A Reflection on the Consolation of the Holy Spirit

> *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.* 2 Corinthians 1.3-7

This is not a very long reading, but in these few verses the Apostle Paul uses the word 'consolation', or some form of it, no fewer than ten times. That gives us some idea how important this consolation is for him, especially when we note that these are almost the very first words of the letter in question: they set the tone for the whole of Paul's second letter to the Church in Corinth. 'Consolation' is what the letter is really about.

The Apostle understands this consolation to be the answer to 'affliction' and 'suffering' – and these words (or words derived from them) appear another seven times in these five verses. ('God' and 'Christ' appear six times – meaning that between them these few words account for nearly one fifth of all the words in the whole text.) The consolation which comes from God is our help in the face of all suffering: this is what the Apostle wants us to know and understand – he wants us to *experience* it in and through our faith in Jesus Christ. We could speak, not of 'faith', but of *trust* – and of this trust as a kind of *spiritual friendship*. In that case, the Apostle's message is that our *friendship with God* is our strength and hope in the face of all trials and tribulations. But it speaks also of a deep *solidarity* between God and our own selves – an *intention* on God's part to be *with us*. (Remember that Jesus is also named 'Emmanuel', which means *God is with us*.) Hence our 'hope remains unshaken' (verse 7).

In Greek – the language used by St Paul himself – the word is *'parakaleo'*. It means 'comfort' or 'compassion'; literally it is about *being called alongside* someone; it is a comfort or a hope which we can *invoke*. In that sense there is a suggestion of *cooperation* between the one who offers

comfort and the one who needs or seeks it. So notice how the Apostle speaks of a relationship of consolation which is exactly like that: it is marked by a mutuality and shared compassion by which we support and sustain each other, even as we are supported and sustained by God.

In Christian usage there is another word – *epiclesis* – which describes a moment in the Eucharistic Prayer when the power of the Holy Spirit is *called down upon* the gifts of bread and wine, that they may become for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We can see that this word is related to the Greek which St Paul uses in his second Corinthian letter; it helps us understand even more clearly how what he is describing is the way in which God's compassion or comfort or consolation (itself another word for *hope*) is *made present* to us, how it becomes *real* for us. It is why it is right to think of it – to experience it – as something which is manifested between *friends*, including a sense of God as our friend *above all*.

It is in this friendship that we become able to comfort and support each other, just as we have know the comfort and support of God. Comfort and support become the means through which our relationships hold together and become effective and fruitful. It is through our sharing of comfort and support that we are knitted together with each other; and this is possible because, first of all, we have been knitted together with God. And although this is a matter of *faith*, it is so more in the sense of *mutual trust* than simply *belief* in the right propositions. That is why we describe our connection with God as a kind of *relationship*. Another manifestation of this same theme is in the moment when the Holy Spirit hovers over Jesus in his baptism, saying, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3.17). As we continue our path through Lent towards the vision of the resurrection, may this interconnection of compassion and consolation be for us a continuing source of inspiration and of life.

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