



## Questions for Personal Reflection or Small Group Study

# First Corinthians

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### CATHOLIC COMMENTARY ON SACRED SCRIPTURE

In addition to the questions below, the Reflection and Application sections throughout this commentary suggest various ways of acting on the message of 1 Corinthians.

#### Introduction to 1 Corinthians

1. In what ways was the culture of Corinth like, and in what ways unlike, the culture we live in today?
2. What challenges would you as a Christian face if you were living in Corinth? What choices would you have to make?
3. What effect would the transmission of letters by hand in those days have on the writers and readers?
4. What does it mean that “the written word is just a script for proclamation”? What does that say about the role of the lector at the Eucharist? About how we read Paul’s letters for prayer?
5. Among the various theological themes (pp. 23–24), which one particularly sparks your interest? Why?
6. In the section on “1 Corinthians for Today” (pp. 26–27), which one of the forecasts or issues in the letter particularly whets your taste to learn more?

#### Cliques and the Cross: 1 Corinthians 1

1. How does Paul’s introduction (vv. 1–3) illustrate the Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic?
2. Before tackling the difficult issues in the letter, Paul gives thanks to God for the gifts he has given to the community (vv. 4–9). What does this tell us about how to approach similar issues in our relationships?
3. For those of us baptized at an early age, it may be difficult to understand what it means to be *called* to fellowship with Jesus (v. 9) since we did not hear the call to conversion as adults. How do we grow in the awareness of being personally called by Jesus?
4. The Corinthian community was divided into factions over personalities. Have you experienced anything similar at times in your parish? What is the root of such problems? What was done about it, and was the remedy successful?
5. Why did Paul appeal to the cross as the solution to the problem in Corinth? What wisdom can we learn from him regarding divisions in the Church?
6. Can you think of an experience where turning to the cross brought light or healing or restoration to a problem?

#### The Power and the Wisdom: 1 Corinthians 2

1. Paul’s third argument is an example from his own experience. The message of the cross got through despite Paul’s weakness. Are there times in your life when God did something wonderful through you despite your weakness?
2. Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* said that the world is more moved by example than by words. This is similar to what Paul is saying at the beginning of this chapter. Can you relate something from your own experience that confirms what both Pauls are saying?
3. How have you experienced the power of the cross in your life?
4. Have you experienced an unexpected insight given by the Holy Spirit? What was it?
5. Very often children are given insights about God that astound us. Do you remember one that you might share?
6. Paul says that the Holy Spirit even gives the proper words to use. Have you had an experience of feeling unprepared or fearful before speaking but then through the gift of the Spirit found the right words to say?

#### Our True Boast Is in God, Not Ministers: 1 Corinthians 3

1. Rivalry over ministers is the first vice Paul points out to the Corinthians. Without identifying persons, are there other vices common in your parish or in your workplace?
2. Each pastor and minister has their particular gifts, and no two are completely alike. If we engage in comparisons, and likes and dislikes, what gospel message are we missing? Why does Paul say this is acting like children?
3. If you are engaged in ministry, what does Paul’s expression, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth” (v. 6) invite you to ponder concerning your own ministry?
4. What does the image of the church as God’s field suggest to you?
5. What does the image of the church as God’s building suggest to you?
6. The universal Church and your local community is the temple of God. What aspects of the community does this image suggest?
7. How would you interpret the phrase, “Everything belongs to you . . . the world or life or death or the present or the future: all belong to you” (vv. 21–22).

#### Servants and Stewards: 1 Corinthians 4

1. Paul says that the apostles are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. If you are charged with some ministry, what do these two terms mean for you in that ministry?
2. In 4:5 Paul is thinking about the judgments (favorable and unfavorable) that the Corinthians have been making about their various ministers. He says that judgment is left to the Lord. Why is this principle important for all of church life?
3. “What do you possess that you have not received?” (v. 7). Why does this rhetorical question lay bare the pride of the Corinthians, and why does it challenge us to avoid comparison?
4. In 4:11–13 Paul describes the apostles’ rugged life and the gentle response they give their persecutors. How do you see their example as a challenge for you when your work is underappreciated, even criticized?
5. In 4:14–15 Paul appeals to his spiritual fatherhood of the Corinthians. Does your parish seem like a family, or is it more like an institution? How can you promote a family atmosphere?

#### Cleansing the Community: 1 Corinthians 5

1. What are the two goods that the Church seeks to achieve when it judges that a public scandal deserves excommunication (vv. 1–5)?
2. Does Paul’s understanding of the new dispensation of the Holy Spirit make the law obsolete? What is the relation of the Holy Spirit to the old law? (See the sidebar on p. 93.)
3. In what way is the Jewish Passover realized in Christ?
4. What property of unleavened bread made it a good symbol of purity (or “sincerity and truth”)?
5. We have little control over the behavior of those outside the Church. If we become aware of a member of the Church engaging in publicly immoral behavior, what should we do?

## The Court and the Courtesan: 1 Corinthians 6

1. Unity and harmony among Christians attracts others to the faith. Public disputes among Christians can have the opposite effect. How would you apply Paul's advice about settling cases within the community today? Would there be exceptions?
2. How do we live the counsel of Paul to put up with injustice or the words of Jesus about turning the other cheek? Notice that Paul puts his counsel in the form of a rhetorical question. Is it a requirement or a strong recommendation?
3. How does the list of sins in 6:9–10 bring into question the doctrine of justification by faith alone?
4. What difference does understanding Christian morality in the heart of the Trinity (p. 106) make?
5. In discussing sexual morality, how does Paul involve each person of the Holy Trinity?
6. In what different ways can Christians “glorify God in your body” (v. 20)?

## Marriage and Virginity: 1 Corinthians 7

1. What is the value of spouses observing mutually agreed periods of abstinence for prayer? Why does Paul discourage total abstinence for spouses?
2. Why is it sinful to regularly refuse sexual union with one's spouse? Are there circumstances when demanding intercourse might be sinful?
3. Paul refers to his celibacy as a gift (charism) but also implies that marriage is a gift (charism). Charisms are given for the building up of the Church (12:7; 14:12). How do you see marriage as a gift for building up the Church?
4. Paul says that in a marriage between a Christian and a non-believer, the non-believer “is made holy” (v. 14) through the believer, and so are the children. Can you give examples from your experience of such couples? Is this always the case?
5. How has the Church understood Paul's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage? (See Catechism 1633–35; 1637; and on annulment 1628–29.)
6. What reasons does Paul give for choosing celibacy as a way of life? Might there be other reasons?
7. Paul says if widows remarry, it should be “in the Lord” (v. 39). What is the advantage of marrying someone who shares your Catholic faith?

## Idols: Freedom and Conscience: 1 Corinthians 8

1. Why does Paul in this chapter begin with concern about fraternal charity rather than an outright condemnation of idol worship?
2. Use an example from your own experience of how “knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up” (v. 1).
3. Explain: “If one loves God, one is known by him” (v. 3).
4. What is the difference between human respect and delicacy for the conscience of others? Give an example of each. Which of these is Paul concerned with here?

5. Since we must follow the judgments of our conscience, why is it crucial that our consciences be properly formed? (See the Catechism, 1790–91.)
6. When causing my brother or sister to sin, I am really sinning against Christ (v. 12). Does that mean the sin takes on the character of sacrilege?

## Paul's Personal Example: 1 Corinthians 9

1. What rights does Paul have that he has forgone for the sake of the gospel? How does Paul use the example of his sacrifice of those rights to urge the “enlightened” Corinthians to sacrifice theirs for the sake of others?
2. How does the image of the ox tramping out grain apply to those who serve the gospel full time?
3. Unlike other apostles, Paul has chosen to be celibate. How else besides celibacy may the Christian be called at times to sacrifice his rights?
4. How can we become all things to all people (v. 22) without sacrificing our principles?
5. Finally, Paul uses the example of athletes sacrificing many things, as he himself does, to win the crown of victory. How does he intend the Corinthians to hear this in view of their lack of concern about their brothers and sisters in the community?

## Warnings and the Eucharist: 1 Corinthians 10

1. What is the New Testament fulfillment of these Old Testament types: cloud, sea, baptized into Moses, spiritual food, spiritual drink, spiritual rock?
2. Paul cites three sins of their ancestors in the desert: idolatry, sexual immorality, and grumbling. All of these brought punishments. How does Paul apply this to the Corinthians? How would it apply to us today?
3. “No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it” (v. 13). How have you experienced the truth of these words in your life?
4. Why was it wrong for some of the Corinthian Christians to participate in the pagan sacrificial meals, claiming they know that the idols are “nothing”? Later Christians, knowing that the pagan gods did not exist, nevertheless refused to offer incense to them, even at the cost of their own martyrdom. What is the underlying message here?
5. Why is participating in pagan sacrifices tantamount to cooperating with the devil?
6. How does Paul's teaching here support the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist?
7. Paul says that when we celebrate the Eucharist we become one body. How does this show the difference between the Eucharist and the pagan sacrifices? How does it show the theme of concern for the consciences of the “weaker” members of the community?
8. In the matter of idol offerings, how does Paul resolve the tension between social ties and avoidance of sharing in idol worship?

## Problems in the Community at Worship: 1 Corinthians 11

1. Getting beyond the cultural differences of the times, what do you see as the lasting values Paul expresses in the matter of women's headdress at the liturgy?
2. In 11:17–18 Paul returns to the question of divisions in the community, this time of a different source than the divisions over ministers at the beginning of the letter. What gravity does the celebration of the Eucharist add to the existence of divisions in the community? How does that apply today?
3. How can Paul say that he received the story of the Last Supper “from the Lord” when he probably never knew Jesus during the Lord's public life?
4. In what way does the Eucharist proclaim the past, the present, and the future (v. 16)?
5. Why is it important to be free of serious sin when one partakes of the Eucharist (v. 27)?
6. Paul dares to say that illness and death in the community can be due to unworthy communion. Remembering that the particular sin he is targeting is lack of love, can you see how this is possible?

## Many Gifts, One Body: 1 Corinthians 12

1. What is the fundamental principle for discerning the gifts of the Spirit (v. 1)?
2. If you had lived in Paul's day and been familiar with some of the pagan ecstatic rituals, what would you see as different in the Corinthian prayer meeting?
3. How does Paul tie the charisms to the life of the Trinity (vv. 4–6)?
4. Are the charisms optional for the Christian? What are the implications for your life?
5. What is the body into which we are baptized (v. 13)? How realistic does Paul consider this analogy?
6. How does the fact that we are all one body show the foolishness of jealousy or of envy of others' gifts?
7. How are the charisms similar to natural gifts? How are they different?

## Love, the Heart of the Gifts: 1 Corinthians 13

1. In 13:1–3 Paul lists the highest imaginable charisms and even acts of heroism to show that they are nothing without love. In today's world, and sometimes even in our families, we see persons pursuing other things to the neglect of love. Have you experienced this?
2. Verses 4–7 list virtues that provide a good examination of conscience. Select one that you would like to grow in.
3. All gifts in this life, whether charisms or natural gifts or material gifts, are temporary. Only love lasts into eternity. Have you had an experience in life where you realized, after losing something precious, that you or your family at least had love?
4. In this life even our faith is enshrouded in mystery, while we look forward to the beatific vision that Paul calls seeing God “face to face.” Have you experienced a longing for that kind of union?
5. In what way does love *remain* whereas faith and hope do not?

## The Gifts in Practice: 1 Corinthians 14

1. Lest anyone feel that the gifts are not necessary if one has love, Paul says “strive eagerly for the spiritual gifts” (v. 1). Have you prayed for any of the gifts? Do you use them? How can you grow in your use of the gifts?
2. Have you ever experienced an unexpected insight into Scripture while you were praying? That is one of the ways the gift of prophecy begins, and it grows when the insight is shared with others.
3. The purpose of prophecy (speaking a message under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) is “building up, encouragement, and solace” (v. 3). Might it also involve a challenge to the hearers?
4. What did Paul mean by the gift of tongues? Why might anyone want to seek this gift?
5. God “is not the God of disorder but of peace” (v. 33). What kind of applications do you see of this truth for yourself, for gatherings of Christians, for the world at large?
6. How do you explain the “mysterious intrusion” in 14:33b–40? Why is this called a mysterious intrusion?

## The Resurrection: 1 Corinthians 15

1. As a Pharisee Paul believed in the resurrection of the just. Why then did Paul before his conversion believe that Christian preaching of the resurrection of Jesus was baseless and misleading?
2. What effect do you feel in reading the testimonies of the appearances of the risen Christ (vv. 1–11)? What role do these appearances have in our Christian faith?
3. What vital consequences does Paul see for those who believe that Jesus is risen from the dead (vv. 12–19)? Conversely, what consequences if he is not risen?
4. How important is the resurrection of Jesus in your own thinking and life?
5. Paul risked his life for the sake of the gospel (vv. 30–32). Are you willing to do the same?
6. What does Paul mean by calling the risen body the “spiritual body” (v. 44)? What insights does this chapter give you about the life of heaven?
7. What does the final resurrection of all who are just mean for material creation?

## Conclusion: 1 Corinthians 16

1. After the sublime climax on the resurrection in chapter 15, how does 16:1–4 bring us back to the church’s community life in the present?
2. How were travel and accommodations different for Paul than they are for our time? How does that affect your understanding of Paul and other early Christian missionaries?
3. What word or phrase of Paul’s closing remarks (vv. 13–24) stands out for you?