

Keynote Address - His Grace, Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto

28th Annual Cardinal's Dinner - October 25, 2007 - Toronto

In the Footsteps of St. Paul

I: Introduction: The Year of St Paul

On June 29th this year, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, Pope Benedict announced that the year following that feast in 2008 will be observed throughout the Catholic Church as The Year of St Paul. In doing this the Pope is following an ancient and fruitful tradition which helps the disciples of Jesus scattered throughout the world to focus their thoughts, energies, and prayers upon one basic theme of Christian faith. This happens at every Jubilee year, and recently we have had theme years such as the Year of the Eucharist and, leading into the millennium, the three years focused on God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As the Holy Father guides us into the Year of St Paul he will no doubt explain more fully why he judges that at this moment in history we particularly need to learn from this great saint. Certainly St. Paul is the great Apostle to the Gentiles, the person God used to reach out to the pagan world with the message of the Good News of Jesus. We in our age are sent to engage a secular world that is at least as hostile to the Gospel as was the Roman Empire of old, and which needs a vibrant witness to life in Christ. As we follow in the footsteps of St. Paul, we can discover how to offer that witness in our contemporary society, as he did in his.

St. Paul's writings form a major portion of the New Testament, and through them God reveals to us how to live as individual disciples, and as a Christian community, and how to engage the world around us with a confident faith. In the Acts of the Apostles it is the example of Paul that guides us as he experiences conversion on the road to Damascus, and then gives his life in total abandonment to the service of the Master. He becomes Paul, servant of Jesus Christ, slave of Jesus Christ. We need to be reminded that our faith is not trivial or conventional, though too easily it can become just that: no, our faith calls us to no less a commitment than that of the fiery St. Paul: *For me, to live is Christ.*

In our archdiocese we have already established a committee to plan ways in which we can fruitfully participate in the Year of St. Paul. There will be numerous occasions for us to deepen our appreciation for the example and message of the great apostle. St Paul is the patron of the first parish of the Archdiocese of Toronto, established in 1822, and the glorious Basilica of St Paul will be the center for pilgrimage for our community.

This evening, however, I would like to reflect on some themes from the life and writings of St. Paul that can guide us along the path to the heavenly Jerusalem, as we seek joyfully to embrace the challenges we face as Christians in 21st century Canada.

II: Lessons for Life from St Paul

1) The Adventure of Bold Discipleship

The life of St. Paul is an adventure story, and so is ours. We need to recognize that. Like Paul, we are engaged in the grand adventure of winning the world for Christ.

Paul experienced a profound conversion when the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He courageously set out through dangers of all kinds to witness to his new found faith – to his new found Master. He faced down all kinds of opposition, and found creative ways to keep moving forward despite daunting obstacles outside and within the Christian community. There is nothing timid in St. Paul. He launched into Europe, and planned to go to distant Spain. He returned to great danger in Jerusalem, and gave the ultimate witness of martyrdom in Rome. Paul was not a man of small plans. He did great things for Christ. He shows us the way.

The spirit of Paul was found in the Jesuit martyrs whose shrine in Midland is the spiritual heart of our archdiocese. They left the comfort of their homeland, for the love of Jesus. They died for Christ, but first of all they lived for Christ, and Paul did both.

As I pray in the tiny chapel in the rectory of our Cathedral, I am conscious of the example of the saintly Bishop Michael Power, who prayed there in 1847, and who set out daily from there to celebrate Mass at St. Paul's, and then walked to the fever sheds where he ministered to the Irish immigrants, ultimately giving his life for them. Like other generous men and women in those early days of Toronto he lived and died in the courageous spirit of St. Paul.

When we, as a family of faith, engage the secular world we too face challenges and opportunities. We can miss the opportunities, and be daunted by the challenges. St. Paul shows us the way to rejoice in the bold adventure of discipleship. He never missed an opportunity to reach out to the world around him with the Good News of Jesus, and he was not intimidated by the magnitude of the task at hand. When he came to the Athens, he went to the meeting place of the Areopagus, and engaged the sceptical Athenians in conversation about the Risen Lord. He did not shy away from the marketplace, nor should we if we follow in his footsteps. He did not retreat into the security of the inner world of believers, but entered into dialogue with the alien world of unbelief. So must we, with humility, and with the confidence born not of natural bravado, but of the serene faith that gave courage to Paul.

Some practical implications for us in our archdiocese:

-We need to become involved wholeheartedly in the world of popular culture and the media. People spend more time at the computer and TV than in Church. We should also not be shy in engaging in the public conversation regarding social issues, and Christians need to be encouraged to engage in public service as politicians.

-We need to give a reason for the hope we have to the people we meet day by day. That means we have to know our faith, and also be ready to explain it and, if necessary, defend it.

- Paul did preach to the choir, but not only to the choir. We too need to seek creative ways to shine the light of the Gospel into every corner of our society. We can do this most effectively by the witness of a life well lived in our families and in the wider community, and amid the activities of the secular world of work and entertainment. Vatican II spoke of the universal call to

holiness, and whatever our role in society or the Church we can make our baptismal commitment real by living day by day with Christian integrity as we go about our tasks in the world. All that we do, we do well, for we do all for the Lord.

2) The Encounter with Christ as the Foundation for Discipleship

St. Paul was apostolically energetic as he established communities of faith around the Roman world, but all his activity was fruitful because it arose out of his encounter with Christ the Lord. He certainly had an unusually dramatic experience on the road to Damascus: someone as strong-willed as Paul needed quite a jolt. But he also went away for prayer and study before embarking on his apostolic labours, and he speaks of the spiritual communion with the Lord that was granted to him. In Paul we see a man of action who is fundamentally a man of prayer.

In our lives as individual disciples, and as communities of faith, we should like Paul be contemplatives in action. Through our lives and our example we proclaim the Lord whom we have first encountered in prayer. All our bold apostolic initiatives – so necessary if we are to follow in the footsteps of St. Paul and engage our world as effectively as he engaged his – will be mere busyness if we do not like Paul root our creative action in the experience of Christ. Fruitful action flows out of adoration, and in adoration we realize that all life-giving action is a response to the grace of God. We do not save the world. We are only servants, and we must be attentive to our Master, in whom alone we find our strength.

Some practical implications for us as an archdiocese:

- The celebration of the Sunday Eucharist should be the spiritual focal point of our life. This means practically that in each parish we need to be attentive to the way in which we dispose ourselves for the encounter with Christ in Word and Sacrament each Sunday. The music, the homily, the service at the altar and in the congregation, the welcoming of friend and stranger, the preparation for a fruitful hearing of the Scriptures, the prayerfully attentive celebration of the rites, and all such elements of our Sunday celebration dispose us to the encounter with the Lord at the Sunday Eucharist, which then impels us, as Paul was impelled, to a life of practical service – to the washing of the feet which was at the heart of the Last Supper. Thanks be to God if after each Mass, fortified by the encounter with God through Word and Sacrament, we go in peace to love and serve the Lord and our neighbour throughout the coming week. Not only the Eucharist, but each of the sacraments which Our Lord has given to us allows us to encounter our Divine Master in this earthly world.
- Individually, and as communities of faith, we must recognize that it is not merely a set of doctrines that we proclaim, but the person of Jesus. So the experience of Eucharistic adoration, the occasions for studying the living faith of the Church, the practice of Lectio Divina in which we listen to the voice of God through prayerful reading of the Scriptures – all these things will enable us to be more effective servants of God in engaging the problems and opportunities of our society.

If we follow in the footsteps of Saint Paul, our apostolic action will arise out of a deep personal encounter with the Master.

3) The Church as the Family of Faith: Frail and Sublime

Paul stands out as a great individual, as a disciple who has had a profound personal experience of Christ. But it is clear from his life, as indeed from all of the Gospels and from the experience of the Church through the centuries, that the life of Christian discipleship is meant to be lived in community.

Jesus established a community, and chose the twelve apostles from them, and gathered them in a communal meal the night before He suffered. He appeared to the community of disciples after His resurrection, and sent the Holy Spirit upon them at Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles, which tells us of the apostolic adventures of Paul, also shows us the life of the early Christian communities. It was no golden age, and those early Christians experienced the problems that all communities face in a world of fallen humanity, but the vision of faith impelled them, and filled them with the energy of hope that allowed them to bear fruit in actions of love.

In Paul's letters we see the affection he had for the various communities he established and visited (after all, most of his letters are to communities). The touching references to numerous individuals reveal that, like St Thomas More, he was a man born for friendship. Being a loner is not a Christian option. But we also see the manifest imperfections of the early communities, and the pain suffered by Paul when people he relied on disappointed him. It is no accident that we begin each Mass with the prayer *Lord, have mercy*, for we are all sinners, who need to be forgiven by God and one another. Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation because He knows we need it. For all that, however, the frail community of believers is truly the Body of Christ. We are meant to live in community, and our faith finds its home within the family of faith that is the Church.

Some implications for our archdiocese:

- Each of our parish communities is called to manifest the practical love, including especially generosity to the vulnerable, that is basic to the vision of Paul. Notice how frequently he refers to taking up a collection to aid the needy. We can too easily become absorbed with our internal problems, but that is not the way of the Christian.
- The active engagement of each Christian in the community, so evident in Acts and in the Pauline letters, is the norm for our parishes, and our archdiocese. When Christians act in the spirit of St. Paul, they share generously with others, especially the most needy, the time, talent, and treasure which are gifts of God. They are not passive disciples, but are actively engaged in the life of the parish and of the wider Church. This is what is meant by Christian stewardship.

III: Conclusion: In the Footsteps of St Paul

As we look to the path ahead, St. Paul shows us the way. He helps us to build Christian communities that are shaped by faith, hope, and love, while recognizing the turmoil that can arise because of the inner struggles Paul describes in Romans 7: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:19). Our communities, like his, need to get beyond being absorbed with our internal issues, in order to reach out practically to help the

needy, and to witness to Christ in this world, boldly, and creatively, and joyfully, in the adventure of discipleship.

If we learn from Paul, we will root our work of Christian witness, whatever form it takes, in continual prayer. And we who follow in the footsteps of Saint Paul face all challenges with the serene courage that comes from the vision of faith. Paul gave to the Christians of Philippi the energizing vision that shows us how to live :

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

(Philippians 2:1-11)