

CELEBRATION OF FIRST VESPERS OF THE SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL FOR THE OPENING OF THE PAULINE YEAR

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls Saturday, 28 June 2008

Your Holiness and Fraternal Delegates, Your Eminences, Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We have gathered near the tomb of St Paul, who was born 2,000 years ago at Tarsus in Cilicia, in present-day Turkey. Who was St Paul? In the temple of Jerusalem, faced with the frenzied crowd that wanted to kill him, he presented himself with these words: "I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God..." (Acts 22: 3). At the end of his journey he was to say of himself: "For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle... a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth" (1 Tm 2: 7; cf. 2 Tm 1: 11). A teacher of the Gentiles, an apostle and a herald of Jesus Christ, this is how he described himself, looking back over the path of his life. But this glance does not look only to the past. "A teacher of the Gentiles" - these words open to the future, to all peoples and all generations. For us Paul is not a figure of the past whom we remember with veneration. He is also our teacher, an Apostle and herald of Jesus Christ for us too.

Thus we are not gathered to reflect on past history, irrevocably behind us. Paul wants to speak to us - today. That is why I chose to establish this special "Pauline Year": in order to listen to him and learn today from him, as our teacher, "the faith and the truth" in which the reasons for unity among Christ's disciples are rooted. In this perspective, for this 2000th anniversary of the Apostle's birth I wished to light a special "Pauline Flame" that will remain lit throughout the year in a special brazier placed in the Basilica's four-sided portico. To solemnize this event I have also inaugurated the so-called "Pauline Door", through which I entered the Basilica, accompanied by the Patriarch of Constantinople, by the Cardinal Archpriest and by other religious Authorities.

It is a cause of deep joy to me that the opening of the Pauline Year has acquired a special ecumenical character through the presence of numerous delegates and representatives of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, whom I welcome with an open heart. I greet first of all His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew I and the members of the Delegation that accompany him, as well as the large group of lay people who have come to Rome from various parts of the world to experience with him and with all of us these moments of prayer and reflection. I greet the Fraternal Delegates of the Churches which have special ties with the Apostle Paul - Jerusalem, Antioch, Cyprus, Greece - and which form the geographical environment of the Apostle's life before his arrival in Rome. I cordially greet the Brethren of the various Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the East and the West, together with all of you who have desired to take part in this solemn initiation of the "Year" dedicated to the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Thus, we are gathered here to question ourselves on the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Let us not ask ourselves only: who was Paul? Let us ask ourselves above all: who is Paul? What does he say to me? At this moment, at the beginning of the "Pauline Year" that we are inaugurating, I would like to choose from the rich testimony of the New Testament, three texts in which his inner features, his specific character appear. In the Letter to the Galatians, St Paul gives a very personal profession of faith in which he opens his heart to readers of all times and reveals what was the most intimate drive of his life. "I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2: 20). All Paul's actions begin from this centre. His faith is the experience of being loved by Jesus Christ in a very personal way. It is awareness of the fact that Christ did not face death for something anonymous but rather for love of him - of Paul - and that, as the Risen One, he still loves

him; in other words, Christ gave himself for him. Paul's faith is being struck by the love of Jesus Christ, a love that overwhelms him to his depths and transforms him. His faith is not a theory, an opinion about God and the world. His faith is the impact of God's love in his heart. Thus, this same faith was love for Jesus Christ.

Paul is presented by many as a pugnacious man who was well able to wield the sword of his words. Indeed, there was no lack of disputes on his journey as an Apostle. He did not seek a superficial harmony. In the First of his Letters, addressed to the Thessalonians, he himself says: "We had courage... to proclaim to you the Gospel of God in the face of great opposition... In fact, we never spoke words of adulation, as you know" (1 Thes 2: 2, 5). The truth was too great for him to be willing to sacrifice it with a view to external success. For him, the truth that he experienced in his encounter with the Risen One was well worth the fight, persecution and suffering. But what most deeply motivated him was being loved by Jesus Christ and the desire to communicate this love to others.

Paul was a man capable of loving and all of his actions and suffering can only be explained on the basis of this core sentiment. It is only on this basis that we can understand the concepts on which his proclamation was founded. Let us take another key word of his: freedom. The experience of being loved to the very end by Christ had opened his eyes to the truth and to the way of human existence. It was an experience that embraced everything. Paul was free as a man loved by God, who, by virtue of God, was able to love together with him. This love then became the "law" of his life and in this very way, the freedom of his life. He speaks and acts motivated by the responsibility of love. Here freedom and responsibility are indivisibly united.

Since Paul lives in the responsibility of love, he is free; since he is one who loves, he lives his life totally in the responsibility of this love and does not take freedom as a pretext to act arbitrarily and egoistically. In the same spirit Augustine formulated the phrase that later became famous: *Dilige et quod vis fac* (*Tract.* in 1 Jo 7, 7-8) - love and do what you please. The one who loves Christ as Paul loved him can truly do as he pleases because his love is united to Christ's will and thus with God's will; because his will is anchored to the truth and because his will is no longer merely his own, arbitrary to the autonomous self, but is integrated into God's freedom from which he receives the path to take.

In the search for the inner features of St Paul I would like, secondly, to recall the words that the Risen Christ addressed to him on the road to Damascus. First the Lord asked him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?". To the question: "Who are you, Lord?", Saul is given the answer: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9: 4f.). In persecuting the Church, Paul was persecuting Jesus himself. "You persecute *me*". Jesus identifies with the Church in a single subject. This exclamation of the Risen One, which transformed Saul's life, in summary already contains the entire doctrine on the Church as the Body of Christ. Christ did not withdraw himself into Heaven, leaving ranks of followers to carry out "his cause" on earth. The Church is not an association that desires to promote a specific cause. In her there is no question of a cause. In her it is a matter of the person of Jesus Christ, who, also as the Risen One, remained "flesh". He has "flesh and bones" (Lk 24: 39), the Risen One says, in Luke's Gospel, to the disciples who thought he was a ghost. He has a Body. He is personally present in his Church, "Head and Body" form one being, Augustine would come to say. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 6: 15). And he added: just as, according to the book of Genesis, man and woman become one flesh, thus Christ and his followers become one spirit, that is, one in the new world of the Resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 6: 16ff.).

In all of this the Eucharistic mystery appears, in which Christ continually gives his Body and makes of us his Body: "The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10: 16f). With these words, at this moment, not only Paul addresses us but also the Lord himself: how could you pierce my body? Before the Face of Christ, these words become at the same time an urgent plea: Bring us together from all our divisions. Grant that this may once again become reality today: there is one bread, therefore we, although we are many, are one body. For Paul, the words about the Church as the body of Christ are not just any comparison. They go far beyond a comparison. "Why do you persecute *me*?". Christ ceaselessly draws us into his body, building his Body from the Eucharistic centre that for Paul is the centre of Christian existence by virtue of which

everyone, as also every individual, can experience in a totally personal way: he has loved *me* and given himself for *me*.

I would like to conclude with words St Paul spoke near the end of his life. It is an exhortation to Timothy from prison while he was facing death, "with the strength that comes from God bear your share of hardship which the Gospel entails", the Apostle said to his disciple (2 Tm 1: 8). These words, which mark the end of the Apostle's life as a testament, refer back to the beginning of his mission. When, after his encounter with the Risen One, while Paul lay blind in his dwelling at Damascus, Ananias was charged to visit the feared persecutor and to lay his hands upon him so that he might regain his sight. Ananias' objection that this Saul was a dangerous persecutor of Christians, was met with the response: this man must carry my name before the Gentiles and kings: "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9: 15f.).

The task of proclamation and the call to suffer for Christ's sake are inseparable. The call to become the teacher of the Gentiles is, at the same time and intrinsically, a call to suffering in communion with Christ who redeemed us through his Passion. In a world in which falsehood is powerful, the truth is paid for with suffering. The one who desires to avoid suffering, to keep it at bay, keeps life itself and its greatness at bay; he cannot be a servant of truth and thus a servant of faith. There is no love without suffering - without the suffering of renouncing oneself, of the transformation and purification of self for true freedom. Where there is nothing worth suffering for, even life loses its value. The Eucharist - the centre of our Christian being - is founded on Jesus' sacrifice for us; it is born from the suffering of love which culminated in the Cross.

We live by this love that gives itself. It gives us the courage and strength to suffer with Christ and for him in this world, knowing that in this very way our life becomes great and mature and true. In the light of all St Paul's Letters, we see how the prophecy made to Ananias at the time of Paul's call came true in the process of teaching the Gentiles: "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name". His suffering made him credible as a teacher of truth who did not seek his own advantage, his own glory or his personal satisfaction but applied himself for the sake of the One who loved us and has given himself for us all.

Let us now thank the Lord for having called Paul, making him the light to the Gentiles and the teacher of us all, and let us pray to him: "Give us even today witnesses of the Resurrection, struck by the impact of your love and able to bring the light of the Gospel in our time. St Paul, pray for us!

Amen.