



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*St. Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 24 September 2008*

### ***Saint Paul (5)***

#### ***Paul, the Twelve and the pre-Pauline Church.***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak about the relationship between St Paul and the Apostles who had preceded him in following Jesus. These relations were always marked by profound respect and that frankness in Paul that stemmed from defending the truth of the Gospel. Although he was virtually a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, he never had the opportunity to meet him during his public life. For this reason, after being blinded on the road to Damascus, he felt the need to consult the Teacher's first Disciples, those whom he had chosen to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote an important account of the contacts he had had with some of the Twelve: first of all with Peter who had been chosen as *Kephas*, the Aramaic term which means rock, on whom the Church was being built (cf. Gal 1: 18), with James, "the Lord's brother" (cf. Gal 1: 19), and with John (cf. Gal 2: 9). Paul does not hesitate to recognize them as "pillars" of the Church. Particularly important is his meeting with Cephas (Peter), in Jerusalem: Paul stayed with him for 15 days in order to "consult him" (cf. Gal 1: 19), that is, to learn about the earthly life of the Risen One who had "taken hold" of him on the road to Damascus and was radically transforming his life; from a persecutor of God's Church he had become an evangelizer of that faith in the crucified Messiah and Son of God which in the past he had sought to destroy (cf.

Gal 1: 23).

What sort of information did Paul gather about Jesus Christ during the three years that succeeded the Damascus encounter? In the First Letter to the Corinthians, we may note two passages that Paul learned in Jerusalem and that were already formulated as central elements of the Christian tradition, a constitutive tradition. Paul passed them on verbally, as he had received them, with a very solemn formula: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received". He insists, therefore, on the fidelity to what he himself has received and faithfully transmits to new Christians. These are constitutive elements and concern the Eucharist and the Resurrection; they are passages that were already formulated in the 30s. Thus we come to Jesus' death, his burial in the heart of the earth and his Resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15: 3-4). Let us take both passages: for Paul, Jesus' words at the Last Supper (cf. 1 Cor 11: 23-25) are truly the centre of the Church's life: the Church is built on this centre, thus becoming herself. In addition to this Eucharistic centre, in which the Church is constantly reborn - also in all of St Paul's theology, in all of his thought - these words have a considerable impact on Paul's personal relationship with Jesus. On the one hand they testify that the Eucharist illumines the curse of the Cross, making it a blessing (Gal 3: 13-14), and on the other, they explain the importance of Jesus' death and Resurrection. In St Paul's Letters, the "for you" of the Institution of the Eucharist is personalized, becoming "for me" (Gal 2: 20) - since Paul realized that in that "you" he himself was known and loved by Jesus - as well as being "for all" (2 Cor 5: 14). This "for you" becomes "for me" and "for her [the Church]" (Eph 5: 25), that is, "for all", in the expiatory sacrifice of the Cross (cf. Rm 3: 25). The Church is built from and in the Eucharist and recognizes that she is the "Body of Christ" (1 Cor 12: 27), nourished every day by the power of the Spirit of the Risen One.

The other text, on the Resurrection, once again passes on to us the same formula of fidelity. St Paul writes: "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 Cor 15: 3-5). This "for our sins" also recurs in this tradition passed on to Paul, which places the emphasis on the gift that Jesus made of himself to the Father in order to set us free from sin and death. From this gift of Jesus himself, Paul draws the most engaging 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 Cor 5: 21); "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 Cor 8: 9). Worth remembering is the comment Martin Luther made, then an Augustinian monk, on these paradoxical words of Paul: "This is that mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners, wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's, and the righteousness of Christ is not Christ's but ours" (*Comments on the Psalms* of 1513-1515). And thus we are saved.

In the original *kerygma* (announcement), passed on by word of mouth, the use of the verb "is

risen" rather than "was risen" - which would have been more logical to use, in continuity with "died... and was buried" - deserves mention. The verb form "is risen" has been chosen to stress that Christ's Resurrection has an effect on the existence of believers even today; we might translate it as: "is risen and continues to live" in the Eucharist and in the Church. Thus all the Scriptures bear witness to the death and Resurrection of Christ because, as Ugo di San Vittore was to write, "the whole of divine Scripture constitutes one book and this one book is Christ, for the whole of Scripture speaks of Christ and is fulfilled in Christ" (*De arca Noe*, 2,8). If St Ambrose of Milan could say that "in Scripture we read Christ", it is because the early Church reinterpreted all the Scriptures of Israel, starting from and returning to Christ.

The enumeration of the apparitions of the Risen One to Cephas, to the Twelve, to more than 500 brethren and to James, culminates with the mention of the apparition to Paul himself on the road to Damascus: "Last of all, as to one untimely born" (1 Cor 15: 8). Since he had persecuted God's Church, in this confession he expresses his unworthiness to be considered an Apostle on a par with those who had preceded him: but God's grace within him was not in vain (1 Cor 15: 10). Thus, the overwhelming 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 believed" (1 Cor 15: 11). The identity and unity of the Gospel proclamation is important; both they and I preach the same faith, the same Gospel of Jesus Christ who died and is risen and who gives himself in the Most Holy Eucharist.

The importance that he confers on the living Tradition of the Church, which she passes on to her communities, shows how mistaken is the view that attributes the invention of Christianity to Paul; before evangelizing Jesus Christ, his Lord, Paul has met him on the road to Damascus and visited him in the Church, observing his life in the Twelve and in those who followed him on the roads of Galilee. In the next Catecheses we will have the opportunity to examine the contributions that Paul made to the Church of the origins. However, the mission he received from the Risen One to evangelize the Gentiles needed to be confirmed and guaranteed by those who offered him and Barnabas their right hand in fellowship, as a sign of approval of their apostolate and their evangelization and of their acceptance into the one communion of Christ's Church (cf. Gal 2: 9). One then understands that the expression "even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view" (2 Cor 5: 16) does not mean that his earthly life has little importance for our development in the faith, but that since his Resurrection our way of relating to him has changed. 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 Paul was to recall at the beginning of his Letter to the Romans (1: 3-4).

The more we try to trace the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth on the roads of Galilee, the better we shall be able to understand that he took on our humanity, sharing it in all things except sin. Our faith is not born from a myth or from an idea, but from the encounter with the Risen One in the life of the Church.

## To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, including the choir from New Zealand and the groups from Britain and Ireland, Scandinavia, Africa, Australia and the Far East. I greet in particular the new students from the Venerable English College and the priests from Ireland who are taking part in a renewal course. May your pilgrimage renew your faith in Christ present in his Church, after the example of the Apostle St Paul. May God bless you all!

My thoughts go lastly to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. *Dear young people*, always be faithful to the Gospel ideal and put it into practice in your daily activities. *Dear sick people*, may the Lord's grace be a support to you in your suffering every day. And to you, dear *newlyweds*, I address a fatherly welcome, inviting you to open your souls to divine love so that it may enliven your family existence.

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