



***“Let yourselves be transformed
by renewing your way of thinking” (Rm 12:2)***

(don Paulo Bazaglia, SSP)

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and pleasing to God:
this is your rational worship.
And do not conform yourselves to the scheme of this age,
but **be transformed by the renewal of the mind**,
in such a way that you may distinguish what is the will of God,
the good and pleasing, and perfect. (Rm 12:1-2)¹*

The theme of 11th General Chapter lies in what is traditionally considered the beginning of the second major part of the Letter to the Romans, which is the parenetical or exhortative section (Chapters 12-15). Not that the exhortative character of Romans is limited to the “parenetic section”, for the exhortation gives the argumentative structure of the entire letter. Romans 12, for example, urges one to live a new life, which exactly opposes to the life described in 1:18-32.²

Today most scholars accept that the letter to the Romans addresses those who appear explicitly to be its recipients, namely, *the people of the nations* (τὰ ἔθνη: 1,5.13; cf. 15,14-16) notwithstanding the exegetical obsession of understanding non-Jewish Romans as Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul writes the letter probably in Corinth, around the year 55 or 56, when he was preparing to bring to Jerusalem the collection he had made among the nations to help the poor among the saints (15, 25-26). He writes

¹ Greek text:

Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρῶν τοῦ θεοῦ
παραστήσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ,
τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν·
καὶ μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ,
ἀλλὰ **μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς**
εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ,
τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον.

² Bultmann characterizes the form of exhortation used by Paul in Rm, common in the early churches, as the scheme “before... but now”, emphasizing the new life wrought by baptism. Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1950, p. 105-106.



to the people he did not know, a community that he had not founded³ so that, among other things, he will earn its support in this endeavor in Jerusalem, since his “priestly office” was to present the offering of all nations to God, among them are those who lived in the capital of the empire. After that he intended to go to Spain, certainly with the support of the brothers in Rome.

Another purpose of the Letter was to clarify to the Romans the dynamic action of God in history, especially in relation to the Jews who had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius (probably in the year 49), and that, on returning under Nero’s permission, were object of contempt on behalf of the Romans.⁴ Paul wishes to warn the Romans against the perverse and poisonous imperial logic, which began to dominate among the followers of Jesus who did not come from Judaism, as if the decisions of the empire would define, in the divine sphere, the luck of persons as elected or damned.⁵ At the risk of the logic of the “Gospel of the Empire” dominating among the community of Jesus’ followers, Paul admonishes the Romans of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which implies new relationship starting from a new mentality. An exhortation, therefore, to sympathize and to enter into communion with the Jews who were despised and ridiculed.

A New Worship, Rational

In 12:1 Paul urges the Romans to carry out a “**rational**” worship, that is, “logical”, according to reason. This cult or “service” consists in considering the mercies of God⁶ and to offer their own **bodies** as **living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God**. The mercies of God indicate the divine strategy, beginning from the choice of the faithful Abraham (the common father of the Jews and of the nations), up to the design of making the Jews stumble in order to include together all nations in faithful obedience (cf. 9:32-33, 11:22-23, 25-32). These are mercies that are shown in history, having in the Son’s resurrection the

³ There is no reliable data on the foundation and composition of the community of Jesus' followers in Rome, and here we will not enter into the question. One of the hypotheses is that some "Romans passing through" Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2:10) have returned and initiated the first nucleus of followers.

⁴ Contempt attributed by W. Wiefel to anti-Jewish currents in wider society, currents that had nothing to do with the question of the rejection of the "Gospel" by the Jews (cf. "The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity", in K. P. Donfried, org., *The Romans Debate*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1991, p. 100).

⁵ Cf. N. Elliott, *A arrogância das nações: A Carta aos Romanos à sombra do Império*, Paulus, São Paulo, p. 219.

⁶ In imperial propaganda, clemency was the indulgence shown by the "benevolent" emperor to his unworthy subjects. "Clemency was the practice of moderation towards a defeated enemy, as long as he was not a recalcitrant or abominable (...) but submissive to the *pax romana*" (Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, pp. 82-85, cit. in Neil Elliott, *op. cit.*, Paulus, São Paulo, 2010, p. 183). Nero, probably in AD 54, at the time Paul wrote Rom, wants to show clemency by allowing the return of the Jews to Rome. In practice, however, what was seen was the parasitic nature of the Roman imperial economy, in the instructions given to a newly appointed provincial governor: "You know my needs! Make sure no one gets anything!" It is impossible that Paul does not bear in mind the real "clemency" of the emperor in warning the Romans to the true mercy that is found in the God of Israel.



culminating point, to inaugurate the history of grace commanded by God who not only raised the Son, but also “established the Son of God with power... according to the Spirit of holiness” (1:4).⁷

The Son of God established with power by the Father opened a prospect of a new life, which also required a new type of sacrifice. It is no longer a question of sacrificing dead bodies of animals, but of an offering of one’s own life to God in its concrete dynamic of relations. To this are alluded the bodies (σώματα), the corporality, the building up of human being through communitarian and social relations.⁸ The word “bodies” appears related to the “mind”, “way of thinking” (νοῦς) of the next verse, which leads to thinking a person in its totality because a new service or exterior worship (behavior) implies a new interior reality (mentality). Glorifying God with one’s body (1 Cor 6:20) is also an ethical requirement for those who worship in spirit and in truth (cf. Jn. 4:23-24).

In relation to the liturgical or cultic language used by Paul to speak about new behavior, it’s worth to remember that, before Claudius, Emperor Augustus portrayed himself as a personified piety, with images that represented him with robe in a position to offer sacrifice. This Roman Imperial propaganda simply concealed the injustice and the barbarism of domination with the image of the pious emperor who sacrificed to gods. The invitation of Paul to the non-Jews of the Roman *ekklesia* to present their own bodies as a sacrifice to the God of mercies entails abandoning the identification of piety with power and privilege, to look for the ridiculed and considered “weak” Jews, accepting also to be considered “impious” before the eyes of the Empire, for the real impiety is that which is described in 1:18-32. Authentic piety, therefore, goes through the new rational worship.⁹

This rational worship, not propelled by magical or fantastic criteria, is the answer that is expected of those who meet the God of mercies, who in Jesus Christ reveals himself completely and sanctifies himself with the gift of the Holy Spirit. An answer that, in connection to the bodies, translates into a battle for justice: “Do not put your members available to sin as weapons of injustice. On the contrary, present yourself at God’s disposal, as *living persons came from death*, and show your members as

⁷ It is interesting to recall that Nero had convinced the Senate to grant the late Emperor Claudius divine honors, so that Nero had become, like the emperors before him, *Divi Filius* (“Son of God”). Nero did not want to associate his life with that of Claudius, did not emphasize his status as *divi filius*, contenting himself with allowing poets to salute him as “God himself” (*ipse deus*: Calpurnius Piso). Cf. Goodman, *The Roman World, 44 BC-AD 180*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p. 55.

⁸ Obviously many considerations could be made here in relation to the “body”, as related for example to the sensory nature of the human being that leads him to sin (cf. Köllner and others). However, I recommend reading the § 3.2 (*Soma*) of J. Dunn, *La teologia dell’apostolo Paolo*, Paideia, Brescia, 1999, pp. 78-84, who proposes the idea of “embodiment”: “When Paul exhorts the believers of Rome ‘to offer your bodies in sacrifice’ it is clear that Paul does not want to convince them to offer their arms and legs on sacrificial altar! His exhortation means above all that they must offer themselves, as seen by the parallel [...] with 6,13.16 [...]. The equivalent of Israel’s commitment expressed in the ritual sacrifice was its dedication expressed in bodily relations” (p. 81).

⁹ The “rational worship” and the “metamorphosis by the renewal of the mind” of Paul (assuming a service to God that is rational and undergoing a complete change from within) are two examples of his rhetorical effort to merge specifically Christian ideas with Jewish and Hellenistic ones. Cf. J. P. Sampley (org.), *Paulo no mundo greco-romano: um compêndio*, Paulus, São Paulo, 2008, p. 556.



weapons of justice” (6:13). This the meaning of the “living sacrifice” of the nations reached by the grace of God and revived by his Spirit.

Concerning still on rational cult, it is interesting to note that Paul’s use of sacrificial language elsewhere, such as: “And this because by the grace of God which was given to me by God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus among the nations, exercising the priestly office to preach the Gospel of God, that the nations may become a pleasing sacrifice, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (15:15-16); “If my blood will be shed in sacrifice on the offering and the liturgy of the faith which you have, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (Phil 2:17); “we are a pleasing fragrance of Christ for God” (2 Cor 2:14-16).

Paul urges self-sacrifice to present oneself to God in the corporal materiality of the victim¹⁰, certainly not in the attitude of the paralyzing victim, but with the knowledge of the losses which “the scheme of this age” causes and ensnares people. The “victims” who offer themselves to God do so in a process of renewal of bodies, of material, communitarian and social relations, and of renewal of mind, of the ways of thinking, according to God who acts with power in human weakness, overcoming the fear that the offering of one’s being might desecrate or bring the wrath of God (cf. Mt 1:8).

Not to conform to the present scheme...

To not conform to the *scheme of this age*¹¹ is to acknowledge “the decisive time in which we live” (13:11). It is a warning in the negative (“**Not to be conformed**”: μή συσχηματίζεσθε) for the positive exhortation (μεταμορφοῦσθε) which follows: “**Be transformed**” (or “**Be transfigured**”). There are two imperatives, the first in the middle or passive voice, and the second is in the passive voice with reflexive sense.¹² Paul is admonishing the Romans not to allow themselves to be shaped, passively, by schemes alien to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, “of this age” itself, of the corruptible time that is not messianic. After all, the Gospel of Jesus proclaimed by Paul is not the gospel of the empire... But Paul does it so not in the sense of exhorting oneself to distance from the world, but to acknowledge the transience of the present in order to act for the new and eternal time: “Those who use this world live as if in fact, they do not. For the scheme of this world passes away (1 Cor 7:13). The followers of Jesus are in the world but not of this world (cf., among others, Jo 15:18-27).

... but be transformed by the renewal of the mind

¹⁰ The verb of sacrificial context used (παραστήσαι) makes us think of the word "sacrifice" (θυσίαν) in the sense of "sacrificial victim".

¹¹ Paul works with the concept of the messianic time. The present (τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ, “this age”, “this era”) precedes the messianic time that is to come and opposes it by its course of corruption.

¹² The prefixes of both verbs (σύν ε μετα) are reflexive, and in the NT μεταμορφώ always occurs in the passive voice. The verbal forms indicate the dynamism of the actions in relation to the subject: at the same time personal commitment of the faithful, and action of the Spirit in their lives. As for verb radicals, some seek to distinguish between σχῆμα and μορφή. "Schema" would refer to the external aspect, the appearance, while "form" is to the internal. One could say: the shape is the engine of the scheme, in which certain artificiality weighs in this distinction.



The “but” (ἀλλά) indicates to not let oneself be shaped or conformed by the scheme of this world or of the time which means **“let be transformed”** or **“be transformed”** (μεταμορφοῦσθε; lit. “let be transfigured” or “be transfigured”). The image of the caterpillar going to be butterfly is perhaps the best example to illustrate the sense of this verb, which in the New Testament occurs only here, in 2 Cor 3:18¹³ and in the episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus (Mt 17:2, Mk 9:2). It is, therefore, about not adopting the external appearances of this world ignoring its perverse internal mechanisms. It is an exhortation not to let oneself be fascinated by the style propagated by the empire that time, and the current ones, as the “natural order of things” to content itself with the “bread and circuses” (although this, substantially, only existed in the theaters of history and not fully in the lives of the people), or to vegetate in the lack of protagonism of those who are blind and submerged in “fake news”. Fashions, customs, habits of the present scheme require personal transfiguration, a “metamorphosis”, a process that allows changing from within to assume a new form and appearance, like the ugly caterpillar which transforms to the point of assuming new form, new figure, to the beautiful butterfly. In other words, for Paul, to assume the same “form” or “image” of Christ: “Those who God knew beforehand, to them he also predestined to have the same image of his Son, so that the Son might be the firstborn among the many brothers” (Rm 8:29).

It is a transformation, therefore, that does not pass through external elements, as simply by the assumption of different actions or rules, but by living the “law of the spirit”, the new principle of life for the faithful. It passes above all **by the renewal of the mind** (τῆ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς), that is, through the renewal of one’s way of thinking, of reflecting, of seeing the world, people, relations, renewal that changes the way of interacting with oneself, with God, and with people. It implies, most of all, an “examining of one’s conduct” (cf. Gal 6:4) and the consequences that comes from such conduct. To use the image of 1 Cor, it is tantamount to assuming a different logic, which does not lead to understanding and thinking according to the theories of merely human wisdom, but according to the Spirit of the Risen one and his power that is revealed in weakness, in the logic of the cross which leads to new life from the Resurrection: “The psychic man does not accept things that come from the Spirit of God. They are madness to those are not able to understand them. On the contrary, the spiritual man knows how to discern everything and does not submit to anyone’s discernment. For ‘who had known the mind of the Lord to give him lessons?’ We have, however, the mentality of Christ” (1 Cor 2:14-16). A *new* way of thinking is thus accompanied by the “service according to the *newness* of spirit” (or of the Spirit: : ὥστε δουλεύειν ἡμᾶς ἐν καινότητι πνεύματος; Rm 7,6).

The renewal of the mind implies assuming ethical criteria with maturity, overcoming blind obedience which keeps in fear and does not open to true relationship. “Do not extinguish the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Examine everything and be with what is good (1 Ts 5:20). The discernment to know “what is good” is not simple, it takes commitment and involves risks. Paul prefers, however, to take risks

¹³ "And we all, with open face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being changed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the working of the Spirit of the Lord".



in order to have communities of followers who carry out a real and profound process of renewal and maturity so that, in clashes with adverse and cruel logic, assumes the mentality of Christ, “until Christ is formed in us” (Gl 4:19), a Pauline expression so dear to Father Alberione.

In fact, the question is to discover “what is good” according to the logic of new life in the Spirit (described in Rm 8). In Paul’s words which follows the theme of the 11th General Chapter: to be able **“to distinguish what is the will of God, the good and pleasing, and perfect”** (δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον). Paul warns against the “scheme of this world”, but it is not that he can offer in detail what would be the “new scheme for the followers of Jesus”. His exhortation is toward a permanent state of mental openness, of constant discernment, not to accept anything new, but to continually examine things¹⁴ and to assume the attitude of the disciple who learns always from the Master: “Learn from me” (cf. Mt 11:25-30), taking from the “treasure” of his mind “new and old things” (Mt 13:52). And this is so that “your spirit, soul, and body may be kept whole and blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Ts 5:23).

We can find an indication of what is “pleasing to God and perfect” in 14:18-19: in a community where the Romans used to despise and ridicule the Jewish minority with its Law and habits, Paul encourages them to stop judging one another to walk in love, for the practice of love puts the faithful in position of honor before God and in position of approval before people (cf. 14:18). And since “metamorphosis” is a continuous process in the life of the faithful, “where we may want to go, we keep our course” (Fl 3:16), occupying ourselves “in all that is true, what is noble, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovable, all that is praiseworthy, that has virtue and is worthy of acknowledgement” (Fl 4:8), living as “friends of the cross of Christ”.

They are several passages, moreover, which speaks of the transformation and renewal that the Risen causes in the faithful, as 2 Cor 4:16:18: “Albeit our exterior is fading out, our interior is being renewed day by day... Do not look for things that can be seen, but for things that cannot be seen. For those that are seen are passing, those that are not are eternal”. And Cl 3:9-10: “You have already taken off the old man and his actions, and have put on the new, who through knowledge is being renewed in the image of your Creator”.

Making Way with The Oppressed

The transfiguration which means renewal of the mind, the assumption of the same sentiments of the Lord Jesus in the present time, is described also by Paul like “anxious waiting for the redemption of our body” among those who groan and suffering from “labor pains” (the “groaning of creation” from Rm 8:18-27). The gifts of God are irrevocable. His calling of the chosen people and of all the nations are also irrevocable. We were already saved by hope yet our body still awaits its redemption, suffering with

¹⁴ The verb δοκιμάζειν indeed implies proof by experience itself, and can be translated by “learning by practicing” or “distinguishing by concrete practice” the will of God.



all creation in labor pains. The new life in the Spirit opens a new dynamic, but we are still limited, not fully free from schemes, from the logic of this world. In the words of N. Elliott, Christians do not always grow in the “awareness of the seductive risk of the ideological air that we breath”¹⁵, the seductive air of the “civilization of wealth” which produces misery, so much today as the imperial propaganda of the first century in Rome. They are like seeds of the Spirit, many of them weigh down by the systemic logic of power and of profit, which by faith we believe will become life’s fruit in the future.

Paul talks about the activity of powerful and renewing action of the Spirit in a world which oppresses the genuinely human and solidary yearnings, which exalts power and dismisses the weak after sucking its few resources, in a such a way that sometimes “we do not know what is best to ask” (Rm 8:26) to this Spirit who comes to aid in weakness. The renewal of the mind, in fact, is a process that also makes us go through the content and the quality of our prayer.

Be transfigured by the renewal of the mind entails listening to the voice of the Spirit in the “groaning of creation”. With apocalyptic categories, Paul announced to the Romans of the Empire the coming and the nearing “day” of the Messiah, the Lord, with a new order, a new scheme, a new figure of the human being. It was an alternative story to the logic of war, dominion, and “peace with circus”. The entire exhortation speaks in this sense. The “imminent coming” of the Lord did not occur objectively, and today one can easily frame Paul imprudently as a delusional apocalyptic. But “perhaps the most important lesson that we can take from the apocalypse of Paul is the intuition from which the true future of the world will not rise from the projects and instruments of the present order”¹⁶. After all, what God accomplished in his Resurrected Son was much more than to alleviate the punishment of transgressions: he inaugurated for Jews and for all of the nations of the Empire a new dominion, the “reign of grace” (cf. 5:21).

As manifested this reign of grace in the present of Paul and as it manifests itself in our present has to see, above all, with rational service, a pleasing worship to God of transformed persons in concrete relations (“embodiment”) beginning from the renewal of the way of thinking and acting. Not by personal merit or power, but by letting the Spirit, who transforms and renews, to act. Hence to move forward to the new “scheme” of the messianic time it is fundamental to listen to the Spirit, because one can easily ignore the voice of the Spirit in the “groaning of creation” living for example “as if the poor didn’t exist”, in the expression of J. Sobrino.¹⁷

“The letter to the Romans is an attempt of Paul to contrast the effects of the imperial ideology within the Roman congregations. Looking to reorient its perceptions around a more authentically Jewish Scriptural perspective, that in this case, means a more communitarian perspective appropriated to the

¹⁵ Neil Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

¹⁶ *Id, ibid.*

¹⁷ “Extra pauperes nulla salus”. Cf. J. Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*, Orbis Books, New York, 2008.



practice of a “civilization of solidarity’ ”¹⁸. On writing to the Romans, as already noted, Paul was prepared to go to Jerusalem to deliver the “offering of the nations” for the poor among the saints. It is the practical exteriorization of the exhortation that Paul makes in 12:16: “Have the same sentiments with one another, without pretensions of grandeur, but *making way with the oppressed*” (τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι). His international economic assistance campaign in making Jews poor in Jerusalem points exactly to the direction that Paul wanted to do with the least, the oppressed and the suffering, to the direction of an alternative civilization, against the alienation of assuming the ideology of the empire and be content with a pious political quietism.¹⁹

The rational worship of those who set themselves on the path of faithful obedience to God thus passes through the offering of themselves in the service to God and to their brothers, through the renewal of the mind in the crucible of discernment, to a new scheme, not of this age or time. Who knows a scheme which we can call “*utopia*”, a “no-time”, a worthy and just life for the majority and for all, which the Spirit is generating. Or *eutopia*, the good place, the new world where those saved through faithful obedience will inhabit, those who in the present make way with the oppressed and the suffering, without letting itself be dominated by the dominant systemic logic which continues to produce victims sacrificed to power, prestige and wealth. The renewal of the mind is the constant overcoming of the schemes of an unjust world, schemes that integrate more schemes in all personal, communitarian or social levels; overcoming that which gives a compromised spirituality by “incorporation”, meaning, that which involves concrete relations of bodies and minds.

Finally, the text of Pt 2:5, addressed probably in the final of the first century to strangers and migrants who were afflicted by preconceptions and maltreated by the natives, underlines the new time to which Paul himself exhorts: “You enter also as living stones in the building of a spiritual house and form a holy priesthood, who offers spiritual sacrifice, pleasing to God by means of Jesus Christ”. To the Romans to whom Paul wrote and for us today, a new pleasing worship to God, the transfigurations through the renewal of the mind, requires openness to the Holy Spirit, so that he may act with power in our weakness. So that in the sieve of our discernment there may be the least, both the Jews of Rome then (if we place ourselves as recipients of Rm), how many refugees of our time, the millions who today die of hunger, those excluded and discarded by the logic of the market. A path that is not for them, the little ones (Rm 12:16), will be far from being a path that has as its beginning the new life of the Spirit, the life of permanent transfiguration through the renewal of mentality.

—Paulo Bazaglia

¹⁸ N. Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

¹⁹ The book of Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*, Fortress Press, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2010, is an example of work that seeks to rethink Paul's mission as an apostle to the defeated and colonized nations.