

A Good Odor

This short article centers around a topic that affects every one of us whether we're aware of it or not. It consists in how to present it in a meaningful way, a problem I have to confront whenever beginning a new writing project. Like so many articles that have come before, the one at hand concerns our relationship with transcendent reality. I've tossed those two words around quite a bit on this website devoted to *lectio divina*, and always feel uneasy when doing so. The reason? It sounds similar to standard phrases you come across in textbooks or articles that in the end aren't particularly helpful.

Admittedly all my efforts in this short article consist in presenting little snippets of information which need to be unified. I choose the word snippet because it represents taking small pieces from a larger reality in an attempt to unify them into something much larger and more coherent. Also it puts into proper perspective our puny efforts in trying to understand something far bigger than we can imagine. Due to the enormous contrast between our efforts and the reality they attempt to describe, I've discovered that one of the best ways to prime our approach is to have a healthy sense of humor. That has a surprisingly helpful way dealing with such things.

One of the most secure ways of bestowing these snippets with any relevance is to back them with sources found in both the Bible and Church Fathers where both sources speak of our relationship with Jesus Christ. While I'd love to delve into material relative to the latter, that would exceed the scope of this article. However, I have a project in mind that just might go in that direction. The same holds true with the Bible. For the moment I prefer presenting some preliminary insights that can be developed at a later time. Thus I decided to focus on a few verses lifted from the epistles of St Paul.

As the title clearly states, the subject at hand is not just an odor but one which is good. I added the adjective good by reason of its incorporation in a verse to be discussed below, namely *euodia* rendered as fragrance. There the adverbial sense is noted which makes it still more attractive. That word, by the way, seemed the best candidate of them all to nail down any remarks with regard to the sense of smell. To me fragrance stood midway between two extremes and

even had an appealing sound about it in English translation.

Right off the bat we can now posit three verses from St Paul which deal with two opposite sides of the sense of smell. One is very attractive whereas the other conveys an element of outright dread. The verses I have in mind are 2Cor 2.14-16 which I present followed by some notations: “But thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of (*osme*) of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?”

Before getting into the matter at hand beginning with vs. 14, Paul gives thanks or *charis* to God, this word connoting a certain graciousness which signifies a manifestation of God’s presence and operation. Right away it promises to have a pleasing association with Paul’s uses of fragrance and aroma in these verses. Thus *charis* has a deeper significance than at first glance. It isn’t formal or static but comes from the heart.

Once this necessary introductory step has been accomplished, Paul speaks of a fragrance (the **RSV** term) or *osme* which doesn’t stand alone. That is to say, it’s intimately bound up with the knowledge (of Christ), *gnosis* being the common noun which has a generic feel about it meaning comprehension of what is known. Thus it’s not unlike the tenuous nature of *osme*. Imagine for a moment such knowledge which has the ability to spread everywhere or literally “in every place,” *topos*. Only something divine has that ability.

More to the point, the verb which represents this spreading is *phanero*. It applies to that which is invisible yet permeates the atmosphere so fully despite being invisible to everyone. Please note that in the context at hand *phanero* refers to being manifest as a result of missionary endeavors and is not so much concerned with ultimate reality. That will come later.

Such a manifestation of knowledge (of Christ) which is identified with the nature of a fragrance as opposed to sight or hearing can’t be pervasive on its own merits. It’s dependent on a divine initiative or as the text says colorfully,

with God leading us in triumph in Christ. The verb is *thriambeuo* which automatically bring up the image of a Roman military triumph down the *Via Sacra*. More accurately, *thriambeuo* is the active playing out of *phanero* or becoming visible just mentioned. The idea is that such knowledge of Christ becomes present to everyone in a manner which cannot be avoided.

And so the nature of *gnosis* (again, of Christ) which is on the verge of becoming visible is given a recognizable identity discernible through our sense of smell. The role of hearing or seeing does not enter the picture. This may come as a surprise because we've always placed considerable emphasis upon them. From this vantage point which has been unfamiliar to many folks the two senses just mentioned are considered secondary. Obviously they are important but not as much as we had thought.

As for fragrance or *osme*, there's no escaping the identity of *gnosis* associated with it. You can't trap a fragrance. It's just like attempting to capture air with a net. Even though the sense of hearing borders upon air, it does have a firm impact once we taken in the words that have been addressed to us. Actually the English noun fragrance is a nice translation since it conveys a certain elegance.

Vs. 15 follows directly, beginning with *hoti* rendered as "for," this being a logical take-off of the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. Paul uses the first person plural most likely referring to fellow workers and himself as being the *euodia* of Christ. This is rendered as aroma which differences from fragrance or *osme* in vs. 14. The root is the verb *ozo* or to smell in the sense of to savor something and is prefaced with the adverbial *eu-* which belongs to the adjective *agathos*, good. Perhaps it'd be better to render it as something like "to smell in a goodly fashion."

Applied to Paul and friends, that means they have this scent directed to God, *to Theo*. Even though it is in this way, the scent cannot help but spread out and have an effect on anyone who comes near them. Actually it seems more pervasive that the Holy Spirit which descended upon the Apostles and others on Pentecost. *Pneuma* is the word for Spirit which also means wind but is neutral as far as any scent goes.

Paul testifies to this communal smelling, if you will, by saying it is literally “in (*en*) those being saved” as well as “in (*en*) those who are perishing.” Thus we have two distinct groups of people which is applicable to the entire human race. The two verbs are *sozo* and *apollumi*, to save and to utterly destroy. Note both are in the present participle meaning that action is happening right now. There’s no future. Words related to our sense of smell are like that. They exist in the present. If we apply the past to a scent, do we have what’s normally called a memory? What about the future? There’s no memory applicable here. Thus when we try describing it our words naturally gravitate toward our two faculties of hearing or seeing. A scent has to be in the present for it to exist.

Paul delineates this scent further in vs. 16. As for those who are marked by *apollumi* or destined for utter destruction, *osme* is one from death into (*eis*) death and to those marked by *sozo* *osme* is one from life into (*eis*) life. Only a fragrance could make such a transition as in these two extreme cases. Paul then adds a rhetorical question, thinking out loud if you will, as to who is worthy or equal to such things. *Pros* is used as a direct, immediate relationship whereas *hikanos* connotes being up to the task. He doesn’t expect an answer but invites those whom he’s addressing to take his words to heart.

Paul’s use of *osme* and *euodia* are realities that make their presence felt right off the bat. Scent doesn’t hang around waiting for our acceptance as is the case with anything we see or hear. Despite its fleeting nature, any scent can linger for some time as it permeates just about everything everywhere. Paul recognizes that some people might want to capitalize on this for their own profit. That’s why in vs. 17 he says that he and those associated with him are not peddlers of God’s word, this apparently something that had been quite common. *Kapeleuo* is a verb for peddlers, alternately as retailers which has a somewhat negative connotation. *Logos* or word-as-expression is what people are trying to sell. *Logos* here seems to be concerned with manifestations of Jesus as well as scripture. I’m not sure. This is simply seems a viable alternative.

In contrast to the so-called peddlers of the divine *logos*, Paul claims to be among those who are sincere and are commissioned by God, *eilikrineia* being a noun alternately as free of dissimulation or marked by purity and *katenanti* as

in the presence of. Thus the speech...the *logos*...at hand is done in Christ.

Now Paul and companions can perceive *gnosis* everywhere. Not only that, attentiveness to its overall presence allows for subtle features to be picked up with ease. Obviously there's a whole subset of odors we get as when cooking a particular sauce, not just one which is overall. This implies the act of cooking or better, simmering of various ingredients which make their presence felt not all at once but at various stages of the cooking process. If the scent is good, it has a way of making a person hungry. Of course the sense of sight or hearing could never do that.

There's another scriptural references worth mentioning with regard to the sense of smell. Since we're still with St Paul, let's look at Eph 5.2 which can be broken up into several sections: "And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." ¹

-*Peripateo* or to walk around in *agape* usually rendered as love but has a strong character of affection.

-As Christ loved us, that is, *agapao*, the active manifested of *agape*. Note *kathos* or "as." It infers that Christ engaged in *peripateo* as we have done.

-Gave himself up or *paradidomi* where the preposition *para-* suggests a giving beside. *Prophora* means a voluntary expression with regard to this offering.

-Fragrant offering or *osme* which is a pleasant scent prefaced with the preposition *eis*, literally "into a pleasant scent." Added to this is *euodia* or odor where *eu-* is the adverbial form of *agathos* (good). Implies is how this scent manifests itself.

-Sacrifice or *thusia*.

The presence of a scent is intended to leave a more lasting impression upon the person involved with it simply because he or she has absorbed it. There are no half measures. In other words, the scent has become part and parcel of oneself. Stop and think for a minute. We don't remember such scents in the same way we do with information coming at us through the eyes or ears. While these two

¹ The very first scent (though it isn't explicit) is the offering of Abel. This was of the fruit of the ground compared with Cain's offering of the firstlings of his flock. Both are noted in the first few verses of Chapter Four in Genesis.

contain information, they remain external to us, “out there,” if you will.

Describing a scent requires effort on our part, for we must make more use of our imagination to bring forth suitable images. The examples we give often consist of those based on hearing and on sight. “The tomato sauce takes like...” “It reminds me of...” and other such common examples. Even then what we come up with is naturally inferior to the scent at hand. And so a scent is identified when a similar one is presented to us. Thus a scent is likened by another scent, no other way.

I’d like to add a sensation parallel to the one of scent or smell, that of taste because it naturally comes to mind. With taste we absorb an object that has mass, this frequently associated with food. It isn’t at all “ethereal” as a scent. Actually the two senses are pretty much aligned and often indistinguishable. Even should a person lose the senses of taste smell there remains the ability to discern texture. That happened to me a few months ago and shows no sign of letting up. I’ve discovered first hand that texture is a kind of feel for the object of our intent where we get a fairly close idea of what something tastes like even if it escapes us entirely. As far as I can tell, it doesn’t apply to smell. I’ve done some cooking on a semi-professional basis over an extended period of time and know first-hand what this is about.

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