

# Possessed by the Love of Christ

(2 Cor 5:14)

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Therefore, since we know the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we are clearly apparent to God, and I hope we are also apparent to your consciousness. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you an opportunity to boast of us, so that you may have something to say to those who boast of external appearance rather than of the heart. For if we are out of our minds, it is for God; if we are rational, it is for us. For the love of Christ possesses us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer. So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.

(2 Cor 5:11-17)

*“L’amore del Cristo infatti ci possiede”* (“For the love of Christ possesses us”). This is the text of the translation of 2 Cor 5:14a in *La Sacra Bibbia*, CEI 2008. We recall the previous translation, “the love of Christ impels us,” and, perhaps even more, the Vulgate version, *“Caritas enim Christi urget nos.”* It is useless to deny that the verb “to possess,” as used in the new translation, is a surprise. Still, it is worthwhile to look even quickly at some modern language translations to verify the notable differences of translation of the Greek text; this is a clear sign of the semantic multiplicity of the Greek: *hē gar agapē tou Christou sunechei hēmas* and of the resulting exhaustion facing a translator. Since every text should be understood in its context, it is still important i) to place the pericope of 5:11-17 in the epistle; and then ii) to understand the organization of the text itself, and then, within it, to understand the function and meaning of the affirmation: *hē gar agapē tou Christou sunechei hēmas*.

### **i) The context of 2 Cor 5:11-17**

After the “preamble” (1:1-11) Paul shares some news, announces the change of his itinerary, and then begins to speak of himself and his own behavior. He has to defend himself against some accusations: his behavior is considered ambiguous and not very sincere. In 2:12 he begins to tell the story of his ministry and his journey to Macedonia to meet Titus. The repetition of the story of his journey leads him to make a long digression filling several chapters, up to 7:4, dealing with his ministry as an apostle. In chapter 5, Paul stopped to reflect on the transitoriness of the human condition and in verse 10 conclude with an admonition: we will all appear before the judgment seat of God and our works will be judged by him.

### **ii) The context of verse 14a and the organization of verses 14-16**

In verse 11, linking himself with the preceding discourse on the judgment of God, “therefore since we know the fear of the Lord...” Paul begins to speak of the apostolate and of the necessity of proclaiming it which moves him to “convince” the non-believers. He is conscious of having enemies and also knows that the Corinthians must combat the accusations that they are moving against him, and, among others, that he is suspected of being mad. The reference comes spontaneously to mind of an episode narrated by Luke in Acts 26. Paul is in the court room, before King Agrippa and the Roman governor Festus, and he reports his Damascus experience. Festus interrupts him and exclaims: “You are mad, Paul. Much learning is driving you mad” (Acts 26:24).

The accusation of madness, therefore, was not new for Paul, and he defended himself energetically: certain facts happened because of his zeal, his ardor for God. On the other hand, the Corinthians can testify to his calmness while among them. “Mad” for God, but “rational” for his brethren: this is how the apostle defines himself.

In verse 14, Paul interrupts his apologia; he has no need of defending himself with his audience, and he has just affirmed that he can speak in a balanced way with them. He can open his heart to them and express what he is experiencing in the deepest part of his being. He senses the need of unveiling what stands at the beginning of his behavior. He then affirms: “The love of Christ finally possesses us; and we know that the one died for all, and so all have died. And he died for all because those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died and rose for them.”

Schematically, the text can be organized as follows:

<b>Thesis</b>	<i>For the love of Christ possesses us.</i>	<i>hē gar agapē tou Christou sunechei hēmas</i>
<b>Motivation</b>	<i>once we have come to the conviction that one died for all</i>	<i>krinantas touto, hoti heis huper pantōn apethanen</i>
<b>Result</b>	<i>Therefore all have died</i>	<i>ara hoi pantes apethanon</i>
<b>Purpose</b>	<i>He indeed died for all so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.</i>	<i>kai huper pantōn apethanen hina hoi zōntes mēketi heautois zōsin alla tō[i] huper autōn apothanonti kai egerthenti</i>

The organization of the text is linear. The main sentence illustrates the thesis: “For the love of Christ possesses us,” (*hē gar agapē tou Christou sunechei hēmas*), and the participle<sup>1</sup> (*krinantas touto*) expresses the motivation: “And we have come to the conviction that one died for all,” (*hoti heis huper pantōn apethanen*). Then, with great ability, Paul continues his argument and, thanks to the repetition of the verb “to die” (*apethanon, apethanen*) he holds the argumentation together. In addition, using the Greek particle *ara* (therefore), he demonstrates the result: “All have died” (*hoi pantes apethanon*); and thus, with the conjunction expressing purpose *hina* (so that), he explains the purpose: “So that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (*hoi zōntes mēketi heautois zōsin alla tō[i] huper autōn apothanonti kai egerthenti*).

### The Thesis: *hē gar agapē tou Christou sunechei hēmas*

Paul immediately reveals the origin, the source of his apostolic ministry: the love of Christ (*hē agapē tou Christou*). Greek has various terms<sup>2</sup> to define love, but the favored term in the New Testament

<sup>1</sup> Literally, “knowing,” but it can be translation, as in Italian, as “we know.”

<sup>2</sup> Besides *agapē* there are other terms in Greek: *storgē*, the mutual love of spouses, and then toward children, or the love of brothers and of children for their parents; *erōs*, which is especially passionate love; *filia*, mainly the love of friendship among equals.

is *agapē*. This particular expression of love is for that which, “in contrast to other types of love that can remain hidden in the depths of the person, it must be manifested, it must show itself.”<sup>3</sup> Of all the New Testament authors, it is Paul who uses *agapē* the most, and he is the only one to use the expression we find in this text under discussion, “the *agapē* of Christ, (*hē agapē tou Christou*).”<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is not easy to specify the meaning of the genitive here, *tou Christou*. In 2 Thess 3:5, there is a similar expression, “the *agapē* of God,” (*hē agapē tou Theou*), where the genitive indicates possession (the “subjective genitive,” the love with which God loves). Still, the context (see v. 13) may suggest that the genitive *tou Christou* is objective, indicating the object, (the love of Paul for Christ). It is probable that both possibilities are not excluded.<sup>5</sup> Although we cannot task grammar itself to express a concept that belongs to the realm of mystical theology, we can still try to explain as follows the expression *hē agapē tou Christou*: it is Christ’s but at the same time it is love for Christ.<sup>6</sup> To explain the meaning of the expression *hē agapē tou Christou* we would have to have a verb that expresses action. But it is exactly around the difficult translation of the verb *sunechō* that our reflection revolves. The Greek language recognizes three basic meanings for this verb:<sup>7</sup>

- 1) “To hold something together.” This is its fundamental sense, its oldest meaning. The other uses of the verb developed out of this and go beyond a purely concrete meaning. We find it, for example, used to express the action of the gods who “hold the cosmos together,” and, hence, it acquires the meaning of “maintaining order.”
- 2) “To enclose, close.” Derived from the fundamental meaning of holding something together, it shows a developing idea of an act of constricting or enclosing.
- 3) The third meaning, “to oppress, to overpower, to dominate,” pushes the preceding meaning to the edges of the semantic field.

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<sup>3</sup> C. SPICO, “*Agapē*,” in: *Note di Lessicografia Neotestamentaria*, GLNTS 4, vol. I, 55.

<sup>4</sup> The other two occurrences are in Rom 8:35 and Eph 3:19.

<sup>5</sup> Zerwick defines it as “*genitivus generalis*.” Cf. M. ZERWICK, *Graecitas Biblica*, Roma, 1966, § 36.

<sup>6</sup> C. SPICO, “*Sunechō*,” in: *Note di Lessicografia Neotestamentaria*, GLNTS 4, vol. II, 624, note 16, defines it as “comprehensive genitive.”

<sup>7</sup> Cf. H. KÖSTER, “*Sunechō*,” in GLNT XIII, 213-236.

Given the various ways of translating the verb *sunechō* in 2 Cor 5:14a, it is interesting to see how different other translations are in modern Italian: “ci incalza” (Bibbia, ed. Marietti 1964), “ci comprime” (E.P. 1964), “ci spinge” (CEI 1971; Traduzione in lingua corrente 1976; E.P 1995), “ci costringe” (Nuova Diodati 1991), “ci possiede” (CEI 2008); and in English: “overwhelms us” (Jerusalem Bible, 1966), “impels us” (New American Bible, rev. ed., 1986), “controls us” (Revised Standard Version, NT, 1946). Only certain versions reflect the meanings laid out above. We should especially note those that attribute to *sunechō* the meanings of “possess” or “impel.” It is now time to ask whether these shades of meaning are present in New Testament Greek. Sometimes the New Testament can be helped by examining the way in which the Septuagint translated the Hebrew text, but in our case, the Septuagint is no help since its Greek translators employed the verb *sunechō* 48 times to translate Hebrew *ʿsr*, whose main meaning is “to enclose.” Only rarely does the Septuagint use the verb for other meanings. Consequently, what basis did the translators have to render *sunechō* with “possess” or “impel”? The only way is to examine the New Testament use of *sunechō*<sup>8</sup> and, in particular, Paul’s use of it. We can lay out its dozen occurrences in four aspects of the same semantic field:

- I. To restrain, constrain, press, someone or something in a real physical sense. Lk 8:45: the crowd presses in on Jesus from all sides; Lk 19:43: Jerusalem restrained by siege; Acts 7:57: the killers of Stephen shout and block their ears; Lk 22:63: the soldiers keep guard over Jesus (literally, restrain him). In all these texts, the verb is transitive and has an object being restrained.
- II. Related to the previous meaning is that of “to crush,” or “to oppress,” always in a real sense, but accomplished through illness (Matt 4:24; Lk 4:38; Acts 28:8) or fear (Lk 8:37).
- III. A meaning distant from the preceding ones<sup>9</sup> is in Acts 18:5 where Paul is presented as completely dedicated to preaching. Here *sunechō* means “to dedicate oneself completely.” Contrary to the preceding meanings, in which the action expressed by the verb means to impose some limit on the subject, here by contrast the verb has a dynamic value and is carried out positively.

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<sup>8</sup> In all, 12 occurrences: 9 in Luke (Gospel, Acts), 1 in Matthew, 2 in Paul: 2 Cor 5:14 and Phil 1:23.

<sup>9</sup> The meaning in classical Greek, for example in Plutarch.

- IV. A final meaning, still linked to the semantic field “to constrain,” is that found in Phil 1:23 and Luke 12:50. In these two texts, *sunechō* is linked to the idea of “to constrain,” but not in a physical or even moral sense, since in these texts the constriction or force is exercised on the interior level. The verb *sunechō*, therefore expresses the idea of “to torment oneself interiorly,” or “to suffer anxiety.” In Phil 1:23 “I am caught between the two” (*sunechomai de ek tōn duo*): “I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better.” In Luke 12:50 Jesus says: “There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish (*sunechomai heōs hotou telesthē*), until it is accomplished.”

An observation emerges from this overview: the translation given by the Italian Bibbia CEI 2008 “the love of Christ possesses us” does not respect any of the meanings present in the New Testament. “To possess” may be considered as a meaning derived from “to crush” or “to overwhelm,” such that a reality presses me, moves me on or may invade me or possess me. It therefore appears that the translators made an interpretive choice based on context. We now have to examine the context by considering the elements brought to light in our initial outline: motivation, results and purpose.

### Motivation, Result, Purpose

V. 14b Christ “died for all” Paul affirms. The traditional formulation in 1 Cor 15:3 “he died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (*apethanen huper tōn hamartiōn hemōn kata tas grafas*) has been changed. Christ dies not “according to the scriptures” but “for all.” This is a rereading in a universalist framework concerning the death of Jesus. Paul employed well the repetition of the verb “to die” and its contrast “to live” to construct the following outline:

- A** And once we have come to the conviction that one **died** for all; therefore, all **have died**
- B** and he **died** for all so that those who **live** might no longer **live** for themselves
- A'** but for him who for their sake **died** and **was raised**

**A)** Christ died for all and the efficacy of his death has reached all and is so great that Paul affirms: “All have died.” This is an absolute image, expressing in a dramatic and grandiose totality the solidarity

of Christ with the human condition, but also with the benefits received from humanity.

**B)** The goal of this “died for all” is introduced by the conjunction “so that” and it is explained: “Those who live might not live any longer for themselves alone.” Paul says that the death of Christ brings forth new men no longer centered on themselves alone but freed from the prison of egoism.

**A’)** “... but for him who died and rose for them.” Up to this point, Paul has spoken separately of “to die” and “to live,” which we find in the combining of the concepts “died and risen” (where “to rise” takes the place of “to live.”) This binomial is not simply a linguistic play on words since it brings about the important affirmation according to which, in Christ who died and rose for all, men find the center of their existence, the orientation of their life that is no longer egotistical, the dimension of new men.

Paul dwells on contemplating this extraordinary newness that takes over a man, and he continues his reflection: (5:16-17) “Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer. So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.” The ancient prophecies (cf. Isa 43:18-19; 65:17; 66:22) have reached their fulfillment: a new man is born made in the image of Christ (cf. Col 3:10; Eph 2:15; 4:24).

### **The construction of his thought**

As a final operation it is possible to reread the text and to follow the development of Paul’s thought by observing the conjunctions and their logical links.

V. 14a: FOR the love of Christ possesses us. The particle “for” (*gar*)<sup>10</sup> joins the reflection on the agape of Christ to the preceding text in which Paul is defined as “out of his mind” for God but “rational” with the Corinthians. The conjugation “for” binds the love of Christ with the divine sphere, the same that determines Paul’s “madness” (v. 13). The love of Christ that is in us, like the “madness” in Paul, finds its cause in God.

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it would be preferable to keep the causal value of the particle *gar*, translating it with “since” as did the CEI translation of 1971.

V. 14b: The expression “we have come to the conviction that one died for all” is joined to the following affirmation:

“THEREFORE all have died”

Similarly in v. 15, from the principle that “he died for all” there depend the following successive affirmations:

- SO THAT those who live might no longer live...
- CONSEQUENTLY from now on we regard no one... (v. 16)
- SO whoever is in Christ... (v. 17)

All the reasoning found between v. 14b and v. 17 depends on the affirmation, according to which “Christ died for all.” Consequently, the statement of v. 14a *hē gar agapē tou Christou sunechei hēmas* is joined to the preceding affirmation by a causal nexus (*gar*) but it is joined also to the following expression thanks to the participle *krinantas* that the Bibbia CEI rendered in a coordinative way: “And we have come to the conviction (*krinantas, knowing*) that the one died for all” with which it confirmed the fundamental event of the salvific death of Christ and its universal value.

### **The Love of Christ possesses us**

The expression *hē gar agapē tou Christou sunechei hēmas* now appears rich in shades of meaning, due especially to the presence of the verb *sunechō*. The translations of the Bibbia CEI 2008 wished to respect this semantic richness in their choice of an open translation, one which does not constrict the reader to a rigid interpretation. Based on the context, they interpreted and rendered the verb *sunechō* with “to possess” and the entire expression as “for the love of Christ possesses us.”

The love of Christ fills us, possesses us, like a power that reaches beyond the human; it is love for Christ that makes us “out of our minds for God!”

The love of Christ fills us, possesses us, so that it might sink its own roots in the cross of Christ. It is not the fruit of our moral force, but it is a gift that arises from the gift of Jesus, who died for all.

And again, the love of Christ fills us, and possesses us in that we might become new creatures, radically changed through the death of Christ.