

Does this Life Matter?

Personal reflection on my overall presentation of the Gospel, especially through my weekend homilies, has brought me to wonder if my emphasis tends to be too negative about this life and the ways we occupy ourselves with so many things and so much stuff. For example, I am keen to repeat St. Paul's stark evaluation of life in the world in terms of "futility:" *"Creation was made subject to futility . . . in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption . . . (Rom 8:20)."*

On the one hand, there is an inescapable truth to what St. Paul says and we can confirm this by appeal to our own dissatisfactions, disappointments and disillusionments in life. Inasmuch as we are trying to find true fulfillment in the things of the world, such as careers, money, toys, entertainment and so forth, we are finding that it eludes us over and over again.

In the context of the Letter to the Romans, this sense of "futility" of which St. Paul speaks must certainly be associated with the "Spirit-flesh" antithesis which surrounds it in the text. When St. Paul opposes *"life according to the flesh"* to *"life according to the Spirit,"* he is not saying that the human body or the material aspects of life are inherently evil. It is generally understood by the best Biblical Scholars that ***"life according to the flesh"*** means something along the lines of *"giving oneself over to the false promises of fallen nature; to believe that created things and mere creatures can do for us what, in reality, God alone can do."* Another way to define it is given in the *Sacra Pagina Commentary on Romans* wherein the Jesuit, Brendan Burns defines the term as *"the realm of human weakness,"* and *"[an existence] self-enclosed, self-regarding and hostile to God."* By contrast, "life according to the Spirit" is *"open to God and to life, (Vol. 6, pg 238, 243 note 3)."*

With respect to the title of this column, the essential qualification St. Paul is making is that there is something in fallen nature which presents itself as "hostility" to God. Material nature, including our bodies, were created by God and are, basically, good. The trouble enters when aspects of this nature promise what they cannot deliver, (read "salvation," "fulfillment," "true happiness," etc.)

Answering the Question:

I suppose the reason for my 'drumbeat' around St. Paul's sense of "futility," is that the forces of secularism are very powerful in our time. There are so many options for us to explore in the world of things that it is all too easy to be seduced. This is the focus of all the negativity about the world and "the flesh:" It is not the things themselves, but the over-reach of those things in making claims of our minds, hearts and souls as if they were gods.

Apart from this problem, we must affirm that this life really does matter. Even though we are *"dust and to dust we shall return,"* this is not the last word on the material realities of creation. Corresponding to the promise of resurrection, which pertains to our bodies, there is the promise of *"New Heavens and a New Earth, (Rev. 21)"* John the Prophet, the seer of the Book of Revelation, quotes the *"one who sat on the throne, (God)"* as declaring, *"the old order has passed away . . . See! I make all things new!"* In the context of the whole vision, the old order certainly represents the corruption of Satan mediated through the likes of the Beasts and the Harlot of Babylon. . . individuals and forces in the world seeking to redirect worship and honor away from God to themselves.



Assuredly, therefore, the "new order" foreseen by John is not a complete loss of this life and the things which are good or important about it. All good things of Creation and the Nature therein are good. Concretely speaking, insofar as there is nothing intrinsically evil and we are striving to live the righteousness of God in Christ, our working, and our building and our creating and our celebrating and our enjoying and all other positive engagements in this life will, in some form, carry over into eternity. It is, after all, Creation itself which *"waits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God, (Rom 8:19)!"* Putting all things of this world and life back in proper order follows upon the gift of Human Redemption and Salvation. It is not necessary to live with chronic guilt for having and enjoying things. Jesus guides our thinking and acting when he says, *"Make friends with yourselves of dishonest wealth so that when it fails, they will receive you into eternal dwellings. (Luke 16:9)"*