

Historic Commentary

(Sixth Sunday in Easter - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 14:15-21 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

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Chrysostom: At all times it is works and actions that we need, not a mere show of words. It is easy for anyone to say or promise something, but it is not so easy to act on that word or promise.... “If you love me,” Christ said, “keep my commandments.” ... I have commanded you to love one another and to do to one another as I have done to you. To love me is to obey these commands and to submit to me, your beloved.

Cyril of Alexandria: Having determined and expressly declared that the enjoyment of the heavenly blessings (supplied, that is, through him by the Father) is both due to those who love him and in very truth shall be theirs, he immediately goes on to describe the power of love. He provides excellent and irreproachable instruction to us for our profit with the intent that we should devote ourselves to its pursuit. For even if a person says that he loves God, he will not immediately merit credit for having true love of God, since the power of virtue does not stand on bare speech alone, nor piety on naked words. Rather, it is distinguished by performance of good deeds and an obedient disposition. Keeping the divine commandments is the best way to give living expression to our love toward God. It presents the picture of a life lived in all its fullness and truth. It is not a life sketched out in mere sounds that flow from the tongue. It gleams instead with the altogether radiant and brilliant colors that paint a portrait of good works.

Augustine: How, then, did the apostles love, but in the Holy Spirit? And yet they are commanded to love him and keep his commandments before they have received him and, in fact, in order to receive him. And yet, without having that Spirit, they certainly could not love him and keep his commandments. We are therefore to understand that he who loves already has the Holy Spirit, and by what he has he becomes worthy of a fuller

possession, that by having more he may love more. The disciples, therefore, already had that Holy Spirit whom the Lord promised, for without him they could not call him Lord. But they had him not as yet in the way promised by the Lord ... He was yet to be given them in an ampler measure

Chrysostom: This promise shows once again Christ's consideration. Because his disciples did not yet know who he was, it was likely that they would greatly miss his companionship, his teaching, his actual physical presence, and be completely disconsolate when he had gone. Therefore he said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor," meaning another like himself.... They received the Spirit after Christ had purified them by his sacrifice. The Spirit did not come down on them while Christ was still with them because this sacrifice had not yet been offered. But when sin had been blotted out and the disciples, sent out to face danger, were preparing themselves for the battle, they needed the Holy Spirit's coming to encourage them. If you ask why the Spirit did not come immediately after the resurrection, this was in order to increase their gratitude for receiving him by increasing their desire. They were troubled by nothing as long as Christ was with them, but when his departure had left them desolate and very much afraid, they would be most eager to receive the Spirit.

Gregory of Nazianzus: The Spirit came after Christ so that we would not lack a Comforter. But he is called "another" Comforter so that you might acknowledge his co-equality. For this word another defines an alter ego, a name of equal lordship, not of inequality. We do not use the word another for different kinds of things but for those that are consubstantial.

Augustine: The apostle says that the Comforter—the title given to the third person of the Trinity—is God. In his epistle to the Corinthians he says, "God, who comforts those who are cast down, comforts us." The Holy Spirit who comforts those who are cast down is therefore God ... Or if they rather take these words of the apostle as applying to the Father or the Son, let them no longer, then, separate the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son or make the Holy Spirit appear less than the Son, when it is his peculiar [office] to offer comfort.

Leo the Great: For the Only Begotten of God himself desired no difference to be felt between himself and the Holy Spirit in the faith of believers and in the efficacy of his works because there is no diversity in their nature.

Athanasius: The Lord called the Spirit “Spirit of truth” and “Paraclete,” showing that the Triad is complete in him. In him the Word makes glorious the creation and, by bestowing on it divine life and sonship, draws it to the Father. But that which joins creation to the Word cannot belong to the creatures. And that which bestows sonship upon the creation could not be alien from the Son. For we should have otherwise to seek another spirit, so that by him this Spirit might be joined to the Word. But that would be absurd. The Spirit, therefore, does not belong to things originated. He pertains to the Godhead of the Father, and in him the Word makes things originated divine. But he in whom creation is made divine cannot be outside the Godhead of the Father

Bede: He calls “the world” the inhabitants of this world who are given over to love of it. In contrast, the saints are on fire with a desire for heavenly things... And so, anyone who is searching for consolation outwardly in the things of the world is not capable of being reformed inwardly by the favor of divine consolation. Whoever yearns after lowly delight cannot receive the Spirit of truth. The Spirit of truth flees from a heart it discerns is subject to vanity and restores by the light of his coming only those it beholds carrying out the commandments of truth out of love.

Augustine: The apostle says, “The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.” How then does the Lord say here, “If you love me, keep my commandments, and [then] I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter”? Notice he says this about the Holy Spirit. But without the Spirit we can neither love God nor keep his commandments. How can we love so that we will receive him when, without him, we cannot love at all? How can we keep the commandments so that we will receive him when, without him, we have no power to keep them? Or is it the case that the love by which we love Christ has a prior place in us so that by loving Christ in this way and keeping his commandments we become worthy of receiving the Holy Spirit so that the love of God the Father (not of Christ, which we already had) may be shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us? That kind of thinking is all wrong. For whoever believes he loves the Son without loving the Father loves some figment of his own imagination, not the Son....

We should therefore understand that whoever loves already has the Holy Spirit, and by having him he becomes worthy of having even more of him. And the more he has the Spirit the more he loves. The disciples already had the Holy Spirit whom the Lord promised.... But they did not yet have him in the way the Lord promised. And so they had him and did not have him inasmuch as they did not have to the extent that they would later. They had him in a more limited sense. He was later to be given to them more fully. They had him in a hidden way, but he was yet to be given to them more openly.... Let us admit then that without the Holy Spirit we can neither love Christ nor keep his commandments. [But it is also true that] the less experience we have of the Spirit's presence, the less we can do, while the fuller our experience of the Spirit is, the greater is our ability. And so this is no empty promise of Jesus here—either to the one who does not have the Holy Spirit or to the one who has him. For the promise is made to the one who does not have the Spirit so that he may have him, and it is made to the one who does have the Spirit so that he may have him more abundantly.

Cyril of Alexandria: It is impossible for one's soul to accomplish anything good, or to have power over its own passions or to escape the great subtlety of the devil's snare if the soul is not fortified by the grace of the Holy Spirit and has Christ himself within it ... Christ promises nothing less than that he will be present and will help those who believe on him through the Spirit, even though he ascends into the heavens after his resurrection from the dead.

Gregory the Great: This other Consoler of humanity, who himself is invisible, inflames each person that he has filled so that he too longs after invisible things. And because worldly hearts are only focused on what is seen, they do not receive him because their minds are not elevated to what is unseen. As secular minds broaden their horizons by focusing on the outward things [of this world], they constrict the ability of the arteries of the heart to admit the Spirit.

Augustine: But why does he speak of life as present to him and future to them? Because his resurrection preceded, and theirs was to follow. His resurrection was about to take place so soon that he speaks of it as present, theirs being deferred till the end of the world. He does not say "you live" but "you shall live." ... Because he lives, therefore we shall live: "As by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead."

Bede: Even now the Son loves those who love him and the Father. But he loves them now so that they may live properly as a result of their faith, which works through love. Then (in the future), he will love them as well, but in such a way that they may come to the vision of the truth of which they only had a taste through faith. When he adds, "I will show myself to him," he will indeed show himself to all human beings but will show his very own being only to the elect. At the judgment even the damned will see Christ, but only the just will see the king in all his beauty.

John Calvin: vs 15. If you love me. The love with which the disciples loved Christ was true and sincere, and yet there was some superstition mixed with it, as is frequently the case with ourselves; for it was very foolish in them to wish to keep him in the world. To correct this fault, he bids them direct their love to another end; and that is, to employ themselves in keeping the commandments which he had given them. This is undoubtedly a useful doctrine, for of those who think that they love Christ, there are very few who honor him as they ought to do; but, on the contrary, after having performed small and trivial services, they give themselves no farther concern. The true love of Christ, on the other hand, is regulated by the observation of his doctrine as the only rule. But we are likewise reminded how sinful our affections are, since even the love which we bear to Christ is not without fault, if it be not directed to a pure obedience.

Vs 16. And I will pray to the Father. This was given as a remedy for soothing the grief which they might feel on account of Christ's absence; but at the same time, Christ promises that he will give them strength to keep his commandments; For otherwise the exhortation would have had little effect. He therefore loses no time in informing them that, though he be absent from them in body, yet he will never allow them to remain destitute of assistance; for he will be present with them by his Spirit.

And he will, give you another Comforter. The word Comforter is here applied both to Christ and to the Spirit, and justly; for it is an office which belongs equally to both of them, to comfort and exhort us, and to guard us by their protection. Christ was the Protector of his disciples, so long as he dwelt in the world: and afterwards he committed them to the protection and guardianship of the Spirit. It may be asked, are we not still under the protection of Christ? The answer is easy. Christ is a continual Protector, but not in a visible way. So long as he dwelt in the world, he openly manifested himself as their Protector; but now he guards us by his Spirit.

Vs 18. I will not have you orphans. This passage shows what men are, and what they can do, when they have been deprived of the protection of the Spirit. They are orphans, exposed to every kind of fraud and injustice, incapable of governing themselves, and, in short, unable of themselves to do anything. The only remedy for so great a defect is, if Christ govern us by his Spirit, which he promises that he will do. First then, the disciples are reminded of their weakness, that, distrusting themselves, they may rely on nothing else than the protection of Christ; and, secondly, having promised a remedy, he gives them good encouragement; for he declares that he will never leave them When he says, I will come to you, he shows in what manner he dwells in his people, and in what manner he fills all things. It is, by the power of his Spirit; and hence it is evident, that the grace of the Spirit is a striking proof of his Divinity.