

What every Catechumen should know about St Paul

At the September meeting of the RCIA Network Executive there was a discussion about the Year of St Paul we are currently celebrating and how we might mark it in the Newsletter. The question was asked what should a catechumen know about St Paul? The following are some ideas. Thanks to Sue Petritz, Joanna Price, David Slingsby and Molly Styant for their contributions.

Introduction

Paul was one of the most influential figures in the history of Christianity due to the variety of his writings and the depth of his thought. Every Christian has been affected in some way by what has been written by Paul.

The theology of baptism which is found in Paul's letter to the Romans and heard at the Easter Vigil shapes the Church's understanding of Initiation and therefore the Rite. (Some Eastern Churches have the Baptism of Jesus as the primary source of their theology or the images of the water and the spirit found in John's Gospel and Epistles.)

Paul's Life

Paul was a ruthless persecutor of Christians.

Christians first encountered Paul as a sinister and frightening man who stood in the background as they stoned Stephen to death for his faith – and 'he approved of the killing' Acts 8:1. He worked for the Jewish religious establishment who 'went from house to house arresting both men and women and sending them to prison'. At this stage Paul did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah and he almost certainly did not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. He saw the Church as a dangerous subversive movement which needed stamping out.

- The Christian response to people who are completely against the Gospel is patience, love, forgiveness – and sacrifice.

Conversion on the road to Damascus

For Paul, his conversion on the road to Damascus and his vision of Jesus changed his life and its direction totally (Gal 1:10-17; Acts 9:1-22). He is overwhelmed by the love of Jesus Christ and devotes himself to showing to everyone that 'Jesus was the Christ' (Acts 9:22). This mission extends to the whole world: it is not just limited to Jews and so Paul takes the good news 'gospel' to the gentiles. Through his correspondence, with the churches he set up or planned to visit around the Mediterranean, we learn of the issues that early Christians grappled with, as they tried to live in the example of Jesus. These are just as valid in today's world.

- Conversion for a Christian in the making may be as dramatic as Paul's or it may be a more gradual process. How do our lives change as a result of our discovery of and meeting with Christ?

On the road to Damascus everything changed. It was whilst he was on his way to Damascus with soldiers, equipped with names and addresses of Christians to be rounded up that his life suddenly changed due to an encounter with Jesus (Acts 9:3). Presumably Paul thought the resurrection was a fraud or a delusion. Was he thinking about the way Stephen died, praying for those who were killing him in the words 'Lord do not hold this sin against them'. Perhaps suddenly a lot of things began to make sense and he heard Jesus saying 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

- There are some people who are so against the Gospel that it is difficult to believe they can ever discover faith in Jesus Christ for themselves. But it can be amazing what God can do – especially if we trust Him.

Personal Experience colours how we see Christ – Paul's famous personal encounter on the road to Damascus may seem extreme; not everyone, not every catechumen is struck by a blinding light and hears the voice of Christ as Paul did (Acts: 9:3-9).

- However, perhaps we have had a moment where an action, an event, even a word has given us a new insight. Like Paul who was persecuting the fledgling Christian Church, we may be challenged to stop some type of action and turn our lives toward Christ and a new path/road. It is in our personal ex-

periences of meeting Christ in our daily lives and with others that we leave our blindness behind and follow Him more closely.

After his conversion, Paul is like many neophytes, who after the Easter Vigil, just can't help but tell everyone about how great God is. Paul's love for Jesus Christ shines through in all he writes.

- Look at how often Paul names Christ in his Thanksgiving (see 1Cor 1:3-9, Second reading of First week of Advent 2008).

Paul was always ready to explain his faith to anyone who wanted to know.

Festus was the Roman Governor based in Caesarea. When he took up his post he found Paul left behind in custody by his predecessor, Felix (Acts 24:27). King Agrippa and his sister Bernice paid a visit to Festus to pay their respects. Festus thought Paul was harmless enough and wanted to let him go but Paul had exercised his right to appeal to Caesar. Agrippa asked Paul to explain his faith and gave him leave to 'speak on your own behalf'. Agrippa responded by saying 'A little more and your arguments would make a Christian of me'. Agrippa sounds a little like a man on the very edge of faith. He was much more receptive than Festus, who just thought Paul was mad) and he must have discerned the challenge in what Paul had to say and in the complete conviction with which he spoke. History does not record whether or not he became a believer.

- It is for us to proclaim the Gospel with our lips – and leave it to God to change the individual.

Paul was an enthusiastic preacher of the Good News.

His enthusiasm was such that in Troas he recorded as preaching into the middle of the night. Unfortunately the effect of this on a young man, Eutychus, who was sitting on a window sill was to nod off and fall down three floors. He is reported as surviving the incident and Paul carried on with the Eucharist, talking until daybreak. (Acts 20:7-12)

- There is a very human side to Paul which we see either in the accounts of his travels in the Acts of the Apostles or in the frustrations he articulates in his letters.

Small is Beautiful – St Paul felt his mission was to bring the Good News, grace and salvation of Jesus Christ to the world; first to



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the Jewish community and then, in particular, to the Gentiles. He began his teachings in synagogues, but moved into the community he was visiting, often being hosted by a head of the household and his/her family. This household would then become his base. He met people in these houses in small groups which echoed the experience of the Upper Room (Acts 20: 6-9).

- Catechumen will be familiar with the parish rooms/halls used for meeting the small group of people who are sharing the Good News together. It may be that someone in a catechumen's household has been a witness of faith to them which has drawn them to enquire. Similarly you/the catechumen may be the one to stimulate the process of faith exploration in your household.

Paul reached out to Europeans

The first Christians came from a mainly Jewish background. They knew the Old Testament, the Law, the prophets and the psalms. To the Greek philosophers of Athens the Gospel seemed very foreign and difficult for them to unpack.. Paul saw his ministry leading into the world of Greeks and Romans (Acts 16:9). He knew that he had to get inside their mindset – to find a way of making primary contact with them. He saw an altar to 'an unknown god' and said 'in fact the unknown God you revere is the one I proclaim to you' (Acts 17:23)..

- There is only one Gospel but it is a message for everyone irrespective of their cultural background. But the language we use may depend on the people we are reaching out to.

Paul's Writings

Paul's early letters to the young Christian churches in Galatia, Thessalonica, Corinth and Rome are probably the earliest documents that we possess from the beginning of the Christian church, dating from about 50 to 58 A.D. Some were written at least 10 years before the gospel of Mark and probably about thirty years before Matthew's gospel.

The First Letter to the Thessalonians is widely accepted as being the first letter written by Paul. Although Paul spent only three weeks in Thessalonica, (Acts 17:1-2) it was enough to found a Christian community. He was forced to leave there suddenly, when encountering opposition from the Jews. Later in his travels when he arrived at Corinth, Paul wanted to write so as to give continual support to the people he had left in Thessalonica.

- They form the oldest preserved documents in the New Testament. Paul's letters are therefore worth reading.

Paul gives the earliest written account of the Eucharist in 1 Cor 11:23-26.

- The beginning of this passage could be taken as a motto for catechesis: *For this is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you.*

Sharing our Story – Although Paul writes many personal reflections and teachings in his letters to communities, it is his relationship with the Evangelist/Gospel writer Luke which gives us much of Paul's story. St Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles recounts and informs us with the narrative, the conflicts, the finer details, and even the travelogue of St Paul's activities. Like the catechumen Paul shared his life story and ministry with many people including this trusted, companion and friend.

- The journey a catechumen will make is also about sharing their/our story with people in the context of the RCIA. This can be a time of sifting through the narrative, identifying the finer details of how God has been active in people's/our lives and marking the events and stages of our journey.

Letter writing in Paul's time followed a particular format and Paul generally uses this

structure when writing to churches he has set up or that he plans to visit.

- First are the greetings as Paul identifies himself as sent from God and identifies the recipient of the letter. Second is the Thanksgiving in which God is thanked for the gifts of the Spirit everyone receives. Third is the body of the letter: what Paul wants to teach. Fourth is the exhortation to the people to apply to their lives and fifth is the closing spiritual farewell.

In the Year of St Paul it would be a good idea to use the second reading at Mass as the basis for reflection and catechesis. Encourage catechumens to read the whole letter —starting with one of the shorter texts

- The order of the letters in the New Testament is based on their length starting with the longest, Romans, ending with the shortest, Philemon.



God of infinite wisdom,
you chose the apostle Paul
to proclaim your Son to every nation.

*We pray that these your servants,
who look forward to baptism,
may follow in the footsteps of Paul
and trust not in flesh and blood,
but in the call of your grace.*

*Probe their hearts and purify them,
so that, freed from all deception,
they may never look back
but strive always toward what is to come.*

*May they count everything as loss
compared with the unsurpassed worth
of knowing your Son,
and so gain him as their eternal reward,
for he is Lord for ever and ever.
Amen.*