

Under His Mercy



Newsletter of the Franciscan Sisters, T.O.R.

January 2009

The Wisdom of Saint Paul

As many of you are hopefully aware of already, Pope Benedict XVI announced back in late June that the Church is dedicating a special Jubilee Year to the Apostle Paul from June 28, 2008 – June 29, 2009, on the occasion of the bimillennium of his birth. This Pauline year has been convoked “with the intention of promoting an ever deeper reflection on the theological and spiritual inheritance bequeathed to the Church by the Apostle to the Gentiles with his vast and profound work of evangelization.”

St. Paul just happens to be one of my patron saints. The reason being is that it happened to be what Pope John Paul II had as part of his name, but also because my own vocational call came out of the blue, hitting me over the head like a 2x4’ (figuratively speaking), similar to St. Paul being knocked down when Jesus called him to be His apostle.

Reflecting back over my life, I realize that St. Paul has always been with me, encouraging and motivating me to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Some very key Scriptures that have impacted my life significantly have been from St. Paul’s letters.

The first Scripture I can remember memorizing as a child (at the prompting of my beautiful mother, God rest her dear soul), was Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” This was the only Scripture I knew by heart and a kind of mantra throughout my growing up years. Whenever I had a challenge or fear to face, I would say this verse over and over to myself and could feel the strength of God rising up within me, propelling me into the trial that lay before me. Whenever I did meet with success it would reinforce this truth of God’s word for me (and give me courage for the next feat). This Scripture is also a good weapon to combat negative self-talk. I wish I could say that I successfully used the truth of this Scripture to tackle every adversity that came my way, but, unfortunately, I did sometimes talk myself out of things I wish I had done instead of having con-

fidence in God as St. Paul did, forgetting that in my weakness lies His strength (cf. 2 Cor. 3:4-6 and 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The next significant Scripture I was told to memorize, this time by my high school religion teacher (thank you, Ms. Naptles), was Romans 12:2: “Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds; so that you may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing, and perfect.” This was a very motivating verse for me to live counter-culturally, an especially difficult task during my teen years.



When I was preparing to make my first profession of vows in this community years ago, it was St. Paul, once again, who captured the essence of why I would make such a radical choice in my life. Therefore, I chose Philippians 3:8-14 as the first reading for that ceremony. Especially significant for me is verse 8: “I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. For his sake I have forfeited everything; I have accounted all else rubbish so that Christ may be my wealth.”

My feast day is celebrated on January 25, the Conversion of St. Paul. The second reading from the Office of Readings for that day is one from St. John Chrysostom on St. Paul. It is my greatest desire and goal to be so grounded and so be able

to emulate St. Paul in this way in my own life: “The most important thing of all to him, however, was that he knew himself to be loved by Christ. This knowledge was so strong that nothing saddened or delighted him apart from that love. It was so strong that he gladly embraced every sort of trial, bearing it for the sake of Christ. This love was so real that the stuff of earth had absolutely no value for him.”

St. Paul attained the fulfillment of the deepest desire of the human heart – an experiential knowledge of God’s unconditional love for him that was his rock solid security. It was from that

secure place of having no fears (not even of torture or death), that he zealously spent his remaining life spreading the Good News as far and wide as he possibly could, so that countless others could come to know this deep love (cf. Eph. 3:18-19 and Rom. 8:38-39). These verses have been a heartfelt prayer for me during very difficult and emotionally painful times.

Our current good shepherd, Pope Benedict XVI, holds St. Paul out to us in a concentrated way this year, because he realizes the timeliness of Paul's example to us today. "He lived and worked for Christ, for him he suffered and died." Our holy father encourages study of Pauline texts because of the "immense wealth of teaching they contain, a true patrimony of humanity

redeemed by Christ." There are so many lessons we can learn from St. Paul and along with our pope, I also encourage you to read and meditate from some of his 14 letters during this year.

I'm sure as you reflect on significant Scripture passages from your own lives, St. Paul will probably be behind many of them. Having St. Paul as a particular patron for us all this year, may we, like him, grow in the profound heart knowledge of "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge..." (cf. Eph. 3:18-19). May St. Paul's timeless example, wisdom, and inspiration enlighten and encourage us all throughout this coming year.

~ Sr. Joan Paule Portenlanger, TOR



Spiritual Muscles

"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his

power through the Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Eph. 3:14-21)

I'm so grateful that St. Paul is praying for us and I am claiming this in a special way throughout this year of St. Paul, relying more consciously on this great saint's intercession. There is, of course, much to be said about this prayer of St. Paul found in his Letter to the Ephesians, but I want to focus on the "inner self," whom he is praying will be strengthened in each of us. Apparently, the Greeks understood the "inner self" as comprising three elements: conscience, reason and will. In the Christian sense, our conscience is the inner barometer that God gives to each of us, allowing us to know instinctively right from wrong. The formation and nurturing of our conscience allows us to become ever more sensitive to the Lord's voice speaking within us, allowing us to know if we are moving towards or away from Him. Our reason enables us to know why certain ways of thinking and acting are right or wrong, allowing us to understand what we are hearing when the Lord is prompting us from within. The gift of our free will empowers us to choose, either for God or against Him, as a consequence of hearing and understanding His voice speaking within. For example, I am tempted to gossip about another person, someone I just got some really juicy news about. If I am aware of my inner life, God's voice speaking through my conscience, I will sense that this would not be right

to do, but I may be strongly tempted and might start to make excuses about why it would be okay. "After all, if I share this news, the person I am speaking with will be able to pray for this unfortunate other more effectively." Now my reason is at work, but not working too well. If I pray for, and am seeking truth, the Spirit can inform and strengthen my reason, letting me know that to gossip would harm the person I am speaking about, the person I am speaking to, and the person who is speaking (me!), and will move me away from God. So, now it is time to act. In my free will I can choose, based on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit speaking through my conscience and my reason, what will help me to move towards God (which involves loving my neighbor as well). Once I act, my conscience comes on the scene again, letting me know (if I listen to it) if I made the right choice. As can be seen, each time we go through this process, we are either strengthened or weakened, depending ultimately on our response to God's grace at work in the "inner self." Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV, who teaches and writes on the discernment of spirits according to St. Ignatius, gives us a way to remember this process of spiritual discernment in three succinct steps: be aware, understand, and take action. I believe that this is one way of understanding what Paul is praying for when he prays that we be strengthened in the "inner self." But, what is the foundation of this strength? We know that we have no strength on our own, at least I hope we know we don't! Our only strength lies in being "rooted and grounded" in the love of Christ, inviting him to "dwell" in our hearts. The word "dwell," as St. Paul uses it here, means permanent, as opposed to temporary residence. We ask the Lord Jesus each day (even each hour or each minute) to take up permanent residence within us, allowing us to experience His profound and personal love for us. In this way our conscience, reason and will is strengthened to choose this love in our daily decisions. By the way, exercising this type of continuous discernment prepares us for the big decisions that come our way, allowing us to more easily know what God's will is in every situation. Therefore, with St. Paul, let us kneel before our Father, asking Him to strengthen our "inner self" through the power of His Spirit, so that we can more deeply know, and more fully share the love of Jesus.

~ Sr. Catherine Lynn Forsythe, TOR



Sr. Thérèse Marie and Sr. Eliana went to Florida State University and spoke at the campus retreat and to the women on womanhood and vocations



Sr. Thérèse Marie gave a 4-part series on prayer for the women at Franciscan University this fall entitled *Intimacy with Christ*



Sr. Mary Catherine, Sr. Eliana, and Sr. Maria Teresa taking a break during the parish mission they gave this October in Donora, PA. The theme was *This is My Body, given up for you*



Sr. Joan Paule and Sr. Mary Markita led a day of reflection for S.F.O. Members from Fostoria, OH and surrounding fraternities



Vocation Discernment Retreat

If you are interested in finding out more about our community or visiting us, Please contact Sr. Thérèse Marie at (740) 544-6204, or vocations@torsisters.org

Discernment Retreat
February 6-8, 2009



Our 20th Anniversary Celebration on September 14: We began with a holy hour, then had dinner and finished with entertainment during dessert. From top: Fr. Mike Scanlan, T.O.R. preaching; friends around the dinner table; dessert assembly line; singing and dancing; and a centerpiece



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Replacing A Cut-Off Valve

St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians (4:23-24), “Your inmost being must be renewed, and you must put on the new man.” Working in maintenance influences my whole life, including my prayer. The Lord often uses images from my work to speak to me. I want to share a reflection I recently had on the process of replacing a cut-off valve. (A cut-off valve enables one to turn the water off to all the pipes that follow it.) The cut-off valve represents our hearts. The water flowing through the pipe is God’s grace moving in and through us. When we sin, we leak out God’s graces, just like a valve does when it needs to be replaced. We often don’t realize a pipe or valve is leaking until the wood around the valve has become damaged – rotten, molded, or even stained. Just so, we often don’t notice how we have fallen into the little sins, but they add up and build their way up to bigger sins – bigger leaks.

Just as the leaky water affects the wood around it, so does our sin affect the people around us. The Lord wants to replace our leaky cut-off valves. He does not just want to put some sealer or putty on it like a band-aid. No, He wants to exchange it for a new one. He takes our hearts of stone and gives us new ones that are soft. “I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts” (Ezekiel 36:26).

However, this can be a painful process. In order to get the old leaky valve off, you have to “heat” up the joints. This “heating up” process can be like spiritual desolation and possibly emotional desolation, or for some, it may even be purgatory on earth. In this exchange process, we could feel very vulnerable,



but the Lord sends the Holy Spirit to hold us together. Grace is always flowing until the moment we die. The Holy Spirit keeps the grace flowing through the pipe until the new valve is on. He keeps it all together. The Lord swaps our heart for one more like His and then seals it with the incredible gift of His mercy and love through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We have the power to turn on or off the flow of grace in our lives – we have the power to respond or not to respond to the Lord working and moving in our lives. This is similar to the cut off valve being opened or closed. So when we are in sin and leaking, we need to go to Confession and let the Lord trade our hearts of stone for new hearts that have a greater capacity to love and show mercy.

~ Sr. Maria Teresa Tortorice, TOR