

## The Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is merciful and gracious
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 3:16-23
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[B]ut whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God ,is perfected.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 5:38-48

The seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the letter of Paul, the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. And the seventh Sunday is a good example of the fact that what the Church is doing with Sundays in Ordinary Time in Paul's letters is not a verse by verse commentary, but what might be called semi-continuous reading. In other words, it's a selective sampling of various passages in the letter without treating it comprehensively. So in the sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we were looking at Paul's statements about the mystery of the new creation and the mystery of Jesus' crucifixion in chapter 2. Now we're going to skip all the way down to chapter 3, verse 16 in 1 Corinthians and look at Paul's statements about the mystery of the Church as the temple of God. So there's a lot of material that gets skipped over there in the lectionary. You should be aware of that. We're going to pick up in verse 16 and look at the selection that the Church has given us for today:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are.

Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." So let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or

Apol'los or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so what's going on in this passage? First, just a little bit of context. In some sense, this passage is gathering up some of the threads that Paul has been laying out in the first two and three chapters—first three chapters—of Corinthians. The context of the letter, remember, is that Paul is writing to address certain divisions that have taken place within the Church at Corinth. People are separating into factions and schisms with one another. Some people are lining up saying, “I belong to Paul.” Other people are saying, “I belong to Apol'los.” Other people are saying, “I belong to Cephas,” and still others are saying, “I belong to Christ.” So there's this problem of divisions within the Church...schism in the Church.

Which, as I pointed out in an earlier video, Paul condemns the idea of division within the Church, and he presupposes that the Church would be unified, that there would be one Church. With that said, then, what Paul here in the reading for today does, is he's continuing along the line of exhorting the Church to unity, but the image that he uses now is of the Church as a temple. He compares the Church to the temple of God. So this is a very Jewish image, so although he's giving it to the Corinthians, he's drawing on Jewish Scripture...he's drawing on Jewish imagery. And he's using that imagery to communicate something to him about the mystery of God.

So just a few points about the image that he's giving here. First, 1) when he says:

Do you not know that you are God's temple... (1 Corinthians 3:16)

It's important here to recognize that the “you” here is plural. So he's speaking to the Corinthians. So although—as we'll see—there is a case to be made for an individual Christian believer — each individual Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit for Paul. In context here, he's addressing the Church. So the believers

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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.

together are God's temple. And the Greek word there is *naos*. It means a "temple" or a sanctuary—in other words, a sacred place where God dwells.

Now, although obviously for a Jew like Paul, there's one temple, the temple in Jerusalem, where all of the sacrifices were carried out and all of the worship of the one God was carried out. The idea of a temple is something that would have been familiar to Paul's Corinthian readers. They would have had their own temples, their own sanctuaries to various gods or goddesses in the Greco-Roman world. So the idea of a sacred place, a sacred space, where the god or goddess would dwell, is not something that would have been foreign to them. Although when Paul speaks about God's temple, he obviously means the one God, the God of Israel, the God who has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

And so what he says here is (to the Corinthians), you are not just a gathering of like-minded people. You are the *naos*. You are the sanctuary. You are the dwelling place of God, and therefore God's spirit dwells within you. So the Greek word here for "spirit" is *pneuma*. It means breath or wind. The Latin here is *spiritus*, from which we get the English word "spirit." So by definition in a Jewish context, the temple isn't just a sacred space. It isn't just a sacred place. It is the dwelling place of God's transcendent Spirit. It's the dwelling place of God's Spirit on Earth.

And it's precisely that dwelling of God within the temple that makes the temple holy. So when Paul uses the language of holiness, *hagios*, that's a very Jewish concept. It means literally "set apart." So what is it that makes a temple a temple? What is it that makes it a sanctuary, a holy space? Well, it's because God's Spirit dwells in that place, and therefore that place is set apart from sin. It's set apart from the rest of the world, and it's set apart for God. It's a special place for Him to dwell.

So what Paul's doing here is he's introducing the Corinthians to the idea that they are not only believers in Jesus or disciples of Christ. They are the temple of God on Earth. They are the dwelling place of God's Spirit, and therefore (watch this):

If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. (1 Corinthians 3:17a)

Okay, so there's a responsibility that comes with the holiness of being God's temple. And in context, there are all kinds of ways one could destroy God's temple. In this case, the most likely reference that Paul's using here...or the most likely reality that Paul's referring to is in fact the divisions within the Church at Corinth, which are dividing not just the body of Christ—like he says in chapter 1, “Is Christ divided?” His answer is no—but are also (in a sense) defiling and destroying the temple of God. So notice again here, Paul's ecclesiology, his theology of the Church, is that just as there should only be one temple in Jerusalem, so too the Church is one temple. There's one dwelling place of God. There's supposed to be a unity to the Church as a temple of God. And so therefore, those Corinthians who are splitting up the Church into factions—who are dividing the Church by means of their schism—are in a sense destroying the temple of God. And he warns them, if you destroy the temple of God, God will destroy you because God's temple is holy and that temple you are.

Before we move on to the next verses, just in order to illustrate this point, I'd love to bring a parallel from the book of Kings. So if you go back to 1 Kings 8—this is not in the lectionary, obviously, but it's a very famous text. It's the account of Solomon's dedication of the temple in Jerusalem in 1 Kings 8. So if you recall, David himself—although he was the most famous king—he didn't build a sanctuary for God. It was Solomon, his son, who in the book of Kings goes about building the sanctuary, building the first temple, sometimes called Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. And the reason Solomon does that is so that the temple can be a dwelling place for God on Earth. And you see this is very vividly and concretely depicted in 1 Kings 8, which describes the completion of the temple. And it says this in 1 Kings 8:10-12, it says that:

...when the priests came out of the holy place...

...which is a name for the inner sanctuary...

...a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

Then Solomon said,

“The Lord has set the sun in the heavens,  
but has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.  
I have built thee an exalted house,  
a place for thee to dwell in for ever.” (1 Kings 8:10-13)

Alright, so what’s going on here? This passage was very famous. Paul would have known it well. And what it describes is the fact that when the temple was completed, one of the ways you knew that it was the temple was because the cloud of the divine glory, which is like the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day. Remember the time of the exodus? It’s sometimes called the *shekinah*, the “glory cloud.” That’s a later term. It’s not found in the Bible, but it’s one that most people are familiar with from rabbinic literature. The *shekinah*, the glory cloud, the cloud of divine glory, comes down in the temple and fills the temple with the glory of God. And that’s what sets it apart. It’s God’s Spirit, His glory, dwelling in the temple that makes it holy and sets it apart. So in this case, even the priest can’t stand to minister in it because of the cloud of divine glory.

So Paul’s taking the same imagery—the holy place in which the Spirit of God dwells—and he’s applying it to the Corinthians. That’s what you are as the Church. You might look just like a ragtag body of believers. You’re poor, you’re not very wise, and you’re not very noble. You gather together maybe in some little assembly room or in someone’s house in order to hear the Good News and worship the Lord. But the reality is you are the temple of God, because God’s Spirit dwells in you, and that’s why there’s a call for there to be unity within the temple...and not to desecrate the dwelling place of God’s Spirit.

Alright, so with that background in mind, if you go back to 1 Corinthians then, the reading ends for today by saying, therefore:

Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. (1 Corinthians 3:18)

Notice once again, Paul's use of that technical terminology I mentioned in a previous video of "this age," meaning "this world," this fallen world. It's a Jewish technical term, because Paul says "the wisdom of this world"—see, he uses both this age and this world, the old creation—"is foolishness with God." For he says... "catches the wise in their craftiness" and:

The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.

So let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apol'los or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's. (1 Corinthians 3:20-23)

So he seems to be returning there to that earlier theme about divisions between Paul and Cephas and Apol'los and say, look, all of you—to the extent that you are at the temple of God—you are one. And you belong to Christ insofar as you are members of His one body, and Christ belongs to God the Father. So the principle of unity for the Church is precisely the unity of Christ with God, the unity of the Father and the Son. So the Church should be as unified as the Father and the Son are with one another, which is a Pauline version of exactly what Jesus says in the Gospel of John, right? John 17...Jesus' final prayer is for the unity of the Church. And He says, I pray, Father, that they might be one as you and I are one. Which that unity is, of course, the unity of the Spirit. It's the Spirit that is the bond between the Father and the Son. And it's the Spirit that dwells within the Church and makes it into one Church.

And by the way, this is one of the reasons why one of the articles of faith in the Apostles Creed is "I believe in one holy Catholic church." Notice two adjectives there—the oneness of the Church and the holiness of the Church—are both adjectives that flow out the Church's identity as the temple of God, and that's what Paul is describing here.

So I just bring this up...I emphasize that element because again, if you live in a contemporary western Christian context, you are so...we are so used to there being divisions within the Church that it isn't really a scandal for us anymore. It's easy, I should say, to become desensitized to the scandal of division within the Church.

But for Paul, the idea that the Church is one is an essential witness to it being the fulfillment of the temple in Jerusalem...because there was only ever one sanctuary, one temple. If you look in the book of Deuteronomy 12, God says, there's going to be one place for you to dwell—that's going to be the one place of sacrifice. It's what's going to unite the twelve tribes of Israel around that one sanctuary. And therefore, if the Church really is the new temple of God, it too has to have both holiness—it needs to be set apart, that's one of the marks of the Church—but it also needs to have oneness. It needs to have unity.

Alright, I'll close then with two quotes from the living tradition. One of them is from St. John Chrysostom (Golden Mouth), my favorite commentator on 1 Corinthians. And he says this about Paul's use of the temple imagery:

“Do you not know that you are the Temple of God?” For since [Paul] had discoursed in the section before, concerning those who were dividing the Church, he thenceforward attacks him also who had been guilty of uncleanness; not indeed as yet in plain terms but in a general way; hinting at his corrupt mode of life and enhancing the sin, by the Gift which had been already given to him.<sup>2</sup>

Pause there. You might think, what are you talking about, Dr. Pitre? Well, I'm not talking about it—Chrysostom is talking about it. But what he's doing is he's getting a little ahead of himself. He's pointing forward to chapter 5, when Paul's going to talk about a man who was committing incest and how he's defiling the temple of God through his sin. So there are two ways that the temple of the Church is being defiled. One is through the divisions within the Church, but then the other is through the grave sin of one of the members of the Church at Corinth. We'll come back to that when we get to chapter 5. That's from Chrysostom's *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* chapter 9, verse 7.

And then a few centuries down the road...so Chrysostom is in the fourth century, and St. Thomas Aquinas is in the 13th century. In the middle ages, Aquinas says this about 1 Corinthians 3:17. He's going to emphasize more of the moral

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<sup>2</sup> *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 9.7; in NPNF1 12.52

desecration of the temple of God through sin. Aquinas says this in his commentary on 1 Corinthians:

“[I]f any man violates the temple of God, him shall God destroy...” [1 Cor 3:17] Now the “temple of God” is violated in two ways: in one way, by false teaching, which does not build on the foundation, but rather uproots it and destroys the edifice... In another way a person violates the temple of God by mortal sin, through which he destroys himself or someone else by his works or example... For a person who profanes a sacred thing commits a sacrilege...<sup>3</sup>

That’s from Aquinas’ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* no. 175. Alright, so what does that mean? Well, notice what Aquinas is doing here. He’s applying the image of the Church as a temple to the individual believer. And what he’s saying is, just as in the Old Testament, the temple of God was holy—meaning it was set apart from sin such that any sin committed in the temple would not just be a sin but an act of sacrilege, an act of desecration — so too, the individual Christian can defile the temple of the Holy Spirit that he is in two ways. First, through false teaching, which would be to take in some kind of untruth and defile basically (in a sense) the temple of the intellect. But the other way is through mortal sin, which defiles the temple of God by violating it in such a way that the person who is supposed to be set apart from sin and set apart for God, instead defiles the very presence of the Spirit within him by committing some kind of grave sin, some kind of grave mortal sin.

In a Jewish context—although Thomas is obviously writing much later than first century Judaism—this would be a very potent image. Because every first century Jew would have known that in the history of Israel, one of the ways that you knew the temple had been defiled is because the Spirit of God would depart from it. So if you recall, we just saw that when Solomon builds the temple and dedicates it originally, God accepts the temple as His dwelling place by coming down in the form of the glory cloud and dwelling within. But if you fast forward a few hundred years to the time of Ezekiel at the time of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century

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<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* no. 175



BC, one of the ways that you know the temple has been abandoned by God after the sins of the priest—which Ezekiel describes. He describes, for example, priests in the Jerusalem temple worshipping idols, worshipping false gods, in the sanctuary. So they desecrate the temple in the book of Ezekiel. And the result is that the glory of the Lord departs from the temple. In other words, the Spirit abandons the temple, because it's been defiled through the sin of the priests.

And what ends up happening is, the Babylonians come in and they destroy the temple once it has abandoned by the Spirit of God. That's the logic of Paul's argument here. Paul is saying the same thing: If you desecrate the temple of the Church, God will come and destroy it. And St. Thomas then is applying that to the individual Christian and saying, if the individual Christian defiles the temple that he or she is by committing a mortal sin, what happens is not that the Christian stops being a temple...but that the Spirit of God departs, just like the Spirit departed in the temple in the Old Testament.

I bring this up, for me, I find this helpful, because it's easy for us—especially in the modern period—to think of mortal sin purely as the violation of a serious rule or a serious commandment. So, how do I commit a mortal sin? Well, I break one of the commandments. But Paul's way of looking at sin is different. Once you realize that the Christian is a temple, that a person who is in Christ has become a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, then a mortal sin isn't just the breaking of a commandment, it's the desecration of a holy place. And that holy place is the immortal soul of each baptized person, so there is something even more serious about a mortal sin in the heart and the mind of a Christian, because a Christian is the temple of God. Each individual believer is nothing less than the dwelling place of God, so that a grave sin is not just an act of transgression, it's also an act of desecration.

So on that happy note, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to live out not just the vocation that they received in their Baptism—to be witnesses to Christ—but also the vocation to holiness, to live as if they are what God has revealed them to be...namely, dwelling places of the Holy Spirit.