

PASTORAL LETTER ON THE YEAR OF ST PAUL

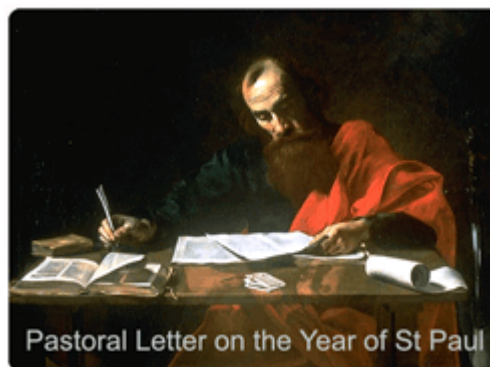
Archdiocese of Keewatin-The Pas
+ Sylvain Lavoie OMI September 2008

On Saturday, June 28, 2008, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI officially inaugurated a *Year of St. Paul*. During the ceremony at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls in Rome, the pope lit a special *Pauline Flame* and also inaugurated a *Pauline Door* through which he entered the Basilica for the ceremony.

This special Pauline Year coincides with the *Synod on the Word* that will be held in Rome this October, at which the pope and selected bishops from around the world will gather to ponder the depth and richness of the gift of God's Word to the church and to all of humanity.

This special year also presents us with an opportunity to learn more about the man, Paul of Tarsus, and his message. Paul is not only a figure of the past who we remember with veneration. He is also our teacher, an Apostle and herald of Jesus Christ.

Paul was a Jew, born in Cilicia in present day Turkey but "brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God..." (Acts 22: 3). That made him a zealous Pharisee who was persecuting the followers of Jesus when he encountered the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus. That event turned his worldview upside down and changed his life forever.



Sr. Teresita Kambeitz osu, who followed the footsteps of St. Paul on her recent sabbatical, summed up her impression of St. Paul's life in one sentence: "St. Paul fell in love with Jesus." It is as simple as that and very comparable to the human experience of "falling in love." We begin to see reality with a different set of eyes and the whole world takes on added color and meaning. That is what it was like for St. Paul.

Pope Benedict, during the opening ceremony and in his subsequent audiences since then, picks up a central theme from St. Paul in that Christianity is not just a new moral code or a philosophy, but an encounter with a person. "We are Christians only if we encounter Christ" the pope states.

Pope Benedict adds a very interesting corrective insight to this encounter of St. Paul with the Risen Lord. He claims that Paul never interpreted this experience for himself as a conversion. Instead, it was a transformation. "The risen Christ appeared as a splendid light and addressed Saul, transforming his thinking and his very life. This transformation of his whole being was not the result of his thinking but of the encounter with Jesus Christ. In this sense it was not simply a conversion, but rather a death and resurrection for him." In short, Paul's old way of thinking and being had died, and a new way of life was born, and so it should be for us.

Freedom was important for St. Paul. The experience of being loved to the very end by Christ had opened his eyes to the truth that *Love*, not *Law*, is the way to the fullness of life. As a zealous Pharisee, Saul was a slave to the Law. He made it his life to obey and enforce that Law. The problem with the Law is that it leaves us centered on our selves and our efforts to keep the Law. It also leads to a dangerous tendency to judge and punish those who are not measuring up to our standard of the Law. Such was the case of Judaism at that time.

Paul experienced the totally free gift of God's forgiveness, acceptance and love through his encounter with the Risen Lord. That encounter transformed his whole legalistic world view into

one of gratuitous, amazing grace. Pope Benedict asserts that “Paul became free as a man loved by God, who, by virtue of God, was able to love together with him. This love then became the ‘law’ of his life and in this very way, the freedom of his life.”

I am convinced that Paul’s experience of Jesus set him free from any addictions. He lived an addictions-free lifestyle. His profound experience of being loved left him free to give his life away. His deepest needs to be loved, to belong and to be valued were met. What an example he is for us and our so easily addicted society.

Paul was also a man of the church. His was not a “Jesus and me” spirituality. Though he was interiorly focused, he was also very much outer directed. As Pope Benedict put it, “despite the immediateness of his relationship with the Risen One, Paul realized that he must enter the communion of the Church, be baptized, and live in harmony with the other apostles. Only in this communion with all would he be able to be a true apostle, as he wrote explicitly in the First Letter to the Corinthians.”

What is especially relevant for us in our missionary archdiocese is the way that Paul was able to announce the Good News and in the process create local faith communities. He taught the people the difference that the Good News could make for them in their lives and empowered members of that community to become leaders. Then he moved on, leaving behind viable, self-sufficient communities of faith that he would stay in touch with by letter and through possible return visits.

Another strong characteristic of St. Paul was his incessant energetic dedication to announcing the Good News at any cost. Having had that life-changing encounter with the Risen Lord, he was like a beach ball in the water. The more others put him down, the more he would simply bounce up elsewhere, ready to proclaim the Good News. For Pope Benedict, two sources, the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St. Paul, converge in a fundamental point. “The Risen One spoke with Paul, called him to the apostolate and made him a true apostle, a witness of the resurrection, with the specific charge to proclaim the Gospel to the pagans, to the Greco-Roman world.” So he did, and so must we, to our own world.

To close this pastoral letter on the occasion of the Year of St. Paul, I would like to invite us to action. I cannot stress enough the importance of gathering around the Word of God, especially on Sunday, the Day of the Lord, even when there is no priest. Jesus is truly present in his Word that is living and active and touches our innermost being with healing.

We can read and reread the writings of St. Paul to soak up his love for Christ and the church and to interiorize his teachings. We can pray with his thoughts and prayers especially using the *Lectio Divina* method of reading, meditating, praying with the passage and finally just being there in God’s presence in quiet contemplation.

We can form bible study groups and prayer groups and participate in renewal programs such as *Returning To Spirit*, addictions awareness workshops, *Healing Soul Pain*, healing conferences and the *Immanuel Process* of parish renewal that we are hoping to initiate throughout the archdiocese. Let us be creative and daring in taking initiatives in this regard.

Above all, I would invite us to be single-minded in our efforts to connect our faith with our lives, as did St. Paul, in a way that will make a difference in our relationships, our families and also our communities.

I would like to close with the words of Pope Benedict XVI, who invites us to thank the Lord for having called Paul, making him the light to the Gentiles and the teacher of us all, and who invites us to pray to him: “Make us even today witnesses of the Resurrection, struck by the impact of your love and able to bring the light of the Gospel in our time. St Paul, pray for us!”

