

CHAPTER TWO

On Being the Fragrance of Christ to God

BACKGROUND: Because of his deep affection for the Christians of Corinth, Paul had not yet returned to visit them as he had promised. In this chapter he explains this decision and addresses the claims of his detractors who were using his prolonged absence as an opportunity to claim that he was a false apostle.

2:1-2. *But I determined this within myself, that I would not come again to you in sorrow. For if I make you sorrowful, then who is he who makes me glad but the one who is made sorrowful by me?* If Paul had returned to visit the Corinthian Christians while the sinfulness he had written about in First Corinthians was still taking place, he would not have been able to hide his disappointment. His demeanor would have caused them sorrow. He loved them and wanted to be with them, but not under those circumstances.

2:3. *And I wrote this very thing to you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow over those from whom I ought to have joy, having confidence in you all that my joy is the joy of you all.* He wrote in First Corinthians that their conduct would determine how he would next come to them—*with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness* (1 Cor 4:21). He wanted to arrive joyfully, so they could share his joy.

2:4. *For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you.* He had written in a stern tone, admonishing them for their misconceptions and wrongdoings because he loved them and wanted the best for them: salvation. Yet his harshness had given him much pain, the type a parent feels when he must reprimand his children or punish their disobedience in order to keep them on the right path.

A father whose ... son is afflicted with gangrene, being compelled to use the knife and cautery, is pained on both accounts, that his son is diseased, and that he is compelled to use the knife on him. CHRYSOSTOM¹

2:5. *But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—not to be too severe.* The sinfulness in Corinth is not a personal affront to Paul but a matter which brings sorrow to the whole Church (see 1 Cor 12:26).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). How can one person's sinfulness bring sorrow to the whole Church?

2:6-8. *This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him.* The man referred to had been involved in a sexual relationship with his stepmother (1 Cor 5:1). The action Paul insisted upon at the time was excommunication, hoping this would spark the offender's desire to return to the fellowship of the Church, thus encouraging him to repent and put an end to his sinful behavior. Apparently this spiritual discipline produced the desired results. The man involved must have shown repentance, because Paul is now urging that they show love by taking the next step, which is to forgive him, welcoming him back into their fellowship. Some

of the Corinthians balked at this, prompting Paul's concern that the man involved will become discouraged—and be lost permanently.

If one lets go him that has been scourged and heals him not, he has done nothing.
CHRYSOSTOM²

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). How might a person be lost to the Church and to God's Kingdom through *too much sorrow*?

2:9. *For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.* Paul's hope is that as they responded to the disciplinary action required initially, they would now respond to the offender's repentance with forgiveness.

Obedience to the stern measure of excommunication might seem to have stemmed from envy and malice, but subsequent forgiveness shows the obedience to be pure and whether they are prone to loving kindness ... not because he is worthy, not because he has shown sufficient penitence, but because he is weak.
CHRYSOSTOM³

In forgiving the excommunicated man and receiving him again into fellowship, the Corinthians would be demonstrating their faith and love. The penitent's faith and love are demonstrated by his repentance and desire to be reinstated, signifying his understanding of himself as a weak human being: unable to save himself and dependent upon the mercy and the grace of God through the saving actions of Jesus Christ. This is the proper work of the Church.

The Church is ... a court of justice, a hospital, a school of philosophy, a nursery of the soul, a training course for that race which leads to Heaven ... and a spiritual bath which wipes away not filth of body but stains of soul, by its many methods of repentance.
CHRYSOSTOM⁴

Excommunication was a tool used often in the early Church to safeguard the true teachings of Christ until they could be preserved by written dogma. The Sacrament of Confession and the authority to prescribe spiritual penance came to be understood in time as the vehicle by which the priest can lead his flock away from sin (Jn 20:23). The value of this instance of excommunication in Corinth is that it shows the zeal with which Paul taught the need for Christians to live in a Christ-like manner.

2:10-11. *Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.* Just as sin affects the whole Church, so do the appropriate corrective actions and subsequent forgiveness or lack thereof. True repentance should be responded to with the forgiveness that Christ taught, else the Body of Christ will be divided and Satan will win souls: those of the unforgiven, if they then stray from Christ, and the souls of those who refuse to forgive, through disobedience and hardness of heart. Those who withhold forgiveness from someone who has truly repented have no right to expect Christ's forgiveness for their sins (Mk 11:26).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). What is true repentance? Must one continue forever in despair about past sins?

2:12-13. Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's Gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia. When Paul decided against returning to Corinth, he asked Titus to go instead and then to meet him in Troas to advise him on the progress the Corinthians were making in responding to the first epistle. When Paul arrived in Troas, however, he did not find Titus waiting for him. As there was no means of instant communication to inquire about his whereabouts, Paul became anxious. Though there had been work for him to do in Troas, he left for Macedonia, hoping to find Titus there.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). Even Paul experienced moments of despondency during trying times. What can we learn from his example (verse 2:14) in coping with difficulties in our lives?

2:14. Now thanks be to God Who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. Paul had been in a poor state of mind. As a teacher of the Gospel, he had been enduring continual persecution. Although he longed to be in Corinth, he considered it the wrong time to return. In addition, he had been without the comfort and support of Titus when he needed it. In this verse, however, he joyously thanks God, Who not only brought him through this distressed state but in spite of it continued to use him as an instrument through which the glorious truths about Jesus Christ were dispersed wherever he went.

We are Royal censers, breathing wherever we go of the heavenly ointment and the spiritual sweet savor.

CHRYSOSTOM⁵

From the time God first began to point fallen man to the road to salvation, the burning of incense has symbolized self-denying obedience. God commanded that it burn perpetually in the Temple (Ex 30:7-8). The constant, smoldering fragrance was a reminder of the sacrifices required by the Mosaic Law—the Old Testament Written Covenant between God and man. This created a *sweet aroma to the Lord* (Lev 2:2) because it indicated man's love for Him. But the process was frustrating because its futility was obvious. The Law had to be followed exactly—legalistically. Each time a person disobeyed any part of it, he was required to bring the prescribed atonement to the Temple. But he would inevitably disobey again, so found himself under continual bondage. Pointing to the need for divine intervention, the Psalmist groaned in desperation, begging that his prayers rising to God be likened to incense (Ps 141:2): that the intent of his heart be acknowledged and judged, rather than his incessant, external, legalistic attempts to follow the Law. Rev 5:8 and 8:3-4 confirm that, in response to that yearning, God sent His Son to usher in the new covenant. The blood Christ shed willingly for the redemption of mankind put an end to the sacrifices required under the Law. According to the terms of the new covenant, the prayers of all the saints rise before God with a sweet savor. "Saints" are those who attempt to live their lives in a manner which matches their prayers: trying to be Christ-like in all things to show love and faith that Christ is the promised Messiah but freed from the necessity to *achieve, on their own*, absolute perfection to *earn* salvation.

The odors of incense signify the fragrant sacrifice of the faithful which they offer by an undefiled life.... The vials are thoughts from which come the fragrance of good deeds and pure prayer.

ANDREW OF CAESAREA⁶

Malachi prophesied that the day would come when incense would be offered to God by Gentiles everywhere (Mal 1:11). In fulfillment of that prophecy, incense is a companion to prayer in the Orthodox Church. The lingering fragrance is a reminder that, under the Blood Covenant of the

New Testament, God's criterion for salvation is a life made sweet by faith in and love for Christ. God gave the Mosaic Law to the nation of Israel as a step toward learning obedience and as an indication of what it would mean to have to be perfect and holy like Christ, Who *has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma* (Eph 5:2).

When our soul's own intrinsic qualities and fruits—prayer, love, faith, vigilance, fasting and the other expressions of the virtues—mingle and commune in the fellowship of the spirit, they effuse a rich perfume, like burning incense.

MAKARIOS OF EGYPT⁷

2:15. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. The Gospel of Jesus Christ sets forth the terms by which all mankind may be saved from the everlasting torment of being far from God. Christ's life on earth, bringing this Gospel to mankind, created an aroma that pleased God. Those who continue Christ's work emit the same sweet scent, discernible to God, whether the message they bring is accepted or rejected.

It is sobering to consider that if those who teach the good news of salvation through Jesus are *the fragrance of Christ* to God, those who defy the Gospel or ignore it (the same thing/Mt 12:30), must bear the odor of Satan.

When the fear of God is not present with strictness, the soul is dead.... It is not dissolved into corruption by ashes and dust, but into things of fouler odor than these: into drunkenness and anger and covetousness, into improper loves and unseasonable desires. If you want to know exactly how foul an odor it has, give me a soul that is pure, and then you will see clearly how foul the odor of this filthy and impure one...For so long as we are in contact habitually with a foul odor, we are not sensitive to it.

CHRYSOSTOM⁸

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (e). It is good to ponder what type of aroma our life emits to God.

2:16. To the one we are the aroma of death to death, and to the other the aroma of life to life. And who is sufficient for these things? The Gospel is the same to all, but because of free will, each person receives it differently. Some hear and take it gladly into their hearts, choosing to take the road through life which leads to salvation. Others ignore or reject it. To the one who accepts it, the Gospel carries the sweet aroma of eternal life. To the one who rejects it, its aroma is made caustic by the eternal death it brings—separation from God. No one, on his own, can attempt the task of teaching the Gospel, knowing the awesome consequences it brings to those who hear and reject it.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (f). How then were Paul, the Apostles, and others through the ages able to accomplish this task?

2:17. For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ. In spite of the claims of his detractors, Paul's mission is to teach the truth that Christ brought to the world, not to bring glory or material profit to himself—as is the case with many false teachers (2 Pet 2:1). The great apostolic mission of the Church is to continue this work. Accordingly, each person who considers himself a Christian is called upon to learn the fullness of Christ's teachings, to live by them, and to pass them on to

others. By permission of God, the Devil has power and dominion in this world, as he will until Christ returns in glory. No area of life on earth is beyond Satan's reach. Wherever God's work is being done, Satan tries especially hard to spread divisiveness (Rev 12:17).

Evil originates...in the spiritual sin of the angel. And the attitude of Lucifer reveals to us the root of every sin: pride as revolt against God. He who was first called to deification by grace wished to be God by himself. The root of sin is thus the thirst for self-deification, the hatred of grace. Remaining dependent on God in his very being, since his being was created by God, the spirit in revolt consequently acquires a hatred of being, a frenzy to destroy, a thirst for an impossible nothingness. As only the earthly world remains open to him, he tries here to destroy the divine plan, and having failed to annihilate creation, to disfigure it. The drama that began in Heaven continues on earth, as the faithful angels close the gates of Heaven unyieldingly to the fallen angels.⁹

It is not surprising, therefore, that throughout its history the Church has been plagued by those who have misused the Gospel for personal gain and glory on earth, rather than to bring people to Christ. Those who sincerely desire to teach God's word or to do His work in any capacity must be careful that they do not fall into Satan's trap in this regard. To the extent that we are rewarded by the world for this work, we can expect no reward in Heaven (Mt 6:1-4). This serves to encourage spiritual growth and the realization that what matters most is not what the world thinks of us but our relationship with God and what He knows about us.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). How can one person's sinfulness bring sorrow to the whole Church?

Those who are Baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity are united as the Body of Christ. It is because of this fact that His redemptive acts made salvation possible for everyone. This also means, however, that one person's unrepentant sinfulness brings sorrow to the whole Church. Sin sets up a barrier between the sinner and God. This barrier blocks the flow of grace and causes spiritual pain, anguish, and the potential of spiritual death, just as blocking the flow of blood through the body would cause serious physical problems.

What a responsibility the Church has, to be Christ's Body, showing Him to those who are unable or unwilling to see Him in providence, or in creation! Through the Word of God lived out in the Body of Christ they can come to the Father and themselves be made again "in the likeness of God."

ATHANASIUS¹⁰

(b). How might a person be lost to the Church and to God's Kingdom through *too much sorrow*? If a person was given the impression that his sinfulness could never be forgiven, he could lose hope:

... and either do as Judas did, or live more sinfully. For if he should shrink from enduring the anguish of lengthened censure and perhaps fall into despair, he will either come to hang himself or fall into greater crimes. One ought then to take steps beforehand, lest the sore become too hard to deal with; and lest what we have done well we lose by lack of moderation.

CHRYSOSTOM¹¹

(c). What is true repentance? Must we continue in despair forever about past sins? To sin is to fall short of the mark with regard to a Christ-like way of life. True repentance is recognition of

sin followed by sorrow that one has offended God and an attempt to change in outlook and actions to preclude further sin.

Let us not be easy-minded afterwards, but when we transgress, afflict our minds and not merely give vent to words. For I know many who say indeed that they regret their sins but do nothing to change. They fast and wear rough garments, but are more eager for money than hucksters; fall more to anger than do wild beasts; and take more pleasure in reproach than others do in praise. These things are not repentance, these things are the semblance and shadow only of repentance, not repentance itself. CHRYSOSTOM¹²

When appropriate, the penitent should make amends with those offended, then partake of the Sacrament of Confession to draw upon the grace of forgiveness Christ entrusted to the Apostles, thus to priests of the Church ordained through apostolic succession (Jn 20:22-23). If absolution is given, the penitent should feel cleansed and reconciled with God, confident of His mercy. To continue in despair over confessed sins at this point is to doubt God's love, which could lead to loss of faith and *unmeasured sorrow*.

The Devil can cause destruction even under the show of piety. He can destroy not only by leading into sin, but even by the opposite: the unmeasured sorrow following repentance for it. Then he uses not only his weapons against us but our own too. For he is not content with striking down by sin, but even by repentance he does this, unless we are vigilant. To take by sin is his proper work; by repentance, however, is our weapon. When even through repentance he is able to cause destruction, think how disgraceful the defeat, how he will laugh at and call us weak and pitiful, if he is able to subdue us with our own weapons. CHRYSOSTOM¹³

We should remember our past transgressions to the extent that they remind us of our vulnerability to sin and to avoid slipping into a prideful feeling of self-righteousness, but we should not let sincerely repented and confessed sins bog us down. Sin prevents us from acting in love freely, which is our God-given potential. To be loosed from the bonds of sin is to be truly joyful, free to be what God wants us to be—holy.

(d). Think about the fact that even Paul experienced moments of despondency. What can we learn from his example (verse 2:14) in coping during difficult times in our lives? When Paul experienced difficult times, he sought comfort, consolation and advice from those who understood his mission. Ultimately though, he relied on God in all things. When he was able to lose himself in his work, he was revitalized, finding strength and courage to continue. Each Christian can find similar comfort from the never-ending Source, for each of us, in some way, is meant to be a teacher of the Gospel to those around us, most importantly through example. No matter what our circumstances might be, as long as we have the gift of life, we can show God we love Him and want to be with Him forever. We do this by trying to follow the road to Him ourselves and by trying to bring others to it. When we put everything in this perspective, we realize that every difficulty in life is temporary and every hurdle surmountable.

(e). It is good to ponder what type of aroma our life emits to God. Just as we leave a distinctive scent in our wake when we wear perfume, and our personality creates a certain atmosphere around us, our spiritual life—or lack of it—creates an aroma discernible to God and to those who are spiritually attuned. Wherever we go, whatever we do, our actions and demeanor should create a *sweet aroma to the Lord*. Those who visit our homes should be able to tell by what they see, what they hear and what we do that we are Christians.

We must therefore offer ourselves as an offering to God, and in all things be found pleasing to our Maker, with an upright heart, with sincere faith, well grounded in hope, fervent in charity, offering Him the first-fruits of His own creation. This Pure Oblation the Church alone offers to the Creator, offering it to Him from His own creation, with giving of thanks. IRENAEUS¹⁴

(f). If no one can teach the Gospel on his/her own, how were Paul, the Apostles and others like them through the ages able to accomplish this task? Only through the grace of God can anyone teach the Gospel (see 1 Cor 15:10). Thus all who desire to pass on the transforming truths about Christ, whether an ordinary traveler on the road through life or a priest in the pulpit—all need to pray for divine assistance.

Were the Apostles not men such as you? Did they not dwell among men? Did they not have the same interests as you? Did they not do the same things? Perhaps you think they were angels? That they came down from Heaven? No! “But,” you will say, “they worked miracles!” It was not because of their miracles that they were remarkable. How long must we speak of miracles to cover up our own laziness? Look at the lives of the Saints. They shone forth, but not because of their miracles. For many who even cast out devils are not honored because they did evil and for this were punished. What then you may ask was it that made them great? Their rejection of wealth, contempt of vainglory, and their turning away from the things of this world. Because had they been wanting in this regard, or had they indulged their passions, then even had they raised thousands from death to life they would have been not merely worthless but would have been considered frauds. Behold then that it is their life which shines forth in every way and draws down on them the grace of the Spirit. CHRYSOSTOM¹⁵

An effort to bring a person to knowledge and understanding of salvation through Christ will bear most fruit if it is approached not as an intellectual exercise but as a spiritual pursuit which involves both body and soul. This requires the use of spiritual tools such as prayer, fasting, and the Sacraments, as well as the tools of knowledge.

Let us return to the word which has been handed down to us from the beginning, watchful in prayer (1 Pet 4:7) and persevering in fasting.

POLYCARP¹⁶

¹ Schaff, “Homily IV,” Vol. XII, p.296.

² *ibid*, p.297.

³ *ibid*.

⁴ *ibid*, “Homily XV,” p.354.

⁵ *ibid*, “Homily V,” p.301.

⁶ Averky, *Apocalypse*, p.91.

⁷ Palmer, Sherrard, Ware, “Love,” (97), Vol. Three, p.328.

⁸ Schaff, “Homily VI,” Vol. XII, p.308.

⁹ Lossky, *Theology*, p.81-82.

¹⁰ Winter, “The Likeness of God,” (Day 100).

¹¹ Schaff, “Homily IV,” Vol. XII, p.297.

¹² *ibid*, p.299.

¹³ *ibid*, p.298.

¹⁴ Toal, “The Eucharist in Prophecy,” Vol. Three, p.113.

¹⁵ *ibid*, “The Leaven of Holiness,” Vol. One, p.353.

¹⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, “The Epistle of Polycarp,” Vol. I, p.34.