this passage is found in its picture of the Church, as a whole, rather than in its description of all the individual roles that people play in it.

Because human beings are very self-centered, we usually miss the fact that St. Paul is actually describing the workings of the Holy Spirit in the Church more than he is describing the range of human activities in it. This passage is intended by him as a tribute to the power and variety of the Holy Spirit's work. The central point, then, is not the equal value of the human works involved in Church activities; instead, it is the fact that all of these different activities are manifestations of the power of the same, single Spirit. Understanding this fact shows us that this is a very different kind of passage than we often realize.

Usually, when we read this, Christians tend to listen to St. Paul's list of gifts of the Spirit and try to find the one that we think fits us best. We congratulate ourselves on the fact that we are engaged in "good Christian works" and reassure ourselves of the fact that we are just as good as anyone else in the Church. However, if we listen to this list

as a series of things that the Holy Spirit does in and for the Church, we will realize that what we are hearing is a description of the depth and intimacy of God's involvement with His people. God does not only do things *for* His people, He also is so gracious as to use His power to allow *them* to do things for themselves and each other. This is evidence of a much greater level of trust and a much deeper interweaving of His life and activity with ours than our usual understanding of St. Paul's words reveals. This is not a trivial distinction.

If we think of these gifts of the Holy Spirit as instances of God allowing His people to make use of His power, then, in our understanding, the people who are exercising these gifts are active participants rather than passive receivers. The prophet is not just a parrot, repeating words that are spoken by Another inside his head; the teacher is not just a mouthpiece for lessons put together by Someone else; the discerner of spirits is not just someone who has access to the understanding of a Higher Being: instead, all of these "gifted" people are personally involved in the divinely inspired activities that they pursue. The main reason for emphasizing this point is that it changes our entire understanding of what living a Christian life in the world really is.

"Doing the will of God in the world" is a common way for Christians to express what they hope to do in their lives. This is a fair description of what the Bible teaches us to do, but it is often heard as if it were speaking of Christians as doing nothing more than working their way down a "to-do" list that God has handed over to them. This may be both too individualistic, in that it does not allow enough connection between what one of us does with what all the others are doing, as well as too passive, because it does not seem to allow for any human input in the process of deciding what ought to be done. With this point in mind, it may make sense to think again about what St. Paul's own teaching about the Church being "the Body of Christ" really means.

If the Church is the Body of Christ, then it is a unified organism with a single life. Insofar as each person belongs to the Body of Christ, that person's life is a part of the greater whole rather than a separate, individual life. This does not mean that each of us does not have his own individual life and individuality; it only means that, as Christians, we find our Christian life as a part of a greater whole.

Because we are a part of a greater whole as Christians, our Christian calling involves activities that support more people than just ourselves and serve to draw more people than just ourselves closer to God. (The traditional term for this is "edify", which uses the metaphor of constructing a building to speak of helping "build up" the Church.) We are not atoms trying to swerve ourselves as close to our source as possible, instead, we are social beings who are able to survive as separated individuals but who find a richer and deeper life when they draw together and form a greater, organic whole. In the same way that our coming into the Church is the result of a delicate dance between God's grace and our own individual choices, so are our actions as Christians an indescribable blend of divine empowerment and human effort. We are swept along by the force of God's will and we make our own paths through the world by our own choices. We act with our natural powers and abilities at the same time that God makes available to us His limitless divine capabilities. Only if we take seriously both His part of the whole and our part of the whole can we see clearly what is really involved in the Christian life. This brings us to a final and, in some ways the most important, point.

Once we have realized that our Christian lives are lived as a part of the Body of

Christ on earth, we ought to begin to be aware of the fact that only part of God's involvement in our lives is directed at achieving things that benefit *us*, alone. Since we are part of a greater whole, the activities of God in our lives and His empowerment of us to do things that we could not do without Him are expressions of His desire to use us to help others as much as they are of His desire to help only us. The first and most important application of this realization ought to be an intensification of our commitment to living good Christian lives because, unless we do so, we are interfering not only with our own closeness to God but also with the religious lives of all of those with whom we interact. We are not only responsible, in a very important way, for our own religious destinies but we are also responsible for doing all we can to aid the spiritual progress of those around us. Membership in the Church is not only a great comfort and strength to us; it is also a real challenge and a serious responsibility!

So, this passage ought not to make us settle back in the pew, warm and comfortable with the idea of the value of our contribution to the Church, it also ought to make us sit up straight and ponder what it is that we can do for those around us as life goes forward. Each of us has serious responsibilities for his own destiny, but each of us also has serious responsibility for the destinies of others. Christians seek to live lives that are in close contact with God not only because that is our natural desire but also because it is the most important form of charity that Christians can exercise for each other.

If you want to help those around you, one of the most immediate ways to do so is by being the best person you can. The physical things that we often call "charity" are only one aspect of the kinds of care and assistance that we actually owe our fellow human beings. That is a sober note with which to end on a hot day late in August, but Christian life is serious business as well as a joyful one. We must undertake it both with a real sense of the value of what we do and a true understanding of how *broadly* it is valuable. Our lives make real, permanent, and important difference not only to us but also to all of those with whom we come in meaningful contact. *Our care for them* as well as our care for ourselves ought to spur us on to be as good followers of Christ as we can be. We are more important than we often realize and so we ought to pay more attention to ourselves and to the quality of our lives than we often do.