

**PAUL THE APOSTLE:  
His Personal Story,  
Mission, and  
Meaning for the Church Today**

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It is truly encouraging to see people coming in such large numbers to hear a talk on St. Paul the Apostle. Having been involved in teaching and speaking on Paul for over 30 years, I am well aware of the emotions he can raise—especially in regard to the female half of the human race.

The other thing about Paul—and this affects everyone—is that much of what he has written is not easy to understand. Reinforcing this impression is the fact that, in the context in which his writings are generally heard, namely the readings at Sunday Mass, Paul has been allocated the ‘unwinnable’ middle slot on the ticket: the Second Reading. While the First Reading, from the Old Testament, usually has some echoes in the Gospel, and so comes back to mind, the middle reading, lacking such resonance, fades into forgetfulness. In the brief span of a pastoral homily, few preachers, myself included, are game enough to recall the Pauline reading and give it some explanation.

A colleague of mine is wont to excuse his neglect of Paul on the spurious and somewhat mischievous basis that he doesn’t believe in reading other people’s mail. My attempts to explain that none of Paul’s letters, even the brief one to Philemon, were really private and that each would have been read out publicly, fall upon deaf ears.

But really the fact that the writings of Paul have been included in our canon of Scripture is not really due to the apostle himself. He, I’m sure, never foresaw such an outcome. He was simply writing to local churches for pressing pastoral reasons. After his martyrdom in Rome, the letters were made into a collection. Then Luke gave his memory a second burst by making him one of the two heroes, along with Peter, of the sequel he wrote to his Gospel: the Acts of the Apostles. It was a later decision of the

Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that the letters of Paul, including some apparently written in his name rather than by him directly, should be included in the canon of the New Testament. This meant that, along with the four gospels and other writings, Paul's letters came to be part of that collection of writings to which the Church turns again and again to see as 'in a mirror the reflection her own essence and identity,<sup>1</sup> and above all the refresh, through the Spirit, the knowledge of her Lord.

This evening I am going to concentrate on the Paul we know from his Letters, rather than from the later account given by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. I propose to present Paul under three headings:

1. To explore what I believe to be the centre and heart of his spirituality and personal vocation.
2. To say something about his understanding of his mission as apostle to the nations.
3. To offer some thoughts about Paul's significance for the on-going life of the Church: that is, what I believe to be the 'Pauline charism' in the life of the church, matching that of Peter, with whom he shares the joint feast that we have just celebrated on 29 June.

### **1. Paul's Vocation.**

To explore the heart of Paul's spirituality it is necessary to consider something of his early life. Paul grew up in Tarsus, a prosperous city, capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, a fertile stretch of land between the Taurus mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. His family, then, belonged to the Jewish Diaspora, the communities of Jews that had spread throughout the major cities of the Greco-Roman world. The proficiency in the writing of Greek and the use of rhetoric later displayed in his letters suggest that his family was wealthy enough to see that he received a good education in both Greek and Jewish learning. In this sense he grew up a man of two worlds—a very good preparation for his subsequent missionary career.

As a young man, to deepen his knowledge of his ancestral faith, Paul went to Jerusalem. Here he became a Pharisee, a member of that movement in Judaism that

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* §7; Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), III, B,1.

saw the Law of Moses supplemented and interpreted by a host of oral traditions which they—the Pharisees—guarded and preserved. Early in his letter to the Galatians Paul assures readers that he advanced beyond many of his contemporaries in his zeal for the traditions of the ancestors:

13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. (Gal 1:13-14).

Soon the young Pharisee found himself principally exercising his zeal by seeking to root out and suppress members of a movement within Judaism who believed that a certain Jesus of Nazareth, crucified as a Messianic pretender by the Romans a few years before, had been raised by God from the dead, proving the truth of his messianic claims made concerning him. We do not know what precisely it was about this new movement within Judaism that so provoked the ire of young zealot. But it would seem that he inflicted such injury upon the community that the memory of his brief persecuting career remained bitter and dogged him long after he had himself joined its ranks.

### *Conversion and Call*

The turnaround in Paul's life on the road to Damascus must be reckoned one of the truly momentous conversions in religious history. Aside from the three accounts in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9.1-19; 22.1-16; 26.2-23), Paul himself refers to it in various places in his own letters. The briefest but the one I believe goes immediately to the heart of the matter is tucked away in a clause of a longer sentence again early in the letter to the Galatians (1.15-16):

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to (in, through) me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles,...

'(T)o reveal his Son to me': the last phrase, 'to me', is richly ambiguous, especially if we are right to hear echoes of biblical (OT Hebrew) language behind the Greek. Does Paul mean 'to reveal his Son to me', or 'in me' (that is, in my inmost being), or 'through me' (that is, as an instrument of the gospel to the nations)? Perhaps he means all three. The key thing, though, is that the crucified Nazarene, one whose mode of

death attracted the curse of the Law (Deut. 21.23; cf. Gal. 3.10-13) and whose proclamation as Messiah, therefore, amounted to nothing less than blasphemy, was now revealed to him as God's only Son. The revelation turned upside down Paul's understanding of God, and God's ways with Israel and the world as a whole.

Paul gives a more sustained theological description of this moment in 2 Corinthians. Speaking of the divergent reception the preaching of the gospel receives he writes:

'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to light up the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ' (4:6).

In language uncannily reminiscent of the Fourth Gospel (John 1.1-5) Paul seems here to think of coming to faith as akin to the act of creation: to God's saying in the darkness of unbelief: 'Let there be light'—a light which reveals the crucified One to be the Son of God, the very image (*eikôn*) of God.

It is impossible, I think, to overestimate the radicality of this experience, the way in which it completely cancelled out everything that Paul thought gave him value in the sight of God hitherto. This is how he describes the transfer from one way of life to another in Philippians:

3.4. ...If anyone else has reason to boast in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gain I had, I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as garbage, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ... 12. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to capture it in the same way that Christ Jesus has captured me.

That last phrase sums up the experience so powerfully. Paul strives to 'capture' the prize as Christ has 'captured' him. The Greek verb suggests the kind of vigorous action a parent might take when grabbing a small child who has suddenly headed out on to a dangerously busy road.

So when we ask what was central to Paul's faith, we have the response right here: it is this sense of being 'captured' by Christ. The risen Lord has taken over his life completely, displacing the Torah (Law of Moses), which had up till now been everything to him. This is how he sums up his new existence in Galatians:

2.19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. With Christ I hang upon a cross; 20 it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me.

Where Paul the Pharisee would have said, 'For me to live is the Torah', Paul the believer in Jesus can simply say 'For me to live is Christ' (Phil 1.21a).

That sense of being grasped by the Son of God in a love that was both deeply personal, and supremely costly in that it involved death by crucifixion, is the heart of Paul's spirituality and the engine of his mission. It is surely remarkable that the most striking sense of being loved by Jesus in the New Testament comes from one who, in contrast to the remaining apostles, never actually knew Jesus 'according to the flesh' (cf. 2 Cor 5:16). This reflects the situation of all subsequent believers, including ourselves. Paul guarantees that we can have a relationship with the Lord just as intimate as those, like Peter and John and Andrew, who walked and talked with him on the dusty roads of Palestine.

## **2. Paul's Mission**

Paul's brief allusion to his conversion early in the letter to the Galatians (1:16) that I cited a moment ago suggests that he considered his coming to faith in Christ and his vocation to be missionary to the nations to be virtually one and the same. In particular, his passionate belief that believers from the non-Jewish world ('Gentiles') were not to have imposed on them the obligation to become Jews first before they could be members of the community of salvation flowed directly from it. What he had experienced so personally—namely that all his righteousness under the Jewish law really counted for nothing (Phil 3:4-9)—played itself out in his personal strategy of mission. There was no longer any 'holy nation', walled up in righteousness over against the 'unclean' nations of the world. In the crucified Messiah God had swept away that separate holiness and exposed its sinfulness (Rom 3:21-30). In the face of a

human alienation from God that was truly universal, the gospel was calling into being a community of believers, made up of Jews and Gentiles alike, made holy through baptism and the gift of the Spirit. This divine outreach of grace meant that it was outdated and indeed contrary to God's purpose to try to enforce Gentile converts to become 'holy' through taking on ritual observances of the Jewish law. The barrier between 'holy nation' and 'unholy rest' had irrevocably been cast down:

You are all sons (and daughters) of God in Christ Jesus. Inasmuch as you have been baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one person in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26-28).

It is in the name of this truth that Paul felt himself obliged to issue his celebrated rebuke to Peter at Antioch, when Peter, who had previously eaten with Gentile believers, withdrew to a separate table following the arrival of more law-observant believers associated with James (Gal 2:11-14):

We are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners'. Yet knowing (or 'having come to know') that a person is justified not by works of the law but by faith in Christ, we have put our faith in Christ Jesus in order that we might be justified by faith and not by works of the law' (Gal 2:15-16).

What Paul is doing here is recalling the fundamental 'conversion conviction' that all believers of Jewish origin such as Peter and himself had come to share. God had thrown down the barrier that had previously meant so much to them. To seek to re-erect it by establishing separate tables is truly to 'transgress' (v. 18); it is to fly in the face of God's act, rebuffing the supremely costly work of Christ (Gal 2:18-21).

It is also important to note, I believe, that what Paul is insisting upon here is very much in continuity with what we know from the Gospels was the practice of Jesus. Jesus kept 'bad company'—or what a lot of people at the time thought was bad company—by dining with 'tax collectors and sinners', celebrating with them the outreach of God's mercy:

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, '*I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Matt 9:10-13).

Paul's mission strategy is totally in line with this practice of Jesus.

*A New Humanity called into being by God's Grace*

So what does Paul think he's doing? What is God's dream for humanity that he thinks he's implementing by going around the world in the service of the Gospel? Paul saw that dream sketched out in Scripture—what for us, of course, is the Old Testament. To be more specific, he focused very much upon the figure of Abraham. In Paul's view, when God called Abraham and promised him that he would become the 'father' of a great many nations, that in his offspring ('seed') all the nations would find a 'blessing', when God did that, God wasn't just calling into being the nation of Israel; there was also a wider promise being made: that in one particular descendant of Abraham, the Jewish Messiah, God's original plan for humanity as set out in the story of creation at the beginning of the Bible, would begin to be fully realized.

That original design, for human beings and for the entire world, had been and continues to be, frustrated by human sin. Paul has a very sophisticated view of sin. For him it is ultimately a radical selfishness, poisoning relationships in all directions: with God, with one's fellow human beings, with one's body, with the non-human remainder of the world (Rom 8:18-22). The life of Jesus Christ, above all his self-sacrificing death upon the cross, represents an outpouring of God's grace and love sufficient to turn back the vast tide of human sinfulness (unleashed for Paul in Adam) and reclaim the human race for true humanity in right relationship to its Creator. We have been reading the texts from Paul's letter to the Romans that assert this overpowering force of grace in the Sunday readings in recent weeks. It is so hard, to communicate in the brief space of a homily, the simple and wonderfully hopeful truth that these texts are asserting over and over:

For if through one man's trespass, many died, *much more* have the grace of God and the gift in grace of the one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. (Rom 5:15)

If through one man's (i.e., Adam's) trespass, death reigned through that one man, *much more* will those who accept the overflow of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ (5:17)

Paul loves that 'much more' on the grace side!

Just a week ago a member of my order of Vietnamese background gave me a little book containing the writings of Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan.

Cardinal Thuan was the young and very energetic bishop of Nha Trang in Vietnam, who was imprisoned by the communist regime after the fall of Saigon in 1975 for thirteen years, eight of them in solitary confinement, when he could do simply nothing. (After his release and expulsion from Vietnam, he toured the world giving talks and missions. He came several times to Australia, where his mother lived to a great age. He was made a cardinal by Pope John Paul II and died in 2002.) He described to a friend a very low point of his imprisonment in these words:

My morale was at its lowest. I was almost in despair. In the darkness of my cell, cut off from my diocese, from God's people, from any human contact, I could not do a thing for anyone; I could not even talk to anyone. I felt completely useless. I prayed, but God did not seem to hear. Then all of a sudden I saw, as if in a vision, Christ on the cross, crucified and dying. He was completely helpless .. certainly worse off than me in my prison cell. Then I heard a voice—was it his voice?—saying: 'At this precise moment on the cross, I redeemed all the sins of the world'<sup>2</sup>

I think the grace and insight granted there to Francis Van Thuan expresses precisely Paul's sense of the victorious overflow of God's grace and love in the obedience of Christ's death upon the cross. It was a single act of divine love so great as to overwhelm all the world's evil at a stroke.

*The Human Response: Faith and Hope*

What, then, is required on the human side in response to this divine gift? Again, Paul pointed to Abraham as a model of the appropriate response: faith and hope. Faith to believe in a God who deals with sinful and weak human beings on the basis of such love and acceptance; hope that such a God will, despite the continuing existence of evil, deliver on the promise of salvation. Personally, as a Pauline scholar, I am delighted to find Benedict XVI's latest encyclical, *Spe Salvi* wonderfully 'Pauline' in its exposition of Christian hope.

So the Gospel that Paul proclaims is basically a summons to the nations of the world to abandon idolatry—in both its ancient and modern forms—and align themselves alongside Israel with this outreach of divine grace: to be the 'beachhead', if you like of a new humanity. Or rather, not a new humanity but humanity as the

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, *Five Loaves and Two Fish* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997) p. vii.

Creator intended it to be coming true for the first time. That is why Paul says in a typical throwaway line: ‘if anyone is “in Christ”, behold a new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17).

[This is all very good and well. But Paul, no less than any other early Christian believer, was acutely conscious of a great trauma that has left its mark upon virtually all the writings of the New Testament: the fact that the bulk of Israel, the Jewish people, has not responded to the Gospel but instead continues to cling to the Law. Paul addresses this issue in chapters 9-11 of his letter to Rome. After a long and complex discussion he emerges with a hope for the eventual salvation of ‘all Israel’ on the basis that the calling and promises of God are never revoked (Rom 11:25-32).

25 Brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And so all Israel will be saved; ...

28 As regards the gospel they are enemies for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Relations between Christians and Jews down the centuries may well have taken a less tragic path had the Church not neglected this challenging but ultimately hopeful Pauline text.

Paul is not, then, indifferent to the fate of his Jewish brothers and sisters. But] (Paul) understands himself to be at the service of a mission to the nations, beginning from Jerusalem, continuing in Asia Minor and Greece, and ranging, in ambit at least, as far as Spain (Rom 15:19, 23-24). At the service of this mission his preaching of the gospel amounts to a ‘calling out’ from the nations those destined to be members of the renewed People of God.

In line with early Christian tradition, he refers to this community, whether taken as a whole or in its various local expressions, as in Ephesus, Corinth, or Philippi, by the Greek word *ekklêsia*. This word, which of course comes down to us as ‘church’, refers in everyday Greek usage to an assembly of the citizens summoned (literally, ‘called out’) by the civic herald to gather in assembly to hear official announcements and make an appropriate response. The aptness of this term to designate the community summoned and addressed by the gospel is patent. The community of believers, both local and worldwide, consists of the ‘called out’ ones: called out of darkness into God’s wonderful light. The members of this community

enjoy a ‘citizenship’ (*politeuma*) vastly more privileged than that of Rome—which in the ancient world was so desirable—the citizenship of God’s Kingdom, with the risen Lord, rather than the Roman emperor, as its ‘Lord’.

### 3. Paul’s Significance: the Pauline charism

Rather than speak of solutions that Paul commends in the particular pastoral situations addressed in his letters, I have tried to convey the essence of Paul’s personal vocation and mission. I have done so because I really believe that it is theological vision (his sense of God as a God of grace) and his christological commitment (adherence to the person of Jesus Christ) that is his greatest legacy to the Church. But now in the concluding third part of this talk, I would also like to suggest that in all of this Paul has left what might be called a ‘Pauline charism’ to the Church, a Pauline charism sitting alongside the ‘Petrine charism’ that the Catholic tradition sees incarnated in the primacy exercised by the Pope as Bishop of Rome. As you are aware, the church commemorates the apostles Peter and Paul in the joint feast we have just celebrated on 29 June. The high status of both apostles might seem to suggest that each merits a feast all to himself. But from the fourth century they have been yoked together as proto-martyrs of the Church of Rome.

I would suggest that we do not regard this yoking together of Peter and Paul as simply a historical accident, but see it as symbolic of two distinct charisms bequeathed to the church. The **Petrine** charism would represent unity and continuity with the tradition, and the faithful preservation and transmission of the tradition. The **Pauline** would represent the more outward-going missionary impulse, and the prophetic challenge to traditional understanding and practice that the experience of mission constantly raises, as the Gospel encounters new cultures and the radical alteration of cultures traditionally Christian. The charisms, Petrine and Pauline, are complementary to each other yet co-exist in a state of some tension, their relationship at risk at times of getting out of balance and distorted.

Of course both formulations of the charisms are a little oversimplified. Paul, for instance, cared deeply for the unity of the Church. The collection he so scrupulously gathered from his Gentile communities for the relief of the mother community in Jerusalem was for him a key symbol of unity (cf. Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; Rom 15:25).

However, I think it is true to say that the Reformation in the 16th century saw an explosion of the Pauline charism that could not, for various reasons—national and social, as well as religious—be contained within the structural unity of the Christian church. Stung by the Reformers’ protest, and by the disunity and hostility that followed, the Roman church in subsequent centuries placed more and more stress upon the Petrine charism, a process reaching its apogee in 1870 with the definitions of papal primacy and infallibility at the First Vatican Council.

My sense is that the impulse leading up to and bearing fruit at the Second Vatican Council in many ways represented a recapturing on the part of the Roman communion of the Pauline charism that had largely become the prerogative of the churches of the Reformation. The ecumenical spring associated with the Council received no little impulse from the work of great Catholic Pauline scholars of the last century such as Pierre Benoit, OP and Stanislas Lyonnet, SJ.

In the wake of the Council, Giovanni Battista Montini, who chose the name Paul following his election as pope, faced the difficult task of holding together the two charisms, the Petrine and the Pauline, in those turbulent years. With what success he did so and to what extent his far less hesitant successor, John Paul II, did so in continuity with the Council, is now a subject of some controversy. My impression is that, at least in official circles, enthusiasm for the Pauline charism has waned in the Catholic Church in recent times. The celebration beginning on 29 June, by highlighting the Pauline charism, offers a chance to redress the balance:

1. To hear Paul’s unique witness to God as a God of grace
2. To be caught up by his passionate devotion to the person of Jesus Christ, who—like all of us—he never ‘knew’ according to the flesh but whose personal relationship with him simply led him to sum up his life: ‘for me, to live is Christ’.
3. To be grasped by his profound sense that it is the impulse of the Spirit poured into our hearts, rather than detailed prescriptions of law, that should regulate and energize Christian life.
4. That those responsible for guarding the tradition and unity of the Church should be open to the challenges presented when the Gospel is preached in new situations and cultures.

There are so many other areas to mention but I shall have to forego that in the interests of bringing this talk to a timely close.

The great Lutheran Pauline scholar of the last century, Ernst Käsemann, was wont to say: 'Paul has always caused trouble in the Church'. That was certainly the case in the early days as many New Testament documents make clear; then there was the Reformation and, as I have remarked, the stirring times of Vatican Two, and its troubled aftermath, which most of us have lived through. I'm sure there have always been people who just wished that Paul would go away. But God has given him to the Church and so to us. The Year of Paul may stimulate us to let his voice be heard, and to give due weight to the Pauline charism, complementary with that of Peter, sometimes in tension with it, but necessary for the life of the Church. Borrowing and applying an image of John Paul II, we can say that the Church needs to breathe with both lungs, Pauline and Petrine, if she is to be faithful to the witness that joined them in death and continues in their joint legacy to her life and mission.