

“Forgive. Six months ago my brother was killed in an automobile accident. He was my closest friend; I loved him dearly. But what makes it worse is that the man who was driving the car claimed—maybe for insurance purposes—that my brother was the driver. I’ve been filled with grief but also with anger and bitterness toward that man. How can I forgive him for what he has done?”

“Jesus can help us do things we can’t do by ourselves. You wouldn’t have come to see me if you didn’t want to do something about it. I’ve noticed how drained you are, and now I understand why.” After letting her pour out more of her grief, I suggested that she kneel and look at Jesus hanging on the cross. I led her through a meditation on his wounds, not merely his physical wounds but especially the wounds of his heart: put there on the cross by the betrayal of one of his own friends, his disciple of three years; rejected by the leaders of his people, denied by his chief disciple, abandoned by the Twelve, mocked and spit upon.

“And what does Jesus say?” I asked. “Father, forgive them. . . .’ Now ask Jesus to give you his heart, his forgiving heart. And when you are ready, call that man into this room in your imagination and say to him, ‘In the name of Jesus, I forgive you.’” It took a long time, but eventually she was able to do that. And when she stood up, she smiled, a genuine smile, for the first time that summer.

The cross had set her free. The power of the cross had set her free.

I have experienced the power of the cross in similar scenes many times in my ministry. The power of the cross!

A little postscript on Rose Mary. Later that evening I prayed that she would not take back the forgiveness she had given, and I dared to ask the Lord for some kind of confirming sign. Then I went to the kitchen for a glass of milk. It was a large kitchen, and on a distant shelf my eye caught “Rosemary” written on a box. There was smaller print under the name, so I moved closer and read the second line: “Leaves.” Then getting a little closer, I could make out the third line. The whole message read: “Rosemary Leaves Whole.”

And so it happened. I cut out the words and sent them to her. She has kept them until now, a reminder of the power of the cross.

### The Receivers: Divine Paradox (1:26–31)

<sup>26</sup>Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

<sup>27</sup>Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, <sup>28</sup>and God chose the

lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something,<sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast before God.<sup>30</sup> It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption,<sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, “Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord.”

OT: Deut 7:7; Judg 7:2; 1 Sam 16:7

NT: 2 Cor 4:7; Eph 2:9; James 2:5

Catechism: humility in prayer, 2559, 2631; Christ, heart of catechesis, 426

Lectionary: St. Agnes; St. Agatha; Common of Holy Men and Women; St. Vincent de Paul

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If God has shown a lack of wisdom in determining to save the world by the cross, he has shown the same folly in the type of persons he has chosen to receive the gift. The **calling** that Paul asks them to consider picks up the “called” theme already introduced in verse 2 and applies it to the concrete circumstances of their coming to the faith. There were few among them who according to **human standards** were **wise** or **powerful** or of **noble birth**. Though there was a handful of notables in the community, among whom we know of Erastus, the city treasurer (Rom 16:23), and Crispus, an official of the synagogue (Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:14), these were the exception in a community made up largely of the lower classes and slaves. Nevertheless, we should note that the gospel has also appealed to some in the higher classes in Corinth, lest we be misled by the broad strokes with which Paul paints the community. The unusual mark of the early Pauline communities was their embracing all classes—unusual because the intentional associations of people back then, as now, were usually composed of the same social class. What accounts for this diversity is that the members of the church came together not by a simple natural attraction or interest but by a divine call.

27–28

Three times Paul says **God chose** (1:27–28), making it clear that it was his gift, not their prowess or merit, that brought about their new status. God bypassed the world’s wise and powerful in order to select “vessels of clay” (2 Cor 4:7, my trans.) to show his wisdom and power. The series of the **foolish**, the **weak**, and the **lowly and despised** climaxes with **those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something**.

29

For “flesh” (Greek) to **boast before God** is Paul’s way of describing humanity’s self-proclaimed independence from God, priding itself on its talents, wisdom, and strength as if they were not God’s gifts. “What do you possess that you have not received?” Paul will later ask. “But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?” (4:7). God’s calling the lowly has turned human pride on its head.

## Boasting in the Lord

Saint Basil the Great comments:

“The wise man must not boast of his wisdom, nor the strong man of his strength, nor the rich man of his riches.” What then is the right kind of boasting? What is the source of man’s greatness? Scripture says: “The man who boasts must boast of this, that he knows and understands that I am the Lord.” Here is man’s greatness, here is man’s glory and majesty: to know in truth what is great, to hold fast to it, and to seek glory from the Lord of glory. The Apostle tells us: “The man who boasts must boast of the Lord.” He has just said: “Christ was appointed by God to be our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, our redemption, so that, as it is written, a man who boasts must boast of the Lord.”

Boasting of God is perfect and complete when we take no pride in our own righteousness but acknowledge that we are utterly lacking in true righteousness and have been made righteous only by faith in Christ. Paul boasts of the fact that he holds his own righteousness in contempt and seeks the righteousness in faith that comes through Christ and is from God. He wants only to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to have fellowship with his sufferings by taking on the likeness of his death, in the hope that somehow he may arrive at the resurrection of the dead. Here we see all overweening pride laid low. Humanity, there is nothing left for you to boast of, for your boasting and hope lie in putting to death all that is your own and seeking the future life that is in Christ. Since we have its firstfruits we are already in its midst, living entirely in the grace and gift of God.<sup>a</sup>

a. Saint Basil the Great, *Homily 20, On Humility 3*; in PG 31:530–31; trans. Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership, Office of Readings, third Monday of Lent.



30 But there is a boasting “in the Lord” (v. 31), which is quite different, and it is consistent with what has happened in Corinth, where the new Christians now exist **in Christ Jesus**. It is not †rhetoric or championing individual †ministers that counts but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He **became for us wisdom from God**. It was a given in the Old Testament that all wisdom is from the Lord (Prov 2:6; Sir 1:1), from whom one should earnestly seek it (2 Chron 1:10–12). Wisdom was even personified as Lady Wisdom, who existed with God before creation (Prov 1:20–23; 8:22–31) and was sent by God to dwell among his people (Sir 24:8–12). The Gospel of John will apply this theme to the preexistent Word, who became flesh and revealed to the human race the God whom no one has seen (John 1:1–18). The bottom line for Paul, too, is that the wisdom from God is the Person of Jesus, who by his example and teaching but, in our present context, most especially by his death on the cross, outshone the most brilliant human wisdom.

## Holiness, Consecration, Sanctification

BIBLICAL  
BACKGROUND

The Bible has an extensive vocabulary connected with the word “holy.” The root meaning of “holy” is “set aside,” “separate from the ordinary or secular.” God is the holy one above all because he is totally other. But things and people can be made holy, the process of which is called sanctification or consecration, the setting aside of a person or object for divine purposes. When one is baptized, one is consecrated, taken from the kingdom of sin and darkness and set aside for the worship and service of God. “Sanctification” refers to the process of making holy, and it can refer either to the initial dedication of the person or object to God or, in the faithful, to our progressive purification and transformation as we grow closer to God in this life.



Jesus is also God’s **righteousness**. Sometimes translated “justice,” this term will be a major issue in Paul’s Letter to the Romans. At one level it means God’s saving justice: his faithfulness to his own sworn word, his promise, to save his people. But it also refers to the concrete way he did it by sending his Son to restore humanity’s broken relationship with God and thus setting them *right* in his sight. As a Jew and a Pharisee, Paul had sought righteousness through observance of the law, but his dramatic conversion convinced him that righteousness came with accepting in faith the gift of God in Jesus, as shown in the love that led Jesus to his death on the cross (Gal 2:20). “For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21).

In what way is Jesus our **sanctification**? The Greek word can indicate a process or its result. There is no need to choose between these two meanings here. Jesus has sanctified us, and thus we have become “saints,” consecrated people. But sanctification is also ongoing, as 2 Cor 7:1 indicates: “making holiness perfect in the fear of God,” and so Paul can pray, “May the God of peace make you holy through and through” (1 Thess 5:23, my trans.). Thus the consecration of baptism, however radical a change it has effected, is not meant to be something static. It calls for a continuing transformation by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

**Redemption** translates the Greek *apolytrōsis*, originally meaning the buying back of a slave or captive by paying a ransom (*lytron*) to set him free. In the New Testament it refers to Christ’s paying the price of his blood to set free those held captive or enslaved by sin (see 1 Cor 6:20). It can also refer to the state of freedom in which the freed find themselves. To the Christians of Paul’s day,

## Christ the Center

For many Christians, religion means “church” with its external practices. But these become chores and routine if one does not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This personal relationship should be the heart of catechesis. After the fourth general synod of Bishops in 1979, Pope John Paul II issued his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (*Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis*), which begins (§5) with a reminder that the Person of Christ is the center of all religious instruction: “At the heart of catechesis we find . . . a Person, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘the only Son of the Father, . . . full of grace and truth,’ who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever. . . . The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but [also] in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ. Only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Trinity.”



it was a powerful image of the freedom they now enjoyed as children of God (Gal 4:7) and the challenge to use that freedom in voluntary service through love (5:13).

31 All of these gifts rather than one’s own achievements or abilities should be the ground for the Christian’s boasting: **Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord.** This is Paul’s abbreviated rendering of the <sup>†</sup>Septuagint version of Jer 9:22–23: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Let not the wise boast of his wisdom, nor the powerful boast of his strength, nor the rich boast of his riches, but let the one who boasts, boast of this: to understand and know that I am the Lord who does judgment and righteousness on the earth.’”

### Reflection and Application (1:26–31)

How can we find ourselves in Paul’s message to the Corinthians here? It may be helpful to start with Paul’s calling them immature, even infants in the faith (3:1). Children grow in self-realization by the affirmation and love of their parents and others and also by their achievements, from beginning to speak to tying their shoes to graduation, and the applause that these achievements bring. In adolescence most teenagers feel a great need for belonging, whether it be to a team, or a youth group, or a gang. Still a bit uncertain of their own identity, they find assurance in an accepting group. At times, however, youth

can be so needy of acceptance by their peers that they lose the sense of their individual worth, compromise their values to achieve that acceptance, and engage in put-downs of other persons or groups.

This is a phase that most grow out of, but sometimes adults lapse into adolescence. Such was the case with the Corinthians, and such is the case with some Christians today. Do we make unhealthy comparisons of our parish with other parishes? Of our community with other communities? Of our work with others' work? There is such a thing as a holy rivalry (St. Basil and his close friend St. Gregory of Nazianzus vied to grow in holiness), but there is also an unhealthy better-than-thou attitude, which militates against unity and cooperation. When in a missionary country, where Christians were a tiny and sometimes a suspect minority, I experienced a great fraternal closeness with other religious communities working there, as also with Catholic laypeople and Protestant missionaries, a closeness that I have sometimes missed in other, developed Christian environments.