

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Active Suffering versus Passive Grace Twenty-third Week in Ordinary Time Monday,
September 11, 2017 8:15 AM **Col 1:24—2:3;** Lk 6:6-11 (What are we called to do
or suffer for the sake of God's will and God's work?)

“I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his Body, which is the Church, of which I am a minister in accordance with God's stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God, the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past.”

There is a very strong and important tradition expressed in these words, which is in contrast to **another tradition in the Church in which the believer is very passive**; and there are many such approaches to gospel life and to God in Christ, which stress the passive role of the believer.

Everything is grace. Everything is God. Everything is God's initiative. Everything is complete in Christ. But this text doesn't stress that aspect. It stresses rather that things are not yet complete.

This troubles some people, this side of Christian theology; it troubles them, especially it troubled **Luther. He wanted to see everything as pure grace and relegate the believer to a passive role of receiving.** Well, the mystics speak the same way. They talk about purely passive gifts of contemplation and mysticism bestowed upon the believer. But of course not everyone really experiences that kind of spirituality. Luther himself was a very spiritual man. He had a very lively, active faith; **but one cannot say that he incorporated the entire gospel tradition in his own personal experience.**

None of us encompasses the entire tradition in our experience, so we have to find where we fit in. This is what **Paul** is doing here. He is **talking about how he fits in to an ongoing process of redemption.** “I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” Well, what would that be? Nobody knows; no one has

ever known. But **there's an idea that somehow Christ's suffering, which is redemptive, his redemptive suffering, continues in the body of the Church.** This is a very strong belief among a certain section of Christians, not all; not everyone is given the insight into this.

So we need to appreciate how different people experience the good news, and how differently even the apostles experienced the good news. In this morning's *Morning Prayer* there was a reading from **James** in which he asked the question, "Does anyone's faith lack works?" That's also of this tradition. **"Faith lacking works," he says, "is dead."** Luther was offended by that letter; he said it was an epistle of straw because Luther found God's abundant grace pouring into the soul and leaving very little room for oneself. All well and good.

Ultimately we are all to be united with Christ. But on the way how are we to understand our role? What are we called to do or suffer for the sake of God's will and God's work? That's what this is about: "on behalf of his Body, which is the Church." So Paul understood that his sufferings: the persecutions, the shipwrecks, the imprisonments, all this was all part of Christ's suffering. Should we understand our suffering that way? Well, that's something you have to ask God. How do you see it? **What do you think God is asking from you?**