

## **Conformity vs Cooperation as means towards Salvation**

### **Juan Ruiz, SJ**

One of Paul's greatest spiritual insights is that people are not saved by conformity to a particular set of laws, but by cooperation with the Spirit of God dwelling within them. Paul makes this point in the letter to the Romans, not to condemn any system of laws, but to readjust the attitude people hold towards that system. There were people at the time of Paul who emphasized conformity with the law as proof of salvation; however, Paul points out that many Jews who try to abide by the Jewish law frequently fail in doing so (Rom 2:17-24). Similarly, he addresses himself to all others who do not follow the Jewish law, but rather try to conform to an internal law, their conscience. In the case of those who follow their own conscience only, he claims they will be judged by how they conform to it and that they too often fail to live up to their internal law (Rom 2:12-16). His purpose is to show that trying to conform oneself to either law often fails. This can lead to feeling spiritually dead. Paul's explanation for the failure is simple, the law does not do anything for them (Rom 3:19-20).

Examples of this failure to live up to one's own laws abound in the public and private sphere. The accusation of hypocrisy is often and accurately made. It could be in reference to a politician who does not live personally as they proclaim publicly. It could be in reference to an adult who tells a child not to do something, but then does that very thing. How many times has the phrase, "Do as I say and not as I do," been repeated? Paul's purpose in pointing out that just about anyone can be accused of hypocrisy is to accentuate that the laws many try to conform themselves to do not guarantee salvation, where salvation is understood as feeling spiritually alive as will be true in eternity. Laws provide good guidelines and can help people to make good decisions, but they are not a source of lifegiving support. For Paul, the laws are dead in that they cannot give spiritual life (Rom 7:12-13).

Paul's purpose is not to deconstruct what people thought of any particular set of laws, but to encourage them to place their trust in cooperation with the indwelling Spirit of God rather than conformity to particular laws (Rom 8:1-4). The key difference is between conformity and cooperation. Conformity is something that depends completely upon one's own efforts, while cooperation implies mutual support. Conformity magnifies burdens. Cooperation alleviates burdens. Paul firmly believes that if one cooperates with the indwelling Spirit of God, then one will live in conformity with the law. However, rather than it being an achievement of one's own effort, it is a fruit of the covenant between God and humankind.

**Juan Ruiz, SJ**, is a temporary deacon and will be ordained a Jesuit priest next summer. This summer, he is interning here at HNJ.