

Sts. Peter and Paul
June 29, 2008
Beginning of the Jubilee Year of St. Paul

LESSON: Every Christian Is Meant to be a Missionary

Today begins a historic chapter in the history of the Church: **The Jubilee Year of St Paul.**

- ✍ St Paul was the young Jewish Pharisee **spearheading the violent persecution** of the very first Christians in Palestine, soon after Christ's resurrection and ascension.
- ✍ At the height of his **violent campaign**, our Lord appeared to St Paul, while he was on his way to the city of Damascus, in Syria, to **arrest** the Christians there.
- ✍ That encounter **completely changed** the direction of his life, and the course of history.
- ✍ He became the **great missionary** who **tirelessly traveled** throughout the Mediterranean for almost **thirty** years, starting Christian communities in city after city, preaching and suffering, and writing a major portion of the New Testament.

But why has Pope Benedict XVI decided to **dedicate this year** to St Paul?

The **surface** reason is that Paul was born between the years 7 and 10 AD, so we have reached his **bimillennial birthday.**

The **deeper** reason comes from the **urgent need** all Christians have today to be reminded of **our most basic identity:**

- ✍ every Christian is meant to be a **missionary**,
- ✍ to **give his life** for the sake of spreading Christ's Kingdom,
- ✍ as St Paul did in the most **excellent way** at the dawn of Christianity.

As Pope Benedict XVI put it when he announced this Jubilee year:

- ✍ "Dear brothers and sisters, as in early times, **today too** Christ **needs apostles** ready to **sacrifice themselves.**
- ✍ "He needs **witnesses and martyrs** like St Paul.
- ✍ "Paul... **did not hesitate** to change sides to the Crucified One and followed him **without second thoughts.**
- ✍ "He **lived and worked for Christ**, for him he **suffered and died.**
- ✍ "How **timely his example is today!**"

St Paul "lived and worked for Christ" in an **extraordinary** manner, and we are **all** called to follow **in his footsteps.**

That's what this year is **about**; that's what it **means** to be a Christian.

ILLUSTRATION: St. Peter's Square

Entering into the St. Peter's Square – looking up toward the basilica – you are confronted by two HUGE statues on either side of the grand staircase leading directly to the church:

- ✍ One statue of St. Peter – holding the keys to the kingdom.
- ✍ The other statue of St. Paul – holding the sword.

Anyone without knowledge of Christian history may believe that the statue is of a great warrior or general who makes history through his use of the sword in great battles. That would make him one among many who have attained fame and fortune at the cost of the blood of others.

But the Christian knows that the sword in the hands of this man has the **opposite** meaning: it is the tool of his execution. As a Roman citizen, he could not be crucified like St. Peter – he died by the sword.

But, if we study St. Paul's letters, perhaps we would discover that the sword, which St. Paul holds in his hands actually says more than just how he died: it can actually stand as the attribute for his life. "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."

Paul writes these words to Timothy as he reflects on the path of his life and the gospel which he has preached to the Gentiles. "I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

Having received this Gospel during his conversion experience on the road to Damascus

- ✍ (where he was knocked from his horse and blinded and the voice said to him, "Saul – why do you persecute me?")
- ✍ Paul set out on four great voyages to significant parts of the then-known world and truly became the teacher of peoples
- ✍ a teacher who carried the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the "ends of the earth."

With his letters

- ✍ he kept together the communities he founded along the way
- ✍ encouraged them in their continued development and growth
- ✍ and secured their existence.
- ✍ He passionately opposed his enemies, who were **not** few in number.
- ✍ He used every available means to fulfill what he called the "necessity" of proclaiming the message Christ had entrusted to him – that Jesus has revealed to him.

How wonderful that Pope Benedict has given us this special year of jubilee to focus on the contributions that St. Paul has made – to the foundation of the early church – and the theology of the Church even today.

Think:

- ✍ of the 27 books of the new testament – 13 of them are attributed to St. Paul. Nearly ½ of the new testament was written by St. Paul! His letters make up the single most important “library” of personal testimony from the first Christian century. No one wrote more letters nor gave more personal testimony than did St. Paul.
- ✍ St. Paul’s letters have had a PROFOUND impact on almost all elements of the faith. With few exceptions, most of the doctrinal teachings of the Church are rooted somewhere in St. Paul’s letters – whether it be on the Church as Christ’s Body or the theology of Baptism. But most of us are probably unaware of this tremendous influence of St. Paul. This year of Jubilee gives us the chance to appreciate St. Paul and his contribution to the faith.
- ✍ I’ve heard many people speak of Paul as a “male chauvinist pig.” And I must admit that he does sound like that sometimes – but those culturally bound statements do not influence his theology or teaching – except when he says that in Christ Jesus, there is “no Jew or gentile, no slave or free, nor man or woman – for all are one in Christ Jesus.”

This year-long celebration of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of St. Paul – the Apostle to the Gentiles – gives us a great opportunity to rediscover the great riches of faith given to us through his writings. And we have those letters written by his hand because he was the greatest missionary of the church – traveling far and wide – enduring every trial and persecution and hunger and difficulty – to proclaim the Gospel he had received from Christ.

APPLICATION: Our Three Mission Fields

Like St. Paul, we are all **called and equipped** by God to be his **missionaries**, his ambassadors, and in actively carrying out that mission we will find the **meaning and fulfillment** we long for.

Being a missionary means always being ready to **talk** about Christ and **explain** Church teaching.

But it also means **being like Christ**, letting his **saving goodness** shine through the **way we live**.

In that sense, we all have at least **three mission territories** to work in.

First, we are all called to be missionaries in our **families**.

- ✍ Every Christian family should be a **mini-church**, a place where peace, forgiveness, order, and harmony reign.
- ✍ That takes constant prayer, **effort**, and sacrifice from parents and children alike.
- ✍ But the **mere effort**, as anyone who has made it will testify, yields joy, wisdom, and fulfillment, **even** when the results aren't perfect.

Second, we are all called to be missionaries at **work or school**.

- ✍ We **show forth** God's glory and goodness by being the very **best** and most **dependable** students, athletes, workers, and professionals that we can be.
- ✍ God wants us to **develop and maximize** the **talents** he has given us.
- ✍ He doesn't want us to be like an apple tree that produces **wimpy apples**.

Finally, we are all called to be missionaries here in the **parish**.

- ✍ A parish is meant to be a **lighthouse** for its community, a **spiritual task force** that builds unity, combats evil, and spreads virtue as the sun spreads light.

As we begin this Jubilee Year of St Paul, let's ask Christ to show each one of us how we can **live our mission better**, so that at the end of our lives we, like St Paul, can say:

"I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."