

July 13, 2008

I dedicated my last column to St. Paul as the Church began to observe a jubilee year in honor of the 2000th anniversary of his birth. I wish to offer further reflections now. When I received the Sacrament of Confirmation, I chose St. Paul as my Confirmation patron saint. As I have matured in the faith and in my vocation, I have grown in my admiration of St. Paul because of his total identification with Jesus and his deep passion to share his love for Jesus with others. Nearly every time I go to Rome, I celebrate Mass at the major Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls where St. Paul was buried after he was executed in 68 A.D.

Prior to his conversion, Saul (Paul's original name) participated in the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr. Saul harassed the early Christians in Jerusalem, dragging men and women out of their homes and throwing them into jail. He obtained letters of recommendation from the high priest so that he might continue persecuting the followers of Jesus in Damascus.

On the road to Damascus, Saul encountered Jesus who challenged him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When Saul asked, "Who are you, sir?" Jesus replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do" (Acts 9:5-7).

St. Paul's conversion was so important for the early Church that St. Luke described it three times in the Acts of the Apostles (in Chapters 9, 22, and 26). Paul's conversion was so transformative and decisive for himself that he described it frequently in his epistles with much emotion and gratitude.

The Lord used St. Paul as his chief instrument in persuading St. Peter and the other apostles to welcome the Gentiles into the Church without imposing

upon them all the prescriptions of Judaism. For 30 years, Paul brought the faith of Christ to Asia, Europe, and even to Rome. Through him the Church became what it is by nature – Universal and Catholic. Paul is known as the Apostle of the Gentiles, and with Peter, he is Patron of Rome.

Paul did nothing to merit the gift of faith. Nor do we. Faith is a gratuitous gift from God which we often take for granted. St. Paul is an inspiration for me inasmuch as he accepted God's invitation to conversion and surrendered himself and his entire life to God.

It is so beneficial for us to appreciate our faith as gift and to pray in the words of St. Paul: "Praise be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens! God chose us in Him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in His sight, to be full of love..." (Eph 1:2).

After his Baptism, St. Paul understood his own identity completely in relationship with Jesus. "Those things I used to consider gain I have now reappraised as loss in the light of Christ. I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ...I wish to know Christ and the power flowing from His resurrection" (Phil 3:7-10).

St. Paul also explained his intimate relationship with Jesus in this way: "...the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

Paul was so aware of Christ's love for him and life in him that his joy perdured even in the midst of terrible suffering: "Even now I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you. In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church" (Col 1:24). St. Paul

remained serene and confident in the midst of many persecutions, sufferings, and ultimately martyrdom.

I deeply appreciate persons who devote their lives single-mindedly to a noble purpose. St. Paul was such a man. He certainly did not have an identity crisis. He understood very clearly God's plan for him. In most of his 14 letters, he began by affirming his vocation. To the Ephesians, he wrote: "Paul, by the will of God an apostle of Jesus Christ to the holy ones, believers in Christ Jesus" (Eph 1:1). He was totally devoted to making Christ known and loved. "All that matters is that in any and every way...Christ is proclaimed! That is what brings me joy. Indeed, I shall continue to rejoice, in the conviction that this will turn out to my salvation..." (Phil 1:18f).

Paul knew himself to be called "that I might spread among the Gentiles the good tidings concerning Him..." (Gal 2:16). He devoted himself as a zealous missionary in four major missionary trips through Asia and Europe. He endured persecutions of every sort in order to proclaim Christ crucified. In the end, he was able to say: "I for my part am already being poured out like a libation. The time of my dissolution is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim:4-6).

Through our reading and prayerful reflection upon St. Paul's letters, may we come to know him better and find inspiration in his love for the Lord Jesus and his passion to share that love with others!