

## Paul's Biography

### "He Dedicated Himself to the Proclamation of the Gospel"

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the last catechesis before the holidays -- two months ago, at the beginning of July -- I began a new series of topics on the occasion of the Pauline Year, reflecting on the way St. Paul lived. Today I would like to take up again and continue the reflection on the Apostle of the Gentiles, proposing a brief biography of him.

Because we will dedicate next Wednesday to the extraordinary event that occurred on the road to Damascus, Paul's conversion, an essential change in his life that followed from his meeting with Christ, today we will pause briefly on the whole of his life.

We have the biographical extreme points of Paul's life respectively in the Letter to Philemon, in which he declares himself "old" (Philemon 9: "presbytes"), and in the Acts of the Apostles, which at the moment of Stephen's stoning describe him as "young" (7:58: "neanias"). The two designations are evidently generic, but, according to ancient computations, a man around 30 years old was described as "young," while "old" was said when a man reached around 60.

In absolute terms, the date of Paul's birth depends to a great extent on the dating of the Letter to Philemon. Traditionally, its writing is dated during his Roman imprisonment, in the mid 60s. Hence, Paul would have been born in the year 8; he would have been more or less 60 years old, while at the moment of Stephen's stoning he was 30. This must be the correct chronology. In fact, the celebration of the Pauline Year we are observing follows this chronology. 2008 was chosen thinking of his birth more or less in the year 8.

In any case, he was born in Tarsus in Cilicia (cf Acts 22:3). The city was the administrative headquarters of the region and in 51 B.C. It had as proconsul none other than Marcus Tullius Cicero, while 10 years later, in 41, Tarsus was the site of the first meeting between Mark Anthony and Cleopatra.

A Jew of the Diaspora, he spoke Greek although having a name of Latin origin, derived by assonance from the Hebrew original Saul/Saulos, and he held Roman citizenship (cf. Acts 22:25-28). Paul seems to be situated, therefore, on the border of the various cultures -- Roman, Greek, Hebrew -- and perhaps also because of this was disposed to fruitful universal openness, to a mediation between cultures, to a true universality.

He also learned manual work, perhaps from his father, consisting of the work of "tent maker" (cf. Acts 18:3: skenopoiōs), to be understood probably as laborer of coarse goat's wool or linen fibers to make mats or tents (cf. Acts 20:33-35). Toward the year 12-13, the age in which a Jewish boy becomes "bar mitzvah" (son of the precept), Paul left Tarsus and went to Jerusalem to be educated at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel the Elder, nephew of the great Rabbi Hillel, according to the most rigid norms of Pharisaism and acquiring a great zeal for the Mosaic Torah (cf Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:5-6; Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5).

On the basis of this profound orthodoxy that he learned in the school of Hillel in Jerusalem, he saw in the new

movement of Jesus of Nazareth a risk, a menace for Jewish identity, for the fathers' true orthodoxy. This explains the fact that he had fiercely "persecuted the Church of God," as he admitted three times in his Letters (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6). Even if it is not easy to imagine specifically in what this persecution consisted of, his had, in any case, an attitude of intolerance.

It is here that the event of Damascus is situated, to which we will return in the next catechesis. It is certain that, from that moment on, his life changed and he became a tireless Apostle of the Gospel. In fact, Paul passed into history more as a Christian, what is more, as an Apostle, than as a Pharisee. His apostolic activity is subdivided traditionally on the basis of three missionary journeys, to which is added a fourth -- his journey to Rome as a prisoner. All are narrated by Luke in the Acts. In regard to the three missionary journeys, however, it is necessary to distinguish the first from the other two.

For the first, in fact (cf. Acts 13-14), Paul did not have direct responsibility, as it was entrusted instead to the Cypriot Barnabas. Together they departed from Antioch on the Oronte, sent by that Church (cf. Acts 13:1-3), and later, having set sail from the port of Seleucia on the Syrian coast, they traversed the island of Cyprus from Salamis to Paphos; from here they reached the southern coasts of Anatolia, today's Turkey, and stopped at the city of Attalia, Perga of Pamphilia, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, from which they returned to the point of departure.

Thus was born the Church of the people, the Church of the pagans. In the meantime, above all in Jerusalem, a harsh discussion arose as to what point these Christians from paganism were obliged to participate in the life and laws of Israel -- all the observances and prescriptions that separated Israel from the rest of the world -- to be truly participants of the promises of the prophets and to enter effectively into Israel's heritage.

To resolve this fundamental problem for the birth of the future Church, Paul met in Jerusalem with the so-called Council of the Apostles, to resolve this problem on which the effective birth of the universal Church depended. It was decided not to impose on converted pagans the observance of the Mosaic Law (cf. Acts 15:6-30); that is, they were not obliged to observe the norms of Judaism. The only need was to belong to Christ, to live with Christ and according to his words. Thus, being of Christ, they were also of Abraham, of God and participants of all the promises.

After this decisive event, Paul left Barnabas, chose Silas and began his second missionary journey (cf Acts 15:36-18, 22). Going beyond Syria and Cilicia, he again saw the city of Lystra, where he took with him Timothy -- a very important figure of the nascent Church, son of a Jewess and a pagan -- and had him circumcised, he went across central Anatolia and reached the city of Troas on the northern coast of the Aegean Sea. And here another important event took place: In a dream he saw a Macedonian from the other side of the sea, namely in Europe, who said, "Come and help us!"

It was the future Europe that requested the help and light of the Gospel. Spurred on by this vision, he entered Europe, sailing from Macedonia and thus entering Europe. Disembarking in Neapolis, he arrived in Philippi, where he founded an admirable Christian community. Then he went to Thessalonica, and left the latter because of difficulties caused by the Jews, traveled to Beroea, and then continued to Athens.

In this capital of ancient Greek culture he preached to pagans and Greeks, first in the Agora and then in the Areopagus. And the speech in the Areopagus, referred to in the Acts of the Apostles, was a model of how to translate the Gospel into Greek culture, and of how to make the Greeks understand that this God of Christians and Jews, was not a God who was foreign to their culture, but the unknown God awaited by them, the true answer to the most profound questions of their culture.

After Athens he arrived in Corinth, where he stayed for a year and a half. And here we have a very certain chronological event, the most certain of his whole biography, because during this first stay in Corinth he had to appear before the governor of the senatorial province of Achaia, Proconsul Gallione, on accusations of illegal worship.

Regarding Gallione, there is an ancient inscription found in Delphi where it is said that he was proconsul of Corinth between the years 51 and 53. Hence, here we have an absolute certain fact. Paul's stay in Corinth took place in those years. Hence we may suppose that he arrived more or less in the year 50 and stayed until the year 52. Then, from Corinth, passing through Cencre, the city's eastern port, he went to Palestine reaching Caesarea Maritima, and from there he left for Jerusalem to return later to Antioch on the Oronte.

The third missionary journey (cf. Acts 18:23-21:16) began as usual in Antioch, which had become the point of origin of the Church of the pagans, of the mission to the pagans, and was also the place where the term "Christians" was born. Here for the first time, St. Luke tells us, Jesus' followers were called "Christians."

From there Paul went directly to Ephesus, capital of the province of Asia, where he stayed for two years, carrying out a ministry that had fruitful returns for the region. From Ephesus, Paul wrote the Letters to the Thessalonians and Corinthians. The population of the city, however, was incited against him by the local silversmiths, who saw their income diminish given the decline of the worship of Artemis -- the temple dedicated to her in Ephesus, the Artemision, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Because of this he had to flee to the north. Having crossed Macedonia once more, he went down again to Greece, probably to Corinth, staying there for three months and writing the famous Letter to the Romans.

From here he retraced his steps: Passing back through Macedonia, he sailed to Troy, and then, briefly visiting the islands of Miletus, Chios, Samos, he reached Miletus where he gave an important address to the elders of the Church of Ephesus, sketching a portrait of the true pastor of the Church (cf. Acts 20).

From here he set sail for Tyre, from where he reached Caesarea Maritima to go once again to Jerusalem. Here he was arrested because of a misunderstanding: Some Jews had

mistaken other Jews of Greek origin for pagans, introduced by Paul in the Temple area reserved only for the Israelites. The planned sentence to death was avoided by the intervention of the Roman tribune guarding the area of the Temple (cf. Acts 21:27-36). This occurred while the imperial Procurator Anthony Felicius was in Judea. After spending a period in prison -- whose duration is debatable -- Paul, being a Roman citizen, appealed to Caesar -- who at the time was Nero -- and the subsequent Procurator Porcio Festo sent him to Rome under military custody.

The journey to Rome touched the Mediterranean islands of Crete and Malta, and then the cities of Syracuse, Rhegium and Puteoli. The Christians of Rome went to meet him on the Via Appia at the Appia Forum (70 kilometers south of the capital) and others at the Three Taverns (40 kilometers).

In Rome he met with delegates of the Jewish community, to whom he confided that it was for "the hope of Israel" that he endured his chains (cf. Acts 28:20). However, Luke's account ends with the mention of two years in Rome under house arrest, without reference either to a sentence of Caesar (Nero), or even less so to the death of the accused.

Subsequent traditions speak of a liberation, which would have favored a missionary journey to Spain or an eventual short trip to the East, specifically to Crete, Ephesus and Nicopolis in Epirus. Always on a hypothetical basis, a new arrest is conjectured and a second imprisonment in Rome -- from where he would have written the three so-called pastoral letters, namely the two to Timothy and the one to Titus, with a second trial, that turned out to be unfavorable to him. However, a series of reasons induce many scholars of St. Paul to end the Apostle's biography with Luke's account in the Acts.

We will turn to his martyrdom later on in the cycle of these catecheses. For now, in this brief account of Paul's journeys, suffice it to take into account how he dedicated himself to the proclamation of the Gospel without sparing his energy and facing a series of grave trials, of which he has left us an account in the second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 11:21-28).

Of the rest, he writes: "I do it all for the sake of the Gospel" (1Corinthians 9:23), exercising with absolute generosity what he calls his "anxiety for all the Churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28). We see a determination that is explained only by a soul truly fascinated by the light of the Gospel, enamored of Christ, a soul sustained by a profound conviction: That it is necessary to take the light of Christ to the world, to proclaim the Gospel to all.

This I think is what stays with us from this brief account of St. Paul's journeys: to see his passion for the Gospel, and thus intuit the grandeur, the beauty, and even more, the deep need that all of us have of the Gospel. Let us pray so that the Lord, who made Paul see his light and hear his word and touched his heart profoundly, make us also see his light, so that our hearts will also be touched by his word and so that we too will be able to give today's world, which thirsts for it, the light of the Gospel and the truth of Christ.

[The Holy Father then greeted pilgrims in several languages.]

[The Pope then made an appeal for the situation in India]

[Translation by ZENIT]

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