

**August 26, 2012**

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Among Latin theologians of the Middle Ages, I wonder if any combined a sense of devotion (*affectus*) with critical reflection more harmoniously than William of St. Thierry (c. 1075-1148). Having published a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans in 1137, William returned to certain themes of that epistle toward the end of his life, particularly the meaning of faith. Between 1142 and 1144 he published two works on the subject, *The Enigma of Faith* and *The Mirror of Faith*.

William was concerned about a disposition to separate faith from love (as he believed the flamboyant Peter Abelard had recently been doing). At no point, William reasoned, is true faith separable from love. Indeed, the human trinity of faith, hope, and love could no more become separated than the divine Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. After all, he writes, this human trinity is an imago of the Triune Deity, so that---with respect to faith, hope, and love---"each is in all, and all are in each."

William even borrows the Latin dogmatic language of Triadology, boldly claiming that faith, hope, and love are *consubstantial* with one another, inasmuch as each partakes of the same *substantia virtutis*. Just as the priority of the Father to the Son and Holy Spirit does not imply a sequential antecedence of the Father, so the priority of faith does not mean that faith exists before hope and love. They all exist together, he says, or they do not exist at all.

In developing his theme, William repeatedly returns to the Epistle to the Romans, where---he insists---the word "faith" invariably has the meaning, not simply of objective assent to proposed doctrine, but also of personal adherence to God in *affectus*. This expression, best translated, I believe---in William's usage---as "enlightened love," indicates the radical inseparability of faith from love in Christian experience.

If this is not the case, William argues, a human being is not really improved by faith. It is not a "strength" (*virtus*). On the contrary, faith without love would make a man worse than the demons. We have it on the authority of St. James that "the demons believe and tremble," whereas a human being is capable of believing without trembling! Consequently, "faith that does not include hope and love is not a strength (*virtus*)." The faith by which man is justified always

has *una forma virtutis* with hope and love.

William demonstrates this inseparability of faith and love by appealing to a human analogy; namely, the relationship of the child to the parents. (This analogy is valid, he says, since faith makes us children of God.) How does a person know that he is, in fact, the child of his parents? He believes it because they tell him it is so. In short, the child has faith in his parents; he puts his confidence in the word of his parents. He knows who he is because he trusts his parents, who tell him who he is. Identity comes from this faith.

But why does a child believe his parents? Because he loves them! That is, the child's faith is inseparable from his *affectus* towards his parents. The authority (*auctoritas*) of the parents is recognized in a relationship of love. *Auctoritas* has a double meaning here: the parents are "authors" of the child, and they are the "authorities" by which he knows their "authorship." Both are perceived in the single experience of *affectus*; faith and love mutually produce one another.

This is analogous to the *auctoritas* of God, who both begets us in grace and instructs us in faith. William says, respecting our relationship with the heavenly Father: "Embrace, then, the grace of divine adoption. You are the heir of God and co-heir with Christ" (cf. Romans 8:17).

Just as the child's faith and love toward the parents are, in root, really the gift of the parents, says William, so a person's faith and love toward the heavenly Father come from the Father's own initiative. They are pure gift---*gratia*. He writes, "We do not have a correct faith about faith if we do not in faith (*fideliter*) understand, above all, whose gift it is. Faith comes from a free will, but a will set free by grace." That is to say, the decision of faith is not simply man's doing, because "man, by himself, is free only to sin." Sinners are "unable of choosing . . . any fruit of justice unless set free by liberating grace."

When I reflect on William's approach to faith, the adjective that rises in my mind comes from later philosophy---existential. That is to say, William's approach to faith shows little interest in its *essence*; he describes it, rather, in the Pauline terms of experience. It is always related to the Holy Spirit's testimony to personal conscience. Of those justified by faith William writes, "they are aware of themselves even in their own conscience in the measure that they call upon the name of the Lord. The Holy Spirit bears witness to their conscience that they are the sons of God."

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**

[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**

[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

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