

June 29, 2008

Pope Benedict XVI has designated a special jubilee year in honor of the apostle, St. Paul, from June 28, 2008 to June 29, 2009. This special year is occasioned by the 2000th anniversary of his birth, which historians have placed between the years 7 and 10. There is much that we can learn and emulate from the life, preaching, and writings of St. Paul. He wrote 14 letters included in the New Testament of the Bible and the second part of St. Luke's "Acts of the Apostles" is dedicated to Paul's four missionary journeys.

Paul was born in Tarsus, situated in present-day Turkey. He was born into a well-to-do Jewish family of Tarsus, but had Roman citizenship. He was sent to Jerusalem to study in the famous rabbinical school headed by Gamaliel and learned tent-making as a trade.

Saul, his name before his conversion, appears in Chapter 7 of the "Acts of the Apostles" as a self-righteous, young Pharisee. He was complicit in the murder of St. Stephen, the first martyr (Acts 7:58).

Soon afterwards, Saul was traveling to the Syrian city of Damascus to persecute the Christians there. In a blinding flash of light, the risen Lord penetrated his inmost being and caused an eventual complete conversion, a change of mind and heart that led him to be a "servant" and "apostle" of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1).

The powerful story of Saul receiving the gift of faith and Baptism is described in Acts, Chapter 9. From that experience, Paul came to understand how sin works in human nature and how the Holy Spirit can completely transform the evil within one. We learn from Paul's life that at the heart of his conversion was a

complete surrender to the love of the risen Lord. After that surrender, the only thing Paul desired to do was to work with all his energies to please God.

That which was most critical and fundamental in Paul's life was that Paul knew himself to be loved by Christ. Enjoying Christ's love, Paul considered himself happier than anyone else, even in the midst of enormous sufferings and persecution. He preferred Christ's love to everything. Apart from Christ's love, nothing saddened or delighted Paul.

Paul summed up his attitude in the words: "I forget what is behind and push on to what lies ahead." When he encountered sufferings and saw his martyrdom as imminent, he encouraged others: "Rejoice and be glad with me!" He said: "I am content with weakness, mistreatment and persecution."

Paul encourages us through his total immersion in Christ's life and love: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Paul was deeply aware of his personal weaknesses, his intellectual and personality shortcomings, yet maintained: "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

When the Lord calls one to conversion and intimacy, He also gives a mission. Paul was very conscious of his mission to be "a witness before all men" of the things which he had seen and heard (Acts 22:15). His 14 letters and the "Acts of the Apostles" show his passion for spreading the Good News of Jesus who came to save all and lead all to the Father: "I was determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (I Cor 2:2). "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (I Cor 9:16).

Our considerations of St. Paul during this year challenge us to ask ourselves whether we so treasure our relationship with the Lord Jesus that we are passionate about spreading our faith by example and through our conversations

**with family members and friends. What are we doing to instill the love of Jesus and an understanding of our faith in the hearts and minds of our young people?**

**During this Year of St. Paul, we would do well to read and pray the “Acts of the Apostles” and the letters of St. Paul in the New Testament. As we do so, we might pray about our own ongoing conversion experience and our own passion to share our life in the Lord and our love for the Lord with others.**

**May the fire for the love of Jesus with which the Holy Spirit enflamed the heart of St. Paul on the road to Damascus inflame our hearts. St. Paul, apostle and martyr, pray for us!**