

## INTRODUCTION TO SAINT PAUL'S LETTERS

Pope Benedict has declared the year between June 29, 2008 and June 29, 2009 as "The Year of Saint Paul". You might be wondering why he's chosen to do this. The answer is quite simple: this year marks, approximately, the 2000th anniversary of Paul's birth. For those of you worrying about getting old, you're a mere child in comparison to St. Paul!

Paul (his given name was Saul but he changed his name to Paul after his conversion—hence the reason many people choose to take a Confirmation name to signify a change in their life's direction) was born and raised as a Pharasaic Jew. This meant that he had a particular love for carefully living all of the 616 precepts of the Law. It also meant that he had a sharp loathing for the early group of Jewish Christians that proclaimed that the Messiah had come and been nailed to a cross. Detailed accounts of Paul's persecution of the infant Church can be found in chapters 7 and 8 of the Acts of the Apostles and in Chapter 1 of Paul's own letter to the Galatians.

My "spiritual suggestion" to you is that you take time in the coming year to carefully and prayerfully read Paul's letters. In the New Testament, Paul's works are arranged by length—Romans is the longest (a 16 chapter letter!) and Philemon is the shortest (a single, very short page). However, it seems to me that it would be more helpful to read the 13 letters in the order in which they were written. That way you can see the progression of Paul's thought and prayer life. Though dating these works is often extremely difficult, here's a list I've composed using the latest Scripture scholarship: 1 Thessalonians (50 A.D.); 2 Thessalonians (51); Galatians (54); 1 Corinthians (56); 2 Corinthians (57); Romans (58); Ephesians (61-63?); Colossians (62-63); Philippians (62-63); Philemon (63); 1 Timothy (66?); 2 Timothy (67?); and Titus (67?). The question marks indicate great doubt in the dating of the letter.

What I propose to do over the coming year is print short overviews of each letter in the Sunday bulletin beginning with 1 Thessalonians. Since I'll only be at Sacred Heart through July, I'll submit the articles that remain to Fr. Gary, and he can print them as he sees fit. In the meantime, keep in mind the words of St. Jerome, the patron saint of those who study Scripture: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."

In Christ Jesus our Lord,

Fr. Mark Catalana

## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: 1 THESSALONIANS (2ND IN A SERIES)

It wasn't that long ago when, if you wanted to communicate with someone living at a distance, you had to write a letter. Imagine not having access to your phone, a computer, or being able to text someone! So St. Paul is using the only option available to him to communicate with the church he founded in Thessalonica, a prominent city in modern-day northern Greece: he writes to them.

And Paul has a reason for writing: he had been worried about the infant Christians he had left behind in Thessalonica while he continued his missionary journey. To help them grow in their new-found faith, Paul's missionary companion, Timothy, has remained with them for a little while more. Now Timothy has rejoined Paul and Sylvanus in Corinth and given a hope-filled report of their progress. Paul now writes to encourage them.

So what does he say? First, he gives thanks to God for their new-born faith and gently challenges them to grow in that faith. He tells them to expect hardships for the sake of the Gospel. Since he was no stranger to hardship and persecutions, Paul's words would have carried particular force. Then he reminds them that God is calling them (and us!) to a life of holiness and charity—a life that will necessarily preclude certain things.

One of the most important sections of this letter contains Paul's words about death and Resurrection (the end of Chapter 4). Many of the earliest Christians expected Christ to return at any moment. They became concerned when their loved ones died before the Lord's return in glory. Would they also inherit eternal life? Paul gently instructs them (in words that are often used at Christian funerals to this day) that Christ's power cannot be limited! All who place their faith and hope in Jesus Christ will share his gift of eternal life.

One last point: at the end of the letter Paul asks that it be read to the entire assembly. Within a few short years, Paul's life and words would take on such great importance that his letters would be shared as great treasures among the early Christian churches, being sent back and forth among them via Christian couriers. In a real sense we continue to do that even to this day. So take some time to prayerfully read the earliest of Paul's letters: 1 Thessalonians.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to email me (no letters please!): [frmark@dsj.org](mailto:frmark@dsj.org).

## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: 2 THESSALONIANS (3<sup>RD</sup> IN A SERIES)

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians appears to be a follow up letter to 1 Thessalonians. Many scholars hold that it was written a year later in 52 A.D. It's fascinating to note that forgery was a problem even in the first century: someone had written a fake letter in Paul's name to the Thessalonians telling them that the end was at hand!

Through the centuries many others have followed in these footsteps--some setting a date for Christ's return, others instructing their followers to sell their possessions and leave behind family and friends. Paul's words still apply: "Let no one deceive you in any way." Paul's point is that the date for the Lord's return is not for us to know. Our job as Christians is to live lives that are faithful to the Gospel. And so they would know that his letters were genuine, Paul ends them with his own distinctive writing: "This greeting is in my own hand, Paul's. This is the sign of every authentic letter; this is how I write." (2 Thes. 3: 17)

Though Paul is clearly the driving force behind his letters, it's interesting to see that he nearly always greets the community using his own name and his traveling companions' names. Timothy is most frequently mentioned in Paul's letters (1 and 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Philippians, 2 Corinthians, Philemon, and, of course, 1 and 2 Timothy).

Here are a few things we know about Timothy: He served as Paul's faithful missionary companion and was often used as Paul's personal envoy to the local churches he had established (definitely as envoy in Thessalonica and Corinth); Timothy's father was a gentile and his mother (Eunice) was a Jewish Christian; and Paul converted him to the faith. Paul hints at Timothy's ineffective leadership in 1 and 2 Corinthians, but these facts remain: it's obvious that Paul highly valued him, and Timothy alone stayed with Paul in faithful service of the Gospel from nearly the beginning of Paul's missionary work to his imprisonment in Rome.

Lastly, Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians contains a theme he will often take up: Christians should imitate him in faith and their work habits. He points out, as he did in 1 Thessalonians and will do in later letters, that he makes no demands of monetary support from them. Instead he works for a living (Paul was a tentmaker—see Acts 18:3) so as not to impose on them. Quiet work for the Lord remains a hallmark of Christian virtue!

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: GALATIANS (4<sup>TH</sup> IN A SERIES)

Imagine a really annoyed parent reprimanding a child. In essence, that's what St. Paul is doing as he writes to the Galatians. Of all his letters, this is by far the most severe. This was a community that consisted of former pagans whom Paul had personally converted to the faith. After he leaves them to continue his missionary journeys, Jewish Christians come among them insisting that they observe the Jewish Law. With the addition of so many Gentile converts, the question for the entire Church became, "Are we Jews who believe in Christ, or are we something entirely new: Christians?" Paul has his answer ready.

No one could doubt that Paul was an expert in the Law; he knew it backwards and forwards before his conversion (Chapter 1, verses 13-14). But he also knew that salvation could not be found in the Law.

The crux of Paul's words to the Galatians can be summed up as follows: How are we saved? If the Law can save us, we have no need of a Savior—we can save ourselves by simply observing the Law. It's obvious that God did not intend the Law to be the only instrument of our salvation (Abraham, our father in faith, was saved and he lived five hundred years before the Law) but our guardian until the time of Christ. That being the case, salvation now lies not in following the Law but through faith in the Son.

In the fourth chapter of this letter (verses 13-16) Paul makes an interesting allusion to a physical condition from which he suffered. Apparently, he had some form of eye affliction that inspired revulsion in those who saw him. Some Scripture scholars believe this might be "the thorn in the flesh" of which St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:7. In any case, Paul uses the kindness the Galatians showed in helping him with his eye difficulties to remind them of the bond of love that exists between them.

There is one last thing I'd like to point out about the letter to the Galatians. In this short work we have the most detailed, autobiographical account of Paul's life before Christianity, his conversion, and his preparation to be an Apostle (it took fourteen years—far longer than seminary preparation today!). Paul may not have sat at Jesus' feet while the Lord preached, he may not have witnessed a single one of his miracles, and he wasn't present at the Last Supper. However, he did experience Christ on the road to Damascus—an event that completely converted him to live for Christ. In Galatians, Paul holds that this same experience of conversion is available to you and me.

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: FIRST CORINTHIANS (5<sup>TH</sup> IN A SERIES)

The city of Corinth, located about 45 miles west of Athens, was an extremely wealthy and important metropolis. Destroyed in 146 B.C. but rebuilt by the Romans in 44 B.C., the city boasted a double harbor that made it a natural hub of commerce. When Saint Paul wrote the Christians in Corinth (a community he himself had founded and nurtured) in 56 A.D., it was a city of about 250,000 people. By way of comparison, Rome at this time was the largest city in the Empire with about 1 million people. Jerusalem, which would be destroyed by the Rome in 70 A.D., had about 150,000 inhabitants.

With so many people and so much wealth gathered in one place, Corinth presented unique opportunities and challenges to Paul. The extraordinary number of visitors created the possibility of new converts who would take Christianity back to their homelands. Along with this, the Christians in Corinth were very generous in financially supporting other struggling Christian communities. Paul asks them to take up a collection at the end of his first letter to them (1 Cor. 16: 1-4) and then thanks them profusely in his second letter for their generosity (2 Cor. 8 and 9).

At the same time, deep divisions and moral depravity (incest, Christians suing one another, irregularities in their Sunday worship, etc.) plagued the community. Paul offers them very specific guidance on how to deal with these and other issues—and he underscores his authority as an Apostle to do so.

Here's an interesting historical sidelight: Pope Saint Clement of Rome wrote the Corinthians around 95 A.D. (it's among the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament). Clement wants them to end the factions which were still tearing apart their community. He writes, "Pick up the letter of Blessed Paul the apostle. Why did he write you at the beginning of his ministry? Even then you had developed factions... You should put an end to this division immediately." Evidently they had not take Paul's words of admonition to heart.

One of the most popular readings in the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. This text on love has been proclaimed at more weddings than I can count! However, Paul obviously didn't originally mean it as a marriage text. Instead, writing to a people who valued many other "unusual" spiritual gifts, Paul reminds them that all gifts are at the service of three principal gifts of the Holy Spirit: faith, hope, and love. These are the only three things that you and I can take into the next life—so stock up now!

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: SECOND CORINTHIANS (6<sup>TH</sup> IN A SERIES)

Few people enjoy criticism—constructive or otherwise—and the Christians in first-century Corinth were no exception. Paul's first letter to them admonished them to live more fully the Christian life. Alas, they didn't take it well (7: 8-13). Now, like a good parent eager to correct a child but not wanting to break the child's spirit, Paul speaks to the church at Corinth of the ties that bind them together: he has suffered for them (1: 5-7; 4: 8-11; and 11: 24-28) and preached the Gospel to them free of charge (Chapter 11)—unlike those who are now stirring up trouble in the community.

Most Pauline scholars believe that 2 Corinthians is actually a composition of several of Paul's letters since the flow of the words doesn't have his customary fluid style. In any case, 2 Corinthians provides fascinating glimpses into Paul's personal life.

Evidently, the Corinthians weren't particularly impressed with Paul's speaking skills: "Some will say, 'his letters are severe and forceful, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible.'" (10:10). Paul himself admits that he is not a professional orator, but that is not the goal of his ministry: "Even if I am untrained in speaking, I am not so in knowledge" (11:6) and "We do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord" (4:5). There is more than one way to preach. As St. Francis of Assisi would comment twelve centuries later, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."!

For those who think the Church spends too much time talking about money, you'll be amused that Paul spends two whole chapters (8 and 9) discussing the giving habits of the Corinthians. His advice on why Christians give and how they should give resonates in the hearts of contemporary believers.

You will almost certainly notice, as you read Paul's letters, that the Church uses his words extensively throughout the Mass—especially in the priest's greeting at the beginning of the Liturgy and in the Eucharistic Prayers. There are two prominent examples of this in 2 Corinthians. Recognize the words, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"? They're from the conclusion of the letter. And the Preface of the First Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation is based on Chapter 6. When you stop and think about it, the entire Mass is one great Scriptural prayer—mention that the next time someone tells you Catholics don't use the Bible!

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: ROMANS (7<sup>TH</sup> IN A SERIES)

How do you summarize in a short article the longest and most theologically sophisticated of all St. Paul's letters? It won't be easy!

Paul always writes his people with specific objectives in mind. Most scholars believe the letter to the Romans was written around the year 58 from Corinth. Paul has successfully taken up the collection for the poor that the Apostles in Jerusalem have requested and is preparing to personally bring it to the Holy City. But he's also looking ahead to his next missionary journey: it's been his dream to evangelize Spain (15:24), and he plans to stop in Rome for help on the way there. Like so many of us, life doesn't go as planned for Paul. While delivering the collection to Jerusalem, he's arrested and, since he's a Roman citizen, shipped off to Rome for trial. He got his trip to Rome—just not in the way he had hoped!

The text of this letter is extremely dense. Consider it the Mount Everest of all Paul's writings: challenged by many, conquered by few. Here are a few things to keep in mind as you read it. Paul presumes his readers have a solid grasp of the Jewish Law in general and the Old Testament in particular. But he also knows that the Church in Rome (like the Church in San Jose in a way!) is "multi-cultural": it's composed of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Paul wants them to see that in Christ ALL have become God's children.

Becoming God's children is not some great achievement on the part of humanity. It's a free gift available to all by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith, then, is the key to understanding Paul's letter to the Romans. You can't earn faith or salvation by works (Chapters 3 and 4) though Paul explicitly says we will be judged by our works (2: 6-8). This is because genuine faith always reveals itself through concrete acts of love.

One of the great sorrows of Paul's life was that all of Israel did not accept Jesus as the Messiah (Chapter 9). Having experienced Christ risen from the dead on the road to Damascus, Paul wants everyone to know the Lord. Still, he does not become bitter or vindictive when this does not happen (Chapter 11); God's call is irrevocable. What is required of Christians is to make the faith credible in a public way through lives completely dedicated to the Lord Jesus—the heart of Chapter 12. We must be ready to live and die for Christ (Chapters 14 and 15)—a message as important in the twenty first century as it was in the first.

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: PHILIPPIANS (8<sup>TH</sup> IN A SERIES)

St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi (a major city in Macedonia named after the father of Alexander the Great) has sometimes been referred to as "the letter of joy". Paul uses the word "joy" or "rejoice" 16 times in this short letter. This is all the more remarkable as Paul tells us (1:13-14) that he's writing from prison! The long-standing tradition of the Church is that Paul wrote from a cell in Rome. However, we know from the Acts of the Apostles that Paul was also imprisoned in Caesaria after delivering the collection from Greece to Jerusalem as well as briefly detained in Ephesus.

In any case, it's clear from the tone of the letter that there's a special bond between Paul and the Philippians. He writes them as a gentle father, eager to see them grow in the faith. You may recall from reading Paul's letters to the Corinthians that he frequently boasted to others about the church in Philippi; he was intensely proud of them. Though poor, they regularly out-gave other, wealthier communities and provided resources for Paul to carry out his apostolic ministry.

Paul has said over and over again in other letters that the important thing is not who preaches Christ but that Christ is preached. Now he is living those words. Unable to move about freely, he can still exhort and encourage Christians with the written word. One of the most striking passages in this letter is found in chapter two. Paul reminds his people that one of the primary virtues of the genuine Christian is humility in verses 6-11. Paul quotes what most scholars believe is an early Christian song—the earliest hymn known to us. Those who follow the Lord must have his attitude in themselves: no Christian can take a place greater than the Lord's, and his place was the cross.

In chapter three, Paul takes up what has become a regular theme in his letters: warning against those who want to re-impose the Mosaic Law (especially circumcision) on Gentile Christians. To a community that he knows and loves so deeply, Paul does not have to use many words; his example of patient suffering for Christ is sufficient. Among his final words to his beloved friends and siblings in the faith, Paul gives Christians of every time and place comfort in moments of trial and difficulty: "I have strength for everything through Christ who strengthens me."

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: PHILEMON (9TH IN A SERIES)

If you blink, you'll miss Saint Paul's letter to Philemon in the New Testament. Written from prison around the year 63, this is by far the shortest of all Paul's letters. In fact, it's so short that it's one of only two works in the entire Bible not divided into chapters—Obadiah is the other. This 443 word letter (about as long as this article!) is a father-like appeal to a spiritual son, Philemon, to take back his run-away slave, Onesimus.

The Greek name "Onesimus" means "Useful." Paul plays on the name to tell Philemon exactly how "useful" Onesimus has become. In fact, Philemon and Onesimus now share something in common: Paul has converted them both to the faith! So Paul is now returning, not a slave, but a brother in Christ to Philemon.

Some have criticized early Christians in general and St. Paul in particular for not doing more to eradicate the evil of slavery in the ancient world—and thus lending legitimacy of a sort to the institution of slavery in the modern world. Yet when one considers Paul's situation his thinking in the matter becomes clear. Paul is writing as "an old man" (verse 9). His time is running out; he's concentrating on the things he can change: the minds and hearts of his fellow believers. And by all accounts, first century Christians were in no position to challenge the Roman Empire. Added to this, Paul and all first century Christians had a sense that Christ's return in glory was imminent. Making Christ known to as many people as possible was the first priority. Changing societal structures would have been way down on the Christian to-do list.

In a way, though, Paul does do something revolutionary in this letter. He tells Philemon that Onesimus is now his equal in Christ: "Perhaps this is why he was taken away from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord." (verses 15-16). One wonders how different our history might have been had we taken Paul's words more seriously.

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: COLOSSIANS (10TH IN A SERIES)

Colossae was a Roman city of about 10,000 people in what is now south-western Turkey. Roman sources tell us it had a flourishing textile industry with a specialization in wool products. There was even a color named after the city: “colossinus” which was a deep red dye for wool. We also know that the city was destroyed by an earthquake during Nero’s reign about the year 61—a few years before St. Paul’s own death.

With this letter to the Colossians, we encounter the first dispute among scholars as to genuine Pauline authorship. Most Scripture scholars now point to several factors that lead them to doubt Paul was the principal author of Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, or Titus. 1. The grammar and style of Greek is markedly different from Paul’s other letters (you’ll notice right away that the sentences are very long and complex as opposed to the compact writing style of the other Pauline letters). 2. Certain issues and situations mentioned in these letters have more to do with problems in the next generation of the Church. 3. It’s difficult to reconcile these works with the known chronology of Paul’s life detailed in the Acts of the Apostles. For this reason, some posit a disciple of Paul’s as the author or perhaps his scribe.

Having said all this, it would be a serious error to dismiss these works as “inauthentic” or worse, “forgeries”. These letters carry the full weight of apostolic authority and are recognized as part of the Church’s Scriptural Canon—and have been recognized as such from the beginning. No matter who the author, all of the works now present in the Bible are proclaimed by the Church to be the authentic and genuine Word of God given to us for our salvation. However, acknowledging the distinctions in style , authorship, and content will also explain the subtle nuances in theology present in these works. First and foremost, the Christian should read these texts in a way profoundly different from the way one might read Shakespeare, Tolstoy, or an address by Lincoln: this is the inspired Word of God!

With this in mind, the letter to the Colossians was written to correct a specific problem in Colossae: a heresy that seemed to want to place Christ within a kind of pantheon of other gods (2: 4-23). Christ is the Lord of creation, and all things exist to serve him—not the other way around. Because the Christian has been baptized in Christ (3: 1-4—the great Easter reading of the Church), you and I have also died to a life of sin. We are reminded what the life of grace looks like for the believer: we are called, as “God’s holy and beloved ones” to lives of heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love”. If that’s not a genuine expression of the Christian life, I don’t know what is.

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: EPHESIANS (11TH IN A SERIES)

At the end of August I found myself on retreat in a Trappist monastery with our diocese's pastoral year seminarians. At the 3:30 (yes, that's a.m.) Vigil services that week, the monks were reading from the letter to the Ephesians. Having just read the letter to the Colossians, I could not help but be struck by the similarities between the two works. And I'm not the first person to notice this. Let's take a look at a few of those similarities.

There are 155 verses in Ephesians. Just over 1/3 of them are nearly identical in content and placed in the exact order as in Colossians. A further 3/5 of Ephesian's content parallels material in St. Paul's other letters. At the same time, 83 words are used only in Colossians and Ephesians and not in any of Paul's works. This has led many scholars to propose that Ephesians is a kind of encyclical letter sent to several local churches in Paul's name.

The city of Ephesus itself was a major seaport on the western coast of what is now Turkey. It served as the capital of the Roman province of Asia and had a population of about 200,000 people. Chapters 18-20 of the Acts of the Apostles tell us that Paul spent upwards of three years in the city, was one of the founders of the Christian community there, and used the city as a kind of base of operations for his missionary journeys. An interesting sidelight is that an early tradition of the Church holds that John and the Virgin Mary lived in Ephesus, and that Mary was assumed into heaven from there.

In the letter itself, as in Colossians, Ephesians takes up the matter of Christian marriage. As a priest, I'm often amused when this text (5: 21-6:11) comes up in the Church's cycle of Sunday readings. "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" (husbands collectively glance at their wives!); "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church" (wives collectively poke husbands in the ribs!); "Children, obey your parents" (children collectively look at the floor!). This reading is also an option as a wedding text—though only one of the couples I've prepared for marriage in 17 years as a priest has ever chosen it.

But a closer reading of the text reveals something remarkably beautiful. Paul tells his people that the marriage relationship is similar to Christ's relationship with his bride, the Church. The Church hangs on the Lord's every word with a trusting faith that Jesus would never lead her astray. And Christ loves his bride so much that he is even willing to die for her. The children of the Church, if they are to grow in faith and holiness, have to be willing to trust and obey their parents. It's not idealistic to suggest that Christian families would be transformed if everyone tried to live these words.

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: TITUS (12TH IN A SERIES)

Saint Paul's general habit was to write entire Christian communities and offer greetings to individual in his letters. However, we do possess four very personal letters written to single individuals: Philemon, Titus, and 1 and 2 Timothy.

A commonly accepted practice in the ancient world was for authors to write in the name of their masters or mentors. In the case of the letter to Titus, this would have had the effect of extending Paul's thought to the problems of Titus' community. Today, many people would find writing in another's name misleading. However, in the first century it was a frequently employed custom: No one would have thought it odd or fraudulent.

Titus is the obvious recipient of this letter. What do we know about him? Paul mentions Titus in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. Interestingly Titus is never directly mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. It was Titus who took up the collection in Corinth for the Christians in Jerusalem. Titus also appears to have served as a kind of "go-between" for the Corinthians and Paul when problems surfaced between them. By all accounts, Titus was a trusted co-worker of Paul's. Given that relationship and the number of years they worked together, it's strange that the tone of this letter is not more personal if Paul is indeed the author.

The principal concern of the letter to Titus is the structure and internal discipline of the Church on the island of Crete. As in many of Paul's other letters, there's a concern that individuals may be worming themselves into the Christian community to teach their own opinions rather than the Gospel as handed on by the Apostles. The letter also describes in detail the commonly accepted method of organizing a local church: a bishop has been appointed by an Apostle who chooses co-workers (priests, deacons, and lay leaders) to assist him (1:5-9). When you think about it, that's the way the Diocese of San Jose was founded 27 years ago: Bishop Pierre Domain was chosen by Pope John Paul II as the Diocese's first bishop. In turn, Bishop Domain gathered around him priests, deacons and lay leaders for the day to day work of running the Diocese and its individual parishes. The term "apostolic succession" flows from this method of guaranteeing a connection to the first Apostles and thus to Christ himself. It's this collective union, what St. Paul means when he refers to the Church as "the Body of Christ", that assures fidelity to the Gospel.

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: TIMOTHY (13TH IN A SERIES)

In a previous article (2 Thessalonians), I discussed St. Paul's co-worker, Timothy. Suffice it to say that Paul considered Timothy a kind of "right-hand man". Though considerably younger than Paul, Timothy was his indispensable partner in proclaiming the Gospel. Timothy served with Paul in Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, and Ephesus as well as being Paul's trusted delegate in gathering the collection in Corinth for the church in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8: 16-24).

After spending so much time together, one might expect a somewhat more personal tone than is displayed in 1 Timothy. In 1: 13-14 Paul briefly discusses his former life as a persecutor of the Church. Unless he's deliberately being humble (a distinct possibility) as he writes the young Timothy, it's difficult to understand why Paul would have to remind Timothy of this. In addition, the letter ends rather abruptly with little warmth or affection—very unlike most of Paul's other letters. Though scholars debate Paul's authorship of both 1 and 2 Timothy, this fact remains: these letters provide valuable insight into the early Church's life and structure.

Of paramount concern in 1 Timothy is the role the pastor plays in preserving both authentic Christian teaching and the unity of the community. Paul knows that doing so will not always make Timothy or any other pastor popular. But popularity is not the goal of the Christian leader: fidelity to Christ is the goal.

Regarding Church structure, Paul lays out the blueprint for the Christian community: there should be one principal leader or bishop (3: 1-7)—Timothy has been designated this leader by Paul himself through the "laying on of hands"; the deacons are to be of the highest character (3: 8-13); the Christian faithful—Paul highlights widows—are called to the life of grace and holiness (5: 3-16); and the priests must be exemplary follows and preachers of the Word (5: 17-22). All of this is a very practical way of outlining what Paul and we understand the Church to be: the very Body of Christ with all of its members contributing to its welfare.

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## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: 2 TIMOTHY (14TH IN A SERIES)

Of all the Pauline letters, 2 Timothy is by far the most poignant. Writing from a prison cell under a sentence of death, Paul reaches out to Timothy, his faithful missionary companion. In these few chapters, the depth of Paul's faith is now fully revealed: he relies and trust completely in the Lord Jesus even as almost all others have abandoned him (1:15).

Presuming that Paul is the author of this letter, 2 Timothy serves as a kind of last will and testament. But here Paul is not bequeathing his possessions to another but something far more valuable: the gifts of faith, hope, and love. The finish line is now in sight. Paul has one last duty to perform: to hand the baton on to young Timothy so that Timothy will keep and pass on the faith.

In a rare moment of nostalgia, Paul recalls the first days of missionary activity with Timothy (1: 3-14). But even this walk down memory lane has a purpose: to strengthen Timothy's resolve to live in Christ. Paul reminds his disciple of how the faith first took root in the lives of Lois and Eunice—Timothy's grandmother and mother. Twenty centuries later I notice that the faith of very strong and holy women is often the starting place for belief in a new generation! My own grandmother and mother performed a similar function for me.

Frequently, in my work with youth and young adults, I'll point out a cross a child is wearing or a Bible someone is reading and ask, "Where did you get that?" Often the response is, "My grandmother gave it to me," or "It was a gift from my Mom." As you and I read this last of Saint Paul's letters, it's natural to ask the question, "What am I doing to ensure that the faith is being passed on in my family?" Like Paul, you and I should not be afraid to speak of the Lord and encourage faith in our loved ones.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to email me: [frmark@dsj.org](mailto:frmark@dsj.org)

## ST. PAUL'S LETTERS: CONCLUSION (15TH IN A SERIES)

You have to admit: the story didn't start very well for Saul-turned-Paul. He began as one who fiercely persecuted those first few Christians—even standing by approving the stoning of Stephen, the Church's first martyr. Saul's name struck fear in the hearts of early believers not joy.

The moment of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus marked a dramatic change of course not only for Saul but for the entire Church. Through this persecutor transformed into an Apostle, the Gentiles would receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some have noted that Saul never met Jesus. This is not entirely true. The encounter he had with the risen Christ was as real as any other human had with the Lord while Christ walked the earth. In fact, one could argue that no one experienced Christ as powerfully as the one who would, from that moment on, be known as Paul.

All of Paul's subsequent ministry flowed from that encounter. As for his attacks on the Church, these came to an abrupt end. It became clear that he was not attacking an institution but the living, breathing Body of Christ: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME?" (Acts 9: 4) So you can see that Paul's vivid descriptions of the Church as "the Body of Christ" and "the Bride of Christ" were not clever images from his fertile imagination but derived from his experience of the Lord Himself.

Further, when Paul describes the primacy of faith, hope, and love in the life of the Christian, he's not making this up off the top of his head. He KNOWS the One who is the giver of faith, the source of our hope, and love itself. With these in place, Paul gives every generation of believers an example of what it means to give one's life entirely to Christ and the joy (and yes, the suffering) that comes from that commitment. Saint Paul's letters vibrantly demonstrate that nothing and no one else can give us freedom except Christ. And the Gospel of Christ is true freedom: freedom for the mind, freedom for the body, and, most of all, freedom for the soul. Do yourself a huge favor and read all about it: pick up your Bibles and, in this year of St. Paul, read and believe!

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