

Brother Emile

## “Rooted and Built Up in Christ”

Four short chapters make up the *Epistle to the Colossians*. Is St. Paul really the author of this epistle? The arguments of those who challenge its authenticity are generally quite weak. There is good reason to believe that this text really was written by Paul, even though Timothy may have played an important role in drafting it. Could this be why, at the beginning of our epistle, we read: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother” (Colossians 1:1-2)?

## A Possible Scenario

Here is a possible scenario for the composition of the *Epistle to the Colossians*. Paul is not the founder of the Church in Colossae. The founder is Epaphras, who was in captivity with Paul. In the Epistle to the Colossians, St. Paul mentions Epaphras twice, calling him “our beloved fellow-servant” (1:7) and in 1:6 he says that it was through him that the Colossians “truly understood the grace of God”. The second mention of Epaphras is in 4:12: “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus (...) He is always wrestling in prayer on your behalf.”

And now, news from Colossae reaches Epaphras in his captivity, brought to him perhaps by Onesimus, Philemon’s slave, who is at the heart of the *Letter to Philemon* and who joined Paul and Epaphras in prison. There is good reason to believe that the master of Onesimus, Philemon, was from Colossae.

Presumably, Epaphras convinced Paul to intervene and to use his apostolic authority in the crisis that erupted at Colossae. Some scholars conjecture that Paul used Onesimus (and Tychicus, see Colossians 4:7) to deliver his letter to the Colossians, entrusting him at the same time with a note for Philemon.

Paul may have realized, because of the crisis at Colossae, that similar problems could arise elsewhere and that it might be useful to write a circular letter on the same themes. This circular letter would be our *Epistle to the Ephesians*.

The *Epistle to the Colossians* mentions Tychicus (4:7), who must bring news of Paul to the Colossians and comfort them. We are told in 4:9 that Onesimus accompanies him. We can imagine Tychicus and Onesimus leaving for Colossae carrying three or perhaps even four letters: the letter of recommendation concerning Onesimus (*Letter to Philemon*), the *Epistle to the Colossians*, perhaps another letter for the Church in Laodicea (see Colossians 4:16), and the *Epistle to the Ephesians*, the circular letter that Tychicus must bring to Hierapolis, Ephesus and other cities of Asia minor.

## A Letter from Prison

The imprisonment of Paul and Epaphras has already been mentioned. But which particular captivity are we talking about? If we could answer this question we could date the *Epistle to the Colossians*. A commonly held opinion is that Colossians, along with Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians, dates from the very end of Paul’s ministry, during his first Roman captivity (from 61 to 63 AD). The French ecumenical translation (TOB) upholds this view. Others like to refer to a period of imprisonment in Ephesus around the year 55 AD. That would help to account for the many comings and goings between Ephesus, Colossae, Laodicea and other cities of the region. It would also explain why there is no mention of the earthquake that destroyed the

city of Colossae in 61 AD. Other scholars have speculated about an imprisonment at Caesarea. The current state of our knowledge does not allow us to put forward any one view with certainty.

## What is Paul fighting against?

What were the teachings which spread at Colossae and which managed to trouble the Christian community founded by Epaphras? And what can we say about the authors of such teachings? We can hypothesize, but there is a general haziness that has led the best specialists to be cautious. What we do know is that the region in which Colossae is situated, in the south of Phrygia, was well-known for its interest in magic, mysteries, and ecstatic experiences. It is easy to imagine how, cut off from Epaphras, their imprisoned teacher, the pagans he had converted to the Christian faith might have fallen prey to those offering more elaborate ways of reaching perfection.

## Christian maturity

Perfection. The term *teleios*, which can be translated as “perfect” or “accomplished”, recurs throughout the epistle. This explains why one Bible scholar<sup>1</sup> has suggested that the question at the heart of this epistle is that of Christian maturity. What is the foundation for this

<sup>1</sup> L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, SCM Press, Rev. ed., 1999, p. 395.

maturity? Is faith in Christ sufficient or does it need to be supplemented with something else? What do we need in order to grow towards the full accomplishment of what God has promised? The word “growth” occurs frequently in this epistle. These questions are at the heart of the debate.

Paul wants the Colossians to be “perfect”, “mature” in Christ. We read in Col 1:28: “It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” See also 4:12 and the many allusions to growth found elsewhere in the epistle. The Colossians must grow in the knowledge of God (1:10) and that growth is given to the Body by God (2:19).

The term “maturity” is perhaps not sufficiently evocative. We can perceive in the unrest at Colossae a degree of worry about what, these days, we might call “fulfilment”. What we have here is a desire to develop a full spiritual life, a desire tainted with anxiety. If there is one thing in this epistle that allows us to draw a modern parallel it is this anxiety associated with a desire for fullness. Those who have succeeded in troubling the Colossians have played on their anxiety expertly. You aspire to perfection? You wish to experience true fullness? Well, in that case, you will need something more than the Christ preached to you by Epaphras. Christ is only for beginners. You need to acquire secret knowledge, ascetic disciplines that are not accessible to everyone.

When Saint Paul speaks out against the empty deceit of “philosophy” (2:8), he is not referring to the legitimate use of reason, but to religious speculation

that others are attempting to impose on the Christians of Colossae. The term “philosophy” was used in Paul’s day to refer to religious systems.<sup>2</sup> For some experts, this has suggested an early form of Gnosticism, for others a religion of mysteries rooted in Hellenism, and for yet others some Jewish movement influenced by the Essenes or an apocalyptic trend. Father Aletti provides us with what is perhaps the most helpful answer when he writes that “the inability of scholars to pinpoint the exact religious and cultural background in question is not due to incompetence on their part, but, rather, pertains to the Author’s way of proceeding, which is constantly to broaden the nature of his remarks so as to make them valid in a broad range of contexts.”<sup>3</sup> According to this view, Paul therefore wanted the contents of the epistle to be applicable in situations similar to that faced by the Colossians. About one thing, though, we can be clear: at the heart of the question being discussed here is “the importance given to the mediation and power of heavenly beings”. This is where we find the root of the wrong that the Epistle strives to correct.

Paul opposes everything which might lead the Colossians to believe that Christ is not enough. This is essentially a struggle for the primacy of Christ. Paul is fighting to ensure that his readers recognize the fullness of Christ and to encourage them to live lives which are consistent with the consequences of this fullness. For the fullness that belongs to Christ is the same fullness

that has filled the Colossians. They have no need to seek a supplement elsewhere. And so we understand the central role of the hymn in chapter 1 and the unique position which Christ occupies in it:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (vv. 15-20).

We must go on to read 2:9-10: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.” All of these verses aim to make the reader more fully aware of the immensity of the gift which is given in Christ. Every reader of this epistle, every Christian, is called to this knowledge, which calls forth grateful acknowledgement. This is where true maturity lies. Acknowledgement can be understood both as recognition, the ability to identify a gift, and as an expression of thanks. If we keep that in mind, we will better understand why song, praise and prayer are so central in this epistle. We will return to this point later.

<sup>2</sup>Norbert Hagedé, *L'Épître aux Colossiens*, Labor et Fides, 1968, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup>J.-N. Aletti, *L'Épître aux Colossiens*, Gabalda, p. 211 and 212 for the next quotation.

## Rooted and built up in Christ

Let us now turn to 2:7: “Continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving”. And v. 6: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue your lives in him”. What call do we perceive in these verses? “Therefore” in v. 6 refers to what has been said about fullness. Everything that follows rests on what has been established in ch.1. Our roots must be planted in that fullness. This is the gift on which we must start to build our lives and to envisage our relationships with others. The ethical teaching of chapters 3 and 4 flows from this. This call to be rooted is not easy for our contemporaries. It runs counter to much of our culture. There is another New Testament writing which links the concepts of fullness and rootedness. A reference to it here may be useful in helping us to understand the nature of the rootedness to which a Christian is called.

## A Johannine Perspective

The fullness present in Christ is underlined in the very first chapter of St. John’s Gospel, in the prologue, which is a kind of summary of his entire Gospel: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (1:16).

The equivalent of the rootedness that Paul speaks of can be found in ch.15 of St. John, in the words of Jesus about the vine and in his many invitations to remain in

him, to remain in his love: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5). A little further on, we read: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (vv. 9-10).

It is important to see how “command” and “love” go together. It is not easy for us today to see these two words side by side. Isn’t love something spontaneous? Doesn’t it come from the heart? How can it be associated with a command?

In order to answer these questions and to show how the Christian faith is not a matter of pure heteronomy,<sup>4</sup> we need to read St. John’s text more closely. We need first of all to notice that the word “command” has a specific meaning in St. John. It is not just an “order”. Its specific biblical and Johannine meaning appears when we see that in ch.14, John has replaced “command” with “word”: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (14:23). We can already see that “keeping his word” is not just carrying out an order. In order to keep a word, to be faithful to a message in a new context, intelligence and creativity are needed. To keep Christ’s “word” or “command” – Christ says a little later that he does not call us “servants” but “friends” – is to grasp the meaning of his life from within, to want his

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<sup>4</sup>The Oxford English Dictionary defines *heteronomy* as “*subjection to an external law*”.

message to be at the source of our lives, of our freedom and of our initiatives.

We are not passively putting into practice what is written in a book. Notice, rather, how the command to love urges us to use our minds to discern what love means. Love can mean so many different things depending on the context. The fact that our gospels are so short speaks of the way in which God trusts us to discern the best way forward. Not everything is written down; but the command to “love” is written. It indicates a clear direction for whoever wants to be Christ’s disciple. But when it comes to understanding how to put the command into practice, all of our faculties are called upon: intelligence, tact, knowledge, sensibility.

## The other is not a limit to the self

It may be necessary to say such things these days because the idea of autonomy, which is at heart of contemporary culture, is often understood superficially, as if everything we received from outside ourselves, every relationship and every exchange, were a threat to that autonomy. What an odd way of understanding what it is to be a person!

*Heteronomy* certainly has a place in the Christian faith, since we acknowledge Another, we seek His will and we are called to keep His Word. But this Other is, according to our faith, the Creator. The unity between the Redeemer and the Creator was something the Gnostics failed to grasp. Father de Montcheuil used to

say: “If we are not autonomous in relation to God, it is because he is not heteronomous in relation to us; he is sufficiently transcendent to be immanent within us so that when we are obedient to the law we are obeying a law which both comes from within and lives within us”. He added, “God is sufficiently transcendent so as to be immanent to us”. What he was trying to say was that the transcendence of God is not to be understood as distance; it is what allows him to scale every wall that seeks to keep him out and to abolish all distance.

This is not to negate the tension which we have to accept as we relate to the Gospel. The Gospel unsettles us, draws us out of ourselves and challenges us. It does this not to alienate us from ourselves, but to awaken us to what is deepest and truest within us. In this sense, we are reminded of the words of E. Mounier: “The other is not a limit to the self, but a source of the self.”

When we talk about rootedness, this is what we should keep in mind to avoid the trap of seeing opposition where there is none. Who, for example, would think of defining a tree that grows towards the sky in opposition to its roots? How absurd it would be to think of the roots as the enemies of the trunk! Our rootedness in Christ is what makes us who we are and it enriches beyond measure. Christ is not a limit; our relationship with him is the relationship one has with an inexhaustible wellspring, with the nourishing earth.

## “Just as you were taught”

It is all about being rooted in faith in Christ, the same faith that was handed down to us by the Apostles. We have here a key word that speaks of the process of tradition. It has to do with “receiving”. In a famous passage from 1 Corinthians Paul, says: “I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you” (11:23).

There is a faithfulness to what we have inherited which we do not make up but which makes up who we are. At the same time, we must not lose sight of that fact that we are called to make visible the fullness that is in Christ in the here-and-now. This implies that we must learn a twofold faithfulness: on the one hand, faithfulness to the origins, to the foundation which remains, and on the other, the requirement to be all things to all people (1 Corinthians 9:22).

It is by showing the radical newness that Christ brings that we become agents of what Christians call “Tradition”. Allowing the newness that is in Christ to dwell within us enables us to be more fully present to our times; welcoming the questions of our contemporaries can help us to discover resources of that same newness that we did not know were there. If, for the apostles, Christ is utter fullness, then he can never be less than that in any period of history. A universe infinitely greater and more ancient than that which even our recent ancestors could have imagined calls for a new awareness and a new expression of the fullness that is in Christ. Teilhard de Chardin’s great intuitions about the need for “a greater Christ for a greater world” were

drawn from his meditation on the epistles which Paul wrote in captivity.

## Tradition and history

In Christian faith, Tradition is not repetition. Cardinal Congar, who carefully studied the notion of Tradition, wrote:

Tradition is living because it is carried by living minds – minds living in time. These minds meet with problems or acquire resources, in time, which lead them to endow Tradition, or the truth it contains, with the reactions and characteristics of a living thing: adaptation, reaction, growth and fruitfulness. Tradition is living because it resides in minds that live by it, in a history which comprises activity, problems, doubts, oppositions, new contributions, and questions that need answering.<sup>5</sup>

In commenting on how the awareness of what has been given in Christ must be deployed in an effort not only to conserve but to develop, Congar makes good use of a text from Ephesians, where, as in our text from Colossians, the question is one of fullness:

“It is given to us, but also *asked* of us, with all the saints, ‘to measure, in all its breadth and length and height and depth, the love of Christ, to know what passes knowledge. And to be filled with all the completion God has to give’ (Ephesians 3:18-19).”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (New York: Hawthorn Publishers, 1964), p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

I quote these words from his book, *The Meaning of Tradition*. In a preface to a new French edition published in 1984, Congar wrote: “The only way to say the same thing in a different context is to say it differently”.

## St. Paul’s Creativity

Paul’s tremendous ability to be creative in a range of situations is easy to see. Consider Acts 17, where Paul is brought to the Areopagus. We see him immersed in Greek culture, burning with the desire to announce to the Athenians “the unknown god” whom they are seeking. The same Paul says to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Notice the role given to the mind, to our discernment. We are called to think, to be creators. It’s an exciting invitation.

The *Epistle to the Colossians* is in itself an eloquent example of Paul’s creativity. Paul did not limit himself to biblical vocabulary or biblical concepts, but he made use of ideas from currents of thought familiar to his listeners.<sup>7</sup> He does this to speak of the fullness that is in Christ. He has sprinkled throughout his epistle words which are like bridges to other cultural worlds. But this is done by an apostle who remains faithful to his intention: to show how Christ is the foundation, the “sub-

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<sup>7</sup> The call to “walk” is reminiscent of Stoicism, and we can hear echoes of Plato in the verse about “shadow and substance” (2: 17), or “shadow and reality” as the French ecumenical translation puts it.

stance” of the real (Colossians 2:17); those who have been baptized have been transferred into his kingdom (1:13) and have access to the fullness that is in Christ. The use of new vocabulary has misled some who have hastily declared that Paul was compromising what is specific to the Christian faith. Underestimating Paul’s creative powers, they have not seen that this vocabulary has been used in the service of new content.

## “Established in the faith”

“The only way for the Colossians to obtain the victory of faith is to remain faithful to the teaching they have received.”<sup>8</sup> The epistle attaches great importance to understanding, true knowledge. The Colossians must penetrate the meaning of the teaching they have received, not in order to accumulate information, but with a view to walking in faith and to living in a way that is in conformity with the Gospel. Teaching must lead to faith. A faith that is not interested in pursuing meaning is, in the long run, a faith without a future. Without a doubt, the living witness remains “the unshakable foundation of Christianity,”<sup>9</sup> but F. Varillon’s warning remains valid: “Fideism is the grave-digger of faith.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> N. Hugédé, *L’épître aux Colossiens*, p. 108

<sup>9</sup> G. Lafont, *Histoire théologique de l’Église catholique*, Cerf, p. 85

<sup>10</sup> Strict fideists assign no place to reason in the life of faith.



## Abounding in thanksgiving

One way of being established in the faith, of taking root in faith, is to live gratefully, to live a life “abounding in thanksgiving” (2:7). It is not hard to see how Paul’s invitation is an answer to the worry fostered by the false teachers in Colossae. Playing on the anxiety of the Colossians, they have tried to manipulate them by making them believe that they have not attained fullness because something is missing. In order for the Colossians to be more aware of the great gift they have already received, Paul invites them to give thanks. Thankfulness is the sign of true maturity. It is striking that the theme of thanksgiving comes up in every chapter of our short epistle. There is probably no better way of letting faith take root in us. It could be said that giving thanks is a way of being rooted in reality. We give thanks because we have become aware of a gift; and that gift of God, given in Christ, becomes the most real thing in our lives. True Christian maturity engages with what is real. Conversely, pursuing fullness by engaging in an ever-increasing number of esoteric and ascetical practices is like running after a “shadow”. “These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ”, says Paul in 2:17. Did he have in mind Plato’s famous cave in which people are satisfied with the shadows while, all the time, reality awaits them at the entrance? The quest of the Colossians is likened to the pursuit of a shadow. Reality, the real substance, belongs to Christ. That is where fullness can be found.

## St. Paul’s struggle

Here we find another important theme of this epistle. Paul stresses his own struggle: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you (...) For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me” (1:24-29). The interpretation of v.24: “In my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” has divided Christians. We are certainly not asked to doubt the fullness that is in Christ, as if his passion lacked something. This would contradict the preceding verses. What Paul says is that, in his own flesh, he is making up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, the church. It is Father Aletti whom we must listen to here: what is not over, what is unfinished is Paul’s struggle. His struggle has a meaning because it contributes to the growth of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

## The Church: a place to grow

The Church is very present in this epistle. It is part of the Gospel (see 1:18a, and 2:19). This means that, for Paul, the Gospel is not only about Christ’s life, death and resurrection, but about his presence among the nations, “a universal presence, a factor of integration, of unity,

<sup>11</sup> On this theme see Aletti, *Saint Paul, Épître aux Colossiens*, pp. 136-137.

life and growth, until believers become a unique entity, defined Christologically (the Body of Christ).”<sup>12</sup>

In the New Testament, the Church is, most of the time, the Church of a region, a city or a locality. But here, in 1:18 and 2:19, it is the universal Church that is referred to. The fullness of Christ continues to be present in the world. Hence the importance in 2:19 of remaining attached to the Head. Paul is struggling, fighting for the growth of the Church. It is equally possible to understand, as Pascal<sup>13</sup> did, that Christ involves us in his own struggle. What he has accomplished, once and for all, must still be communicated to all of humanity and to all ages. For this to happen, he needs people who are prepared to struggle. More generally, we might imagine that, by talking about his own struggle, Paul wants to help the Colossians to realize that struggle is part of their life in faith and part of their rootedness.

Paul found it necessary to introduce the theme of struggle in order to complete what was said about fullness: fullness does not release us from the need to struggle. It is not about choosing the easy route. We should be suspicious of any presentation of the faith that omits this. Patience is inherent to faith. To lead others to believe that faith is effortless and carefree can only foster discouragement. Such discouragement occurs when there is too great a discrepancy between the picture painted by the one who speaks of faith and the reality of those trying to live it, in their poverty.

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<sup>12</sup> Aletti, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> Blaise Pascal: *“Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world. We must not sleep meanwhile.”*

## Contempt

This theme is linked to that of maturity. Those who treat others with scorn demonstrate their lack of maturity. The disdain that the teachers of Colossae have shown appears in 2:16-18:

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking.

The message is loud and clear: those boasting about being advanced because of their visions and disciplines are in reality puffed up, i.e., they are utterly unspiritual. Their lack of maturity can be seen in their contempt for others. In v.18 a word is used that is not found elsewhere in the New Testament and that comes from the world of athletics and the stadium: “to disqualify” (and the implication is that the decision, the result of a referee’s mistake, is the wrong one). The French ecumenical translation (TOB) of this verse, when translated, means: “Do not let anyone strip you of your victory”. Those who have carefully studied the term say that it refers to being deprived of something to which one has a right.<sup>14</sup>

Those who exclude or despise others show, by their actions, that they have not understood Christ. For Paul, maturity is expressed in mutual assistance, in the love we have for our brothers and sisters, in the sense of com-

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<sup>14</sup> Hugedé, p. 147 and note 167 on the same page.

munity. This is how the new humanity takes shape. The *First Letter to the Corinthians* is explicit on this issue, but so is our epistle: “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (...) Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body” (3:12-15). When people strive for unity, they are growing in maturity.

## Christian ethics: living the life of the resurrection

“So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (3:1). This introductory verse allows Paul to set out, in what follows, what living the life of the resurrection actually means. Everything he has already written about the fullness that is in Christ, about his primacy and about baptism will be present in this ethical section. The epistle suggests that Christian ethics could be defined as learning how to live as risen beings.

We learn from this part of Colossians that to grow in God, to mature in Him in the Christian life is not to collect ecstatic experiences or to pursue esoteric practices, but that maturity is acquired as we learn how to live with others. Echoing this, one commentator writes: “Ethical behaviour is both the fruit of the fullness experienced in

Christ and the place where this fullness is made visible and recognized.”<sup>15</sup>

It is important not to misunderstand the meaning of the words taken from our epistle that are read on Easter morning: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1). This is not a call to run away from earthly realities or to abandon human responsibility. Rather, we should see it as a call to understand all things in the light of the resurrection. If we understand our lives and those of others from the perspective of the resurrection then our actions will be attuned to the truth.

The first four verses of ch.3 form an introduction where we find two themes that will be developed in vv. 5-17. Notice that these themes are developed in the opposite order to that given in the introduction. Verse 1 began with: “You have been raised with Christ” and then we read in v. 3: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” In the development which follows, the author begins with death in v.5 and ends with life and resurrection, probably because of his desire to end on a positive note.

The images that are used are taken from the rite of baptism. Paul then begins to speak of death and of everything in human existence that is bound to death and has no future: “The old self with its practices: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language (...) You have discarded the old human nature and the conduct that goes with it.”

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 216.

## A new way of seeing the world

The Colossians have received a new way of living in the world and of seeing it: “You have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (3:10). Paul has listed a number of categories in which human beings commonly place their brothers and sisters. The list is not complete and it will be more extensive in Galatians. But we are to understand that we have moved beyond these categories because of the radical newness that has entered the world. We must now see all things in the light of that newness, which is that of the resurrection. That is what it means to “set our minds on things that are above”.

What this life of resurrection is like is described in 3:12-17. The phrase “clothe yourselves” is obviously taken from the rite of baptism. What must the Colossians clothe themselves with? What will express the fact that they have risen from the dead? The answer is a life of compassion and mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, love (vv. 12-15).

The new relationships that ensue must be lived in this world. This theme runs from 3:18 to 4:1. Returning to our theme of maturity, we could say that maturity does not lead us to run away from the world and its structures.<sup>16</sup> Instead, when we are dealing with that part

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<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 399-400 for these insights and for much of what follows in the next paragraphs. What appears in quotation marks is from this work.

of reality that resists what is new, we are to be creative and inventive in everyday relationships.

The fact that Paul is not more frankly revolutionary has disappointed some modern readers. He takes as his starting point the world as it is, with its social structures: the Greek world, a patriarchal society. However, he introduces something new by his emphasis on reciprocity. He does not stop with the submission that wives must show to their husbands, but goes on to instruct husbands to “love” their wives. The term *agapè* must be understood in all its force: a love that places itself at the service of another. As for the master-slave relationship (a delicate issue, since this letter is carried to his master Philemon by the slave Onesimus), we should notice that Paul mentions not only the simplicity of heart with which slaves must serve their masters but, more surprisingly, insists that masters treat their slaves with justice and equality. Some authors have spoken here of a subversive element, as there is no precedent for such a relationship between master and slave in the ancient world. L. T. Johnson has commented that Paul relativizes the entire social system by placing it within the critical framework of the good news from God. This means that the existing social system now finds itself in tension with the community ideal of neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Greek (3:11). Notice the end of 3:18: “As is fitting in the Lord”. The new relationship with God compels Christians to rethink their concept of what is “fitting”. Paul has been accused of justifying an unjust social order, but those who accuse him of this have perhaps not paid sufficient attention to the power of these

few words and the novelty they herald: “As is fitting in the Lord”. What is foremost is obedience to God. Every submission of one person to another that runs counter to this obedience to God must be rejected. “In the Lord”, therefore, places this social structure itself, as well as all social structures, under the critical judgment of the Gospel. Nobody wishing to live the Gospel can avoid the tensions of an imperfect world. The ethical section of the epistle does not allow us to forget this.

We can only stand amazed at the way in which the *Epistle to the Colossians* lays out before us, as it were with a single gesture, the fullness that is in Christ, his cosmic role and his primacy, whilst at the same time showing us where this fullness must be lived out: in our everyday relationships with each other.

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