



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 4 February 2009*

Saint Paul (20):

St Paul's martyrdom and heritage

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The series of our Catecheses on St Paul has come to its conclusion; today we shall speak of the end of his earthly life. The ancient Christian tradition witnesses unanimously that Paul died as a consequence of his martyrdom here in Rome. The New Testament writings tell us nothing of the event. The Acts of the Apostles end their account by mentioning the imprisonment of the Apostle, who was nevertheless able to welcome all who went to him (cf. Acts 28: 30-31). Only in the Second Letter to Timothy do we find these premonitory words: "For I am already on the point of being sacrificed"; the time to set sail has come (2 Tm 4: 6; cf. Phil 2: 17). Two images are used here, the religious image of sacrifice that he had used previously in the Letter to the Philippians, interpreting martyrdom as a part of Christ's sacrifice, and the nautical image of casting off: two images which together discreetly allude to the event of death and of a brutal death.

The first explicit testimony of St Paul's death comes to us from the middle of the 90s in the first century, thus more than three decades after his actual death. It consists precisely in the *Epistle* that the Church of Rome, with its Bishop Clement I, wrote to the Church of Corinth. In that epistolary text is an invitation to keep her eyes fixed on the example of the Apostles and, immediately after the mention of Peter's martyrdom, one reads: "Owing to envy, Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and the west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the

extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into a holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience" (1 *Clem* 5: 2). The patience of which Clement speaks is an expression of Paul's communion with the Passion of Christ, of the generosity and constancy with which he accepted a long journey of suffering so as to be able to say "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal 6: 17). In St Clement's text we heard that Paul had arrived at the "extreme limit of the west". Whether this is a reference to a voyage in Spain undertaken by Paul is open to discussion. There is no certainty on it, but it is true that in his Letter to the Romans St Paul expresses his intention to go to Spain (cf. Rm 15: 24).

The sequence in Clement's letter of the two names of Peter and Paul is, however, very interesting, even if they were to be inverted in the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century. Referring to the Emperor Nero, Eusebius was to write: "It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified during Nero's reign. This account is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemetery of that place even to the present day" (*Ecclesiastical History*, 2, 25, 5). Eusebius then goes on to reference the earlier declaration of a Roman priest named Gaius that dates back to the early second century: "I can show the trophies of the Apostles. For if you go to the Vatican or on the Ostian Way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this Church" (*ibid.*, 2, 25, 6-7). "Trophies" are sepulchral monuments; these were the actual tombs of Peter and Paul which we still venerate today, after 2,000 years, in those same places: that of St Peter here in the Vatican and that of the Apostle to the Gentiles in the [Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls](#) on the Ostian Way.

It is interesting to note that the two great Apostles are mentioned together. Although no ancient source speaks of a contemporary ministry of both in Rome, subsequent Christian knowledge, on the basis of their common burial in the capital of the Empire, was also to associate them as founders of the Church of Rome. In fact this can be read in Irenaeus of Lyons, toward the end of the second century, concerning apostolic succession in the various Churches: "Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches... [we do this] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul" (*Adversus Haereses*, 3, 3, 2).

However let us now set Peter aside and concentrate on Paul. His martyrdom is recounted for the first time in the *Acts of Paul*, written towards the end of the second century. They say that Nero condemned him to death by beheading, an order which was carried out immediately (cf. 9: 5). The date of his death already varies in the ancient sources which set it between the persecution unleashed by Nero himself after the burning of Rome in July 64 and the last year of his reign, that is, the year 68 (cf. Jerome, *De viris ill.* 5, 8). The calculation heavily depends on the chronology of Paul's arrival in Rome, a discussion into which we cannot enter here. Later traditions specify two other elements. One, the most legendary, is that his martyrdom occurred at the *Acquae Salviae*,

on the Via Laurentina, and that his head rebounded three times, giving rise to a source of water each time that it touched the ground, which is why, to this day, the place is called the "Tre Fontane" [three fountains] (*Acts of Peter and Paul by the Pseudo-Marcellus*, fifth century). The second version, in harmony with the ancient account of the priest Gaius mentioned above, is that his burial not only took place "outside the city... at the second mile on the Ostian Way", but more precisely "on the estate of Lucina", who was a Christian matron (*Passion of Paul by the Pseudo-Abdias*, fourth century). It was here, in the fourth century, that the Emperor Constantine built a first church. Then, between the fourth and fifth centuries it was considerably enlarged by the Emperors Valentinian II, Theodosius and Arcadius. The present-day [Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls](#) was built here after the fire in 1800.

In any case, the figure of St Paul towers far above his earthly life and his death; in fact, he left us an extraordinary spiritual heritage. He too, as a true disciple of Christ, became a sign of contradiction.

While he was considered apostate by Mosaic law among the "Ebionites", a Judaeo-Christian group, great veneration for St Paul already appears in the Acts of the Apostles. I would now like to prescind from the apocryphal literature, such as the *Acts of Paul and Thekla* and an apocryphal collection of Letters between the Apostle Paul and the philosopher Seneca. It is above all important to note that St Paul's Letters very soon entered the liturgy, where the structure prophet-apostle-Gospel is crucial for the form of the Liturgy of the Word. Thus, thanks to this "presence" in the Church's liturgy, the Apostle's thought immediately gave spiritual nourishment to the faithful of every epoch.

It is obvious that the Fathers of the Church, and subsequently all theologians, were nourished by the Letters of St Paul and by his spirituality. Thus he has remained throughout the centuries and up to this day the true teacher and Apostle to the Gentiles. The first patristic comment on a New Testament text that has come down to us is that of the great Alexandrian theologian, Origen, who comments on Paul's Letter to the Romans. Unfortunately, only part of this comment is extant. St John Chrysostom, in addition to commenting on Paul's Letters, wrote seven memorable *Panegyrics* on him. It was to Paul that St Augustine owed the crucial step of his own conversion, and to Paul that he returned throughout his life. His great catholic theology derives from this ongoing dialogue with the Apostle, as does the Protestant theology in every age. St Thomas Aquinas has left us a beautiful comment on the *Pauline Letters*, which represents the ripest fruit of medieval exegesis.

A true turning point was reached in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation. The decisive moment in Luther's life was the "Turmerlebnis" (1517), the moment in which he discovered a new interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of justification. It was an interpretation that freed him from the scruples and anxieties of his previous life and gave him a new radical trust in the goodness of God who forgives all, unconditionally. From that time Luther identified Judaeo-Christian legalism, condemned by the Apostle, with the order of life of the Catholic Church. And the Church therefore appeared to him as an expression of the slavery of the law which he countered with the freedom of

the Gospel. The Council of Trent, from 1545 to 1563, profoundly interpreted the question of justification and found the synthesis between law and Gospel to be in line with the entire Catholic tradition, in conformity with the message of Sacred Scripture read in its totality and unity.

The 19th century, gathering the best heritage of the Enlightenment, underwent a new revival of Paulinism, now developed by the historical-critical interpretation of Sacred Scripture, above all at the level of scientific work. Here we shall prescind from the fact that even in that century, as later in the 20th century, a true and proper denigration of St Paul emerged. I am thinking primarily of Nietzsche, who derided the theology of St Paul's humility, opposing it with his theology of the strong and powerful man. However, let us set this aside and examine the essential current of the new scientific interpretation of Sacred Scripture and of the new Paulinism of that century. Here, the concept of freedom has been emphasized as central to Pauline thought; in it was found the heart of Pauline thought, as Luther, moreover, had already intuited. Yet the concept of freedom was then reinterpreted in the context of modern liberalism. The differentiation between the proclamation of St Paul and the proclamation of Jesus was thus heavily emphasized. And St Paul appears almost as a new founder of Christianity. It is true that in St Paul the centrality of the Kingdom of God, crucial for the proclamation of Jesus, was transformed into the centrality of Christology, whose crucial point is the Paschal Mystery. And it is from the Paschal Mystery that the Sacraments of Baptism and of the Eucharist derive, as a permanent presence of this mystery from which the Body of Christ grows and the Church is built. However, I would say, without going into detail here, that precisely in the new centrality of Christology and of the Paschal Mystery the Kingdom of God is realized and the authentic proclamation of Jesus becomes concrete, present and active. We have seen in our previous Catecheses that this Pauline innovation is truly the deepest fidelity to the proclamation of Jesus. In the progress of exegesis, especially in the past 200 years, the points of convergence between Catholic exegesis and Protestant exegesis have increased, thereby achieving a notable consensus precisely on the point that was the origin of the greatest historical dissent. There is thus great hope for the cause of ecumenism, so central to the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, I would like to mention briefly the various religious movements named after St Paul that have come into being in the Catholic Church in modern times. This happened in the 16th century with the "Congregation of St Paul", known as the Barnabites; in the 19th century with the "Missionaries of St Paul", or Paulist Fathers; in the 20th century with the polyform "Pauline Family" founded by Bl. Giacomo Alberione, not to mention of the secular institute of the "Company of St Paul". Essentially, we still have before us the luminous figure of an Apostle and of an extremely fruitful and profound Christian thinker, from whose approach everyone can benefit. In one of his panegyrics St John Chrysostom established an original comparison between Paul and Noah. He says: Paul "did not put beams together to build an ark; rather, instead of joining planks of wood he wrote Letters and thus rescues from the billows not two, three or five members of his own family but the entire ecumene that was on the point of perishing" (*Paneg.* 1, 5). The Apostle Paul can still and will always be able to do exactly that. Drawing from him as much from his example as from his

doctrine will therefore be an incentive, if not a guarantee, for the reinforcement of the Christian identity of each one of us and for the rejuvenation of the entire Church.

To special groups

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's audience. I particularly welcome students from the Bossey Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies in Geneva, as well as pilgrims from Hong Kong and the United States of America. God bless you all!

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The liturgical Memorials of several martyrs St Blaise, St Agatha and the St Paul Miki and his Japanese companions are being celebrated in these days. May the courage of these intrepid witnesses of Christ help you, dear *young people*, to open your hearts to the heroism of holiness; may it sustain you, dear *sick people*, in offering up the precious gift of prayer and of suffering for the Church; and may it give to you, dear *newlyweds*, the strength to impress upon your families the perennial Christian values.

Appeal for an end to violence and terrorism in Sri Lanka:

The situation in Sri Lanka is continuing to give rise to concern. The news that the conflict is escalating and of the number of innocent victims prompts me to address a pressing appeal to those who are fighting to respect humanitarian law and the freedom of movement of the population. May they do their utmost to guarantee assistance to the injured, security to the civilians and permit their urgent need for food and medical treatment to be satisfied.

May the Blessed Virgin of Madhu, widely venerated by Catholics and also by members of other religions, hasten the day of peace and reconciliation in this beloved country.

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