STS General Chapter 2021 Address by the Senior
Philippians 2:1-11

On Sundays all are gathered together in unity. The records of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows. The presider exhorts and invites us into the pattern of these good things." Apart from the fact that it always seems good to quote from the Apology of Justin Martyr, this particular quote contains two important reflections for us here today and for the coming year in the life of our Society. And those reflections can be found in the words - exhortation and invitation.

There are many synonyms – beseech, entreat, goad, encourage, charge, advise and implore – and those just for starters! But the word itself carries its own weight and even some wonderous beauty in the context of our second lesson today. Derived from the Latin and from the middle English of the 15th century, this word "exhortari" is really at the core of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. Unlike his letters to the church at Corinth or even Galatia which often carry overtones of admonition, Paul writes to the congregation at Philippi with a degree of warmth and affection. In essence this is an exhortation that is also a word of encouragement.

Now Paul is as good as anyone at admonishing, criticizing and speaking his mind if he thinks that his flock has gone astray. But here Paul, ever the good pastor, exhorts and affirms the faith of his flock at Philippi. Building upon his thoughts in the first chapter, Paul outlines in chapter 2, the characteristics of a community that is in Christ Jesus – a community marked by joy, fellowship, love, partnership, affection, unity and a common mindset.
And it is these qualities that we are called to share among us as our Society gathers in General Chapter retreat in this year of Our Lord 2021.

This disjointed time of pandemic has brought stress and strain to so many of our communities and institutions, often even in our congregations and we in the Society have not been immune from such strains. It is clear from conversations I have had with many members over the past 18 months or so, or from what I have seen on social media, that we are not of one mind about this pandemic, its causes and effects or its treatments and this has caused some division and even dissention among us.

Yet Paul is calling for the church at Philippi to recognize the differences that existed between them and yet still respond in a different way. And Paul begins his exhortation with an "if" as though the things upon which he is about to present are absent. But the Greek here is more nuanced and the "if" is not conditional but rather affirmative. So, Paul says, if there is any encouragement in Christ (and there is) and if there is any consolation from love (and there is) and if there is any sharing in the Spirit (and there is), if there is any compassion and sympathy (and there is) then be of the same mind. And being of the same mind does not mean agreement in all things, for Paul recognizes that differences and disagreements will continue to exist. Rather Paul anticipates that wonderful understanding of consensus, so central to our own Rule which says that we may not agree – ever – on certain things but we can be of the same mind in our life in the Spirit. And that same mind will be called for in this retreat as we gather in the midst of a mask mandate and other restrictions.

We may not like it; we may not agree with it. But this opportunity to gather is greater than passing inconveniences and the time spent together in prayer, reflection, learning and sharing is surely called for as we seek to live within this Society in the mind of Jesus Christ. And we will need to be of one mind most especially as we invoke the power of the Holy Spirit over the election process for a Senior. We may not agree on all the qualities we feel are important for that office and we may not agree about who might best serve us going forward. But, under our Rule, we are called to listen to that Spirit and discern what might be best, not for any one of us, but for our Society as a whole. Paul urges and encourages the congregation at Philippi to exercise that gift of living in the Spirit with a common mind, with a consensus of community and with a bond of love.

But Paul's exhortation is not just put in the form of vague, wishy washy or trite sayings. Rather his exhortation is designed to draw us in to the pattern of these good things and specifically that means a life in Christ. Indeed, Paul is calling upon all his listeners and readers to imitate Christ and more specifically to imitate Christ's humility.

Now the word imitation, used by Paul in this context, is not one by which we simply copy the actions of another or indeed use imitation as a form of flattery. Rather this imitation is based upon Paul's initial comment that our mind should be the same as that which is in Christ Jesus. Our mind, our life, even our very being, are to be formed and molded by the mind of Christ so that we become like Christ in every way save in His divinity and perfection including this call to imitate Christ in His humility.

Now humility is not highly prized or even understood in our society today; rather humility is often denigrated or used as a tool to achieve one's ends. And there is humility and false humility, the latter best characterized by that famous Dicken's character, Uriah Heep, who is a model, par excellence, of such false humility. Unctuous, obsequious and insincere, Heep is the model of cloying humility with his famous phrase "I am your

‘umble servant sir, your very ‘umble servant.” And if I might be so humble as to suggest that only an Englishman could say that correctly!

But clearly this is not the humility of which Paul speaks nor that found in this wonderful little book entitled *The Imitation of Christ*. This has been one of my favorite books over the years of my spiritual formation and I have found it a gem that is filled with words of encouragement and exhortation which are designed to draw me into the pattern of life in Christ. Read on a regular basis as part of all our daily spiritual reflections, this book would, I believe, help shape the basis for us of our life in Christ and our life lived together within this Society.

And this book is filled especially with exhortations regarding humility just as Paul exhorted the church at Philippi to the same humility. Paul makes his point about humility by using this famous and wonderful Christological hymn where we hear clearly that Jesus, though God, did not exploit that relationship but rather “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” And this understanding shows us that obedience is an integral part of humility.

Many of you know that I spent some 10 years in my Catholic Order. And when I left it was not because of my vows of poverty or chastity but rather that I was not willing to bend my will to God’s will in both humility and obedience as Christ Himself did. I wanted to imitate the way of the self-centered world, thinking that I knew best, rather than imitate Christ in His humility. It took me years to understand and accept the truth of this reality and I will confess that humility remains a struggle for me each and every day. Too often I am not willing to “be of the same mind that is in Christ Jesus.” I am not willing to bend my will to that of God. I am not willing to become obedient “even to the point of death.” Even in my 73rd year of life, I struggle with this call to humility and likely will till the day of my death.

But that is when I turn to a work such as *The Imitation of Christ* and particularly one lovely section entitled “On Lowly Submission.” The prophet Micah has already called us “to walk humbly with our God” and now the author of the Imitation adds these thoughts for our reflection. “God protects and delivers the humble man. He loves and comforts the humble man. To the humble man He inclines Himself; on the humble man He bestows great grace; and when he is cast down, He raises him to glory; to the humble He reveals His secrets and sweetly draws and invites him to Himself. Reckon not yourself to have profited in anything unless you first feel yourself to be inferior to all.” Surely such words as these could be our call to live in true humility and obedience all the days of our life. But Thomas a Kempis brings us full circle back to Paul when he adds these words from a section entitled “to imitate Christ by means of the cross.” Thomas says, “if you will be exalted in heaven, humble yourself in the world; if you will reign with me, bear the cross with me, for only the servants of the cross find the way of blessedness and true light.” This is an exhortation that is also encouragement, guidance and wisdom to which Paul would have given full assent. This is an invitation into the pattern of these good things.

My sisters and brothers. We are now entering into our retreat and the coming 48 hours are a time for reflection, prayer, learning and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren and that will all be a blessing. But, in addition, I would offer this thought - that in many ways this retreat is preparing us for next year when we will come together to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of this Society. Of course, there will be planning for that event in terms of speakers and logistics. But I am also offering an exhortation and an invitation to all members of the Society, present or not, to take the next twelve months to prepare for that upcoming anniversary by doing two things – first read again and again and again this exhortation and word of encouragement from Paul in Philippians 2 and reflect upon it so that we might grow in our understanding of what it truly means to be of the same mind that is in Christ Jesus and to imitate Him in His humility. And then I would offer this simple work, *The Imitation of Christ* as something for us all to read and make use of in our ongoing spiritual formation. Indeed, I would ask chapters deans as they gather in retreat during the coming year to not only read from the Rule as is our custom, but also to read, reflect and pray on some sections of this book so that together we may grow in our imitation of Christ. With such means we will then truly be prepared to celebrate our anniversary in 2022.

Exhortation and invitation! An exhortation to be of the same mind, to have the same love and to be in full accord during the days of this retreat and indeed for the coming year. An invitation into the pattern of these good things as found in the words of Paul to the church at Philippi and the writing of Thomas a Kempis which remain the call for our common life in this Society. Through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, may these next few days be a blessing to all who are gathered and for our absent brethren and may this coming year be a further blessing so that indeed we may grow as a community marked by joy, fellowship, love, partnership, affection, unity and a common mindset which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen