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Saint Paul: A Personal Encounter with Christ

For the feast of the conversion of Saint Paul on 25 January, here is an article originally published in 2008 for the Year of Saint Paul in the Church, convoked by Benedict XVI to foster Christian unity.

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Apostle to the Gentiles

Who was Paul of Tarsus? He was born in the capital of the Roman

Province of Cilicia, now part of Turkey. When he was captured before the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem, he addressed the crowd that wanted to kill him with these words: *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.*(6)

Towards the end of his days, looking back over his life and mission, he will say of himself: *I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher.*(7) Paul is not only a figure of the past. His message and life are always relevant, since they contain the core of the perennial Christian message.

Paul has sometimes been called the "thirteenth Apostle." Although he didn't belong to the group of the original Twelve Apostles, he was called to his mission by Christ himself, who appeared to him on the

road to Damascus.(8) Moreover, he did as much as anyone to spread the Gospel. *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.*(9)

Paul did not lack for difficulties or travail, all of which he bore out of love for Christ. But all the effort he expended and all the success he achieved never led to vainglory. As St. Josemaría wrote: "human logic cannot possibly explain the world of grace. God usually seeks out deficient instruments so that the work can more clearly seen to be his. It is with trembling that St. Paul recalls his vocation: *And last of all, as by one born out of due time, he was seen also by me. 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).*"(10) "How could we not admire a man such as this?" said Benedict XVI. "How could we not give thanks to God for having given us an Apostle of this category?"(11)

St. Paul's theological teachings are centered on the figure of Christ. His letters don't provide us with many

historical features of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, as the Gospels do. His concern for the events of our Lord's earthly existence is focussed on the mystery of Christ's passion and death on the Cross. Paul was never a witness to Jesus' earthly life; the only information he has comes from the apostolic tradition that preceded him, as he explicitly says: for I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.(12) St. Paul's letters also contain various hymns, professions of faith, and doctrinal acclamations that were probably used in the primitive Christian liturgy and catechesis. Jesus Christ is the center and foundation of Paul's writing and preaching. In his written works, the name of Christ appears 380 times, surpassed only by that of God, mentioned 500 times.

Personal encounter with Christ

Reflecting on the life of St. Paul, we could ask ourselves how a personal encounter with our Lord comes about and what sort of relationship is established between Christ and the believer. Paul's answer contains two key points. First, he highlights the indispensable need for faith.(13) As he wrote to the Romans: *For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law.*(14) The same point is stated even more explicitly in the Letter to the Galatians: *you know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.*(15) Communion with God comes about exclusively through grace. God comes out to meet us and grants us his mercy, pardoning our sins and allowing us to enter into a relationship of love with him and with our brothers and sisters in the faith.(16)

This doctrine of justification reflects the process of Paul's own vocation.

He was a strict observer of the Mosaic Law, fulfilling even the smallest details. But these practices led him to feel satisfied with himself, to seek salvation through his own efforts. This is his situation when he discovers he is a sinner, persecuting the Church of the Son of God. Paul's awareness of sin will be the starting point for abandoning himself to God's grace, given through Jesus Christ

Secondly, Paul puts great stress on a personal encounter with our Lord himself. Christ's unlimited self-giving on the Cross is the strongest invitation for us to rise above our own ego and shun vainglory, placing all our confidence in our Lord's salvific death and resurrection: *he who glories, let him glory in the Lord.* (17) This spiritual conversion means, therefore, not seeking oneself, but putting on Christ, giving oneself in union with him. Thus we come to

share in Christ's life and immerse ourselves in him, sharing in both his death and his life. The Apostle describes this reality through the image of Baptism: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*(18)

Paul sees the Son of God not only as the One who died out of love for us, obtaining our salvation from sin: *"dilexit me et tradidit semetipsum pro me,"* he loved me and gave himself up for me. Christ is also the One who is present in our own lives: *"vivo autem iam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus,"* it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.(19) St. Josemaria liked to repeat these words of the Apostle, since he saw the Risen Christ as the only reason

for a Christian's entire life and mission.

Life in the Spirit

Identifying oneself with Christ means living in the Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke emphasizes the dynamic and impelling role of the Holy Spirit. As St. Josemaría wrote: "There is hardly a page in the Acts of the Apostles where we fail to read about him and the action by which he guides, directs and enlivens the life and work of the early Christian community. It is he who inspires the preaching of St. Peter (cf. Acts 4:8), who strengthens the faith of the disciples (cf. Acts 4:31), who confirms with his presence the calling of the gentiles (cf. Acts 10:44-47), who sends Saul and Barnabas to the distant lands where they will open new paths for the teaching of Jesus (cf. Acts 13:2-4). In a word, his presence and doctrine are everywhere."(20)

In his writings, Paul underlines the presence of Third Person of the Blessed Trinity in a Christian's life. The Spirit dwells in our hearts.(21) He has been sent to us by God so that we might become identified with his Son and be able to exclaim: "*Abba, Father!*"(22) Letting oneself be led by the Spirit, who gives us life in Christ Jesus, frees us from the law of sin and death and leads us to manifest in our lives the deeds—the fruits—of the Holy Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.*(23)

The Apostle insists that authentic prayer takes place only when the Spirit is present: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought,*

but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.(24) In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, the Holy Spirit is, as it were, "the soul of our soul, the most secret part of our being, from which a movement of prayer towards God arises continuously, something which we find it hard to fathom."(25) Paul invites us to be more aware of the action of the Holy Spirit, to be more attentive to his presence in us and learn how to transform it into prayer.

The first fruit of the Spirit in a Christian soul is love. Indeed, *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*(26) If, by definition, love is what unites people together, the Spirit is the one who brings about communion in the Church. He is the cohesive force that keeps the faithful united to God the Father, through Christ, and draws those who are

separated towards full communion with the rest. The Holy Spirit guides the Church towards unity.

Towards Unity

Among the many points the Apostle stresses in his epistles, one is especially relevant for this Pauline Year: the unity of all Christians. We are spurred to beseech God insistently for this grace—as great as it is difficult to attain—on seeing that the Patriarch Bartholomew I (following in the footsteps of the Vicar of Christ) has also convoked a Pauline Year in the Orthodox Church. St. Paul's teachings remind us that full communion among all Christians is founded on the reality of sharing *one Lord, one faith, one baptism*.⁽²⁷⁾ Therefore we should 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."(28) St. Paul points out the most effective path towards unity in words the Second Vatican Council repeated in its decree on ecumenism: *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.*(29)

The Apostle diligently strove to conserve the immense grace of unity. He invited the Christians at Corinth, right from the beginning of his first letter, to avoid any divisions among themselves.(30) Paul's admonitions and advice are very relevant today. In the world of the Third Millennium, with humanity ever more interconnected, and paradoxically ever more fragmented and divided by a hedonist and relativistic atmosphere—which

places in doubt the existence of any objective truth(31)—our Lord's prayer, "*ut omnes unum sint*," *that all may be one*,(32) is for us the greatest promise of union with God and unity among all mankind.

1. St. Josemaría, Homily *Loyalty to the Church*, 4 June 1972.

2. Cf. Hymn for First Vespers of the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul.

3. Cf. *Gal* 1:15-18.

4. Cf. *II Cor* 11:32.

5. Cf. *Acts* 7:58.

6. *Acts* 22:3.

7. *II Tim* 1:11.

8. Cf. *I Cor* 15:8.

9. *II Cor* 11:22-27.

10. St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 3.
11. Benedict XVI, General Audience, 25 October 2006.
12. *I Cor* 15:3; cf. 11:23ff.
13. Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience, 8 November 2006.
14. *Rom* 3:28.
15. *Gal* 2:16.
16. Cf. *Rom* 3:24.
17. *I Cor* 1:31.
18. *Rom* 6:3ff.
19. *Gal* 2:20.
20. St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 127.
21. Cf. *Rom* 8:9.
22. *Gal* 4:6.

23. *Gal* 5:22-25.

24. *Rom* 8:26.

25. Benedict XVI, General Audience,
15 November 2006.

26. *Rom* 5:5.

27. *Eph* 4:5.

28. Benedict XVI, Address during
meeting with Bartholomew I for
opening of the Pauline Year, 28 June
2008.

29. *Eph* 4:1-3.

30. Cf. *I Cor* 1:10.

31. Benedict XVI, Address during
meeting with Bartholomew I for
opening of the Pauline Year, 28 June
2008.

32. *Jn* 17:21.

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