

Living according to the Spirit

Ordinary 14A 2014

For the next several weeks the second reading at Mass will be taken from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, one of the most important writings in the Bible. I once spent several years writing a commentary on Romans, and so this letter has special meaning for me. And because I have benefited so much from that letter, I would like to share with you what has been so important for my Catholic life.

The central theme of Romans is this: *We are saved by God's grace rather than by our own efforts.* While Paul introduces this theme early on, today's reading occurs midway in the letter, after Paul has explained how God saved us through the death and resurrection of his Son. Having shown us that we have sinned and so are in need of God's saving grace, Paul describes the new life we enjoy in Christ. He says that since we have been saved by God's grace, we now live in the realm of God's Spirit. This is why he writes: "You are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the Spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you." But what does Paul mean?

To live according to the flesh is to put our hope and trust in what is fleeting and mortal, and so destined for destruction. For example, when we place our hope in our possessions, we are living according to the flesh. When we place our hope in the pursuit of the glory and praise from others, we are living according to the flesh. When our hope is for this life only, we are living according to the flesh.

To live according to the Spirit is to live in what St. Paul calls "newness of life." We live according to the Spirit when we allow the power of God's Spirit to guide us. We live according to the Spirit when we trust in the power and providence of God. We live according to the Spirit

when we live in hope of resurrection life, the life that only God can give us.

When Paul says we are no longer in the flesh but in the Spirit, he does not mean that we are no longer in the body or in the world, or that we must have nothing to do with the world. All to the contrary! We live in the world; we have no other choice. We suffer and die in the body, we have no other choice. But something has changed for us. Something is different. Whereas those who live according to the flesh are still under the power of sin, this is no longer true for us. Whereas formerly our lives were threatened with eternal separation from God, this is no longer true for us. Because we live in the realm of the Spirit, the power of God's Spirit is at work in us, and this Spirit enables us to do what we could not do. This Spirit is our promise of eternal life; for if the Spirit of God dwells in us then God will raise us from the dead.

I have read Romans hundreds of times, and each time I find something new, something I did not see before. Reading Romans has taught me the importance of God's grace in my life. Reading Romans has taught me the power of God's Spirit. Reading Romans has taught me how foolish it is to ground my life in what is passing and fleeting. Reading Romans has made all of the difference for me. Living by the Spirit has changed and transformed my life. If you allow yourself to be guided by the Spirit, the Spirit of the Living God will change your life as well.