

# The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Zechariah 9:9-10
<i>Response</i>	I will extol thee, my God and King, and bless thy name for ever and ever.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 6:3-4, 8-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 11:25-30

The fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our journey through Paul's theological masterpiece, the letter to the Romans. And now we get to one of my favorite chapters in Romans, which is Romans 8. It's Paul's beautiful chapter about this world and the world to come, about the old creation and the new creation. And in chapter 8, verses 9, 11-13, the Church pulls these verses out of this chapter for today's reading on the fourteenth Sunday. So let's look at what Paul has to say, and we'll try to unpack it. Okay, in Romans 8:9, Paul writes:

But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

And then it skips down to verse 11:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.

So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so let's stop there. What's going on here? The first thing that has to be said is that—and I've said this elsewhere—when Paul talks about the flesh and the Spirit, he's not talking about the body and the soul in the way that we would normally assume if we heard those words, especially if we hear them contrasted with one another. He doesn't mean your exterior part of yourself and your interior part of yourself. He's talking about two realms, two spheres of reality. The "flesh" in Paul—the Greek word is *sarx*—refers to this fallen visible world, the world all around us...which of course includes our mortal bodies, it includes our flesh. But it isn't limited to that, and it isn't—it can be misleading to reduce it to that or think of it totally in those terms.

And then second, the realm of the Spirit is the sphere of reality that's under the dominion of the Holy Spirit that we are participating in invisibly and moving toward through the grace of Christ that will become fully visible in Heaven—in the new Jerusalem—and then finally in the new creation, in the world to come, which will be completely suffused with and animated by the Spirit.

So when Paul talks about these two spheres of reality, the flesh and the Spirit, they're really basically synonymous with the ancient Jewish idea of the old creation and the new creation. And I've talked about this elsewhere, but you can kind of diagram this as two overlapping circles or two overlapping spheres of reality. On the one hand, you have the realm of the flesh, the old creation, which refers to this present world—this fallen world of sin and death. And then on the other side, you have the realm of the Spirit, or the world to come, or the new creation...which is the realm in which the risen Christ and all the saints will one day reign in glory at the end of time at the final judgement, the resurrection of the dead—and in which Christ already reigns now in the heavenly Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So it's these two overlapping spheres of reality. And in the middle of them is the realm of being "in Christ." This is where Christians who still are in this world live, kind of an in between phase. I don't want to say a limbo, because that has all kinds of connotations. But it's where the two realms overlap. So on the one hand, Christians who are baptized already have the Spirit of God dwelling in them. They already have the new life of the resurrection in them, but it hasn't fully manifested itself in the resurrection of their bodies just yet. So they still experience suffering. They still experience death. They even still have to battle against sin. At the same time, though, they really belong to the life of the new creation, and they're journeying toward that life.

And so what Paul is trying to do is get the readers to the Romans to understand that although visibly, they look around them, it looks like they're still in the flesh—this fallen world of sin and death—the invisible reality is that they're not...but that they live in the Spirit. And the reason that he can say that is because through their Baptism and through faith, the Spirit of God dwells already within them. The Spirit is already dwelling within them. And the upshot of that—the implication of that spiritual fact—is that if the Spirit of Christ...

...is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. (Romans 8:10)

So even those who—and this is a great mystery—even those who have died with Christ in Baptism, as Paul says in Romans 6, are still going to experience physical death. Baptism doesn't erase the consequences of sin. Even Christians are going to taste the bitter fruit of physical death and suffering and sickness and illness and all kinds of trials and tribulations. However, what Paul is saying here is if the Spirit dwells in you, you have a kind of down payment, so to speak. You have a promise. You have a sure hope of participating in the life of the resurrection, which will not just include spiritual life being given to the soul, but physical life, bodily life, being given to the risen body. As he says in verse 11:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.

So if you want to share in the resurrection now...in other words, make sure that the Holy Spirit continues to dwell in you, because He's your guarantee of a share in the life of the world to come. You can't see it now; it's invisible. But it's a real participation in that life, and it's a guarantee that the same Spirit that raises Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also.

One reason that's important to emphasize is that in the first century (as well as now), it can be tempting to think, "Oh, well, the resurrection of the body is something that was for Jesus but not for me, necessarily." So, Jesus was raised from the dead. The tomb was empty. His body was glorified in order to prove that He really was the Messiah. It was a vindication of His identity. And that's of course true on one level, but it's not the whole story. Because the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday is also a foreshadowing of what the same Spirit will do with our mortal bodies in the resurrection on the last day. So Paul's trying to get the readers of Romans to see—look ahead, so to speak—to look forward to their own share in the glorified life that Christ already possesses now in the wake of Easter Sunday.

So, what's the upshot of that? Well, there are two implications. First is eschatological, what I just mentioned. There's an eschatological implication. If the Spirit is dwelling in me and continues to dwell in me, then I'm going to have a share in the bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

But there's also a moral implication to the reality of the indwelling Spirit and the reality that I'm not in the flesh anymore but I'm actually living in the Spirit. I might be living in Louisiana, but I actually belong to the kingdom of God. I actually belong to the heavenly Jerusalem. That's my real address. That's my real citizenship; it's in Heaven. The moral implication of that is that I can't live any longer as if I belong to this world. I can't live as if I'm in the flesh. I have to live as if I'm in the Spirit. I have to live out the reality that's invisible but that is a real result of my union with Christ through faith in Baptism. So Paul says here:

...we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh you will die...

Notice there, again, he doesn't mean if you live in the body. We all have to live in the body. He means if you live according to the ways of the flesh, the sinful, fallen world in which we dwell. If you want an example of what that looks like, go look at Galatians 5, where Paul lists the works of the flesh. And it's things like idolatry, sexual immorality, envy—all kinds of various deadly sins, capital sins, are part of the works of the flesh. So what he's saying is you can't live in mortal sin anymore. That's effectively what he's talking about. Because...

...if you live according to the flesh you will die...

And he doesn't mean physical death. Everybody is going to die physically, but if you participate in the works of the flesh—namely, the sinful activities of the flesh—you're going to die spiritually. You'll lose the life of the world to come. So by contrast, if the Spirit lives in you, then...

...by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.

So what does he mean by that? He doesn't mean the body is bad. What he does mean, though, is that our bodies are fallen. And because of the fall, we are inclined to sin. We all know what it's like to experience cravings and desires of our body that are not good, that are not holy, that are not righteous...but are inclined towards sin. Paul explains this later in Romans—or earlier, actually, in Romans 7:

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.  
(Romans 7:19)

This inclination to do evil rather than good is part of our fallen nature. And so what Paul says is, if the Spirit of God dwells in you, then what you have to do is put to death the deeds or the works of the flesh. In other words, you have to eradicate sin from your life. And that means fighting against sinful tendencies and fighting against the inclination to sin. And the image here Paul uses is that of putting the deeds of the flesh (the works of the flesh) to death—killing them.

And I bring this up because someone was recently asking me about this. The language of mortification—where does that come from in the spiritual tradition of

the Church? Well, that comes from Romans 8. Because what Paul is literally saying here in the Greek is that you have to put to death, or you have to mortify. If someone says, “I’m mortified,” that means they’re scared to death, right? Mortality has to do with death. So you put to death the works of the flesh.

And there’s a beautiful passage in the Catechism on this. Paragraph 2015—we’ll close with that. What does that look like? What is the moral implication here? The *Catechism* says this:

The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes...<sup>2</sup>

So this is the one place in the *Catechism* where it uses that language of mortification. And in context here, it’s talking about the renunciation of sin and spiritual battle against temptation. So what the *Catechism* is saying is, there is no holiness unless we take up the cross and do battle against our sinful inclination. And we don’t just avoid mortal sin. We put it to death. We mortify it. We kill it—that means eradicate it—by taking up the cross and following Christ.

And only when we do that—when we renounce sin and enter into the spiritual battle—can we actually pass along the way, the path of perfection that is only accessible...we’re only able to access it by journeying along the way of the cross. And when Paul says in Romans 8 is that when we do that—when we put to death the deeds of the body, we’ll live in the life of the resurrection. Because the only way for us to get to the resurrection and the life of the world to come is through union with Christ on His cross in His passion and death.

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 2015