

Life is disregarded and undervalued, including the lives of the unborn as well as the lives of the newly born. Life is cheap and disposable.

Marriage is a matter of casual convenience and disposed of just as easily. Divorce is common. Pornography and sexual depravity are rampant.

I'm sure all of that sounds familiar to you but I am not referring to our contemporary culture. This is a description of the Roman culture at the time of Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Saint Paul established the church in Philippi, in what is now northern Greece, in about the year A.D. 50. He received a remarkable welcome and the community grew quickly in its faith and numbers. It is clear from Paul's letters that the church in this Roman outpost was very dear to him and he held its members close to his heart.

But when Paul continued his missionary travels to establish churches in other cities, problems began to arise. Doctrinal and moral controversies arose, causing division and confusion. When Paul heard of these difficulties he wrote a warm, upbeat, personal letter to the people of Philippi. Afraid that the issues they were facing may drive them away from God, Paul encourages the people to “stand firm in the Lord.”

The world we live in is much like the the world of Saint Paul. We are surrounded by a culture that makes it difficult to be followers of Christ and His Church. If we hold to our faith, we will most likely be insulted. If we say “all lives matter, both the born and unborn,” a seemingly self-

evident statement, we are labelled as racists, bigots, and hatemongers. If we stand up for the way God has set things in order, by declaring marriage to be between a man and a woman, and that men and women are equal in dignity, we are called intolerant, homophobic, and misogynists.

The normal behavior of the popular culture does not follow the Christian principles of dignified self-control, self-forgetful love, humility, and moral integrity. Instead it glorifies self-indulgence, exaggerated individualism, superficiality, and moral weakness, just as the pagan society of Philippi did.

And so we too need to be encouraged to “stand firm in the Lord.” we need to be reminded, as Paul reminded the Philippians, that we are not citizens of this world. We are citizens of Heaven. And we must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the pagan culture that surrounds us.

This world is not Heaven. It is the path to Heaven. It will one day pass away and be replaced by a new Earth which shall be eternal. That is the gold medal we must keep our eyes on in order to persevere through life's trials. This world is a place of trial and temptation, a training ground to prove our worthiness of our true home.

We cannot imagine the joys that await us. We do not know what the new Heaven and the new Earth will be like. But the Bible offers us clues that theologians over the centuries have expanded upon.

The popular conception of sitting on clouds playing harps is sweet but ultimately sounds boring. And Heaven will be anything but boring.

We will have work to do; not the servile work that we engage in just to pay bills and keep food on the table. It will be the work of Adam in the Garden, it will be work undertaken for the joy of working.

When questioned by the Pharisees, Jesus told us the greatest commandment was to love God. The second greatest is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Love is work. And the work we take the greatest joy in is the work we do for love.

When we fall in love with another person we take endless delight in discovering new facets of the person to fall in love with. It may be their charm or their wit, the way they tilt their head or their smile. It may even be their little eccentricities that we find so endearing but the rest of the world finds annoying.

In Heaven we will embark on the work of an endless adventure, continually discovering new facets of God to fall in love with. And we will find the fulfillment of our individual gifts in expressing that love.

But before we get there we have to get through our pilgrimage here on Earth. How do we do that? How do we remain in the world but not of the world?

When we hear the words “Roman outpost,” we may imagine a fort out in the wilderness far away from civilization. But that is not what the

Romans meant. A Roman outpost was a thriving city that had been conquered by the Roman empire and turned into a sort of mini Rome. Philippi was a key military outpost. The Roman soldiers posted there were all veterans who had served in the army for twenty one years and earned the privilege of full Roman citizenship. This assured the loyalty of the city, allowing for it to become a focal point in the empire with Roman roads and all the trade and commerce those roads provided.

The Roman citizens of Philippi took great pride in their citizenship and tended to hold themselves apart from the local populace. They wore Roman clothes, ate Roman food, spoke Latin, and followed Roman laws, customs and ceremonies. They were stubbornly Roman and would never allow themselves to be tarnished by the surrounding culture.

As long as this was the case, the Roman empire remained strong, vigorous and safe. This was the context in which Paul reminded the Christians that they were citizens of Heaven. Just as the Romans never forgot they belong to Rome we should never forget that we belong to Heaven, and our conduct must match our citizenship.

This is how we change the world, as we did two thousand years ago, by remembering that as Christians, our abiding principles are to love God and to love our neighbor.

Love is the hallmark of the Christian. In the ancient pagan world, unwanted newborns, the sick and elderly, were abandoned in the

wilderness to waste away and die. It was, more often than not, the Christians who would find them, take them in, and care for them.

The early Christians did not organize special interest groups or political parties. They did not directly oppose the government. They did not picket or protest or attempt to overthrow the ruling authorities. They simply stood as a faithful, alternative presence, a sign of contention, obedient to God.

The last pagan emperor of Rome, Julian the Apostate, clearly saw the writing on the wall when he wrote to his priests, warning them of the behavior of the Christians. He wrote:

“These impious Galileans (Christians) not only feed their own, but ours also; welcoming them with their agape, they attract them, as children are attracted with cakes... Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity. ... Such practice is common among them, and causes contempt for our gods.”

We respond to hatred, bigotry, intolerance and persecution, with love.

Early in the third century a group of Christians were arrested in the Roman province of Carthage in North Africa. They were found guilty of being Christian, a crime at the time under the emperor Diocletian, and sentenced to die in the local arena.

Among them was a woman from a wealthy family named Perpetua, and a slave named Felicity. Perpetua was a young mother and Felicity

was pregnant at the time of her imprisonment, giving birth while still in captivity.

Perpetua kept a diary of her time leading up to her death. This diary has been examined by experts many times and declared to be an authentic account of the persecution of Christians under Diocletian. The last words Perpetua recorded in her diary before her martyrdom in the arena, echo the words of Saint Paul and serve as a guide for living in a world that is increasingly hostile to our beliefs.

“Stand fast in the faith, and love one another.”