

On Paul, an Apostle of Christ “Love Is the True Wealth of Human Life”

2008-09-10

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-23585?l=english>

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday I spoke about the great turning point in St. Paul's life after his encounter with the Risen Christ. Jesus entered his life and transformed him from persecutor into apostle. That meeting marked the start of his mission. Paul could not continue to live as he did before. Now he felt invested by the Lord with the charge to proclaim his Gospel as an apostle.

It is precisely about this new condition of life, namely of his being an apostle of Christ, that I would like to speak today. In keeping with the Gospel, we normally identify the Twelve with the title of apostles, thus intending to indicate those who were life companions and hearers of Jesus' teaching. But Paul also feels himself a true apostle and it seems clear, therefore, that the Pauline concept of apostolate is not restricted to the group of Twelve.

Obviously, Paul is able to distinguish well his own case from that of those “who were apostles before” him (Galatians 1:17): He recognizes for them an all-together special place in the life of the Church.

However, as everyone knows, Paul also sees himself as apostle in the strict sense. It is true that, at the time of the Christian origins, no one traveled as many kilometers as he did, by earth and sea, with the sole object of proclaiming the Gospel.

Hence, he had an idea of the apostolate that went beyond that left to the group of Twelve, and handed down above all by St. Luke in the Acts (cf. Acts 1-2:26; 6:2). In fact, in the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul makes a clear distinction between “the Twelve” and “all the apostles,” mentioned as two different groups to benefit from the apparitions of the Risen One (cf. 14:5.7).

In that same text he then goes on to humbly name himself “the least of the apostles,” comparing himself to an abortion and affirming literally: “not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God (that is) with me.” (1 Corinthians 15:9-10).

The metaphor of the abortion expresses extreme humility; it is also found in the Letter to the Romans of St. Ignatius of Antioch: “I am the least of all, I am an abortion, but it will be given to me to be something, if I reach God” (9:2). What the bishop of Antioch will say in relation to his imminent martyrdom, foreseeing that it would reverse his unworthy condition, St. Paul says in relation to his own apostolic commitment: It is in this that the fruitfulness of God's grace is manifested, who knows how to transform an unsuccessful man into a splendid apostle. From persecutor to founder of Churches: This is what God has done in one who, from the evangelical point of view, could have been considered rejected!

According to St. Paul's conception, what has God made of him and of the other apostles? In his letters three main characteristics appear, which constitute the apostle. The first is to have “seen the Lord” (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1), namely, to have had a decisive encounter with him, virtually chosen, by

the grace of God with the revelation of his Son in view of the joyful proclamation to the pagans. In a word, it is the Lord who constitutes the apostolate, not one's presumption. The apostle does not make himself, but is made by the Lord. Hence, the apostle needs to refer constantly to the Lord. It is no accident that Paul says he was “called to be an apostle” (Romans 1:1), that is, “not from human beings nor through a human being but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Galatians 1:1). This is the first characteristic: to have seen the Lord, to have been called by him.

The second characteristic is to “have been sent.” The Greek term “apostolos” itself means, in fact, “sent, ordered,” that is, ambassador and bearer of a message; therefore he must act as charged with and representative of a mandate. It is because of this that Paul describes himself as “Apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1), namely, his delegate, placed totally at his service, so much so as to call himself “a slave of Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:1). Once again the idea appears in the first place of another initiative, that of God in Jesus Christ, to whom one is fully obliged, but above all the fact is underlined that a mission was received from him to fulfill in his name, putting absolutely in second place all personal interests.

The third requisite is the exercise of the “proclamation of the Gospel,” with the consequent foundation of Churches. The title “apostle,” in fact, is not and cannot be honorific. It entails concretely and even dramatically the whole existence of the subject in question. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul exclaims: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?” (9:1).

Similarly in the Second Letter to the Corinthians he affirms: “You are our letter ... a letter of Christ administered by us, written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God” (3:2-3).

Do not be surprised, then, if [St. John] Chrysostom speaks of Paul as “a diamond soul” (Panegirici, 1,8), and continues saying: “In the same way that fire applying itself to different materials is reinforced even more ... so Paul's word won to his cause all those with whom he related, and those who made war on him, captivated by his speeches, became fuel for this spiritual fire” (ibid., 7,11). This explains why Paul describes apostles as “God's co-workers” (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1), whose grace acts with them.

A typical element of the true apostle, brought well into the light by St. Paul, is a sort of identification between the Gospel and the evangelizer, both destined to the same end. No one like Paul, in fact, has evidenced how the proclamation of the cross of Christ appears as “a stumbling block” and “foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23), to which many react with incomprehension and rejection. This occurred at that time, and it should not be surprising that the same happens also today. The apostle also shares in the destiny of appearing as “a stumbling block” and “foolishness,” and Paul knows it; this is the experience of his life.

To the Corinthians he wrote, not without a trace of irony: "For as I see it, God has exhibited us apostles as the last of all, like people sentenced to death, since we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and human beings alike. We are fools on Christ's account, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clad and roughly treated, we wander about homeless and we toil, working with our own hands. When ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we respond gently. We have become like the world's rubbish, the scum of all, to this very moment" (1 Corinthians 4:9-13). It is a self-portrait of St. Paul's apostolic life: In all these sufferings the joy prevails of being bearers of God's blessing and of the grace of the Gospel.

Paul, moreover, shares with the Stoic philosophy of his time the idea of a tenacious constancy in all the difficulties that come his way; but he surpasses the merely humanistic perspective, recalling the component of the love of God and of Christ. "What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am

convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39).

This is the certainty, the profound joy that guides the Apostle Paul in all these affairs: Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And this love is the true wealth of human life.

As can be seen, St. Paul gave himself to the Gospel with all this life; we can say 24 hours out of 24! And he carried out his ministry with fidelity and joy, "to save at least some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

And in his encounters with the Churches, though knowing he had a relationship of paternity with them (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15) if not really of maternity (cf. Galatians 4:19), he put himself in an attitude of complete service, stating admirably: "Not that we lord it over your faith; rather, we work together for your joy, for you stand firm in the faith" (2 Corinthians 1:24). This remains the mission of all the apostles of Christ in all times: to be fellow workers of true joy.

[The Pope then greeted pilgrims in several languages.]

[Translation by ZENIT]

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