GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 10 September 2008

St Paul's view of what it means to be an apostle of Jesus Christ

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday I spoke of the great turning point in St Paul's life after his encounter with the Risen Christ. Jesus entered his life and transformed him from persecutor to Apostle. That meeting marked the start of his mission; Paul could not continue to live as he did before, he now felt that the Lord had invested him with the task of proclaiming his Gospel as an Apostle. It is precisely this new condition of life, that is, his being an apostle of Christ, that I would like to talk about today. Usually, in accordance with the Gospels, it is the Twelve that we identify with the title "Apostles", thereby desiring to point out those who were Jesus' companions in life and who listened to his teaching. Yet Paul too felt that he was a true Apostle and it clearly appears, therefore, that the Pauline concept of "apostolate" was not limited to the group of the Twelve. Obviously, Paul is able to markedly distinguish between his own case and that of those "who were Apostles before" him (Gal 1: 17); he recognizes that they have a very special place in the life of the Church. Yet, as everyone knows, St Paul understood himself as an Apostle in the strict sense. It is certain that at the time of the early Christians, no one covered as many kilometres as he did over land and across the seas, with the sole aim of proclaiming the Gospel.

Therefore he had a concept of apostolate that went beyond the exclusive association of the term with the group of the Twelve that was passed down primarily by St Luke in the Acts (cf. Acts 1: 2, 26; 6: 2). Indeed, in the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul makes a clear distinction between "the Twelve" and "all the apostles" mentioned as two different groups of beneficiaries of the Risen One's apparitions" (cf. 15: 5, 7). In that same passage he then goes on to mention himself humbly as the "the least of the apostles", even comparing himself to "one untimely born", and declaring himself "unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Cor 15: 9-10). The metaphor of the miscarriage expresses extreme humility; this will also be found in St Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to the Romans: "I am not worthy, as being the very last of them, and one born out of due time. But I have obtained mercy to be somebody, if I shall attain to God" (9, 2). What the Bishop of Antioch was to say in relation to his imminent martyrdom, foreseeing that it would reverse his condition of unworthiness, St Paul says in relation to his own apostolic commitment: it is in this that is manifest the fruitfulness of the grace

of God who knows precisely how to transform an unsuccessful man into a splendid apostle. From a persecutor to a founder of Churches: God brought this about in one who, from the evangelical point of view, might have been considered a reject! Therefore, according to St Paul's conception, what is it that makes him and others apostles? In his Letters three principal characteristics of the true apostle appear. The first is to have "seen Jesus our Lord" (cf. 1 Cor 9: 1), that is, to have had a life-changing encounter with him. Similarly, in his Letter to the Galatians (cf. 1: 15-16) Paul was to say that he had been called or chosen, almost, through God's grace with the revelation of his Son, in view of proclaiming the Good News to the Gentiles. In short, it is the Lord who appoints to the apostolate and not one's own presumption. The apostle is not made by himself but is made such by the Lord; consequently the apostle needs to relate constantly to the Lord. Not without reason does Paul say that he is "called to be an apostle" (Rm 1: 1), in other words, "an apostle - not from men nor through human means, but "through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1: 1). This is the first characteristic: to have seen the Lord, to have been called by him. The second characteristic is "to have been sent". The same Greek term apostolos means, precisely, "sent, dispatched", that is as ambassador and bearer of a message; he must therefore act as having been charged and as representing a sender. It is for this reason that Paul describes himself as an "apostle of Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1: 1; 2 Cor 1: 1), that is, his delegate, placed totally at his service, even to the point that he also calls himself "a servant of Christ Jesus" (Rm 1: 1). Once again the idea of someone else's initiative comes to the fore, the initiative of God in Jesus Christ, to whom Paul is fully indebted; but special emphasis is placed on the fact that Paul has received from him a mission to carry out in his name, making every personal interest absolutely secondary. The third requisite is the task of "proclaiming the Gospel", with the consequent foundation of Churches. Indeed, the title of "apostle" is not and cannot be honorary. It involves concretely and even dramatically the entire life of the person concerned. In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul exclaims: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?" (9: 1). Similarly in the Second Letter to the Corinthians he says: "You yourselves are our letters of recommendation... a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (3: 2-3). Thus it should not come as a surprise that Chrysostom speaks of "a soul of diamond" (Panegyrics, 1, 8), and continues saying: "in the same way that fire, in setting light to different materials burns ever stronger.... So Paul's words won over to his cause all those with whom he came into contact, and those who were hostile to him, captivated by his discourses, became the fuel of this spiritual fire" (ibid., 7,11). This explains why Paul defines the apostles as "fellow workers" of God (1 Cor 3: 9; 2 Cor 6: 1), whose grace acts within them. A typical element of a true apostle, which St Paul highlights effectively, is a sort of identification between Gospel and evangelizer, both destined to the same fate. In fact no one emphasized as well as Paul that the proclamation of the Cross of Christ appears "a stumbling block... and folly" (1 Cor 1: 23), to which many react with incomprehension and rejection. This happened then and it should not come as a surprise that it also happens today. Consequently, the apostle shares in this destiny, in appearing as "a stumbling block... and folly", and Paul is aware of it; this is the experience of his life. He writes to the Corinthians, not without a vein of irony: "For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. "To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we

endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the scum of all" (1 Cor 4: 9-13). This is a self-portrait of St Paul's apostolic life: in all this suffering the joy of being a herald of God's blessing and of the grace of the Gospel prevails.

Paul, moreover, shares with the Stoic philosophy of his time the idea of a tenacious constancy in all the difficulties that arise; but he overcomes the merely humanistic perspective by recalling the element of the love of God and of Christ: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered'. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm 8: 35-39). This is the certainty, the profound joy that guides the Apostle Paul through all these vicissitudes: nothing can separate us from the love of God and this love is the true treasure of human life. As can be seen, St Paul gave himself to the Gospel with his entire existence; we could say 24 hours a day! And he exercised his ministry with faithfulness and joy, "that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9: 22). And with regard to the Church, even knowing that he had a relationship of fatherhood with her (cf. 1 Cor 4: 15), if not actually of motherhood (cf. Gal 4: 19), he adopted an attitude of complete service, declaring admirably: "Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy" (2 Cor 1: 24). This remains the mission of all Christ's apostles in all times: to be his fellow workers in true joy.