

Homily for OT XIV  
July 5, 2009  
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From the second reading of the day (II Corinthians 12:7-10):

*...a thorn in the flesh was given to me... Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.*

No one knows what this "thorn in the flesh" that "was given to" St. Paul was. It is anybody's guess. Some say that he, like Moses, was afflicted with a speech impediment that made him less than impressive as a preacher. They reference Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, "I was with you in weakness, and in much fear and trembling." [I Corinthians 2:3] Some speculate that the "thorn in (his) flesh" was a physical handicap or illness, though there is no evidence for this. Others, with still less evidence, imagine that Paul suffered from a psychological affliction, like manic depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

No one knows, and it is really not important, for Paul's point is clear: there was something in himself that he desperately wanted to be changed. He prayed for God to change it, but God said "No," for a reason that taught St. Paul a great and salutary lesson: that it is through our weaknesses, and not our strengths, that we receive the grace of God. So, Paul declares: "I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me."

Now, let me take the rest of today's homily to apply Paul's insight to a single, topical example: the controversial issue of homosexuality. The world is telling us, through all its media, that "Gay is good"—implying that anyone who questions that, especially from a Christian viewpoint, is collaborating with injustice and oppression. But that is not fair, either to the Church, or to those among us whom the world calls "Gay."

Many years ago, just before the Stonewall riot that gave rise to the Gay rights movement, a freshman at Yale confided in me that he was homosexual. He said that living in a dorm with other men was for him like a straight man living in a girls' dorm: his temptations were so severe that if he could push a button to rid himself of his attraction to his own sex, he would do so instantly.

This young man, hardly more than a boy, was pleading for my help, and I was at a loss to help him. So I took counsel with an older clergyman who had a special ministry to homosexuals. His advice was clear and simple: he said, help this young man to not "come out of the closet" and declare himself to the world; help him to not make his homosexuality a defining element of his identity; help him to accept his condition as just one weakness among others; help him to prevent it from controlling his behavior.

I don't know what became of him. I hope that he is living at peace with himself now, and was not among those marching in last month's Gay Pride parade, or attempting to get married to another man.

I am thinking too about another young man whom I met more recently, who told me that his life had been changed one day in confession, when the priest promised that

when he finally met God face-to-face, he would want to thank him for leaving him with his affliction of homosexuality. This priest evidently helped him realize that his struggle for purity, which involved so many failures, was strengthening him in ways he hadn't realized were important: it was giving him self-knowledge leading to wisdom; humility leading to dependence on God's grace; and compassion for the weaknesses of other people. The thought that he owed these strengths to his peculiar weakness, and his struggle with it, this man told me had the marvelous effect of making him less prone to give in to his temptations.

The case of homosexuality illustrates the truth of St. Paul's paradox, "When I am weak, then I am strong." But, to understand this, one must try to see through, to unmask, the strategy that is so widely recommended currently to people dealing with same-sex attractions. This strategy is to affirm same-sex attraction as a strength, rather than a weakness; to make it the defining element of their identity, a badge of honor, even an entitlement.

One must see this strategy for what it is: a strategy to resolve an inner conflict (so poignantly expressed by that Yale freshman long ago) by sheer force of will; to change reality by the false expedient of giving it a different name; and to believe, against both evidence and common sense, that human beings come from our Creator, in not just two, but four other sexes: "LGBT"—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered.

Christians are committed to the truth that human beings are created in two sexes, either male or female; that their natural attraction to each other is vital for the wholeness and continuation of the human family; and that therefore, when this natural attraction is, by whatever cause, short-circuited, it is a kind of suffering—one of the many kinds of suffering that human beings endure in a fallen world. And the question that a Christian asks of this, or any other, kind of suffering is always this: How can it be redeemed? Not explained, not eliminated, but redeemed.

In the case of homosexuality, the first step to redeem it must be to acknowledge what it is—a kind of suffering, not natural, not good. One must not encourage people to resolve their condition by redefining it, or defining themselves in terms of it. Like St. Paul, a person may well pray to be rid of this "thorn in the flesh," but he is more than likely to receive God's answer to St. Paul: "No. My grace is sufficient for you."

Then, what does the person do? Like the second man who confided in me, he may continue for a long time trying to resist the temptations that arise from his affliction; he may often fail, and have to come back to confession, time and time again. But with the grace of God, he will discover that his suffering and struggles yield a harvest over time of virtues—real strengths of character like wisdom, humility and compassion—that wouldn't otherwise have been developed in him. In that way, his affliction can be redeemed; and of this painful "thorn in his flesh" he may someday, with St. Paul, be able to say, "I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me."