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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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THE PAULINE YEAR

This year's feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29 marked the beginning of a jubilee year of St. Paul, the celebration of the bimillennium of the apostle's birth. Of course, no one knows for sure that Paul of Tarsus was born in AD 8 or 9, but as we will see, it is reasonable to conclude that he was born in the first decade of the Christian era. Pope Benedict proclaimed this jubilee celebration in June of 2007 in a decree that urged all the faithful to use the jubilee year to come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the letters of Paul and their foundational significance to our faith in Jesus Christ. The international center of this celebration is Rome itself and the basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls, the church built near the original site of his burial and the church that still holds his bones, the "trophies of the apostle" as one ancient writer calls them. Throughout this year, the basilica will host a series of academic conferences, concerts, art exhibits, and other special events.

Since very few people are in a position to be able to pick up stakes and move to the Eternal City for a whole year, the pope has made suggestions as to how the jubilee ought to be observed beyond Rome. Not surprisingly, these counsels focus on preaching, teaching, and study. For most Sundays of the Church year, the second reading of the Mass is taken from the letters of Paul. For a variety of reasons, this reading is the one of the three that is most likely to be ignored in the average Sunday sermon, but in this Pauline jubilee year, the pope suggests, it would be appropriate to focus on the epistle as a way of presenting the apostle's thought more

forcefully to the Sunday congregation. Parishes, diocesan catechetical programs, and other institutions of learning can offer lectures, presentations, and courses in the life and letters of Paul. And then there is the individual level and effort, as anyone who can read is quite capable of picking up the New Testament, turning past the gospels and Acts, and so beginning his own personal encounter with the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Luke's book of the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's own letters are our only written sources for details on the life of the apostle. There are not many details, really, since it was never Luke's intention to give us a biography of Paul, nor did Paul himself think it necessary or helpful to provide his readers with a complete account of his life. And every detail that we are given seems to raise at least a question or two. For example, even the man's name can raise a doubt. In his own letters, he always refers to himself as "Paul," which is a Latin name, a Roman name. Luke also refers to him as "Paul," but only from Acts 13:9 forward; prior to that, Luke gives his name as "Saul," a Hebrew or Aramaic name, a Jewish name. A common explanation of this – and it was never more than a guess – used to be that his original name was "Saul," which he changed to "Paul" after his conversion. It is more likely that he always had both names. Many Jews of that time, especially those who grew up in a large Greek city like Tarsus, had two names: one Jewish that would have been used mainly in Jewish religious circles, and the other one either Greek or Roman, the one more commonly used. The "change" in

name that occurs in Acts is perhaps Luke's way of signaling the development of the apostle's vocation, the switch from a Hebrew name to a Latin name indicating the trajectory of Paul's mission, which began with the Jews and then moved toward the Gentiles.

The year of his birth is determined from Paul's own reference to his escape from the city of Damascus by being lowered over the wall in a basket. The apostle speaks of this in II Corinthians 11:32-33, and Luke also recounts the event in Acts 9:24-25. Paul says this happened under King Aretas, and so it had to be between the years 37 and 39. His conversion took place several years before that, and with those years more or less fixed, he was most likely born some time in AD 5-10. He describes himself in Philippians 3:5 as "a Hebrew born of Hebrews," and this may be a reference to his language, affirming either that he could speak Aramaic or read Hebrew or do both. Whatever his proficiency in the Semitic languages, he wrote his letters in a very good Greek, in a style that shows some signs of Stoic rhetoric, and his Scripture quotations are from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. All of this suggests a good education in both the Rabbinic tradition and Greek learning.

Tarsus, as Paul boasts in Acts 21:39, was no small town. Built by the Greeks, it had been the capital of the Roman Empire's province of Cilicia for a generation and more. Everyone who was anyone and in the neighborhood visited the place, including Cicero, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra. Roman citizenship had been granted to its inhabitants in the days of Mark Antony, and the fact that Paul was a Roman citizen by birth becomes important in determining the venue of the trial that would finally decide what would happen to him.

Luke tells us that Paul spent at least some of his years in Jerusalem as a student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, and that he was present at the killing of Stephen: although he did not himself cast a stone, he did tend the cloaks of those who did. In his letters, Paul admits several times that he persecuted the Church of Christ, but he does not mention anything about his role in Stephen's

death. It is owing to his hatred of the Church and his efforts to stamp it out that Paul describes himself as the least of the apostles and one who did not deserve that office.

No conversion story is more dramatic than the tale of Paul's being knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus. Paul speaks of it in the first chapter of his letter to Galatians, and Luke thinks it is so important that he tells it three times in the Acts of the Apostles, in chapters 9, 22, and 26. Each chapter is different from the others, but the core of the event, the dialogue between the Risen Lord and Paul, is always the same:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”
“Who are you, Lord?”
“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

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From that day forward Paul's life was at the service of the one whose resurrection he had denied and whose disciples he had persecuted. In an apostolic ministry that would last twenty-eight years Paul would suffer much and have more reverses than successes. At the end, he would die for the faith that he had once hated so fiercely. At the beginning, however, none of this was clear to anyone, least of all Paul himself. As he tells it in the first two chapters of his letter to the Galatians, after his baptism in Damascus he did not return to Jerusalem, as might have been expected, to begin his new life at the center of the new movement and to confer with the lead-



ers, the apostles. Instead, he went away to Arabia for a while and then returned to Damascus. Only after three years did he go to Jerusalem, and then he only stayed a couple of weeks, and only spoke with Peter and James. From there he went to Syria – Antioch in Syria would be his home base for most of the rest of his ministry – and from there he and his companions made a number of journeys, preaching the gospel, and planting churches in some cities and encouraging them in others.

The gospel Paul preached is quite simple, although “simple” is probably not the first word that springs to mind to most people trying to describe his writings. He argues like any rabbi of his age, and so his arguments are difficult for us to follow. His themes, however, are very basic, and all of them are touched upon in the opening verses of his greatest epistle, his letter to the Romans:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was born 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, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we received grace and apostleship for the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Christ Jesus.

It is all here. Jesus has been raised from the dead. He is the Christ, the Messiah, spoken of by all the prophets and written about in the sacred scriptures. Faith in him is now being extended beyond the boundaries of Israel to all the nations of the world, even to “yourselves” at Rome, the capital of the empire and thus a good symbol for the whole world. Moreover, this Jesus is the Son of God, revealed to be so in his resurrection from the dead, and as Son of God he is the very fullness of God, so that “Lord,” the name of God revealed to Israel, is now appropriately and necessarily applied to him.

This gospel is given to Paul and to all the apostles to be preached “for the obedience of

faith.” Faith in Jesus, which comes through the preaching of the word and the mysteries celebrated by the Church, chiefly baptism and the Eucharist, is the gift which enables all peoples, no matter where they live or in what age they live, to enter into his death and resurrection – not just to hear about it, not just to assent to its truth, but to actually enter into it and be transformed by it, so that the dying and rising of Christ and his return in glory to the Father, becomes the dying and rising of all who belong to the Body of Christ, and opens for them the way into the heart of the Father’s love. By the grace of adoption, those who receive the gospel in faith become what Jesus is, the sons and daughters of the living God.

This gospel, as Jesus had foretold, aroused hatred and suspicion. Since Paul had held this hatred in his own heart as his first reaction to the gospel of Christ, he could hardly have been surprised at the hostility he encountered. The religious hostility of the synagogue fueled political suspicions, and Paul was eventually brought before courts of Roman law in Jerusalem and in Caesarea. When he was asked if he was willing to have his case decided in Judea, Paul refused. As a Roman citizen, he had the right of appeal to Caesar, the right to be heard in the imperial court of Rome. In his letter to the Romans, Paul had expressed his hope of visiting the capital one day; now he was going there in chains. He arrived in Rome in AD 61, and the book of Acts ends with the note that for two years he lived there under house arrest, but still meeting with many people and still preaching the gospel. A tradition that goes back further than Eusebius, the Church historian, says that Peter and Paul were both martyred in the persecution begun by the Emperor Nero, Paul dying first in 64 by the sword, and Peter after him in 67 on a cross.

Any year is a good year to spend some time with the letters of Paul, but this jubilee year, this Pauline year, is perhaps an especially good moment to do so. And of course we do so not for the sake of St. Paul, but for the sake of what he preached – Jesus Christ, and him crucified, our hope of glory.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.

