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Accepting Others in their Diversity

Paul's Mediation Strategy towards the Weak and Strong

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Abstract

In Romans 14:1–15:13, Paul offers the believers in Rome an articulate and vibrant call for mutual acceptance, while respecting the differences in practical observances (food and calendar matters) of some of them: the "weak in faith" and the strong. Within these differences, the community is experiencing conflict and laceration: some despise and ridicule others, while the latter, usurping God's place, even go so far as to condemn the former. Paul does not limit himself to recommending tolerance, but intends to convince, to persuade, one another of the need to seek and build peace and unity in diversity together, because God and Christ have already manifested acceptance and love for every human being. Analysing this discourse, especially from a rhetorical standpoint, helps readers and today's Church appreciate Paul's mediation skills and understand the message's relevance in a society like ours, marked by unyielding diversity in ethnicity, culture, and religion.

In this article,[1] I would like to reflect on *the key aspects of the rhetorical strategy of mediation* employed by the Apostle Paul (Rom. 14:1–15:13) to deal with the

[1] The core of this article is based on my monograph, Alma 2022, published in French last year, which constitutes a slightly reworked and expanded version of my doctoral thesis discussed and accepted at the Faculty of Protestant Theology of the University of Strasbourg, on 16 November 2020.

state of tension and conflict, of contempt and judgement, arising from the different practices of the so-called "weak" and "strong" followers of Jesus in Rome, around the middle of the first century AD.

I will proceed in three steps to explain what is really at stake and Paul's intentions. Firstly, I will briefly outline the socio-religious composition of the followers of Jesus in Rome and the real issue that troubled them; secondly, I will justify and develop a rhetorical schematic reading of Paul's speech in Rom. 14:1–15:13, to follow his logic and coherence; finally, I will present some theological reflections around the call for the acceptance of diversity in the Church.

The *purpose* of my contribution is to offer some stimulus to continue thinking about the difference and diversity in the Church and to create a positive and welcoming atmosphere where people want to belong and stay engaged. The interest of this study stems from the difficulty, in every human community, one of Christian faith in our case, of living, walking, and praising the same Lord, but from different experiences, of diverse cultures and finally, also, of divergent or heterogeneous practices. This is a situation that is more and more common in our Western societies and in our time. Due in part to immigration, churches in Western countries have become a true reflection of our multicultural and multi-religious society. Thus, we are *all* confronted with an irreducible difference and complexity, *intra et extra ecclesiam*.

Most of the time, the difference is perceived as a threat to one's own identity, rather than as a springboard to broaden the experience, or even enrich the knowledge of life.

So, before being theological, doctrinal, the crisis of our churches in Europe (and beyond) is first and foremost relational (see Seibold 2010). Most of those who leave, for example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, young people in particular, do not leave it for reasons related to good or bad theology, but because they have not been able to find a space in which they can live and experiment, and a climate of welcome and friendship in the church. According to a survey on the devotional life, beliefs, ethical values, conduct and community commitment of young Adventists, carried out in 2007 in seventeen European nations, *Valuegenesis Europe* – from a collection of about 6,000 surveys (see *Spes Christiana* 2013, 1–201; Mora 2021), among *the fundamental needs* that these young people express is that of living and growing in a friendly, loving, and welcoming community (see Sigg 2013, 163–183, especially p. 181).

This "hemorrhaging of young people", however, concerns not only the Adventist Church, but is a cross-cultural phenomenon also in the Catholic Church and Protestant churches.[2]

Cultural diversity is a fact of life. The real challenge, therefore, is how to handle this cultural, ethnic, religious diversity with respect for oneself and for others. Obviously, there are no simple answers.

In this essentially relational context, it is my conviction that the articulation of "Paul's speech" in Rom. 14:1–15:13 certainly conceived for *an intra-community context* of believers in Jesus, very chronologically and culturally distant from ours, has not lost its relevance and scope.

In the past, Rom. 14:1–15:13 has often been explained with a focus on the socio-historical identity of the weak and the strong. Who are they? Where do the differences in practices that mark and divide the community of Roman believers come from? What is the background of the local churches in Rome, or what is the characteristic composition of these communities of believers in Jesus? Are we dealing with general principles in Rom. 14:1–15:13, or principles applied to a historically defined situation? Moreover, the text of Rom. 14:1–15:13, as well as the whole ethical or parenetical section of Rom. 12:1–15:13, has remained somewhat in the shadow of the more so-called "theological" section (Rom. 1–11), not without a certain ambiguity.[3]

As for me, without excluding the importance of this kind of research (diachronic investigation), I decided to focus my exegetical investigation *more* on a synchronic approach and particularly rhetorical. What especially interests me is to grasp the *mediation strategy* that Paul implemented to exhort, in the name of the Gospel, the mixed and diverse community of his Roman readers, to overcome the incipient tearing apart in which these disciples of Jesus Christ found themselves.

1. The Disciples of Jesus in Rome: A Socio-Historical Background

The Letter to the Romans is the main literary source of information on the socio-historical context of Jesus' disciples in Rome, towards the middle of the

[2] It is "an ecumenical fact" in Italy and in the Western Christian world. See Genre and Giannatempo 2018, 31; Garelli 2016; Salvarani 2023.

[3] As an example, I recall in passing the case of Aletti's (1998, 1553–1600) commentary on "Romans" which reserves for Rom. 12:1–15:13 only the equivalent of a single page of commentary (*sic*!) out of the forty-eight pages in total.

first century AD. This community of believers appears to have been a "handful of people" scattered in several groups or small family cells ("domestic churches"), of essentially mixed Jewish and pagan origins (cf. Rom. 16:3–15).

From the very beginning of this letter, Paul seems to want to create an ideal bridge, a continuity, between his faith in Jesus and the faith of Israel. The Gospel is not presented as an innovation of the last hour, but as a promise that had already been announced in the Jewish Scriptures, in the First Testament (Rom. 1:1–2, cf. 1:16–17). The *Scriptures* of Israel, in fact, constitute the backdrop, the source of instruction for every believer, for the sake of hope (Rom. 15:4). Without them, the Gospel according to Paul[4] would remain virtually incomprehensible.

Among the hypotheses on the origin of Christians in Rome, it is quite common to take advantage of a few clues from the book of *Acts*. For example, the beginnings of the Christian faith in the Roman capital are related to these Jews or Roman proselytes (cf. Acts 2:10,11) that came to Jerusalem from the vast Jewish Diaspora on the occasion of the Feast of Pentecost. While hearing Peter preaching the Gospel (Acts 2:1,5,14), they could have accepted faith in Christ (cf. v. 41). Pilgrimages to Jerusalem by Jews and proselytes, residing in Rome or elsewhere in the Diaspora of the Empire, were a known and common event. Thus, the Roman Jewish community was the "cradle" (see Caragounis 1998, 245–279, especially 249–250), and even the "necessary condition" (Wiefel 1991, 89), which enabled the formation of the new Christian community.

It is possible that riots may have occurred in the synagogues because some participants believed in Christ. Following the edict of expulsion of the Jews from Rome, ordered by Emperor Claudius in 49 AD (Suetonius, *Life of the Twelve Caesars. Claudius* XXV; Acts 18:1–2), a decisive *turning point* occurred which changed substantially and definitively the face and composition of early Roman Christianity. The change that happened was so important that one can speak of a Christian *community before* and a *community after* the Edict of Claudius (Wiefel 1991, 93). It was a circumstance that K.P. Donfried did not hesitate to call "an explosive situation of tension and hostility" (Donfried 1998, 6). Without knowing precisely when the disciples of Jesus left the Roman synagogues to form independent communities, it is probable that as a result of these disorders the Pagan-Christian component largely took over the

[4] "κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου", cf. Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8.

Judeo-Christian component. In compliance with François Vouga, "from the point of view of its internal constitution, the Christianity of Rome to which the apostle is addressing seems to bring together an influential minority of Judeo-Christians, who according to Rom. 14:1–15:13 hold to their ideals of holiness, refuse to eat meat and consume wine, as well as a majority of pagan-Christians with a rather liberal tendency" (Vouga 2000, 170).

The conflicts and tensions in the communities, reported in Rom. 14:1–15:13, are compatible with this mixed composition of early Roman Christianity and Christianity in general. The double component, Jewish and pagan, of the Christian community in Rome is evoked in the Letter to the Romans in several places, cf. for example the oppositions: Ἰουδαῖος / Ἕλλην;[5] Ἰουδαῖος / ἔθνος;[6] περιτομή / ἀκροβυστία;[7] Ἰσραήλ / τὰ ἔθνη;[8] "Rejoice, O *gentiles* (ἔθνη), with *his people*"[9], that cross the whole letter from one end to another. Regarding these tricky and practical issues concerning the tense relations between Jews and pagans, Alan Segal asserts accurately: "The issue was not how the Gentiles could be saved but how to eat with them and marry them" (Segal 1988, 363). It was not primarily an issue of orthodoxy in Rom. 14–15, but of *orthopraxis*.

Differences, mainly concerning the sensitive sphere of food related traditions (meat or vegetable habits, Rom. 14:2–3; distinction between clean and unclean food, Rom. 14:14,20; wine consumption, Rom. 14:21), and matters of calendar (special days, Rom. 14:5–6)[10], provoke a deleterious climate of disunity, discord and apprehension that affects all members of the community: the strong *despise* (ἐξουθενέω) and the "weak in faith" *judge* (κρίνω, Rom. 14:3,10).

Regarding the socio-historical identity of the *weak in faith* many hypotheses have been developed (see Alma 2022, 115–136), on which it is not possible to dwell on this occasion. The most convincing hypothesis, if not the most consistent explanation, is that the weak in faith, according to the overall theological logic of the Letter to the Romans, are mostly believers in Jesus of Jewish

[5] Cf. Rom. 1:16; 2:9,10; 3:9; 10:12.

[6] Cf. Rom. 3:29; 9:24.

[7] Cf. Rom. 2:25,26,27; 3:30; 4:9,10,11,12.

[8] Cf. Rom. 11:25.

[9] Cf. Rom. 15:10.

[10] Cf. for example feast days, Sabbaths, fasting days, etc.

origin, who, with some sympathizers of the Jewish faith (from the pagan world), continue, even after having confessed their faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, to observe a certain number of Mosaic laws (see above).

The observances of the weak are not felt, obviously, by Paul as meritorious works having a soteriological value (see Pitta 2009, 607), nor as adherence to false doctrines (Ricciotti 1991, 544), or necessarily to be corrected, but rather as the expression both of a sincere and faithful conduct to Christ (Barclay 2013, 200, 206). This conduct, in fact, is performed only "to (honor) the Lord" (κυρίῳ, Rom. 14:6, 3 times), and as a sign of gratitude to God (εὐχαριστεῖ τῷ θεῷ, Rom. 14:6, 2 times). In any case, it is likely that the question of the clean and the unclean among the believers in Rome goes far beyond the distinction of Lev. 11, and has to do with *an excess of zeal* typical of the Jews in the Diaspora with regard to the ritual slaughter of animals and handling of animals by pagans, the "non-Jews," who were considered ritually impure. To quote one example, we know from Flavius Josephus (*Autobiography* III, 14) that the choice of total abstention from certain foods was also made by Jewish priests taken prisoner to Rome in the second half of the 50s of the first century AD: "[…] even in poverty, far from forgetting piety towards God (τῆς εἰς τὸ θεῖον εὐσεβείας), they lived on figs and walnuts." In these conditions, perceived as constituting a danger to one's religious integrity, one easily understands *the extreme choice of abstention* which was also discussed among the first Christians of Jewish origin in Rome. It is also quite possible that the Edict of Claudius, regarding the expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 49 AD, made it more difficult to obtain *kosher* meat in the capital (see Alma 2022, 135, 247–249, 260). After all, a chicken was still a chicken in Judea as in Rome. The problem was not what kind of meat to consume, but *how* it was prepared and *by whom*.

Abstention from meat and wine was, in a pagan background, the only way for the Jews to avoid ritual contamination and to keep their own religious identity, based not only on the Torah but also on the tradition (Oral Torah). The fact that the Mosaic laws do not prohibit the consumption of either meat (later called *kosher*, "suitable") or wine is also not a problem, as it could be a factor of exception or occasional abstention, as attested in Jewish history and tradition. This is what emerges, moreover, from certain traditional narratives on the "heroes of the faith," or the "conscientious heroes" in the Diaspora, namely the paradigmatic experiences of Daniel and his companions at the

court of Babylon (Dan. 1:8,12,16); of Tobit, true model of the faithful Jew, deported to Nineveh (Tb. 1:10–11, LXX); of Judith, the courageous woman in the camp of the enemy general Holofernes (Jdt. 10:5, LXX); of Esther, the very beautiful queen, at the court of the king of Persia (Esth. 4:16) (Shogren 2000, 248–251).

What was really problematic in Rome were the negative effects, even the harmful repercussions, that the divergent practices had on the ecclesiological level, on community relations: judgment, contempt, scandal, conflict, loss of faith.

2. A Rhetorical Reading of Paul's Speech on Acceptance (Rom. 14:1–15:13)

It is not possible here to recall the interest and the importance of *rhetorical criticism* for New Testament exegesis and, in particular, for the exegesis of Pauline letters (see Betz 1975, 353–379; Kennedy 2006/1984; Aletti 1992, 385–401; Jewett 2007; Sampley and Lampe 2010; Pitta 2015, 575–591; Porter and Dyer 2016). Without neglecting, of course, the specific literary conventions of the epistolary genre (see Klauck 2011).

Nor is it necessary to prove that Paul was a specialist in rhetoric to accept the fact that, in harmony with his mission as a zealous witness (1 Cor. 9:16, cf. 2 Cor. 11:28) in the service of the Gospel of God (Rom. 15:16), he may have had recourse to all the means available to him to convince his readers of the authenticity and life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ he himself had (Gal. 1:11–23). For the eminent doctor of the Ancient Church, Augustine of Hippo, there was no doubt: eloquence, even the art of rhetoric, accompanied the wisdom of the apostle Paul (see Augustin in Raulx 1866, 66–67). At that time, "every writer, Greek or Roman, uses the instruments of rhetoric to write any text in prose or in verse" (Salles 1995/1996, 93). In Paul's time, in Hellenistic and Roman circles, *"rhetoric was in the air"* (Longenecker 1990, CXIII; Marrou 1948, 293–294). Paul's letters were conceived and written even more as messages *to be heard than to be read* (cf. 1 Th 5:27; Col 4:16).

To this end, among the main reasons which lead me to propose a rhetorical analysis of Rom. 14:1–15:13, I would like to mention the formally argumenta-

tive register of this literary unit, attested by the high recurrence of the coordinating conjunction γάρ, having above all an explanatory and causal value,[11] and the observation that Rom. 14:1, like a rhetorical *propositio* ("exhortation-thesis") (Aletti 2011, 109–110), triggers a coherent and well-argued exhortation (comparable to a rhetorical *probatio* although it is not conventional in every way), in which Paul seeks to eagerly substantiate his *propositio*, even to justify and amplify it, by several reasonings (*rationes*), or *ad hoc* arguments.

I consider, therefore, that Rom. 14:1–15:13 is not just a simple exhortation to brotherly love, a sort of passive tolerance, but rather a thoughtful and reasoned appeal, that can be studied as a coherent rhetorical unit. It combines exhortation and theology, imperative and indicative of faith, to motivate and foster mutual acceptance.

From a strictly methodological point of view, following the scholars Aletti and Pitta,[12] I take advantage of what Aristotle already recommended:

> *A speech has two parts*. It is necessary to state the subject, and then to prove it. […] The first of these parts is the *statement of the case* (πρόθεσις / *propositio*), the second the *proof* (πίστις / *probatio*), a similar division to that of problem and demonstration. […]
>
> So then *the necessary parts* (ἀναγκαῖα) of a speech are the *statement of the case* and *proof* (πρόθεσις καὶ πίστις). *These divisions are appropriate to every speech*, and at the most the parts are four in number - exordium, statement, proof, epilogue (ἐπίλογος / *peroratio*) […] (*Rhetoric* III,13,1-2.4, emphasis added).

Thus, the "duo" *propositio* – *probatio* (πρόθεσις – πίστις) constitutes precisely, according to Aletti, one of the major features of what he calls "Pauline rhetoric" (Aletti 2004, 47–66). At the end of my rhetorical analysis of Rom. 14:1–15:13, I consider that the whole of Paul's speech, where exhortation and argumentation are mixed, is articulated in three essential rhetorical parts, quite easily identifiable: 1) a main thesis (*propositio*, Rom. 14:1); 2) a strong argument

[11] Cf. in particular Rom. 14:3,4,[5],6,7,8,9,10,11,15,17,18, and Rom. 15:3,4,8. See also Blass and Debrunner 1982, 551, 452. This argumentative character of Rom 14:1–15:13 is also recognised, albeit briefly, by Porter 2016, 110.

[12] Jean-Noël Aletti and Antonio Pitta, two contemporary New Testament scholars, tried to correct this sort of original obsession. See the pioneering work of Betz (1975, 353–379) on Galatians: consisting in applying at all costs the models of the ancient rhetorical *dispositio* on the scale of a letter or a writing taken as a whole.

(*probatio* or several *rationes*, Rom. 14:2–15:6) and 3) an amplifying conclusion (*peroratio*, Rom. 15:7–13).

On this occasion, unfortunately, one cannot go into detail, but I can at least enumerate (with a few brief comments) the main parts that make up Paul's discourse and its logic.

2.1 Propositio: Main Thesis (Rom. 14:1)

Accept him who is weak in faith, not for disputes of opinion.

The *propositio*, namely the announcement of the subject or the summary of the "point to be debated," which Paul wants to instil here among the believers of Rome, is the *call* to accept the weak (v. 1). In harmony with the manuals of ancient rhetoric, it is expressed in a "clear and lucid" manner, easy to remember (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* IV, 5, 26). All that follows, although important, is in the service of this essential purpose (Pitta 1992, 78). This *propositio* is formulated from a double perspective: *what must be practiced* imperatively, the acceptance of the brother or sister "weak in faith," and *what must be avoided*, contrasts or disagreements (μὴ εἰς διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν, v.1b). The main *propositio* of this unit is taken up and re-launched by two other exhortations, acting as *sub-propositiones*, or secondary theses, whose opening verbal subject is always expressed in the first person plural: 1) "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another…" (Rom. 14:13); 2) "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves…" (Rom. 15:1–2). Paul aims to build and strengthen community ties. He plays the solidarity and belonging card to the same community: first, in 14:13, by wanting to create the conditions of acceptance, he implies and urges *all members* of the community to put an end to the transversal climate of destructive criticism; then, in 15:1–2, by thematically reiterating the need of acceptance, he exhorts, if possible in an even more demanding way, either to support "τὰ ἀσθενήματα τῶν ἀδυνάτων", or to take responsibility for the happiness of others (ἀρέσκω), having Jesus as an example to imitate (15:3–6).

In Paul's eyes, therefore, there is room for different opinions and practices, as long as they are not experienced as means of justification, or merit, before God.

2.2 Probatio: The Reasons for Accepting (Rom. 14:2-15:6, in three steps: A – B – C)
The πίστις – *probatio* – *argumentatio* is the central part, the essential core of the speech (Rom. 14:2–15:6), where the emphasis is primarily on the task of *docere*, namely the duty *to instruct in order to persuade.* This is the part in which Paul arranges the πίστεις, or better still the *rationes*, in support of his thesis. By *ratio*, I mean a thought, an idea having the function of an argument in relation to what one wants to demonstrate (the *propositio*), namely a reason or a reasoning, an explanation or a justification, very often introduced by the causal conjunction γάρ. This is typical of the Pauline way of writing: Paul does not limit himself to listing actions to be performed or attitudes to be assumed, but at the same time provides *the reasons* so that his audience can recognize and follow them as a sign of faithfulness and belonging to Christ. He therefore wants to explain what accepting the other actually consists of, in the context of a divergence of opinion in matters of lived faith.

His "reasoned exhortation" progresses through *three rhetorical micro-units* within which is perceived a *crescendo*: **(A)** Accepting without despising or judging (Rom. 14:2–12), **(B)** The dynamics of accepting, or moving from judgement to edification (Rom. 14:13–23), **(C)** Following the example of Christ (Rom. 15:1–6).

(A) Accepting without despising nor judging (Rom. 14:2–12)

– ***Ratio 1*** (*imago*, cf. 15:3–6) | God has already shown his acceptance (14:2–3, cf. 15:3–6) + 1st *expositio*, 14:2, first subject of conflict: tensions over meat consumption (cf. 14:5ab).

– ***Ratio* 2** | The Lord has the power to sustain every believer in every circumstance (14:4).

– ***Ratio* 3** | What really counts, beyond all differences, is to belong to the Lord (14:5–9) + 2nd *expositio*, 14:5ab, second subject of conflict: issues of calendar (cf. 14:2).

– ***Ratio* 4** | There is only one Judge, but it is not "you" (14:10–12)!

(B) The dynamics of Accepting, from judgment to reciprocal edification, from criticism to peace (Rom. 14:13-23)

– ***Subpropositio*** (secondary thesis) | Stop judging each other and do not put a stumbling block in the way of your brother (and sister, 14:13).

– ***Ratio* 5** | Nothing is unclean in itself, but ... "your brother" (and sister) is worth much more than your food choices (14:14–19)!

– ***Ratio* 6** | All things are clean ... but be careful (14:20-21)!

– ***Ratio* 7** | Faith as an inspiring motive for Christian existence (14:22–23).

(C) Following the Example of Christ (Rom. 15:1–6)

– ***Subpropositio*** (secondary thesis) | Supporting the "not-strong" and pleasing your neighbour (15:1–2).

– ***Ratio* 8** (*imago*, cf. 14:2–3) | Following the example of Christ for harmony and unity (15:3–6).[13]

2.3 Peroratio: An Amplifying Conclusion (Rom. 15:7–13)
Mutual acceptance like Christ's universal acceptance.

The last rhetorical unit constitutes the *peroratio* of the exhortative speech begun in Rom. 14:1, *id est* its culminating point, or its natural *"climax"* (Moo 1996, 826, 872, 883; Schreiner 1998, 704). On the other hand, notably because of its deliberately amplifying character, this pericope also constitutes the conclusion of the exhortative section (12:1–15:13) as well as the general conclusion of the gospel proclaimed by Paul to the Roman believers (1:16–15:13), based on his *propositio generalis* (1:16–17).

Paul concludes his speech on the weak and the strong in the most classic way: he summarizes in a few words the essence of what he is saying by repeating the major exhortation to accept (15:7, cf. 14:1). This is not without significant variations compared to Rom. 14:1. It is known, in fact, that "nothing is more unpleasant than a dry repetition" (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria VI*, 1, 2). He amplifies his speech, whether by moving from accepting the weak *to accepting one another* or by *proposing Christ as the ideal model* of this acceptance. Moreover, he appeals to the feelings of his audience by evoking the work of Christ for those of the circumcision (περιτομή) as well as for the pagan nations (τὰ ἔθνη), namely for *the whole* of humanity. Paul, in fact, raises his thinking from a local level, the tensions between the weak and the strong in Rome (14:1–15:6), to a universal level: the relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations (15:7–9a), conceived in the background of eschatological salvation, based on God's promises as witnessed to in Scriptures (15:9b–12).

In Rom. 15:7a: "Therefore (διό, or: for these reasons), accept one another (προσλαμβάνεσθε ἀλλήλους)," Paul, through a *process of inclusion*[14] with

[13] The first and last *ratio*, founded respectively on the exemplary work of God (14:3) and of Christ (15:7), open and close the whole *probatio* and underline its utmost importance.

[14] In Greek, ἐπαναδίπλοσις – or *inclusio/redditio* in Latin.

14:1, "accept (προσλαμβάνεσθε) him who is weak in faith," closes the circle, underlines the link between the opening and closing exhortations, and arrives at the culminating point of his speech. This point is further reinforced in 15:7b by the repetition of the same verb, this time in the indicative mode, to express Christ's action: "just as (καθὼς) Christ *has accepted* (προσελάβετο) you," in the same way that God's acceptance was previously granted: "for God *has accepted* (προσελάβετο) him" (14:3c).

It is therefore a matter of accepting not only *because* God has done so (γάρ, 14:3c), but also *as* Christ has done (καθὼς, 15:7b). What Christ has done, by his example, constitutes the foundation of what the believer is called to do.[15]

3. Theological Perspectives

From a rhetorical point of view, Paul's discourse in Rom. 14:1–15:13 is not a *judicial speech* on a fact of the past, on which it would be appropriate to pronounce a judgement for or against; nor a *deliberative speech* concerning a more or less useful choice to make in the future; it is above all an exhortative speech, with an essentially *epidictic* register, conceived and written *from* and *for the present situation* of believers in Rome, *to inspire* every believer, no matter how weak or strong, to change his *way of being* and *of relating to the other*, to the difference.

In other words, *Paul's mediation strategy*[16] or persuasive logic has a threefold purpose:

a. to *praise* the unconditional accepting action of God and of Christ in particular (14:3c; 15:7);[17]
b. to *blame* both the contemptuous attitude of the strong and the condemnatory attitude of the weak, and any other destructive behaviour likely to create disunity (14:3,10,15, 20);
c. to *persuade* each to accept the other in solidarity (*tolerance is not enough!*), with a view to peace and harmony, and in the light of eschatological hope (15:4-6,9b-12).

On this matter, four final reflections can be proposed:

[15] Paul seems to return here to the indicative/imperative dialectic, particularly evident throughout the Letter to the Romans.

[16] For more details, see Alma 2022, 295– 297, 301.

[17] The fact of praising the most honourable divine action, according to Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria III*, 7, 27, is also a way of encouraging to imitate it.

1. *People are more valuable than observances.* Paul's discourse cannot be taken as an abolition of the Mosaic laws, as many scholars continue to think,[18] especially before or against the "New Perspective on Paul" (see Sanders 1986/1977; Dunn, 2014/2005). Paul was a Jew and remained a Jew believing in Jesus, the Messiah, to the core. He knows this *excess of zeal* that some believers in Rome show regarding some specific practices, but it is not the difference of *orthopraxis* that concerns him, but rather *the destructive effects* of tensions and conflicts on community relations. Paul does not make value judgements about the ins and outs of the conflict: to eat or not to eat meat, to drink or not to drink wine, to distinguish or not to distinguish between days. He is aiming at something even more important: principles and advice to help each one find the motivation as well as the personal and communitarian spiritual resources to overcome the impasse. As a mediator and facilitator, Paul puts everyone into seeking the *common good* together, namely *peace* and *mutual edification* (Rom. 14:17,19; 15:2), accepting and recognizing each other as brothers and sisters *not in spite of* diversity *but through* diversity (Cullmann 1988). He knows that every single person is worth much more than their own ideas, which can always change. Safeguarding the relationship with the other is worth more than the claim to be right about the other. Moreover, Paul can easily exhort the strong to take care of the weaknesses of the weak (literally: those without strength / οἱ ἀ-δυνατοί, Rom. 15:1), for he knows what he is talking about. He has already taken care of them, out of love for the salvation of others, throughout his ministry: "To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). He was a true *"exemplum gratiae"* (Dettwiler 2004, 428), an example

[18] According to Pitta (2009, 549), "the Mosaic Law is not abrogated but relativized, or at the very most made negative, when it is asked for the justification it cannot give, for this is offered only by God, through Jesus Christ. On the contrary, the Law, together with the Prophets, testifies that justification does not take place through it but through faith in Christ (cf. Rom. 3:19–22). Therefore, *Jesus Christ cannot represent the end or conclusion of the Law but its goal*, its fulfilment or full realization (cf. Rom. 10:4). Without the recognition of this paradoxical relationship between the Law and Christ, it is not possible to grasp the complex vision of the Law in the Letter to the Romans" (emphasis added).

of grace lived and experienced (cf. 1 Tim. 1:12–16). His whole public life, between light and shade, has been "*a long prelude* to his speech" (see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1968, 328).[19]

2. *The diversity of the Church is not just a human accident but a creation of the Spirit of God*, who loves a rich, creative, and abundant life (cf. 1 Cor 12). Not being able to appreciate diversity in life as in the church is myopia, a lack of vision. The Spirit of God has never stopped guiding the Church in history. Consequently, it is not and should not be a scandal for the Church to decide to change. Change is not a surplus, nor an option but a necessity. Only a spiritually dead church will always be the same. A living church will necessarily have to deal with change. In this sense, the well-known *"Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est"*, or *"Revival and Reformation"*[20], cannot be or remain a simple slogan without concrete effects in the life of Church.

3. *Church unity is an important value, but it is not the only one* or even the most important. One can kill the other, his neighbour, even with words. Jesus had already taught this (Mt 5:21–22, cf. 7:1–5). Even in the church there are many sick words, which need to be cured. Even in the church there are wars, and primarily they are "war(s) of words" (Oestreich 2016, 161). Among these sick words that deserve all our care and attention, just to give an example, is the word *unity*, almost a kind of mantra of many churches. Unity is certainly an important value for God's Church, no one would dream of saying or thinking bad things of unity, but is it really true when in the name of this value one can accept, for example, discrimination in the church between women and men who want to serve God as a pastor? Even without wanting to?

4. *Love is the value par excellence that must guide Christian ethics*, without any possible discounts. According to Paul, love for one's neighbour, for the other, constitutes the fulfilment of "the *whole* law" (ὁ πᾶς νόμος, Gal. 5:14, cf. Rom. 13:8). The life and unity of the Church, when understood as uniformity of thought that leaves no room for diversity, must always be subjected to the critical judgement of love: "If your brother (or sister) is distressed by what you eat, you are no longer *walking in love* (κατὰ ἀγάπην). Do not let what you eat [namely your personal point of view or conviction] – cause the ruin

[19] "The speaker's life, insofar as it is public, forms a long prelude to his speech" (emphasis added).
[20] I am thinking here of one of the recent motivational slogans of the mission of Seventh-day Adventist Church.

(ἀπόλλυε) of one for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:15). So, the unity of the Church (Rom. 12:4–8; cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–27), past or present, is not primarily threatened by difference, but especially by prejudice and arrogance which override respect for the other person. Unity does not erase uniqueness[21]. Christian faith (read also *love*/ἀγάπη) can integrate and rejoice in difference, in diversity.

4. Conclusion

My dream, in conclusion, is not just an ideal Church, but a real church in real life, a complicated and paradoxical life where people can accept their fragility and vulnerability that only God can change, as he wants. A church where differences, or diversity, are perceived not as a threat but as a gift to continue supporting and thinking about our faith. In this regard, a thought by Ellen G. White is really inspiring:

> In matters of conscience the soul must be left untrammelled. *No one is to control another's mind, to judge for another, or to prescribe his duty.* God gives to every soul freedom to think, and to follow his own convictions. "Every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). No one has a right to merge his own individuality in that of another. In all matters where principle is involved, "let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). In Christ's kingdom *there is no lordly oppression, no compulsion of manner* (White 2017/1898, 550).

In these difficult times, where the crisis has become permanent,[22] every Christian need to promote an encouraging and accepting church that does not deny sin but *does not judge people*. A church that does not close its eyes to the weaknesses of human beings, but first and foremost puts itself at their service to support and care for them (Gal. 6:2: "*Bear* – βαστάζετε[23] – *one another's burdens*, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ"). This is simply its *raison d'être.*

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[21] I borrow this remarkable insight from McGlone (1989, 245), referring to *Household Codes*.

[22] For French philosopher Revault D'Allonnes (2012, 10), "... the crisis has become permanent. We cannot see its end. Thus dilated, it is both the centre and the norm of our existence."

[23] The apostle Paul used this same verb in Rom. 15:1: "We who are strong ought to bear (βαστάζειν) with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves."

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Zusammenfassung

In Römer 14,1–15,13 ruft Paulus die Gläubigen in Rom deutlich und lebhaft zur gegenseitigen Akzeptanz auf, wobei er die Unterschiede bei den praktischen Verhaltensweisen (Ernährung und Kalender) von einigen von ihnen respektiert: die „Schwachen im Glauben" und die Starken. Innerhalb dieser Unterschiede kommt es in der Gemeinschaft zu Konflikten und Verletzungen: Die einen verachten und verspotten die anderen, während die letzteren, die sich den Platz Gottes anmaßen, sogar so weit gehen, die ersteren zu verurteilen. Paulus beschränkt sich nicht darauf, Toleranz zu empfehlen, sondern will die anderen von der Notwendigkeit gemeinsamen Friedens und einer Einheit in Vielfalt überzeugen, weil Gott und Christus bereits die Annahme und Liebe zu jedem Menschen bekundet haben. Die Analyse dieser Rede, v.a. unter rhetorischen Gesichtspunkten, hilft den Lesern und der heutigen Kirche, die Vermittlungskünste des Paulus zu schätzen und die Relevanz der Botschaft in einer Gesellschaft wie der unseren zu verstehen, die von einer bleibenden Vielfalt in Bezug auf Ethnien, Kultur und Religion geprägt ist.

Résumé

Dans Romains 14,1-15,13, Paul lance aux croyants de Rome un appel clair et vibrant à l'acceptation mutuelle, tout en respectant les différences d'observances pratiques (alimentation et calendrier) de certains d'entre eux : les « faibles dans la foi » et les « forts ». Au sein de ces différences, la communauté connaît des conflits et des déchirures : les uns méprisent et ridiculisent les autres, tandis que ces derniers, usurpant la place de Dieu, vont même jusqu'à condamner les premiers. Paul ne se contente pas de recommander la tolérance, mais entend convaincre, persuader les uns et les autres de la nécessité de rechercher et de construire ensemble la paix et l'unité dans la diversité, parce que Dieu et le Christ ont déjà manifesté l'accueil et l'amour de tout être humain. L'analyse de ce discours, en particulier du point de vue rhétorique, aide les lecteurs et l'Église d'aujourd'hui à apprécier les capacités de médiation de Paul et à comprendre la pertinence du message dans une société comme la nôtre, marquée par une diversité irréductible en termes d'ethnicité, de culture et de religion.

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