

On Paul's World and Time Period

"I Begin Today a New Cycle of Catecheses, Dedicated to the Great Apostle"

VATICAN CITY, JULY 2, 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to begin today a new cycle of catecheses, dedicated to the great Apostle St. Paul. To him, as you know, I have consecrated this year, which extends from the liturgical feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29, 2008, to the same feast in 2009.

The Apostle Paul, an exceptional and virtually inimitable yet stimulating figure, is before us as an example of total dedication to the Lord and his Church, as well as of great openness to humanity and its cultures. It is just, therefore, that we reserve a particular place for him, not only in our veneration, but also in an effort to understand what he has to say to us, Christians of today, as well.

In this, our first meeting, I would like to pause to consider the environment in which he lived and worked. Such a topic would seem to take us far from our time, given that we must insert ourselves in the world of 2,000 years ago. And yet, this is only apparently and partly true, because it can be verified that in many ways, the socio-cultural environment of today is not so different than that of back then.

A primary and fundamental factor to keep in mind is the relationship between the environment in which Paul was born and developed and the global context in which he successively inserted himself. He came from a very precise and specific culture, certainly of the minority, which was that of the people of Israel and their tradition. In the ancient world and notably at the heart of the Roman Empire, as scholars of the subject teach us, the Jews constituted about 10% of the total population. Here in Rome, their number around the middle of the first century was even fewer, reaching a maximum of 3% of the inhabitants of the city.

Their beliefs and lifestyle, as happens also today, distinguished them clearly from the surrounding environment. And this could have two results: either derision, which might lead to intolerance, or admiration, which was expressed in different ways, such as the case of the "God-fearing" or "proselyte," pagans who associated themselves in the synagogue and shared the faith in the God of Israel.

As concrete examples of this double attitude we can mention, on one hand, the sharp judgment of an orator such as Cicero, who scorned their religion and even the city of Jerusalem (cf. *Pro Flacco*, 66-69), and on the other, the attitude of Poppea, Nero's wife, who is remembered by Flavius Josephus as a "sympathizer" of the Jews (cf. *Antichita giudaiche* 20, 195.252; *Vita* 16). And we should note Julius Caesar had already officially recognized particular rights for them, noted by the already-mentioned Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (cf. *Ibid.* 14, 200-216). What is certain is that the number of Jews, as is true today, was far greater outside the land of Israel, namely, in the Diaspora, and not in the territory that others called Palestine.

It is no wonder, then, that Paul himself was the object of the double, contrasting evaluation, of which I have spoken. One thing is certain: The particularity of the Jewish culture and religion easily found a place within a reality as all-pervasive as the Roman Empire. More difficult and trying was the position of the group of those Jews and Gentiles who adhered in faith to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as they were distinguished both from Judaism and the prevailing paganism.

In any case, two factors favored Paul's commitment. The first was the Greek, or rather the

Hellenistic culture, which after Alexander the Great became the common patrimony at least of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, though integrating within itself many elements of peoples traditionally regarded as barbarians. A writer of the time states, in this regard, that Alexander "ordered that all keep the whole 'ecumene' [inhabited earth] as homeland ... and that there be no longer a distinction between Greek and Barbarian" (Plutarch, *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute*, paragraphs 6.8).

The second factor was the political-administrative structure of the Roman Empire, which guaranteed peace and stability from Britain to southern Egypt, unifying a territory of a dimension never before seen. In this space, one could move with sufficient liberty and security, enjoying among other things an extraordinary road system, and finding in every point of arrival, basic cultural characteristics that, without detriment to local values, represented in any case a common fabric of unification "super partes," so much so that the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, contemporary of Paul himself, praises the emperor Augustus because he "has brought together in harmony all the savage peoples ... becoming a guardian of peace" (*Legatio ad Caium*, paragraphs 146-147).

The universalistic vision typical of St. Paul's personality, at least of the Christian Paul after the event on the road to Damascus, certainly owes its basic impetus to faith in Jesus Christ, inasmuch as the figure of the Risen One goes beyond that of any particularistic restriction. In fact, for the apostle "there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free man, no longer male or female, but all are only one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Yet, the historical-cultural situation of his time and environment also influenced his choices and commitment. Paul has been described as a "man of three cultures," taking into account his Jewish origin, Greek language, and his prerogative of "civis romanus," as attested also by his name of Latin origin.

We must recall in particular the Stoic philosophy, which prevailed in Paul's time and also influenced, though marginally, Christianity. In this connection, we cannot but mention the names of Stoic philosophers, such as the initiators Zeno and Cleanthes, and then those chronologically closer to Paul, such as Seneca, Musonius and Epictetus. Found in them are very lofty values of humanity and wisdom, which were naturally received in Christianity. As a scholar on the subject writes masterfully, "Stoicism ... proclaimed a new ideal, which imposed on man duties toward his fellowmen, but at the same time freed him from all physical and national ties and made him a purely spiritual being" (M. Pohlenz, *La Stoa*, I, Florence 2, 1978, pp. 565ff).

It is enough to think, for example, of the doctrine of the universe understood as one great harmonious body and, consequently, of the doctrine of the equality of all men without social distinctions, to the equating at least in principle of man and woman, and then the ideal of frugality, of the just measure and of self-control to avoid all excesses. When Paul writes to the Philippians: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8), does no more than take up a strictly humanist concept proper to that philosophical wisdom.

In Paul's time, there was also a crisis of the traditional religion, at least in its mythological and also civic aspects. After Lucretius, already a century earlier, had controversially stated that "religion has led to so many misdeeds" (*De rerum natura* 1, 101), a philosopher such as Seneca, going well beyond any external ritualism, taught that "God is close to you, he is with you, he is within you" (*Lettere a Lucilio*, 41, 1).

Similarly, when Paul addressed an auditorium of Epicurean philosophers in the Areopagus in Athens, he says literally that "God does not live in shrines made by man ... but in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17: 24.28). With this, he certainly echoes the Jewish faith in one God that cannot be represented in anthropomorphic terms, but he also follows a religious line with which his listeners were familiar. We must take into account, moreover, that many educated

pagans did not frequent the official temples of the city, and went to private places that promoted the initiation of followers.

Not a motive for wonder, therefore, was the fact that Christian meetings (the "ekklesiai"), as attested to especially in the Pauline Letters, took place in private homes. At the time, moreover, there was still no public building. Therefore, the meetings of Christians must have seemed to their contemporaries as a simple variation of this more intimate religious practice. Nevertheless, the differences between pagan and Christian worship are not of slight importance and involved as much the awareness of the participants' identity as well as the common participation of men and women, the celebration of the "Lord's Supper" and the reading of the Scriptures.

In conclusion, from this brief review of the cultural environment of the first century of the Christian era, it is clear that it is not possible to understand St. Paul adequately without considering the background, both Jewish as well as pagan, of his time. Thus his figure acquires a historical and ideal depth, revealing shared and original elements of the environment. However, this is also equally true for Christianity in general, of which the Apostle Paul is a paradigm of the first order, from whom all of us today have much to learn. This is the objective of the Pauline Year: to learn the faith from him, to learn from him who Christ is, to learn, in the end, the path for an upright life.

The Pope then greeted pilgrims in several languages. In English, he said:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Sunday, the Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul, marked the beginning of a Year dedicated to the figure and teaching of the Apostle Paul. Today's Audience begins a new series of catecheses aimed at understanding more deeply the thought of Saint Paul and its continuing relevance. Paul, as we know, was a Jew, and consequently a member of a distinct cultural minority in the Roman Empire. At the same time, he spoke Greek, the language of the wider Hellenistic culture, and was a Roman citizen. Paul's proclamation of the Risen Christ, while grounded in Judaism, was marked by a universalist vision and it was facilitated by his familiarity with three cultures. He was thus able to draw from the spiritual richness of contemporary philosophy, and Stoicism in particular, in his preaching of the Gospel. The crisis of traditional Greco-Roman religion in Paul's time had also fostered a greater concern for a personal experience of God. As we see from his sermon before the Areopagus in Athens (cf. Acts 17:22ff.), Paul was able to appeal to these currents of thought in his presentation of the Good News. Against this broad cultural background, Paul developed his teaching, which we will explore in the catecheses of this Pauline Year.

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors present today, including the Pallottine Missionary Sisters, the Columban Missionaries and the Soweto Catholic Church Choir. I also greet the various groups coming from England, Ireland, Norway, the Bahamas, Canada and the United States. May your visit to Rome be a time of deep spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

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