

LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

St Paul's love for Christ was synonymous with his love for the Church. It could not have been otherwise. After all, in that pivotal moment of his conversion, Paul had heard Jesus ask him: "Why are you persecuting me?" Paul might have answered that he was not persecuting any particular person; he was persecuting the Church. But he realised then that Christ and the Church were one. If he was persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ.

Indeed Paul saw clearly that Christ and the Church were one mystical person, one mystical body. He would make this a frequent theme of his letters. For example, he writes to the Colossians, "He [Christ] is the head of the body, the Church" (Col 1:18). And to the Corinthians: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:27).

Paul loved the Church too because he himself had engendered many of the Christian communities to the faith. He felt like a father to them and they were, as it were, his children. He writes to the Corinthians: "I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (1 Cor 4:14-15).

Paul felt so in love with the Church, so united with the various communities of the faithful, that he suffered for them and even agonised over them. He writes to the Church in Galatia: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you! I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you" (Gal 4:19-20).

In a similar vein he writes to the Corinthians: "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the Churches" (2 Cor 11:28).

And of course if "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25), how could Paul not love the Church? In a word, he lived and he died to build up the Church.

Pope Benedict sums it up: "Certainly Paul teaches us also that the Church is the body of Christ, that the head and the body are inseparable and that there cannot be love for Christ without love for his Church and its living community." (Address, 22 December 2008)

TOWARDS UNITY

Love for the Church brings with it the desire that the Church have that unity that Christ begged

Paul had heard Jesus ask him: "Why are you persecuting me?" Paul might have answered that he was not persecuting any particular person; he was persecuting the Church. But he realised then that Christ and the Church were one. If he was persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ.

of the Father: "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21-22).

St Paul felt keenly the need for unity, writing about it in several of his letters. When there were divisions among the Corinthians he wrote to them: "I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Cor 1:10).

And to the Church in Ephesus: "I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:1-3).

In this Year of St Paul we can intensify our prayers for Christian unity, buoyed up by the knowledge that Patriarch Bartholomew I has also convoked a Pauline Year for the Orthodox Church. We pray that the unity of Christians, founded on "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5) may become a reality. With Pope Benedict we pray that "our common faith, the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins and obedience to the one Lord and Saviour, be fully expressed in the community and ecclesial dimensions as soon as possible." (Address during meeting with Bartholomew I for opening of the Pauline Year, 28 June 2008)

FAITHFUL TO THE END

St Paul's great desire, after preaching Jesus Christ and his Gospel, was to be with Christ forever in heaven. He took nothing for granted and was single-minded in pursuing that goal. He wrote to the Philippians: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what

lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:12-14).

And he was not afraid of death: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). Having struggled throughout his life to be faithful and worthy to be with Christ for all eternity, Paul came to the end of his life in a Roman prison, exhausted by his efforts to spread the Gospel but confident now of receiving his reward. From his prison cell he wrote to Timothy: "For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Tim 4:6-8).

What an example St Paul gives us of fidelity to the end, of self-sacrificing love for Christ and his Church, of total self-giving to the cause of the Gospel! "Paul is not, for us, a figure of the past," Pope Benedict says. "Through his letters, he still speaks to us today. And one who enters in dialogue with him is moved by him toward Christ crucified and risen." (Address, 22 December 2008).

Fr John Flader is the Director of the Catholic Adult Education Centre and the Editor of INFORM.

Questions for discussion

1. What impresses you most about the life and teaching of St Paul?
2. St Paul was totally captured by love for Jesus Christ. How can we grow more in love for Jesus ourselves?
3. St Paul's love for Jesus Christ led him to spend his life making Jesus known to others. What can we do to imitate Paul in the work of evangelisation?
4. Since the promotion of Christian unity is a goal of the Year of St Paul, what are some ways in which we can cooperate in the work of ecumenism?

INFORM
faith & life matters

The Message of ST PAUL



On the 28th June 2008, in the Roman Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, Pope Benedict XVI officially opened the Year of St Paul. The year commemorates the 2000th anniversary of the birth of the Apostle to the Gentiles and it will close on the 29th June 2009, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul.

In that same ceremony, the Pope lit a "Pauline flame" at the entrance to the Basilica as a sign inviting the Church to meditate on the truths of the faith in the light of the apostle's teaching. And he opened the "Pauline Door," passing through it along with the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I. This gesture is significant in that the Pope has wanted the promotion of Christian unity to be one of the main themes of the year.

The Year of St Paul is an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the message this great saint has left to the Church through his writings and his prodigious effort to spread the faith.

APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

Who was St Paul? He was born in Tarsus, the capital of the Roman Province of Cilicia, now part of Turkey. His Hebrew name was Saul and he was brought up as an observant Jew. When he was arrested in front of the Temple in Jerusalem, he appealed to the crowd: "I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers" (Acts 22:3).

A fierce persecutor of the Church who witnessed and approved of the martyrdom of St Stephen, Paul was converted by Our Lord on the road to Damascus. A light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground, hearing a voice which said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He answered, "Who are you, Lord?" And he heard the reply, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:3-6).

Saul lost his sight and was led by the hand into Damascus, where he fasted for three days. Meanwhile a disciple named Ananias had a vision in which Our Lord asked him to go to Saul

and told him the great mission Saul was to carry out: "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

When Ananias went and laid hands on him, Saul regained his sight and was baptised then and there (cf. Acts 9:18).

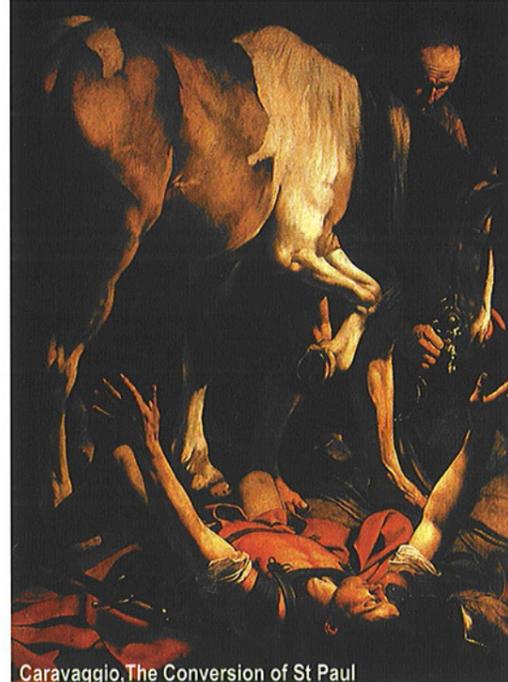
After three years in Arabia, Paul spent the rest of his life preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ on three missionary journeys that took him all over Asia Minor as well as to Greece, Macedonia, Italy and possibly Spain. He was imprisoned twice in Rome, writing several of his letters during his imprisonment, and he died a martyr there.

According to an ancient tradition, Paul was beheaded under the Emperor Nero in either 64 or 67 AD. Constantine the Great built a church over his tomb on the Via Ostiense, outside the city walls to the southwest of Rome. The Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls has been rebuilt several times, most recently in the 19th century after a fire destroyed the previous building.

SUFFERING FOR THE GOSPEL

Paul has sometimes been called "the 13th apostle". Although he was not one of the original twelve, he did as much as anyone to spread the Gospel and he suffered greatly for it. He says of himself, in response to some of his critics: "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one - I am talking like a madman - with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor 11:22-27).

In spite of his heroic efforts and his suffering for the faith, he looked on himself with the utmost humility: "For I am the least of the apostles, and am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (1 Cor 15:8-9). Pope Benedict comments: "How could we not admire a man such as this? How could we not give thanks to God for having given us an



Caravaggio, The Conversion of St Paul

apostle of this category?" (General Audience, 25 October 2006)

But St Paul is not only a figure of the past. His message and life are always relevant. They contain the core of the Christian message. In his homily for the inauguration of the Year of St Paul, Pope Benedict said: "Let us not ask ourselves only: who was Paul? Let us ask ourselves above all: who is Paul? What does he say to me?" (Homily, 28 June 2008).

LOVE FOR JESUS CHRIST

St Paul's teaching and writing are centred on the figure of Jesus Christ, who was the love of his life, the reason for his very existence. More than just a follower of Christ, St Paul considered himself to be one with Christ: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

In his written works, the name of Christ appears 380 times, surpassed only by that of God, which is mentioned 500 times. St Paul's letters also contain various hymns, professions of faith, and doctrinal acclamations that were probably used in the early Christian liturgy and catechesis.

St Paul summed up his love for Christ in his letter to the Philippians: "For to me, to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21). Christ was everything for him, and he would suffer the loss of everything else rather than lose Jesus Christ. Enumerating his credentials as a good Jew, he now counts all of this as nothing compared with the privilege of knowing Jesus Christ: "Circumcised on the

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the Church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:5-8).

Paul goes on to say that he is happy to have lost everything in order to serve Christ: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:8-9).

Pope Benedict comments on this radical conversion and new life of St Paul: "Before his conversion, Paul had not been a man distant from God and from his Law... In the light of the encounter with Christ, however, he understood that with this he had sought to build up himself and his own justice, and that with all this justice he had lived for himself. He realised that a new approach in his life was absolutely essential. And we find this new approach expressed in his words: 'The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20; General audience, 8 November 2006).

The Pope goes on to say: "It is important to realise what a deep effect Jesus Christ can have

on a person's life; hence, also on our own lives" (General audience, 8 November 2006).

PREACHING CHRIST CRUCIFIED

St Paul not only loved and preached Jesus Christ, he preached Christ crucified. This might seem strange to our generation, so caught up in love for the world, for comforts, for pleasures. But then it seemed strange to Paul's generation too. He writes to the Corinthians: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart' (1s 29:14)... For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:18-19, 22-24).

Why did Paul lay so much stress on Christ crucified? As he says, the cross is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." In a word, it is through the cross that Christ redeemed us. The cross is our redemption, our resurrection, our victory, our joy, our union with Christ. St Paul was firmly convinced of this. He writes to the Galatians that it is precisely through his union with the cross that he has become one with Christ: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no

longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

Paul was obviously very moved by the fact that Christ loved him and gave himself for him. Why would Christ love Paul, who had dedicated all his energies to persecuting the Church? It is a mystery: a mystery of love, a mystery of mercy. Paul describes it in his letter to Timothy: "I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of Our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 1:12-14). For Paul, to preach Christ crucified was to preach the mercy of God.

"THE LOVE OF CHRIST URGES US"

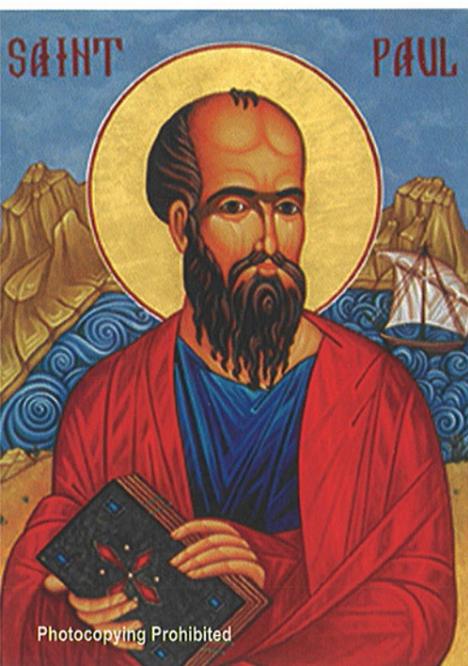
St Paul's love for Jesus Christ moved him to spend his life preaching Christ, and ultimately to die for love of him.

He was firmly convinced of the absolute necessity of people who would preach Christ to others. Unless there was someone to preach, others would never hear of Christ and come to believe in him: "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom 10:14-17).

Knowing that he had been called by Jesus Christ precisely to proclaim the Good News to the Gentiles and to kings (cf. Acts 9:15), St Paul felt impelled to carry out that mission. He did not expect any reward for preaching. Rather, he would have to answer to God if he did not do it: "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16)

What moved him to this zeal was especially his love for Christ, his desire to make him known to the whole world. He would sum up this attitude with his well-known words: "For the love of Christ urges us" (2 Cor 5:14).

If Christians today had the same zeal to speak about Christ, how different the world would be!



Photocopying Prohibited

"Let us not ask ourselves only: who was Paul? Let us ask ourselves above all: who is Paul? What does he say to me?"

(Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 28 June 2008).



Photocopying Prohibited