• Why, in the letter to the Corinthians, do they never say normal stuff like, “How’s the family?” and “Do you like your new job?”

I have to admit that when I first read this question from one of our faith formation students, it made me laugh. I thought to myself, what a great question! In answering this question, one must realize that at the time Paul lived—in the first century AD—writing materials were not as readily available as they are today. We think very little about the cost of paper, but in Paul’s time what you used to write more permanent documents on could be quite expensive. The wealthier people of that time could be more expansive in how much they wrote, but Paul was a tentmaker and did not have a lot of money. He would need to be much more economical in how much he could write. So, most likely, his letters to the Corinthians were not simply two letters, as they are in the Bible. Rather, over time the various short letters Paul wrote to them got consolidated into two long letters.

Paul most likely wrote some very short letters that addressed very specific issues he was concerned about. He did write greetings in his letters that would have been typical for that day. Also, remember that he was writing his letters to be read to an entire community and not to a specific person. Hence, Paul would be more concerned with getting right to the point about what he thought they were doing wrong and how they needed to address the issue. Paul was concerned with remedying issues that he recognized would hinder people from following Christ in the way Christ intended. In a sense, we should consider Paul’s letters more like business letters than personal letters. Paul, of course, did deal with personal issues and would speak often from his own experiences as a means of making his point. But he was really all business when getting people to recognize that their behavior needed to change. And he provided both the rational for the needed change and the way to go about making the change.

Let us also realize that while Paul was writing, he was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would have ensured that Paul only wrote what would be of value to the people of his time and also to following generations. The letters were going to serve as a guidance for us, to be read as a means of understanding how to follow Christ. They would also help us understand how we should help people who stray from the truth. Paul never deviated from his understanding of the faith. It is what made his letters so universally applicable, not just for the Corinthians, not just for the people of the first century AD, but for all people, in all places, in all times.