Orthodoxy, Orthopraxis, and Orthokardia: A Reflection on the Letter of James

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Some people read this passage from the Letter of James as the dialectic that exists between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. 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 performatve. 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, 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. 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 sal-
vation. In his book *Moral Wisdom*, James Keenan says
that “we sin more out of our strengths than our weakness-
es” because we do not see things as sinful that we should
notice if our consciences were well educated. 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 out-
side the chosen people.

Our Holy Father Francis asks us a similar
question in his exhortation. Are you being a bridge or a
battlement? 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.”

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.” 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:

1 James 2:14-18 (NRSV).

2 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).
3 From the Greek *orthopraxis*: from *orthos* right, true; and *praxis* a doing; as in “right action or practice;” ibid.

4 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.”


6 Mt 25:32-46 (NRSV).


9 Ibid.