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ORTHODOXY, ORTHOPRAXIS, AND ORTHOKARDIA:  
A REFLECTION ON THE LETTER OF JAMES

Br. Alex Juguilon, O.S.C.

*Nota bene - What follows is the transcript of a reflection given by Br. Alex on the occasion of a Convivium fellowship, here at Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary.*

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can that faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.<sup>1</sup>

Some people read this passage from the Letter of James as the dialectic that exists between *orthodoxy*<sup>2</sup> and *orthopraxis*.<sup>3</sup> In one sense, our faith is predicated on doctrine, teachings handed down to us, and philosophical and theological concepts grounded in Plato and Aristotle. And in another sense, our faith is predicated on *praxis*, movement, the response to a call, a performative. As Christians, we sometimes find ourselves

caught between these two polarities. This tension is something I have confronted every day throughout my life. But perhaps James is talking about a different type of “*ortho*.” Maybe James is talking about *orthokardia*,<sup>4</sup> having the right heart – a loving disposition that will inform our beliefs and guide the “whys” and “how’s” behind our actions. This “right heart” is what I would like to reflect upon with you this morning.

This year 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. In the constitution, the Council speaks to the dialectic between doctrine and practice. In article 14, the constitution turns to the criteria for visible faith, set by Robert Bellarmine (whose feast day was yesterday) some five hundred years ago, and which remained the bench mark, without revision, until 1964. These criteria, which are the visible bonds that fetter the believer to the Church, consist of: public profession of faith, communal participation in the sacraments (historically the Eucharist), and submission to magisterial governance.<sup>5</sup> The Council restates these bonds, but the Council wisely goes on to remind the faithful that these bonds only serve to define the body – the *corpus* – of the faith community. They do not signify the life of the Church. And just as the body needs a heart, the faith community needs the revealing of charity throughout the living of their several and collective lives. Without charity practiced and given indiscriminately, the Church is not alive, just as a body without a heart is nothing more than a corpse.

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus teaches that the “presencing” of charity in the dealings of the *everyday*

separates the goats from the sheep, damnation from salvation.<sup>6</sup> In his book *Moral Wisdom*, James Keenan says that “we sin more out of our strengths than our weaknesses” because we do not see things as sinful that we should notice if our consciences were well educated.<sup>7</sup> In the Gospel of Matthew, the goats did not see Jesus in the poor, the stranger, the prisoner, or the sick. Similarly, the Pharisee did not look upon the Publican with kindness. The crowd did not show mercy to the woman caught up in adultery. The priest and the Levite did not offer assistance to the bloodied traveler. The rich man did not feed Lazarus. In each circumstance, charity came from outside the chosen people.

Our Holy Father Francis asks us a similar question in his exhortation. Are you being a bridge or a battlement?<sup>8</sup> Charity gives us the “how” to build bridges. But the question is, “who” are we building bridges to? Are we building bridges to those who are like us, or are we building bridges to those who shock us, who look different than us, who have a different political view than us, who have a different ecclesiology than us, or who have a different orientation than us? How we build those bridges defines who we are as Christians. “When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message...is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing.”<sup>9</sup>

Pope Francis’ concern emerges out of the wisdom found in article 28 of the Second Vatican Council’s pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes*. Here, the Council boldly states

states that “respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political, and even religious matters.”<sup>10</sup> So what is the takeaway from all of this? The takeaway is that faith is invisible. You do not know what a person’s faith is by looking at them - whether that person is standing on a street corner or standing in a Church. But faith can be made visible through charitable works.

If we, as future ministers, are to evangelize the world, it would seem wise to have charity as our starting point for each and every encounter. It would seem wise to orient our actions according to *orthokardia*. This includes orienting our awareness towards the need to provide quality, affordable healthcare for all people, especially the poor and needy. It includes orienting our support for a legal system that protects the unborn, the elderly, the homeless, and those condemned to death. It means orienting our consciences against socio-politico-economic systems that empower the rich and deprive the underprivileged and marginalized. It means witnessing to the Gospel in a way that allows us to live our lives with authenticity, with integrity, and above all, with charity.

### *Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> James 2:14-18 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> From the Greek *orthodoxos*: from *orthos* right, true; and *doxa* opinion; from *dokein* to think, seem: “sound in opinion or doctrine, esp. in religious doctrine; hence, specif., holding the Christian faith as formulated by the great church creeds and confessions” as defined by *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed., unabridged (Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam Company, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> From the Greek *orthopraxis*: from *orthos* right, true; and *praxis* a doing; as in “right action or practice;” *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> From the Greek *orthos* right, true; and *kardia* heart; *ibid.*  
Note, I have combined these two words to indicate the quality of “having the right heart or right interior disposition.”

<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964), English trans., in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1975), 366.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 25:32-46 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> James Keenan, *Moral Wisdom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel” issued November 26, 2013. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965), English trans., in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1975), 928-929.