



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 25 October 2006

Paul of Tarsus

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We have concluded our reflections on the Twelve Apostles, called directly by Jesus during his earthly life. Today, we begin to examine the figures of other important early Church personalities.

They also spent their lives for the Lord, the Gospel and the Church. They are men and also women who, as Luke writes in the *Book of Acts*, "have risked their lives for the sake of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (15: 26).

The first of these, called by the Lord himself, by the Risen One, to be a true Apostle, is undoubtedly Paul of Tarsus. He shines like a star of the brightest magnitude in the Church's history, and not only in that of its origins. St John Chrysostom praised him as a person superior even to many angels and archangels (cf. *Panegirico*, 7, 3). Dante Alighieri in the *Divine Comedy*, inspired by Luke's account in Acts (cf. 9: 15), describes him simply as "vessel of election" (Inf. 2: 28), which means: instrument chosen by God. Others called him the "13th Apostle", or directly, "the first after the Only".

Certainly, after Jesus, he is one of the originals of whom we have the most information. In fact, we possess not only the account that Luke gives in the *Acts of the Apostles*, but also a group of *Letters* that have come directly from his hand and which, without intermediaries, reveal his personality and thought.

Luke tells us that his name originally was Saul (cf. Acts 7: 58; 8: 1), in Hebrew also Saul (cf. Acts

9: 14, 17; 22: 7, 13; 26: 14), like King Saul (cf. Acts 13: 21), and he was a Jew of the diaspora, since the city of Tarsus is situated between Anatolia and Syria.

Very soon he went to Jerusalem to study the roots of Mosaic Law in the footsteps of the great Rabbi Gamaliele (cf. Acts 22: 3). He also learned a manual and common trade, tent making (cf. Acts 18: 3), which later permitted him to provide personally for his own support without being a weight on the Churches (cf. Acts 20: 34; I Cor 4: 12; II Cor 12: 13).

It was decisive for him to know the community of those who called themselves disciples of Jesus. Through them he came to know a new faith - a new "way", as it was called - that places not so much the Law of God at the centre but rather the person of Jesus, Crucified and Risen, to whom was now linked the remission of sins. As a zealous Jew, he held this message unacceptable, even scandalous, and he therefore felt the duty to persecute the followers of Christ even outside of Jerusalem.

It was precisely on the road to Damascus at the beginning of the 30s A.D. that, according to his words, "Christ made me his own" (Phil 3: 12). While Luke recounts the fact with abundant detail - like how the light of the Risen One touched him and fundamentally changed his whole life -, in his Letters he goes directly to the essential and speaks not only of a vision (cf. I Cor 9: 1), but of an illumination (cf. II Cor 4: 6), and above all of a revelation and of a vocation in the encounter with the Risen One (cf. Gal 1: 15-16).

In fact, he will explicitly define himself as "apostle by vocation" (cf. Rom 1: 1; I Cor 1: 1) or "apostle by the will of God" (II Cor 1: 1; Eph 1: 1; Col 1: 1), as if to emphasize that his conversion was not the result of a development of thought or reflection, but the fruit of divine intervention, an unforeseeable, divine grace.

Henceforth, all that had constituted for him a value paradoxically became, according to his words, a loss and refuse (cf. Phil 3: 7-10). And from that moment all his energy was placed at the exclusive service of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. His existence would become that of an Apostle who wants to "become all things to all men" (I Cor 9: 22) without reserve.

From here we draw a very important lesson: what counts is to place Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives, so that our identity is marked essentially by the encounter, by communion with Christ and with his Word. In his light every other value is recovered and purified from possible dross.

Another fundamental lesson offered by Paul is the universal breadth that characterizes his apostolate. Acutely feeling the problem of the Gentiles, of the pagans, to know God, who in Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen offers salvation to all without exception, he dedicates himself to make this Gospel - literally, "good news" - known, to announce the grace destined to reconcile men with God, self and others.

From the first moment he understood that this is a reality that did not concern only the Jews or a certain group of men, but one that had a universal value and concerned everyone, because God is the God of everyone.

The point of departure for his travels was the Church of Antioch in Syria, where for the first time the Gospel was announced to the Greeks and where also the name "Christians" was coined (cf. Acts 11: 20, 26), believers in Christ.

From there he first went to Cyprus and then on different occasions to the regions of Asia Minor (Pisidia, Laconia, Galatia), and later to those of Europe (Macedonia, Greece). The most famous were the cities of Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, without forgetting Berea, Athens and Miletus.

In Paul's apostolate difficulties were not lacking, which he faced with courage for love of Christ. He himself recalls having endured "labours... imprisonment... beatings... numerous brushes with death.... Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, cold and exposure. And apart from these things there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the Churches" (II Cor 11: 23-28).

From a passage of the Letter to the Romans (cf. 15: 24, 28) appears his proposal to push on even to Spain, to the Far West, to announce the Gospel everywhere, even to the then known ends of the earth. How can one not admire a man like this? How can one not thank the Lord for having given an Apostle of this stature?

It is clear that he would not have been able to face such difficult and at times desperate situations if he did not have a reason of absolute value, before which no limit could be considered insurmountable. For Paul, this reason, as we know, is Jesus Christ, of whom he writes: "The love of Christ impels us... so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (II Cor 5: 14-15), for us, for all.

In fact, the Apostle renders the supreme witness of blood under the Emperor Nero here in Rome, where we keep and venerate his mortal remains. Clement of Rome, my Predecessor to this Apostolic See, wrote of him in the last years of the first century: "Because of jealousy and discord, Paul was obliged to show us how one obtains the prize of patience.... After preaching justice to all in the world, and after having arrived at the limits of the West, he endured martyrdom before the political rulers; in this way he left this world and reached the holy place, thus becoming the greatest model of perseverance" (*To the Corinthians*, 5).

May the Lord help us to put into practice the exhortation left to us by the Apostle in his Letters: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (I Cor 11: 1).

To Special Groups

I am pleased to greet the many English-speaking pilgrims present, especially those from England, Ireland, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, India, Indonesia, Japan and the United States of America. My special greetings go to the pilgrims from the Dioceses of Cheyenne and Wheeling-Charleston, led by their Bishops. I also greet the priests taking part in the Institute of Continuing Theological Education of the Pontifical North American College. I thank the Holy Rosary School Choir from Gauteng, South Africa, for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I cordially invoke an abundance of joy and peace in the Lord.

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