

On Paul and the Other Apostles “He Insists on Fidelity to What He Himself Has Received”

2008-09-24

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-23704?l=english>

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak about the relationship between St. Paul and the apostles who preceded him in the following of Jesus. These relationships were always marked by profound respect and by the frankness that in Paul stemmed from the defense of the truth of the Gospel. Although he was practically a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, he never had the opportunity to meet him during his public life. Because of this, after the dazzling light on the road to Damascus, he saw the need to consult the first disciples of the Master, who had been chosen by [Christ] to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul elaborates an important report on the contacts maintained with some of the Twelve: above all with Peter, who had been chosen as Cephas, Aramaic word that means rock, on which the Church was built (cf. Galatians 1:18), with James, the “Lord’s brother” (cf. Galatians 1:19), and with John (cf. Galatians 2:9). Paul does not hesitate to acknowledge them as the “pillars” of the Church. Particularly significant is the meeting with Cephas (Peter), which took place in Jerusalem. Paul stayed with him for 15 days to “consult him” (cf. Galatians 1:19), that is, to be informed on the earthly life of the Risen One, who had “seized” him on the road to Damascus and was changing his life radically: from persecutor of the Church of God he became evangelizer of faith in the crucified Messiah and Son of God, which in the past he had tried to destroy (cf. Galatians 1:23).

What type of information did Paul obtain on Jesus in the three years after the encounter of Damascus? In the First Letter to the Corinthians we find two passages, which Paul had learned in Jerusalem and which had been formulated as central elements of the Christian tradition, the constitutive tradition. He transmits them verbally, exactly as he has received them, with a very solemn formula: “I delivered to you ... what I also received.”

He insists, therefore, on fidelity to what he himself has received and transmits faithfully to the new Christians. They are constitutive elements and concern the Eucharist and the Resurrection. They are texts already formulated in the [decade of] the 30s. Thus we come to the death, burial in the heart of the earth and resurrection of Jesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Let’s take one at a time: the words of Jesus in the Last Supper (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23-25) really are for Paul the center of the life of the Church. The Church is built from this center, being in this way herself. In addition to this Eucharistic center, from which the Church is always reborn – also for all Paul’s theology, for all his thought – these words have a notable impact on Paul’s personal relationship with Jesus. On one hand, they attest that the Eucharist illumines the curse of the cross, changing it into a blessing (Galatians 3:13-14), and on the other, they explain the breadth of the very death and resurrection of Jesus. In his letters, the “for you” of the institution becomes the “for me” (Galatians 2:20), personalized,

knowing that in that “you” he himself was known and loved by Jesus and, on the other hand, “for all” (2 Corinthians 5:14): this “for you” becomes “for me” and “for the Church” (Ephesians 5:25), that is, also “for all” of the expiatory sacrifice of the cross (cf. Romans 3:25). By and in the Eucharist, the Church is built and recognizes herself as “Body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27), nourished every day by the strength of the Spirit of the Risen One.

The other text, on the Resurrection, transmits to us again the same formula of fidelity. St. Paul wrote: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Also in this tradition transmitted to Paul he again mentions the expression “for our sins,” which underlines the gift that Jesus has made of himself to the Father, to deliver us from sin and death. From this gift of himself, Paul draws the most moving and fascinating expressions of our relationship with Christ: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). It is worthwhile to recall the commentary with which the then Augustinian monk Martin Luther accompanied these paradoxical expressions of Paul: “This is the grandiose mystery of divine grace toward sinners: by an admirable exchange our sins no longer are ours, but Christ’s, and the righteousness of Christ is no longer Christ’s but ours” (Commentary on the Psalms from 1513-1515). And so we have been saved.

In the original kerygma – proclamation – transmitted from mouth to mouth, it is worth pointing out the use of the verb “has risen,” instead of “rose” which would have been more logical, in continuity with “died” and “was buried.” The verbal form “has risen” has been chosen to underline that Christ’s resurrection affects up to the present the existence of believers: We can translate it as “has risen and continues to be alive” in the Eucharist and in the Church. Thus all the Scriptures attest to the death and resurrection of Christ, because – as Hugh of Saint Victor wrote – “the whole of divine Scripture constitutes only one book, and this book is Christ, because the whole of Scripture speaks of Christ and finds its fulfillment in Christ” (De Arca Noe, 2, 8). If St. Ambrose of Milan can say that “in Scripture we read Christ,” it is because the Church of the origins has reread all Israel’s Scriptures starting from and returning to Christ.

The enumeration of the Risen One’s apparitions to Cephas, to the Twelve, to more than 500 brethren, and to James closes with the reference to the personal apparition received by Paul on the road to Damascus: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Corinthians 15:8). Because he had persecuted the Church of God, he expresses in this confession his unworthiness to be considered an apostle, at the same level as those who

preceded him: but God's grace has not been in vain in him (1 Corinthians 15:10). Hence, the boastful affirmation of divine grace unites Paul with the first witnesses of Christ's resurrection. "Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you have believed" (1 Corinthians 15:11). The identity and unity of the proclamation of the Gospel is important: both they and I preach the same faith, the same Gospel of Jesus Christ dead and risen who gives himself in the most holy Eucharist.

The importance that he bestows on the living Tradition of the Church, which she transmits to her communities, demonstrates how mistaken is the view of those who attribute to Paul the invention of Christianity: Before proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he encountered him on the road to Damascus, and met him in the Church, observing his life in the Twelve, and in those who had followed him on the roads of Galilee. In the next catecheses we will have the opportunity to go more profoundly into the contributions that Paul has made to the Church of the origins; however, the mission received on the part of the Risen One in order to evangelize the Gentiles must be confirmed and guaranteed by those who gave him and Barnabas their right hand, in sign of approval of their apostolate and evangelization, and of acceptance in the one communion of the Church of Christ (cf. Galatians 2:9).

We understand, therefore, that the expression – "[f]rom now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer" (2 Corinthians 5:16) – does not mean that his earthly life has little relevance for our maturing in the faith, but that from the moment of the Resurrection, our way of relating to him changes. He is, at the same time, the Son of God, "who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead," as St. Paul recalls at the beginning of the Letter to the Romans (1:3-4).

The more we try to follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth on the roads of Galilee, so much the more will we understand that he has taken charge of our humanity, sharing in everything except sin. Our faith is not born from a myth or an idea, but from an encounter with the Risen One, in the life of the Church.

[The Holy Father then greeted the pilgrims in several languages.]

[Translation by ZENIT]

Copyright 2008 – Libreria Editrice Vaticana