

Homily Alumni Day, 2008 Votive Mass of St. Paul

INTRODUCTION:

On the right side in the front of this great chapel dedicated to Our Lady there is a small side chapel that is dedicated to St. Paul. Each of the two windows in that chapel depicts Saint Paul. In one window he is holding a sword (the two-edged sword of the Word of God). In the other he is holding a scroll upon which he is writing. The words that he wrote would also be God's words. This chapel with its windows presents Saint Paul as the Apostle --the great proclaimer of God's word -- the one sent forth to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

About 30 years ago when I was on my first trip to Rome a group of us stopped in a small church off the Aventine -- the name of which I cannot remember. I recall seeing in an apse over a side altar a striking mosaic of Saint Paul as an older man holding out his hand which contained a replica of the church in which we were standing. I remember to this day the vividness of the colors and the aged face of Paul. His holding a church building symbolized his great work of founding Christian assemblies/churches in Asia and Europe in the first century.

These pictures capture two essential aspects of the life and ministry of Paul -- first, apostle of the word and then the founder of churches.

Let me reflect today with my classmates of the class of 1973 and with all of our alumni, friends and faculty and seminarians about these two roles of St. Paul and their meaning for our lives first as disciples of Jesus and then as priests in his Church.

APOSTLE OF THE WORD:

In the letter to the Galatians Paul makes clear that he has been designated, chosen, and appointed by God as an apostle. He is sent to proclaim the gospel -- the one gospel of Christ. He knew he was following the command of Jesus that we heard expressed in today's gospel. For Paul the gospel is divine in its origin. For Paul his commission as an apostle is also divine in its origin. He understood that he had been empowered by the Spirit of God to preach the Word. He knew that Word carried the power of a two edged sword.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul cries out, "We preach not ourselves but Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants." As preacher and apostle he knew his

place in the divine scheme and he knew Jesus who was the Lord of his life and of the world.

Paul preached the gospel of Jesus and the good news about Jesus with three important qualities: clarity, conviction and compassion.

First, he preached with clarity. When we read the letters of Saint Paul we hear him speaking loudly and clearly. Even though at times he depicts himself as a poor rhetorician, yet he speaks directly and forcefully with the light of Christ illuminating his mind. There are no doubts in his proclamation of the truth that he has understood as the gospel – a good news for all people about Jesus the Lord and Messiah, and the fulfillment of God’s plan held secret in former ages and now revealed in these last times. Paul proclaimed a Messiah whose death has brought forgiveness of sins and whose resurrection has brought life – life forever.

Paul also spoke with great conviction. What he proclaimed, he believed – deeply, profoundly, and ardently as though on fire himself. He was never a tinkling cymbal or resounding gong. Anyone who opposed him discovered not only the two edged sword of God’s Word, but also the sharp edge of Paul’s tongue. For what was at stake was not Paul’s ego, but the revelation of God himself.

Saint Paul was so convinced that he was truly not only preaching God’s Word but also following it in his own life as a disciple of Jesus that he could say over and over, “Imitate me.” How bold a statement and how clarion a call. Yet Paul could say this to others because he firmly believed that he had first imitated Christ. If others saw Christ in him, then they could and should imitate him. As he says in the letter to the Galatians, “It is not longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” He could also say that he had become all things to all for the sake of other’s salvation.

Paul also spoke with great compassion. He describes himself as a loving father and nursing mother in his first letter to his beloved Thesslonian community. He was servant for his Corinthian community and an earthen vessel of God’s message of reconciliation. He knelt in humble prayer for his Philippian community. What compassion and love accompanied his clarity and conviction! For Paul, compassion was feeling with others in his proclamation so that he might understand their needs and proclaim the gospel so that they could truly understand and accept it.

FOUNDER OF CHURCHES:

Paul was more than an apostle and preacher. He was also a founder of communities of faith. Paul knew from his experience of Jesus who had called him and from his earlier experiences of Christians in community at Antioch that the

message of the gospel lived not only in the lives of individuals but this life giving word formed, made, and even created believers into assemblies (little churches).

Believers formed, as Paul so eloquently expressed in his first letter to the Corinthians, “One body, one spirit in Christ.” Christians, Paul knew, were members of the one risen body of Christ and, therefore, joined also to one another. He expressed so clearly in Colossians and Ephesians that Christ was the head of this body, his church.

Paul recognized, as a pastor/shepherd, that this body was grounded in the Spirit and was filled with the Spirit’s gifts. The Church found its unity as one body by the power of the same Spirit.

In the churches he founded Paul encouraged different gifts for the common good. At the same time, he demanded a unity in love. It is no accident that the great hymn on love in First Corinthians follows the chapter on the multiplicity of charisms.

Paul was the first true “churchman.” As he says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” Paul knew the power of God in the Christian assembly.

AND NOW US:

My brothers and sisters,

One of Saint Paul’s great themes was that believers would imitate him because he first imitated Christ. Let all us, disciples of the Lord Jesus, find in Paul a model to follow so that we may more closely imitate the Jesus himself. Let us be apostles who proclaim the gospel with clarity, conviction, and compassion. Let follow in Paul’s footsteps and continue to create the communities of which we are members, while always remembering that is the Spirit has made/formed us as one body in Christ. Let us respect the diversity of gifts from the spirit and encourage the unity that is grounded in love.

FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE PRIESTS:

Let us hear again St. Paul’s words to Timothy, “Re-ignite the spirit given in the laying on of hands.” Let us be apostles of the one gospel with clarity illuminated by the Spirit given us in ordination, with a conviction that is personal and ecclesial and with compassion born of suffering with our people.

Let us be men of “communion” building up the body and knowing the power of the Spirit in the diverse gifts we see and in unity that binds us together in love.

CONCLUSION:

In the middle of his second letter to the Corinthians Saint Paul exhorts,

“All of us, gazing with unveiled faces on the glory of the lord,
Are being transformed into the same image
From glory to glory
As from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

Let us pray today that this Alumni Day, 2008, when we spend time with the Lord and with one another, will be an opportunity to see the glory of the Lord again and be transformed into his image all the more by the power of God’s living and life giving Spirit.