

St. Paul, an inspiring leader of the Early Christian Communities (2 Cor 11:23-29) – Points for Reflection for Priests and Christian Leaders

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ABSTRACT: *St. Paul is often referred to as the most important and creative figure in the history of the early Church, as is evident from his life, works, missionary journeys and general evangelizational legacy. He was, in fact, the leading missionary of that early Christianity. But most Christians may not be fully aware of these noble facts, as Paul was also really notorious for his earlier brutal persecution of the same Church. This article aims at bringing out the laudable merits and legacy of this great apostle which remain exemplary for all Christians, especially the Christian leaders, to this day – a fact for which the Church specially celebrated the Year of St. Paul from June 28, 2008 to June 29, 2009. The methodology employed in this work is the historical-exegetical method. With the help of this method, the shining examples and general legacy of this great apostle in the early Church have been more deeply unearthed with the result that they would now become a constant and lasting encouragement for all Christian leaders, and Christians in general, as well as biblical scholars and students. It is on that note that this article, which was initially a reflection for priests and Christian leaders here in Nigeria, has now been updated and is being published for the benefit of a wider audience.*

KEYWORDS: An inspiring Leader, Christian Leaders, the Church.

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, the 28th day of June 2007, the Holy Father at that time, Pope Benedict XVI, gave a homily during the First Vespers of the Solemnity of Ss. Peter and Paul in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls in the city of Rome. This homily was in honour of the two great pillars of the Church of Rome, Peter and Paul – the founders, so to speak, of that Church of Rome. The Holy Father first paid glowing tribute to the two apostles for their heroic sufferings and sacrifices which eventually culminated in their martyrdom there in Rome. He then specifically lauded Paul’s role in his evangelizational endeavours with the following words: “He lived and worked for Christ, for him he suffered and died. How truly his example is today!”¹ Then followed the all-important announcement: “And for this very reason I am pleased to announce officially that we shall be dedicating a special

Jubilee Year to the Apostle Paul from 28 June 2008 to 29 June 2009, on the occasion of the bimillennium of his birth, which historians have placed between the years 7 and 10 AD.”² The Supreme Pontiff finally called on all, all dioceses and all institutions all over the world, to work towards the actualization and implementation of this announcement.

This article dwells on St. Paul as an inspiring leader of the early Christian Communities – as a reflection initially meant for priests and Christian leaders here in Nigeria. But the general feeling is that it would really benefit a wider audience – hence its present official publication.

Explanation of Key Words and Concepts

To “lead” could be described variously, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. There are, therefore, many sociological and anthropological views of who a leader is. But generally speaking, “to lead” is to guide. It is to point the way forward. It is “the ability to affect others’ actions or attitudes in a dynamic manner. It involves an interplay between leaders and followers and is usually directed toward an end or purpose.”³ A leader is one who has this ability. An inspiring leader is one who manifests this ability with greater inspiration, resulting in a clear capacity to be always creative and to influence those he/she is leading more positively and dynamically.

A Christian Leader is, therefore, one who takes charge of a Christian community, at its various levels, in all the Christian Denominations. Included here are Priests, Religious, Pastors, Elders, General Overseers, to mention but these few. “The Church,” in this article, would, sometimes, be specifically referent to the Roman Catholic Church – but this will always be clear from the context. However, it would, mainly, be used to refer to the “Church of Christ” which is believed to encompass all the groups that go by the name “Christian”. All these groups, in Nigeria, for example, come under the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). This article is meant for all of them.

Who is Paul

Paul, otherwise also known as Saul, was a first-century Jew who strongly persecuted the followers of Jesus but who was miraculously transformed into the leading missionary of that early Christianity. He is seen by most scholars as the most important and creative figure in the history of the early Church. He called himself an “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13) and founded Churches in Asia Minor and Greece. With these Churches, Paul also corresponded extensively with the result that his extant letters now form an important part of the New Testament (NT). The book of the Acts of the Apostles also devotes more than half of its content to his career. Given this background, Paul could be described as a pioneer in formulating the doctrines and the ethical implications of the Gospel and his influence has persisted across the Christian centuries.⁴ No one would then wonder why

the universal Church celebrated the very many years of his ministry and influence, as already mentioned.

Paul was, therefore, a leader. Yet he was not just an ordinary leader. He was a Christian leader – a very inspiring one. He was a leader following Christ and imitating him, as the focus and foundation of Christian leadership is Christ himself. He came that we may have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). He came, not to be served but to serve. Thus, Jesus and the apostolic Church portray the unique Christian exercise of authority as *diakonia* or service. This is precisely why Paul describes himself as a *diákonos Xristoû*, a “servant of Christ,” in our exegetical text below (2 Cor 11:23) in contradistinction to his opponents at Corinth who he also terms “false apostles” (2 Cor 11:13).

The relationship within the Christian community emanates from the conviction that Christ and the Church are united in the Spirit. Hence, the death of Jesus becomes the beginning of the Christian paradox of power through weakness, life through death. It is these basic points of awareness that have enabled Paul and the community to always give thanks to God in all situations (1 Thess 2:13; 5:18) and to constantly live in hope (1 Thess 4:15-17). They also give rise to the challenge to imitate the pattern of the weakness and power of Christ which is so explicit in the life and letters of Paul, as well as in mutual responsibility within the community.⁵

Paul’s Life

As a Jew, Paul’s original name was Saul (Acts 7:58; 8:1,3), as already hinted above. He was from the tribe of Benjamin (Phil 3:5; Rom 11:1) but was born and raised in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia (Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3). Paul was a Roman citizen and this plays an important role in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. for example Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-29; 23:27). He was a Pharisee, educated at the feet of Gamaliel “according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3). Prior to his conversion, Paul actively preserved and protected the religious traditions of these his forefathers. He, therefore, intensely persecuted the Christian Church (Gal 1:13,23; Phil 3:6; 1 Cor 15:9) and was present at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20).

It was, however, while he was on his way to Damascus to further his self-assigned plan of persecuting the Christians there that the unexpected happened in his life. He suddenly experienced a vision of Christ (Gal 1:12,16; Acts 9:3-8; 22:6-11; 26:12-19). This experience had dramatic effects on Paul: It changed his entire life, self-understanding, theological views and goals. In other words, theologically speaking, the encounter with the risen Lord revealed to Paul that the scandal of the cross was not the end of the story of Jesus. It produced a complete “u-turn” in Paul’s life, turning him from a persecutor to a propagator of Christianity! Christ himself, in fact, commissioned him to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles (cf. also Rom 1:5).

Subsequently, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul engaged in three distinct missionary journeys (cf. Acts 13:2-15:29; 15:36-18:22; 18:23-21:16). He was later arrested in Jerusalem but, as he appealed to Caesar – stemming from his right as a Roman citizen – he was sent to Rome for trial. According to 1Clem. 5:4-5, Paul later suffered a martyr's death there in Rome.

Paul's Theology and Ministry

Paul's theology could be gleaned especially from his many letters and from the portrait of him by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. Of the twenty-seven writings which make up the NT, there are four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one letters and the Book of Revelation. Of these twenty-one letters, tradition attributes thirteen – almost a half of the entire NT – to Paul. From these thirteen letters, however, many scholars have tried to distinguish seven of them which they describe as the “genuine” letters of Paul. They are the ones which are strongly believed to have been written by the apostle himself. They are: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Romans and Philemon. The remaining seven others do not command the same scholarly certainty of authorship, even though they may seem quite Pauline in content. They include: Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. In any case, the foregoing distinction is more of an academic saga which has no effect whatsoever on the inspired and authoritative character of these letters. “Regardless of who wrote them, they are all part of the canonical scriptures and recognized by the Church as being inspired and normative.”⁶ Consequently, for the purposes of this write-up, I will take all those letters (with the exception of the letter to the Hebrews) as Pauline and, hence, freely allude to them when necessary.

The central theme and message of these letters is Christ and the salvation that is in him and through him. However, one also bears in mind that Paul never set out in those letters to bring forth a systematic presentation of his theology. Rather, their content is always determined by the needs of the readers as Paul perceives those needs.⁷ A good illustration of this would be got, for example, from what is believed to be his first two surviving letters: 1 Thessalonians and Galatians.

In the first (1 Thessalonians), Paul addresses the Thessalonian Church as made up of those who have been called to the kingdom of God (1 Thess 2:12; 4:7; 5:24). The kerygma of the Gospel there is based on the Christology of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Thess 1:10; 2:15; 4:14), the Son of God (1 Thess 1:10) and Lord (1 Thess 1:1,3,6,8; 4:14). Having believed in the Gospel, they have received the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:5,6; 4:8) and have been purified (1 Thess 2:3; 4:7). They have obtained “holiness (1 Thess 3:13; 4:3-7; 5:23) without having recourse to the Torah. But faced with a new challenging situation in Galatia, however, Paul changed the emphasis of his letter there. In response to other Jewish-Christian opponents there who challenge especially his position on salvation of Gentile Christians without observing the Jewish law, Paul emphasizes more his central

doctrine of justification for the Gentiles, without the Torah or circumcision. Thus, against his opponents' views, Paul spells out his doctrine of justification by faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 2:15-21; 3:2-5,6-18,19-25,26-29; 5:5-6; 6:7-10,14-16) which basically affirms the sufficiency of salvation for gentile Christians through Christ, without the Torah. According to him, this doctrine even originated in Jewish Christianity itself and had actually legitimated the early mission to the non-Jews (Gal 2:16-21; 3:2-5,10-13,18-25; 5:4; 6:13).⁸ It was actually a similar opposition that Paul experienced at Corinth and he also audaciously addressed it in 2 Cor 10 - 13, as seen in the exegetical section below.

Thus, Paul's theology in all his letters is focused on Christ and the salvation that is possible only through him, but the particular aspect to be emphasized in each of those letters is determined by the special circumstances that have occasioned his writing the particular letter. Dunn summarizes this point very clearly:

“It is not only in the clarification and sharper definition of his heritage that the centrality of Christ for Paul's theology is evident. Christ is the thread which runs through all, the lens through which all comes into focus, the glue which bonds the parts into a coherent whole. The very form of the letters he wrote expresses the point for us, beginning and ending as they do most regularly by invoking on his readers the grace of Christ. And there is little difficulty in recalling how much the body and substance of Paul's theology throbs and pulses with the name of Christ and bears throughout the stamp of the impact of his life, death, and resurrection on Paul.”⁹

It is this total emphasis on Christ which gives Paul's ministry its compelling force and irresistible relevance in the Church. One can illustrate this with the two very important sacraments of the Church: Baptism and the Eucharist; these two brought to focus the centrality of Christ in Paul's understanding of gospel and church. ‘Baptism was “in the name of” Christ. Individuals were baptized into Christ, into his death, into his body (Gal 3:26-28; Rom 6:1-14). ‘The bread and cup were a sharing in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). The supper was the Lord's. It was partaken “in remembrance” of Christ. It re(-)presented the death of Christ, and by sharing in it they proclaimed afresh Christ's death “until he comes”’ (1 Cor 11:23-26).¹⁰

Brief Exegesis of 2 Cor 11:23-29

The Text

The text of 2 Cor 11:23-29 runs thus:¹¹

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews

the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

The Background of the Text and its Delimitation

The Epistle of 2 Corinthians is, in general, “Paul’s spirited refutation of certain sham ‘apostles’ who had infiltrated the Corinthian church for their own ends, and in the process were busily discrediting Paul and the true gospel he preached.”¹² These intruders were actually “Jewish Christians, and they attacked Paul’s apostolic authority.”¹³ Paul remarks on his speaking like a “fool” or “madman” (vv. 21b and 23a) in responding to these intruders as boastfully as he does but he feels he has been obviously forced to do so by their discrediting stance to his apostolate at Corinth. Yet his remarks actually show a strong element of parody, revealing his refusal to take the competition with them seriously,¹⁴ as he is really boasting out of weakness (11:30-33; 12:5-10).

The letter being divided into two major parts, chapters 1-9 and 10-13 respectively, 2 Cor 11:23-29 is naturally found in its second part, which actually forms “a unit we could call ‘Paul and his opponents.’”¹⁵ But the text of 2 Cor 10-13 is actually divided into three smaller components: a) An appeal for complete obedience (10:1-18), b) Paul speaks like a fool (11:1-12:13) and c) A warning prepares a visit (12:14-13:10), then comes the conclusion (13:11-13).

The second part above (Paul speaks like a fool) is further divided into three parts: a) Paul’s justification for being foolish (11:1-21a), b) Paul’s boasts of himself (11:21b-12:10) – further divided into: 1) His sufferings (11:21b-33) and, 2) His visions and revelations (12:1-10), and c) Further justification for his foolishness (12:11-13).¹⁶

Vv. 23-29 form part of 11:21b-33 where Paul dwells profusely on his sufferings as a minister of Christ. The catalogue of those sufferings runs through v. 27, comprising four patterned sets of adversities in v. 23b, vv. 24-25, v. 26 and v. 27 respectively. To this straightforward listing of afflictions “vv. 27-29 constitute an addendum, formally but not materially distinct from the catalogue itself.”¹⁷

Hence, Paul’s speaking as a fool, his “fool’s speech,” actually begins from that verse, 21b. But the exegesis in this article has been limited to vv. 23-29. This is because the exordium is at v 23, while vv. 24-27 give the litany of afflictions endured by Paul in his missionary

service, as already pointed out. But throughout, he is ‘speaking as a fool,’ and consciously setting his service as a *diákonos Xristoû*, a ‘servant of Christ,’ in antithesis to the claims of the rival mission preachers.¹⁸ Then the last two verses, vv. 28-29, stand at the high point of the list of his sufferings ultimately showing Paul’s “service for the churches as their authentic messenger, founder and guide.”¹⁹ This selected text shows Paul, indeed, as an inspiring leader in the early Church – and this is the emphasis of this article.

Brief Exegesis

In v. 23, Paul states the fundamental matter of the debate between him and his opponents at Corinth. He strongly contrasts himself with them, emphasizing that if they are “servants of Christ” (*diákonoi Xristoû*), he is a better one (*hyper egō*) – because such is the hallmark of his life and his life’s work. Paul has earlier described those antagonists as “false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (11:13) when they are actually “servants” of Satan (11:15). He, therefore, emphasizes that those opponents are no match to him in any way, as he is a missionary-servant who has apostolic authority on account of which he has come to Corinth.²⁰ Hence, he boastfully begins to enumerate the ordeals he has gone through in comparison with them, to justify his stand – “with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.”

From vv. 24-27 Paul goes ahead to list more things which he has suffered, some of which will also appear in summary in 12:10 – he has already listed similar catalogues of suffering in 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5 (cf. also 1 Cor 4:9-13; Rom 8:35): “The forty lashes less one” which he had received, five times, at the hands of fellow Jews, is a provision of Deut 25,1-3. This text states that if a person is convicted in a court of law, he may receive whippings, in punishment, proportionate to the seriousness of the offense committed – the number of blows, in any case, not exceeding forty. However, “the present list is the earliest evidence for the practice of stopping one short of the maximum allowed, probably to avoid going over the maximum due to a miscout.”²¹

Paul was also beaten with rods three times (v. 25) – a specifically Roman punishment, as Roman officials were often accompanied by “lictors” bearing wooden rods with which such beatings were administered. But even though Roman citizens were later exempted from such beatings, yet that exemption was often ignored.²² In Philippi (Acts 16:22-24), for example, Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten with rods and thrown into prison, at the orders of the Roman magistrate. But they were later released with apologies (Acts 16:35-40). “Once I was stoned” (v. 25): This may have been the incident at Lystra (Acts 14:19) where at the instance of hostile Jews from Antioch and Iconium, Paul was stoned.

Paul embarked on several journeys and the dangers to which he was exposed (v.26) were really innumerable – from rivers, robbers, his own people, Gentiles, in the city, wilderness, at sea and from false brethren. “False brethren” (*pseudadelphoi*) is a Pauline particular expression (cf. Gal 2:4 and 2 Cor 11:13) referring to “those who try to impose the law on

Gentile Christians.”²³ It stands at the climax of the trial list in this verse, to attract greater emphasis to itself²⁴ – as these people were part of Paul’s problems at Corinth.

All the difficulties mentioned in v. 27 are qualifying “in toil and hardship” (*kopō kai mochthō*). They belong to hardships often faced by those who, like Paul, have to earn their living by working at some craft or trade.²⁵ But Paul was not found wanting in his apostolate, despite all these.

Vv. 28-29 dwell on another sort of problem burdening Paul, namely, his daily pressure (*epistasis*) and anxiety (*merimna*) “for all the Churches” which he founded, including the one in Corinth. Constant claims are made upon his time and thought concerning the affairs of all these churches.²⁶ Actually, when these two words in v. 28 are taken together with the rhetorical questions in v. 29 (Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?), the whole picture emerges very clearly: “it seems evident that what is in view is Paul’s pastoral concern, his ‘all-inclusive care for his entire work’ as a servant of Christ and Christ’s people”²⁷

Points for Reflection

It is now time to look at some aspects of the life and ministry of this great apostle to see how best one can benefit from his life and experiences. It is, indeed, true that very many things could be substantially said about Paul. This paper, however, limits itself to these five aspects which seem to be the major ones:

Apostolic Zeal

Paul was overwhelmingly zealous for Christ and for the apostolate. I think that Paul’s other name should really be “zeal”, “apostolic zeal.” He was constant in his zeal to the point of being put in chains and suffering martyrdom. This zeal saw Paul, as already said, embark on three different missionary journeys, so as to preach the Gospel of Christ. These journeys sometimes turned very dangerous. This zeal was also very clear in all his letters.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul underlines: “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 Cor 12:15). He goes on: “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). Also, referring to the other apostles, he writes: “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 15:10). And in short, it was Christ who sent him “to preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). He challenges his opponents at Corinth, as already seen above in the brief exegesis, that he is better than they are in serving Christ: “Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one....” (2 Cor 11:23).

Paul was sad that many of his brothers, the Jews, had not readily embraced Christ. So he writes to the Romans: “I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my

heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race” (Rom 9:1-3). And in his farewell speech at Miletus to the elders of Ephesus, as recorded by Luke, Paul says: “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). He gives a similar advice to the elders themselves: “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the Church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son” (Acts 20:28).

The Spirit of sacrifice and suffering

Related to the foregoing quality is this one. Paul had to undergo a lot of sacrifices and sufferings in order to keep up with his work of evangelisation. To convince the Corinthians to remain faithful to the Gospel he had preached among them, in the face of severe opposition from his opponents, Paul recounts his numerous sufferings and tribulations which include imprisonments, countless beatings and even nearness to death (2 Cor 11:23-29) – as has been duly exegetically analysed above. He talks of the torn in the flesh given him, to harass him, and for which he has prayed the Lord three times to remove, but the Lord answered, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:7-11). Paul then concludes: “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

Finally, to Timothy, his son whom he left in charge of the Church in Ephesus, Paul charges: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel, the gospel for which I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal. But the word of God is not fettered. Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory” (2 Tim 2:8-10).

The Eucharist

There were abuses of the Eucharistic celebration in Corinth. Paul decries these abuses: “When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk” (1 Cor 11:20-22). He then states the first Eucharistic account in the NT:

‘For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (1 Cor 11:23-26).

This Eucharistic formula and theology, he has already commented upon in 1 Cor 10:16-17, as already hinted above.

Paul finally warns that the Eucharistic meal has to be well celebrated, lest “you come together to be condemned” (1 Cor 11:33-34). This means that they have to celebrate it together as a community (1 Cor 11:33), worthily (1 Cor 11:27-30) and not in disorder (1 Cor 11:20-22).

Collaboration with others

Paul greatly evangelized and built up Christian communities across the northern and eastern parts of the Mediterranean. In Greece and Southern Turkey, he founded several communities. In Damascus, Antioch in Syria, Ephesus and Rome, Paul lived and worked with other fellow Christians building up the young churches in Christ. He also corresponded with the communities he founded, communities like Corinth, Philippi and Thessalonica. Paul was successful in his evangelization in these communities owing to his personal relationship with them, enhanced by personal visits and correspondences. He also sent delegates to them, like Titus and Timothy, and established elders/presbyters to lead these communities in the Way of Christ.²⁸

For instance, he writes to Philemon: “Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker...” (Philem 1-2). Paul wrote to the Colossians from prison (Col 4:10,18). Epaphras and Aristarchus of Thessalonica were fellow prisoners (Col 4:10; Philem v.23). The letter was sent out in the name of Paul and Timothy (Col 1:1) and it contains greetings from Aristarchus, Epaphras, Luke, Demas (who later left the faith), and Mark (the cousin of Barnabas) who did accompany Paul on his first missionary journey. These five co-workers also send good wishes in Paul’s letter to Philemon, who was living in or around Colossae.²⁹

Prayer

Prayer could be said to be the entering into a relationship with God. It is our response, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, to the Father’s invitation into relationship, communion and communication with him in Jesus.³⁰

Paul is conscious of the above facts about prayer. Thus, he emphasizes its need in his letters: “Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:17). Also, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col 4:2).

Paul requests for prayers from the Christian communities: “Brethren, pray for us” (1 Thess 5:25). Also, “And pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison” (Col 4:3). On this issue of prayer, cf. also 2 Thess 3:1-2; Phil 1:19.

Practical Application of the Reflection

That Priests are all leaders in the Church, like St. Paul, does not require any further commentary – whether as parish priests, parish vicars, chaplains or teachers. The same applies to other Pastors of souls, Elders as well as all others engaged in organization in all the Christian denominations. What are basically different between the situation of Paul and the present times are only matters of epoch and audience. Thus, priests and all these other leaders have much to learn from St. Paul, as his example – as already observed – is still true and valid today.

One begins with Paul's zeal for Christ and the apostolate. One learns from Paul to keep up the zeal for the apostolate in spite of all odds. It has been observed that people enter the seminaries and houses of formation full of zeal and solid resolutions for God and the apostolate. Also, most Christian leaders are filled with very strong zeal at the very beginning of their apostolate. But later on, when faced with one problem or another (or even series of problems), this zeal sometimes begins to sag. Accusations and counter accusations set in – and even despondency. St. Paul is certainly a shining example of perseverance and doggedness in this regard for all Christians. As has been observed in the exegetical section, for instance, the many sufferings, difficulties and trials which he encountered did not discourage him in any way. They rather emboldened him all the more.

Closely related to the above is Paul's readiness to sacrifice and suffer for Christ and the apostolate. The priestly life, and those of all leaders in the Church, is principally that of sacrifice. But sometimes, as human beings, this life may be influenced by some daunting difficulties encountered from the apostolate and even from the relevant Church authorities, as the case may be. Then friends and colleagues begin to compare notes as to who are more favoured than the others, resulting, sometimes, in ill-feelings on the part of some of those involved. But Paul's emphasis becomes a challenge at such times, as he avows: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:35-37).

Coming to the Eucharist, one notes how seriously the church takes this sacrament: "The mystery of the Eucharist is the true centre of the sacred liturgy and indeed of the whole Christian life. Consequently, the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, continually seeks to understand and to live the Eucharist more fully."³¹ It is, therefore, very important for the priest and for all those involved in this liturgy, to endeavour to listen to Paul and make up their minds to give the people of God the very best in that celebration – for example, in its general preparation, the homily and the music. In some places, some abuses are being reported regarding the Eucharist. There may not be any need to go into details here, for it is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to emphasize that this "highest point" of the Church's life and praxis demands from the priest and all those concerned the greatest and most studied attention.

The priest can never do it alone in any apostolate, no matter how gifted and intelligent he may be. The same applies to all the other Christian leaders. They need the conscious and solicited co-operation of all the people of God for a good apostolate. Today, people are experts in many fields of life – and even in theology. Today, people are becoming more conscious of their rights and dignity as human beings. This is surely a good thing, as it shows that the society is developing more. This means, then, that the priests and other Christian leaders have to try to co-operate with them, and not just dictate for them, for the proper growth and development of the parish, church or institution, as the case may be. Collaborative ministry is the key term in this case. This is imperative, as it would also promote the proper growth of the Church and all its members in their political and social existence in their different countries. This aspect is still most needed, especially in developing countries, where the role of the Church in the proper development of the different aspects of the human society is still clearly manifest.

Above all, when priests and all Christian leaders are able to healthily work together with others in their different areas of apostolate, then the work would naturally become lighter for them. They would then be able to have some personal time and be able to care more properly for themselves and for their health. It is, indeed, their duty to take care of their own health, bearing in mind Paul's injunction to Timothy to that effect (cf. 1 Tim 5:23).

All the above would be better realized, however, only with a deep sense of prayer life: taking off time to remain apart with the Lord in personal prayer. All Christian leaders have to learn this from Paul, yes, but ultimately from Jesus himself. They would always function better, being people of deep prayer. By so doing, the priests, on their own part, would be ever ready to take seriously the priestly promises of Obedience, Poverty and celibate Chastity. Then would priests and all the other Christian leaders be better able to struggle to be exemplary to the flock of Christ in their care.

CONCLUSION

Serious thanks must go to Pope Benedict XVI for declaring the Jubilee Year in honour of St. Paul from June 28, 2008 to June 29, 2009. It is that declaration which elicited in the writer of this article the desire to look more closely at the shining legacy of this unique apostle, the dogged apostle to the Gentiles and, indeed, to the whole world. In that homily, which has already been referred to above, the Holy Father himself further describes Paul's legacy as follows: "The success of his apostolate depended above all on his personal involvement in proclaiming the Gospel with total dedication to Christ, a dedication that feared neither risk, difficulty nor persecution."³² The Pope's observation has also been amply demonstrated, for example, in the exegetical section of this paper, where Paul spiritedly battles his reputation-damaging opponents in Corinth (2 Cor 11:23-29). Therefore, he (Paul) presents to the priests and other Christian leaders, an inviting example, as they labour in the Lord's vineyard, being ever challenged by the spiritual wellbeing and

pastoral demands of the people of God as well as their own personal sanctification. Paul was, without any doubt, a very inspiring leader in the early Church.

As has already been pointed out, there are other aspects that could be highlighted in the life and ministry of St. Paul. But what has been presented in this paper seems to summarize it all and help to place him holistically in focus. May all priests and Christian leaders go ahead in the service of God and his people, fully trusting in his grace and the prayers of St. Paul.

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