



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 7 February 2007

Priscilla and Aquila

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Taking a new step in this type of portrait gallery of the first witnesses of the Christian faith which we began some weeks ago, today we take into consideration a married couple.

The couple in question are Priscilla and Aquila, who take their place, as we already mentioned briefly last Wednesday, in the sphere of numerous collaborators who gravitated around the Apostle Paul. Based on the information in our possession, this married couple played a very active role in the post-Paschal origins of the Church.

The names Aquila and Priscilla are Latin, but the man and woman who bear them were of Hebrew origin. At least Aquila, however, geographically came from the diaspora of northern Anatolia, which faces the Black Sea - in today's Turkey -, while Priscilla was probably a Jewish woman from Rome (cf. Acts 18: 2).

However, it was from Rome that they reached Corinth, where Paul met them at the beginning of the 50s. There he became associated with them, as Luke tells us, practicing the same trade of making tents or large draperies for domestic use, and he was even welcomed into their home (cf. Acts 18: 3).

The reason they came to Corinth was the decision taken by the Emperor Claudius to expel from Rome the city's Jewish residents. Concerning this event the Roman historian Suetonius tells us

that the Hebrews were expelled because "they were rioting due to someone named Chrestus" (cf. "The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, Claudius", n. 25).

One sees that he did not know the name well - instead of Christ he wrote "Chrestus" - and he had only a very confused idea of what had happened. In any case, there were internal discords within the Jewish community about the question if Jesus was the Christ. And for the Emperor these problems were the reason to simply expel all Jews from Rome.

One can deduce that the couple had already embraced the Christian faith in the 40s, and now they had found in Paul someone who not only shared with them this faith - that Jesus is the Christ - but who was also an Apostle, personally called by the Risen Lord.

Therefore, their first encounter is at Corinth, where they welcomed him into their house and worked together making tents.

In a second moment they transferred to Ephesus in Asia Minor. There they had a decisive role in completing the Christian formation of the Alexandrian Jew Apollo, who we spoke about last Wednesday.

Since he only knew the faith superficially, "Priscilla and Aquila... took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18: 26).

When Paul wrote the *First Letter to the Corinthians* from Ephesus, together with his own greeting he explicitly sent those of "Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house" (16: 19).

Hence, we come to know the most important role that this couple played in the environment of the primitive Church: that of welcoming in their own house the group of local Christians when they gathered to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist. It is exactly this type of gathering that in Greek is called "ekklesia" - the Latin word is "ecclesia", the Italian "chiesa" - which means convocation, assembly, gathering.

In the house of Aquila and Priscilla, therefore, the Church gathered, the convocation of Christ, which celebrates here the Sacred Mysteries.

Thus, we can see the very birth of the reality of the Church in the homes of believers. Christians, in fact, from the first part of the third century did not have their own places of worship. Initially it was the Jewish Synagogue, until the original symbiosis between the Old and New Testaments dissolved and the Church of the Gentiles was forced to give itself its own identity, always profoundly rooted in the Old Testament.

Then, after this "break", they gathered in the homes of Christians that thus become "Church". And

finally, in the third century, true and proper buildings for Christian worship were born.

But here, in the first half of the first century and in the second century, the homes of Christians become a true and proper "Church". As I said, together they read the Sacred Scripture and celebrate the Eucharist.

That was what used to happen, for example, at Corinth, where Paul mentioned a certain "Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church" (Rom 16: 23), or at Laodicea, where the community gathered in the home of a certain Nympha (cf. Col 4: 15), or at Colossae, where the meeting took place in the house of a certain Archippus (cf. Phlm 2).

Having returned subsequently to Rome, Aquila and Priscilla continue to carry out this precious function also in the capital of the Empire.

In fact, Paul, writing to the Romans, sends this precise greeting: "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the church in their house" (Rom 16: 3-5).

What extraordinary praise for these two married persons in these words! And it is none other than Paul who extends it. He explicitly recognizes in them two true and important collaborators of his apostolate.

The reference made to having risked their lives for him is probably linked to interventions in his favour during some prison stay, perhaps in the same Ephesus (cf. Acts 19: 23; I Cor 15: 32; II Cor 1: 8-9). And to Paul's own gratitude even that of all the Churches of the Gentiles is joined. Although considering the expression perhaps somewhat hyperbolic, it lets one intuit how vast their ray of action was and therefore, their influence for the good of the Gospel.

Later hagiographic tradition has given a very singular importance to Priscilla, even if the problem of identifying her with the martyr Priscilla remains.

In any case, here in Rome we have a Church dedicated to St Prisca on the Aventine Hill, near the Catacombs of Priscilla on Via Salaria.

In this way, the memory of a woman who has certainly been an active person and of great value in the history of Roman Christianity is perpetuated. One thing is sure: together with the gratitude of the early Church, of which St Paul speaks, we must also add our own, since thanks to the faith and apostolic commitment of the lay faithful, of families, of spouses like Priscilla and Aquila, Christianity has reached our generation.

It could grow not only thanks to the Apostles who announced it. In order to take root in people's

land and develop actively, the commitment of these families, these spouses, these Christian communities, of these lay faithful was necessary in order to offer the "humus" for the growth of the faith. As always, it is only in this way that the Church grows.

This couple in particular demonstrates how important the action of Christian spouses is. When they are supported by the faith and by a strong spirituality, their courageous commitment for the Church and in the Church becomes natural. The daily sharing of their life prolongs and in some way is sublimated in the assuming of a common responsibility in favour of the Mystical Body of Christ, even if just a little part of it. Thus it was in the first generation and thus it will often be.

A further lesson we cannot neglect to draw from their example: every home can transform itself in a little church. Not only in the sense that in them must reign the typical Christian love made of altruism and of reciprocal care, but still more in the sense that the whole of family life, based on faith, is called to revolve around the singular lordship of Jesus Christ.

Not by chance does Paul compare, in the *Letter to the Ephesians*, the matrimonial relationship to the spousal communion that happens between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5: 25-33). Even more, we can maintain that the Apostle indirectly models the life of the entire Church on that of the family. And the Church, in reality, is the family of God.

Therefore, we honour Aquila and Priscilla as models of conjugal life responsibly committed to the service of the entire Christian community. And we find in them the model of the Church, God's family for all times.

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To special groups

I extend a cordial welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, China, and the United States of America. May your visit to Rome inspire you to live the truth of the Gospel ever more fully. Upon all of you I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Dear *young people*, everywhere be witnesses of non-violence and of peace and with your generous commitment, you will contribute to build a better future for all. You, dear *sick people*, with your sufferings, consider yourselves "collaborators" of Christ, who took upon himself the sufferings of the world. And you, dear *newly-weds*, build your happiness day by day, as the Apostle Paul exhorts, rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer, contribute to the needs of the brethren (cf. Rom 12: 12-13).

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