

Saint Paul - A Model for Us All

by Bishop Michael

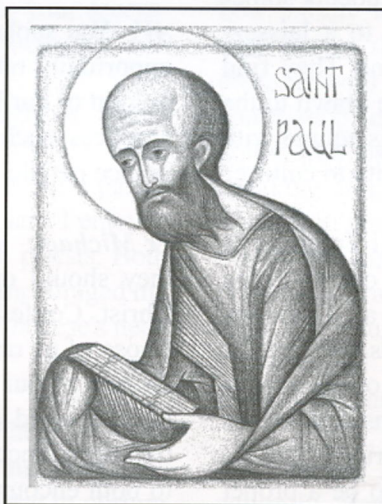
As we embark on a new ecclesiastical year, we do well to recommit ourselves - bishop, clergy and faithful - to our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ and to the service of His Holy Church. Someone who epitomized such a constantly renewed commitment was Saint Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, whose faithful preaching and tireless labors brought the message of the Gospel "to the very ends of the world."

For 2,000 years the Church has recognized St. Paul as a model for all of us to follow. When one reflects on the life and teaching, the missionary labors and martyrdom of the Apostle, it is no wonder that St. John Chrysostom wrote of him: "I love all the saints, but I love most the blessed Paul, the chosen vessel, the heavenly trumpet, the friend of the Bridegroom, Christ."

The Acts of the Apostles reveals to us many things about St. Paul. Clearly he was a man of character - zealous and totally committed to Christ. He proudly proclaimed his habit of speaking the full truth without waffling (20:20,27), and refused to be intimidated by the threat of chains and trials in Jerusalem (20:23). He refused to offer a bribe to Felix the Roman governor in exchange for his freedom (24:26), and he demanded his case be heard in Rome by the emperor himself so that he could preach the Gospel in that city (26:32). Such character is the mark of the Christian and is necessary in order for the Church to be truly holy, truly "other" than the world.

Paul was also a man of prayer - in prison or in court, in the synagogue or alone. Right from the start, immediately after he met the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he turned to prayer and fasting as he awaited the Lord's will (9:9). Following his baptism, we find him time and time again in prayer in the synagogues, where he proclaimed that Jesus was indeed the awaited Messiah (9:22). Publically he was a preacher of the Word "in season and out of season." Yet at Philippi, he exited the city gates and found a place for private prayer near a river (16:13). He teaches us by example of the necessity of both liturgical prayer and personal prayer, both public worship and private prayer.

He was a member of the Church - no "lone ranger" but rather the consummate team player. As soon as he was formally initiated into the Faith, he met with the members of the very community that as Saul the Pharisee he had attempted so vigorously to destroy only a short time earlier (9:17,ff.). Throughout his life he attended the gatherings of the People of God - in Damascus, in Iconium, in Corinth, and in Ephesus. He teamed up with Barnabas, then Silas, then Luke, and later Aquila and Priscilla, and finally James and the elders in Jerusalem. He teaches us how to truly be a member of the Body of Christ, and always faithful to His holy Church.



Sketch by Fr Andrew Tregubov

Paul was a witness to the Resurrection - the central message of his faith, preaching and theology. The focus of his ministry, stemming from his first encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus (9:5), was that Christ was victorious over death and sin. This is the Good News that he had been chosen to proclaim to the children of Israel and the Gentile nations: Jesus is the Messiah! Christ is Risen! And we who live this faith are being saved! ... "But if Christ is not risen, our faith is futile ... and we of all men are the most pitiable" (I Cor.

15:17,19). So too the Resurrected Savior must be the object of our worship, the theme of our sermons, the pattern of our lives, and the inspiration of our ideals.

The Apostle was an agent of conversion and change - repentance from sin and purity of heart. In summarizing his work for the elders at Miletus, Paul referred to the basic acts of repentance before God as fundamental to the faith (Acts 20:21). He repeatedly insisted on "metanoia" - the change of one's mind (26:16,21). And because such transformation took time, Paul stayed for long periods in the various churches - weeks at Thessalonica, a year and a half in Corinth, two years each in Ephesus, in Caesarea, and in Rome - all of this because of Paul's conviction that he was called by God to be an agent of change of heart. The focus of our spiritual life must also be constant repentance for our sins, and encouraging others to return to Christ.

Mutually Encouraged by Each Other's Faith

He was a servant of the community - in the Temple at Pascha, as well as in chains in prison. His work at Derbe was summarized as making many disciples (14:21). He was incredibly successful at enlarging the local churches by preaching and deepening their faith. In returning to towns previously evangelized like Lystra and Iconium, he strengthened the resolve of the new converts, encouraging them to persevere in faith (14:22). Churches were served and strengthened by the addition of the affluent (17:12) and the educated (17:22). His four missionary journeys brought him to many congregations, which he united and whose faith he increased. We too must be servants - standing at the altar or in the soup kitchen, serving others as our Master did, and bringing others to His Church.

Paul was a colleague in suffering - embracing the lowly and persecuted, the sick and the dying with the joyous message of the Gospel. In response to the Good News, he was driven out of Antioch in Pisidia, mocked by the Athenians, stoned at Lystra, beaten and imprisoned at Philippi, and dragged out of the Temple in Jerusalem. What was his response of encouragement for each of those communities? "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). His was an asceticism of serving and leaving and starting over, trusting that someone else would build upon his work without worrying about it afterwards. Paul encourages us all as we face difficulties: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

Indeed, the Apostle's shadow falls upon successive generations of bishops, priests and laypersons.

Continued from page 5

stall the urgency of such a life. To Zacchaeus, the Lord said, "I am coming to your house!" If Christ came to us, would he recognize our home as a Christian home at any given time? Would ours be a churchly home or would he find the TV blaring, and could He watch what we are watching? The details demonstrate whether we live in a way in which Christ is present among us.

In his closing remarks, Father Michael, asked that the parish communities hold him in their prayers and not to focus on his specific person, reminding us of the psalmist's injunction not to put trust in princes

His contribution in shaping the type of leaders we need in a renewed Church, as presented so clearly in the Acts of the Apostles, remains a valuable measure of effectiveness for all ages.

As Acts ends with the stirring announcement that Paul brought his work to its destined completion, welcoming all who came to him and preaching the kingdom of God to them (28:30), so it must be for those of us who serve Christ in the 21st century. At the very center of the only civilization he knew, the Apostle to the Gentiles taught about and witnessed to our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ openly and unhindered. This is the model every Orthodox Christian must follow. Paul's exhortation for all of us to emulate rings across the centuries: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (I Cor. 11:1).

Paul's theology is central to the Christian Faith; he is a model for members of the Church to this very day. His teaching about the Lord, that spans more than half the New Testament, can be summed up in one sentence - one that we must not only memorize but also emulate daily: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me ... and the life that I live in the flesh I live in the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20).

This issue of *Jacob's Well* is reverently dedicated to the memory of this great saint - truly a model for us all. As we begin the new liturgical year, let us recommit ourselves to Christ and His Church, asking for his intercession: "Holy Apostle Paul, pray unto God for us!"

or sons of men. His personal goal as bishop is to model leadership as service, to encourage communities to give glory to God both at the Altar in each church as well as at the altar of the soup kitchen.

AV: Thank you, Father Michael. Please be assured that despite our recent difficulties, both clergy and laypeople have a genuine desire to trust our hierarch shepherd, and to rediscover the father who truly loves his flock. We look to you as the sign of our unity, the bearer of catholicity across our large and diverse diocese.

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