

LETTER II

A.D. 330

Again, brothers and sisters, Easter is coming — and joy along with it. The Lord has brought us once again to this special season of the year, so that after we have listened to the teaching that regularly comes before it, we will be able to keep the Feast appropriately.

So, then, let us celebrate this heavenly joy, together with the saints of old who kept the same Feast. Yes, they keep the Feast with us, and they are examples to us of life in Christ. Not only were they commissioned to preach the gospel, but if we look back at their lives, we will see that they also lived it. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "You, therefore, follow me" (1 Cor. 4:16). Let us follow him then, because that command has been passed down to us. The admonition originally given to the church at Corinth reaches to all Christians of all time in every place. For the apostle Paul was "a teacher of all nations in faith and truth" (1 Tim. 2:7).

As a matter of fact, we get the same sort of teaching from all the saints of old. Solomon, for example, used proverbs, saying, "Hear, my children, the instruction of a father and pay attention to get understanding, for I give you a good gift; do not forsake my word; for I was an obedient son to my father, and beloved in the sight of my mother" (Prov. 4:1).

A good father, you see, uses the right methods of instruction — and lives up to his teaching himself. That way he won't give opponents an opportunity to say, "You that teach others, why don't you teach yourself?" (Rom. 2:21). Rather, like a good

servant, he behaves so that not only is he right with God, but he also has a good influence on others. Then when, as in the Lord's parable, he has doubled the grace committed to him, he will hear, "Good and faithful servant, you have been faithful in a little, I will set you over much: enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matt. 25:21).

THE WICKED'S DEGRADED CONDITION

Since we are always supposed to be doers of what the Lord tells us rather than just hearers, let us especially be doers during the days of the Feast. By thus imitating the lives of the saints, we will enter into the joy of our Lord in heaven. *That* joy is not temporary and fleeting; it stays with us.

Evildoers have deprived themselves of this joy and will suffer the consequences: grief and misery in the torments of hell. People like this cannot even be compared with the saints of God, for not only is their behavior evil, but their minds are perverted, no longer demonstrating much of the image of God. They barely measure up to the level of animals, and their uncontrolled drive for pleasure can be compared to the behavior of lustful stallions (Jer. 5:8).

Because of their trickiness, their crimes, and their horrible sins, they are called a "generation of vipers" (Luke 3:7). Having come so low as to crawl in the dirt like snakes, they think only of what they can see and feel, valuing such things above everything else. Thus they gloat over what they can experience with the five senses, looking out for their own desires instead of serving God.

Still, it was when humanity was in this state that the Word—the Son—came to seek and to find that which was lost. Even before He came, He tried to restrain us from such foolishness, crying out, "Don't be like the horse and the mule which have no understanding, and whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle" (Ps. 32:9). And because His own people were careless and acted as the wicked did, Isaiah, praying in the Spirit, said, "You are to me like merchants of Phoenicia" (Isa. 23:2).

THE SAD EFFECTS OF NEGLECTING GOD

The avenging Spirit protests against these evil people, saying, "Lord, in Your city You will despise their image" (Ps. 73:20). They had become so foolish — they had become so lacking in understanding — that in their busy minds they compared the Divine Wisdom (the Son) to themselves, thinking they could invent something equivalent to Him. As the apostle Paul said, "professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the corruptible image of man, and birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. . . . Therefore God gave them over to a reprobate mind to do those things which are not convenient" (Rom. 1:22,23,28).

They did not listen to the prophetic voice that asked, "To what have you likened the Lord, and with what have you compared Him?" (Isa. 40:18). Nor did they listen to David, who prayed about people like them, saying, "All those that make them [idols] are like them, and all those who put their trust in them" (Ps. 115:8). They were so blind to the truth that they considered a stone to be God. Like creatures without normal eyesight, they groped about in the dark. As the prophet Isaiah cried, "They hear indeed, but they do not understand; they see indeed, but they do not perceive; for their heart has grown fat, and their ears have grown dull" (Isa. 6:9,10).

THE FEASTS OF THE WICKED

Those people who do not observe the Lord's feasts are like that even today. They invent holidays (cf. 1 Kings 12:32,33), but the result is days of sorrow rather than days of gladness. "For there is no peace to the wicked" (Isa. 48:22), as the Lord says. And as we are also told, "Gladness and joy are taken from their mouth" (Jer. 7:34). Yes, the feasts of the wicked are hollow.

CHRIST OUR EXAMPLE

But the wise servants of the Lord, who have really put on the

new nature created in the likeness of God (Eph. 4:24), listen to what He says. They apply to themselves the commandment given to Timothy: "Set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). They keep the Easter Feast so properly that even unbelievers, seeing their orderliness, must say, "God is truly with them" (1 Cor. 14:25).

Just as someone who receives an apostle receives the Lord who sent him, so someone who follows the saints' example ends up following the Lord. The apostle Paul, you will remember, said, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Our prime example, of course, is our Savior. He demonstrated the fullness of His deity when He told His disciples: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:29).

The same is true of the occasion on which He put water in a basin, tied a towel around His waist, and washed His disciples' feet. At that time He told them, "Understand what I have done. You call Me Master and Lord, and you tell the truth, for I am. If therefore I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet: for I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, you also should do" (John 13:12-15).

O, dear brothers and sisters! How can we possibly praise our Savior's lovingkindness enough? How much volume and what kind of a "trumpet" should we use to extol such help as He gives us here? Not only do we bear His image, but He gives us His life as a pattern of heavenly behavior, so that we can follow Him.

Thus, we have from Him examples so that: if we suffer, we should not threaten our oppressors; if we are abused, we should not call names back, but should bless those who curse us; and in everything we should commit ourselves to God, who judges correctly (1 Peter 2:21-23). Christians who take that attitude and live according to the Scriptures will be partakers of Christ.

They will also be imitators of apostolic behavior. As a matter of fact, if the apostle Paul were around them, he would praise them just as he did the Corinthians: "I commend you for always keeping me in mind and carrying on the tradition I handed on to you" (1 Cor. 11:2).

HERESIES ARE PERVERSIONS OF THE TRUTH

Other men came along who used Paul's words, but they wanted to "obey" them their way. So they twisted what he said to fit their schemes. They are like the followers of Hymenaeus and Alexander — and before them, the Sadducees. These people, as St. Paul said, "made shipwreck of faith" (1 Tim. 1:19), since they were confused about the mystery of the resurrection (2 Tim. 2:18).

That is undoubtedly why he made special note of the fact that the Corinthians had held fast to the traditions just as he had handed them on. Paul was emphasizing that we should hold the same views on the gospel that our teachers held. It was not only outwardly that these wicked men disguised themselves. When the Lord said they put on sheep's clothing and looked like whitewashed tombstones, He meant that they put on a very good pretense.

So these deceivers spoke the divine words, while inside they had evil intentions.

Of course, the first to do this sort of thing was the serpent, the devil, who was the inventor of wickedness in the first place. He put on a disguise to talk with Eve, and in that form he deceived her. But in his train are all these inventors of heresies, who, sure enough, refer to the Scriptures but do not believe the orthodox faith handed down to us by our Fathers. Instead, they call these truths "traditions of men." The fact is, they have gone astray because they do not really know the Scriptures — nor their power.

GOD'S DOCTRINE AND MEN'S TRADITIONS

You can see, then, that it was right for Paul to praise the Corinthians, because their views were in agreement with the traditions he had given them. Further, it was quite appropriate for the Lord to reprove the Jews when He said, "Why do you break the commandments of God on account of your traditions?" (Matt. 15:3). For they changed the commandments handed down to them from God to suit their own foolish ideas.

Instead of following God's tradition, they embraced the traditions of men.

Later, the apostle Paul instructed the Galatians, who were in danger of doing the same thing, "If anyone preaches to you anything besides what you have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9). There is no association at all between the orthodox faith and the fancies of human invention. The Fathers of the church are the ministers of truth, preaching the kingdom of heaven. But those false teachers who get carried off in the opposite direction have no real hope. All they can do is go through the motions of life, thinking that when they die they will cease to exist. So we hear them say, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isa. 22:13).

That is why the blessed Luke reproves man-made traditions and ideas, while handing down the words of the apostles. He made his purpose quite clear in the beginning of the Gospel he wrote: "Many people have written narrations of the events that happened among us, using the traditions handed down to us by the original disciples and other eyewitnesses. Since I have clung to the truth from the beginning, I decided to write it all down in order and send it to you, excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth about what you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

What the apostles received, they passed on without change, so that the doctrine of the mysteries (the sacraments) and Christ would remain correct. The Divine Word — the Son of God — wants us to be *their* disciples. It is appropriate for them to be our teachers, and it is necessary for us to submit to their teaching alone. Only from them and those who have faithfully taught their doctrine do we get, as Paul writes, "faithful words, worthy of complete acceptance" (1 Tim. 1:15). With them we are back to ground level, because they did not become disciples as a result of what they heard from others. Rather, they were eyewitnesses and servants of God the Word, and they handed down what they heard directly from Him.

Some of them told about the great miracles performed by our Savior, and preached His eternal godhead. Others wrote about Him being born as a baby of the Virgin Mary, and announced

the festival of the holy Passover, saying, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). As a result of their testimony, each of us and all of us together, and all the churches in the world, know "that Christ rose from the dead, of the seed of David, according to the Gospel" (2 Tim. 2:8).

Let us not forget what Paul wrote to the Corinthians concerning the Lord's resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12-57). By that resurrection "He destroyed him who had the power of death; that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). Yes, and He raised *us* up along with Himself, because he cut loose the hold death had on us. He gave us a blessing instead of a curse, joy instead of grief, and a feast instead of mourning—the holy and joyful Feast of Easter.

Thus, with our hearts full of all that He has done for us, we rejoice continually, as Paul commanded: "Praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks" (1 Thess. 5:17,18). So when Easter time comes around, we make it and everything connected with it known, just as we received it from the Fathers.

THE DATES OF THE EASTER SEASON

Thus we write once again. Holding to the apostolic tradition, we remember each other when we meet for prayer. We keep the Easter Feast together, giving thanks to the Lord with one voice. Having received the grace of the Lord, and being followers of the saints who went before us, "we shall make our praise in the Lord all the day" (Ps. 35:28). Properly keeping the Feast in this way, we will share in the joy of heaven.

We begin the forty-day fast on March 9. Easter Week begins on April 13. Therefore, we keep the Feast on Sunday, April 19, and follow it up with the seven weeks to Pentecost. Throughout the whole time, let us rejoice and delight in Christ Jesus our Lord, through whom to the Father be glory and dominion by the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

The brothers and sisters who are with me greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.