

June 2009

Dear Friend of the Franciscan Missions!

On June 21 (Father's Day), we come to the beginning of summer. June 1 returns us to the season called Ordinary Time. June 7 is the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity and June 14 is the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ. St. Anthony's feast is June 13. We all pray for you in a special way on that day. The Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus is June 19, followed on June 20 by the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The Solemnity of St. John the Baptist is June 24, and the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, the patrons of the Church of Rome, is on June 29. Pray especially for Pope Benedict during this month, for all our fathers, grandfathers, godfathers, and stepfathers--those who are living and those that have died. The Year of Paul comes to an end on June 29. Pope Benedict has declared the Year of Priests which will begin on June 19 and follow through to the next year. As we keep St. Anthony's feast, pray for those who are hungry, that bread and other food may come to the poor. Thank you for your generous support of our missions, your prayers and generosity make a big difference. Be assured of our prayers. Enjoy the summer!

Reflecting on the Year of Paul

Fr. Russell Becker, O.F.M.

By reason of jealousy and strife, Paul, by his example, pointed out the prize of patient endurance. After that he had been seven times in bonds, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, had preached in the East and the West, he won the noble renown which was the reward of his faith, having taught righteousness unto the whole world and having reached the farthest bounds of the West; and when he had borne his testimony before the rulers, so he departed from the world and went unto the holy place having been found a notable pattern of patient endurance. —First Epistle of Clement, circa AD 96.

The Year of Paul comes to a close on June 29. St. Paul is the larger-than-life figure in the history of Christianity that was instrumental in expanding the understanding of the Church's mission. In the beginning, Gentiles were only welcomed with some difficulty, but Paul encouraged Peter and the other apostles to look truly to the ends of the earth and proclaim the Gospel to all people. This Year of Paul provided an opportunity to take a fresh look at a familiar friend and discover anew the riches of his preaching. For me it was fun to listen again to things I have had in the back of my mind, and to bring them back to the center of my thought and reflection. Here are some parts that particularly struck me.

Earthen Vessels. *We hold a treasure in earthen vessels that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us* (2 Cor 4,7). Paul is quite honest and realistic as he shares the inner workings of his life of faith and the frustration that he felt. It is consoling and encouraging as we look at our own lives to listen to Paul share a bit of his. In Romans 7, he goes on discussing the law and how we are freed from it through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, but he acknowledges that the spiritual life is not so easily lived because of the power of sin which keeps us living a life of the flesh and not of the Spirit. His frustration comes out as he says: *What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.... For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil that I do not want.... So then I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand...who will deliver me from this mortal body?* (Rom 7,15–24). I think most of us can resonate with these words. We have all known this frustration. In the midst of it, we might be tempted to just give up, but Paul trusts in God who has called him. We should have such confidence! *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom 8,37–39).

Once I was passing a church that had the topic of the Good Friday sermon on the sign outside: **Crucified by Stupidity**. This was a very good explanation for what was remembered on Good Friday. All those people who made stupid choices: Judas, Peter, the chief priests, the crowds..it was all so clear and then I began to remember that all of us get caught up in stupidity and, like all those whom I had so quickly remembered, only realize it after we make our stupid choices. Then it becomes so clear and we feel terribly. St. Paul offers the foolish wisdom of the Christ crucified. We can recover from our stupidity! *...but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1 Cor 2,4). Christ is with us even though we may not think we deserve God's love: *But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us* (Rom 5,6ff), so we are reconciled and given a new start..

Self-emptying. As we Franciscans remember the approval of the First Rule of St. Francis 800 years ago, we have to come back to the center of Francis' life which is rooted in St. Paul. In the Letter to the Philippians 2, 5–11, St. Paul encourages us to embrace the way of Christ: *though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...* He knew we are called to be other Christs and that we had remarkable potential: *for we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them* (Eph 2,10). Here is where we discover the freedom of the children of God, not by gaining power over others and pushing others around, but by the lifelong embrace of selflessness that comes when we have the same attitude as Christ. Like Paul and St. Francis we are all called to grow into Christ, so that more and more we can say. *I have been crucified with Christ and the life I live is no longer my own; Christ is living in me* (Gal 2,19–20).

Love in the end. Almost every wedding has the reading about love from 1 Corinthians 13. Sometimes when we hear it read we just zone out, but the words should be written across our hearts: *If I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.... Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous.... Love never fails.* What a different world we would have! Paul felt that followers of Christ should not be divided from one another nor from anyone else. This can only happen if we embrace the way of love showed us by Christ.

Pray constantly. The best advice he gives to the Church even to this very day comes from his first letter: *Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus* (1 Thess 5,6–8). This admonition occurs throughout his work. I suppose that is how he was able to accomplish so much, imagine what we would be capable of with such prayer! St. Augustine, whose own life and thought were greatly influenced by Paul wrote this prayer which hearkens to many themes of Paul:

Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know you, and desire nothing save only you. Let me hate myself and love you. Let me do everything for the sake of you. Let me humble myself and exalt you. Let me think of nothing except you. Let me die to myself and live in you. Let me accept whatever happens as from you. Let me banish myself and follow you, and ever desire to follow you. Let me fly from myself and take refuge in you, that I may deserve to be defended by you. Let me fear for myself and fear you, and let me be among those who are chosen by you. Let me distrust myself and put my trust in you. Let me willingly obey for the sake of you. Let me cling to nothing save only to you, and let me be poor because of you. Look upon me that I may love you. Call me that I may see you, and ever enjoy you. Amen.

The Year of Paul has been a great opportunity to embrace again the way of the Lord preached by St. Paul. He is still a great model for us all. When we begin to wonder if we can actually do what we are called to do, as I am sure Paul, St. Augustine and St. Francis did, remember those words that came to Paul (and through him to us) from the Lord: *my grace is enough for you!* (2 Cor 12,7).

Questions for reflection:

1. Do you get frustrated trying to live faithfully? Have you experienced the saving power of God in difficult times?
2. How do you embrace the attitude of Christ and the way of self-emptying?
3. What does love mean these days? What do you think Paul meant?
4. How can we pray without ceasing?
5. Is God's grace truly enough for you?

Please remember our missionaries on their birthdays:

- June 2: Archbishop Roberto Gonzales, O.F.M. (Puerto Rico)
- June 16: Fr. Paul Williams, O.F.M. (Home Missions)
- June 21: Archbishop Luis Sainz, O.F.M. (Bolivia)
- June 23: Fr. Emerson Rodriguez-Delgado, O.F.M. (Peru)

May the Spirit fill them with blessings, energy and peace!

Please remember our missionaries and former missionaries who are ill:

- Fr. Ignatius McGeedy, O.F.M. (Brazil)
- Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)
- Fr. Aloysius Siracuse, O.F.M. (Brazil)
- Br. Rosario Vieira, O.F.M. (Brazil)
- Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)
- Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Home Missions)
- Fr. Stanislaus Widomski, O.F.M. (Japan)

May God's healing love touch them and give them strength!