

Item #24 (Galatians 2,10)

This Item was Entry #23 in my previous website.

The following brief piece (Bibliography §217) was written as a preface for a book by one of my former students, Fr. Saviour Menachery, C.M.I. I fancy it for a number of reasons. First, it enabled me to focus on helping “poor”, i.e., underdeveloped countries, a topic I have been actively interested in since a discerning professor of philosophy named Fr. George Klubertanz, S.J., taught me a mind-opening course in philosophical ethics in 1950-1951 at Saint Louis University. Second, it helped me to put help for the poor into the larger framework of being a Christian after the mind of the Catholic Church as I understand it. Third, it gave me a chance to pay public homage to Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity with whom I have worked for many years.

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“Preface” for “*Remembering the Poor*” (Gal 2,10: Pauline Preaching of an Integral Gospel, by Saviour Menachery, C.M.I.

The interpretation of any written text should take into account the context. This is especially important for the interpretation of biblical texts, which can have normative value in the life of believers. “Context” here is to be taken primarily in the sense of the words in which the biblical text is found. But context also includes many other factors which influenced the shaping of the *original meaning* of the text and the shaping of the attempts to come to grips with the *relevance* of that original meaning in the milieu of any given reader.

Father Saviour Menachery’s reworked version of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Saint Thomas (the Angelicum) in Rome has as its goal the interpretation of the phrase “remembering the poor” in Galatians 2,10. Well aware of the need to interpret this text in its many contexts he dedicates two preliminary parts of his book to preparation for his actual discussion of the text in question.

In Part One Fr. Saviour outlines “The Socio-Theological Setting of Pauline Apostolic Preaching”. Here he goes into a thorough discussion of various external and internal factors which influenced the shaping of Paul’s original meaning in Galatians. Factors such as the makeup of the Greco-Roman society of Paul’s time, Paul’s concept of being an “apostle”, the dynamics of preaching, Paul’s internalization of what the word “gospel” means.

Then, in Part II, Father Saviour, true son of the Pontifical Biblical Institute that he is (before doing doctoral studies at Saint Thomas he acquired a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture), makes a detailed analysis of key Greek words which bear on the text. There is no substitute for consultation of the original language in which the biblical text was written. By exploring the meaning of these Greek words Father Saviour gives a good approximation of the mind of Saint Paul, a mind which was determinative for the writing of Galatians 2,10 as nothing else was, for it was Paul's understanding of himself and of his role in the Christianity of the first-century Mediterranean world which framed the text in question. And it is in and through the language Paul used that one best arrives at this understanding.

Only after this elaborate but indispensable preparation does Father Saviour address the text itself. He situates briefly some past and present interpretations of Galatians 2,10 against their historical backgrounds. Then he gives a detailed explanation of how he views Paul's words in the immediate context.

This is a work of biblical theology. That is to say, it focuses on the religious meaning of the text in question. This religious meaning is the bridge which makes possible the discerning of the relevance of Galatians 2,10 in the world of today. Here is where the context grows more complicated. Not only to identify the poor of today, but how to help them. There is no particular difficulty in deciding how to come to the aid of those who are in danger of dying from hunger from one day to the next: supply what is need as quickly as possible. Much more challenging is how to come to the aid of the economically poor on a long-term basis.

Father Saviour keeps referring to the need of coming to the assistance of the poor as part of the "integral gospel". The choice of "integral" is significant. Not "essential". By implication one can be an follower of Christ in essentials even if one does not come to the aid of the poor. Should there ever be a day when there are no really poor persons, would it therefore be impossible to be a Christian?

Worship of the Father as revealed by his Son and worship as intended by the Son would seem to be at the essence of what it is to be a Christian. That means worship of the Father in the context of fellow worshippers, and one's worship of the Father dictates an attitude to one's fellows. Be they poor or not, there is an obligation to a more fundamental approach to others than just thinking about their poverty. Father Saviour touches on this more fundamental approach at the end of his study of Galatians 2,10 when he notes that *being a slave meant not being a human person*. Here is being hinted at the deepest level of a Christian attitude to one's fellows, Christian and non-Christian alike—the attitude that each one is a *person*. This is the distinctive gift of Christianity to the world: the development under the guidance of the

Spirit to the realization of the implications of the terms “Father”, “Son” and “Spirit” in the preaching of Christ, and the beginning of the realization of what that means for living as a Christian in all the worlds which followed, temporally and geographically, on that preaching. Living with persons as persons in the context of Father, Son and Spirit in the way revealed by the Son. Here is Christianity at its deepest level. Here is the essence of what it is to be a Christian.

Several years ago I taught in various places in western India, and at the end of my stay was fortunate to be able to visit a house of Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in the heart of Mumbai. The sister superior arranged a special program for me. She introduced me to three young girls, children really, about nine or ten years of age. Each was horribly disfigured and mentally handicapped. Two were blind. The sisters were training them to use whatever abilities they had so that they could be as fully developed a human person as possible. They discovered that these little girls had incredible memories for Indian music, words and all. The superior asked them to sing several songs from their repertoire. They did so with delight. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the superior, beaming unselfconsciously on them with unadulterated love. Here was Christianity at its purest. Inculturation at its most profound level of realization. The exaltation of the person as person for love of Christ.

Father Saviour’s book is explicitly about a text dealing with the poor in the context of one of the writings of one of Christianity’s most dedicated believers. It is the merit of the book that it helps the reader get to the underlying theology of this dedicated believer’s attitude to the poor. And in so doing Father Saviour has suggested further depths in which Christian dedication should be framed. James Swetnam, S.J. **(15 May 2009)**

Since writing the above I have lived most of my life in my home city of St. Louis in the midst of much crime. I have worked with Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in their soup kitchen in the city not far from where I live. One of the sisters, who is from England and has a degree in history from the University of Oxford, plus many years of experience with poverty in New York, tells me that what impresses her about working in the poorest areas of St. Louis (described by some as the most dangerous city in the United States) is the breakdown of the family. From what I have seen of poverty in St. Louis and elsewhere the breakdown of the family is central to poverty and crime here. Other elements enter in, of course, but the breakdown of the family is central, and the failure of many persons, including the victims of poverty and crime themselves, usually fail to recognize this or to admit it. Or to take responsibility for it in any way. James Swetnam, S.J. **(1 August 2019)**