

“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU...”

*A lectio divina* retreat with retreat with St. Paul:  
Conversion and the First Years of Mission (Acts 9-16)

## **THE PHENOMENON OF PAUL OF TARSUS: The mystery of a vocation to a bond with the Risen Jesus bidden in Heart of God the Father**

It is difficult to imagine the Church without the vocation and mission of St. Paul of Tarsus. Although Paul did not meet Jesus preaching the Gospel in the towns and villages of Palestine, he did receive, by the will of God the Father, the special grace of a meeting with the Risen Jesus near Damascus in the early thirties (of the first century). It was there, though considered an “untimely birth”, that he was placed by God in the ranks of the great apostles. Writing his First Letter to the Corinthians, he first confirms the appearance of the Risen One to Cephas, to the Twelve, to five hundred of the brethren and to James, and then adds: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the Church of God” (1 Cor 15:8-9)<sup>1</sup>. In what, in its very essence, did Paul’s new birth consist of? He had not stopped believing in the One God, the God of the Chosen People, and therefore also of the tribe of Benjamin. He had not rejected the Holy Scriptures of his fathers – he would continue to read and explain them in Jewish synagogues. Fr. Waldemar Chrostowski writes: “Paul changed his convictions, but not his religion. He did not stop being faithful to the faith of his fathers, with its origins reaching back to Abraham, Issacs and Jacob; on the contrary, he recognized that his meeting with Jesus Christ unveiled the true goal and orientation of that religion”<sup>2</sup>. Without a doubt it was at Damascus that Paul changed from a Pharisee defending God and the Jews from Jesus of Nazareth into a defender of God before the Jews who called into question the words directed to Jesus at His baptism in the Jordan: “... You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you” (Mk 1:11). Before the Damascus event, everything told Paul that he had already found the truth – his intellect, his heart, and his will, that is to say, his whole attachment to the traditions of his fathers. It was only at Damascus that God enlightened Paul's heart, that within him should shine “the light ... of the knowledge of God’s glory shining in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). In the One whom he saw, Paul recognized the Messiah who was invoked with such longing in the Holy Books of Israel and in the daily lives of some Jews. But he also recognized in Him the Son of God, equal to the Father in glory and dignity. The whole image of a holy God, separated from mankind, had to be burnt out of Paul – consumed in the fire of God 's grace, for no human power could lead him to faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Did God the Father have to go so far, and could He demand – particularly of Jews – that they believe in Jesus as God? And yet they did believe – Simon Peter, Andrew, Barnabas, Saul, Timothy, and Titus, and so many others in the history of the proclamation of the Gospel of the Son of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from *Holy Scripture* (in this English translation) from *The Holy Bible*. Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition

<sup>2</sup> *Between the Synagogue and the Church*, the chapter entitled “could not oppose that vision from heaven”

In this retreat that we are beginning, our constant motif and point of reference will be wonder at the grace of faith in Jesus as God and man. Grace, that is God himself working in man, was able and is able still to show man the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. However, as near Damascus two thousand years ago, so also today, the ways of grace elude our human criteria – the one who is least holy converts and change his life, while the one who is outstanding for his zeal and piety loses his faith many times and stops practicing it. God knows the heart of man, and by His grace we can break away from the old man and believe, sometimes believe anew and more fully, in Jesus of Nazareth. As Pope Benedict underlined, such a transformation is never just the fruit of a psychological process or maturation, nor of an intellectual or moral evolution. The conversion of Paul “was not the fruit of his thinking, but of a meeting with Jesus Christ”<sup>3</sup>.

Paul’s transformation near Damascus, and later his whole mission as a preacher of the Gospel, took place in the time of the Paschal Church, the Church which lived of the mystery of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Paul’s mission was connected with the founding of new Churches, born mainly of “Godfearers”, that is to say pagans interested in Judaism, as well as pagans who didn’t know Judaism at the time. Paul took responsibility for them as a responsible shepherd; he would return to these communities and strengthen them with his letters. His particular intellectual giftedness, coupled with the workings of grace, brought it about so that Paul was not only a pastor – one who leads to Baptism and administers the gifts of the Holy Spirit – but also that he was from the beginning a theologian, one who in the light of the Jewish scriptures reflected on the nature of this new community of faith in the Son of God. As believers in Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we greatly require deep reflection, based on the Word of God, on the community of the Church – reflection and prayer far removed from ideological and political influences. In St. Paul’s vocational path, described in the Acts of the Apostles, and also in his own writings, we find precious pearls in which the truth about the Church shines forth – the Church as a community enlivened by the power of the Holy Spirit and gathered around the table of the Word and the Eucharist, a community which recognises the Cross of Jesus as the only path of man’s liberation from sin and death. The community of the Church which we make up today is the same as to which Paul belonged and which he formed.

In his mission as a preacher of the Gospel, Paul was met with strong opposition from the majority of his countrymen who viewed Christianity as a new sect which endangered the purity of Israel’s faith. Paul repeatedly experienced persecution from his countrymen, many times carried out by the hands of pagans skilfully aroused against Christians. In the persecutions of the young Church, one fact consistently surprises us: these persecutions strengthened the faithful, and the Church spread to new territories because of them. In the opinion of many bishops, the

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Catechesis of 3 September 2008

present time of the Church is a time of growing persecution of Christians. Sometimes these are bloody persecutions, as in some countries of Asia or Africa; sometimes – for example in Western Europe – they are persecutions hidden under slogans about the fight for freedom and equality of all. Undoubtedly, however, a disciple of Christ will meet situations today in which he is called upon to bear witness to his faith in Christ. One can lose something, and sometimes very much, when he confesses his Master and His Gospel. Our retreat with St. Paul will allow us to see how Jesus leads His disciple to greater freedom of heart, how He leads him through the stage of experiencing his own weakness, until finally he finds his foundation in the strength that comes from God. In the following days, in prayer, we will seek the voice of Jesus, who told Paul with such power: “My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak...” (2 Cor 12:9). After hearing these words of Jesus, Paul could say from the bottom of his heart, “... I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protection of Christ’s power over me ... For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10). One fruit of our retreat may be a greater acceptance of our limitations – moral or spiritual limitations, or limitations of character – while at same time opening ourselves to the working of Christ’s power.

Entering retreat, we must consciously turn to the Holy Spirit, the best interpreter of the inspired Scriptures. St. Paul lived in deep dialogue with the Spirit of Jesus, and he handed on to his brothers the framework of theology of the Spirit helps us in our weakness: for we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit Himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will.” (Rom 8:26-27). There is no true prayer without openness to the action of the Spirit of Jesus. Holy Father Benedict XVI captures this thus; “We could say that the Holy Spirit, that is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, is like the soul of our soul, the most hidden part of our being, from which He continually raises prayer to God which we cannot even express in words”<sup>4</sup>.

On our way of prayer, let us often turn to the Holy Spirit, asking Him first to quiet our hearts, to pour into them the grace of peace, and then to open the mystery of God's Word to us. May the Sequence of the Solemnity of Pentecost lead us into this time of the silence of retreat, a silence directed to listening to the voice of the Son of God:

*Veni, Sancte Spiritus  
et emitte caelitus  
lucis tuae radium.*

*Come, Holy Spirit  
and send forth the heavenly  
ray of your light.*

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, Paul - *The Holy Spirit in Our Hearts*, General Audience of 15. 11. 2006

*Veni, pater pauperum,  
veni, dator munerum,  
veni, lumen cordium.*

*Come, father of the poor,  
come, giver of gifts,  
come, light of hearts.*

*Consolator optime,  
dulcis hospes animae,  
dulce refrigerium:*

*Greatest Consoler,  
sweet guest of the soul,  
sweet refreshment.*

*In labore requies,  
in aestu temperies,  
in fletu solatium*

*In labour, you give rest,  
in heat, coolness,  
in sorrow, comfort.*

*O lux beatissima,  
reple cordis intima,  
tuorum fidelium.*

*O most blessed light,  
fill the intimate hearts  
of your faithful.*

*Sine tuo numine,  
nihil est in homine,  
nihil est innoxium.*

*Without your divine power  
there is nothing in man,  
nothing in man is innocent.*

*Lava quod est sordidum,  
riga quod est aridum,  
sana quod est saucium.*

*Wash that which is dirty,  
water that which is dry,  
heal that which is wounded.*

*Flecte quod est rigidum,  
fove quod est frigidum,  
rege quod est devium.*

*Bend that which is rigid,  
fire that which is frigid,  
rule that which is going astray.*

*Da tuis fidelibus,  
in te confidentibus,  
sacrum septenarium.*

*Give to your faithful ones,  
who put their trust in you,  
the sevenfold sacred gifts.*

*Da virtutis meritum,  
da salutis exitum,  
da perenne gaudium.*

*Give the merit for virtue,  
give leave-taking into salvation,  
give eternal joy.*

TEXT for the prayer of DAY 1:

Acts 9:1 -30 also Acts 8:1 -3

DAY 1

“Who are you, Lord?” - From the religiosity of a Pharisee to an encounter with the Risen Jesus (Acts 9:1-30 also Acts 8:1-3)

INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATIO

In a homily at the beginning of the Year of St. Paul (2008-2009), Pope Benedict XVI expressed a thought that also enlightens us when we open the Acta of the Apostles in order to do *lectio divina* on the vocation of the Apostle of the Gentiles. The Pope stressed: “At the end of his life's path Paul says: - God has appointed ... a teacher of the Gentiles to proclaim the message of faith and truth ... (1 Tim 2:7, cf. 2 Tim 1:11). Teacher of the Gentiles, Apostle, and preacher of Jesus Christ – this is how he defines himself, looking back on the course of his life. This does not mean, however, that he looks only to the past. “Teacher of faith” is a word which contains in itself the future, all nations, and generations. For us, Paul is not just a figure from the past, an honoured memory. He is also our teacher, the apostle and preacher of Jesus Christ for us as well”<sup>5</sup>.

St. Paul is not, therefore, for us an honoured figure from the past - he is a preacher of Jesus Christ, a teacher of faith and truth. The Church owes its theological reading of the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus in large measure to him, against the background of the whole plan of salvation, that is, within the framework of the history of the Chosen People. Paul's personal meeting with Jesus near Damascus became for him an exceptional window on God's truth and plan of salvation.

Context - the appearance of the figure of St. Paul in the Acts of the Apostles

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<sup>5</sup> Homily of Benedict XVI during Vespers in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, 28.06.2008

## 1. The Church before the call of Paul

In order to properly interpret Paul's vocation, we need to place it against the background of the life of the community of Jesus' disciples – either those who themselves were with Jesus before His passion and afterwards met Him risen, or those who believed the witness of the Apostles and received baptism in Jesus' name. God's plan for the world's salvation reached its climax at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross. Uncreated love had come to its very “limits” – Jesus gave His life in exchange for those condemned to death on account of their sins. The mystery of human evil demanded sacrifice, penance, a recompense for the justice so deeply violated by sin. In his letters Paul will help the communities of believers to understand the depths of the mystery of the Cross, the sacrifice of Jesus, that unique “ransom” from sin that only God – Man could offer. In the Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: “For Jews want miracles for proof, and Greeks look for wisdom. As for us we proclaim the crucified Christ ...” (1 Cor 1:22-23).

The community of Jesus' disciples existed before the call of Paul. It lived with faith in Jesus and gave a dynamic witness to Jesus before both Jews and pagans. From the beginning however, from the apostle Peter's first address after Pentecost, the Good News met resistance on the part of some of the listeners, mainly Jews at first. The Sadducees connected with the Sanhedrin in particular, but also many Pharisees distanced themselves from the apostles, and then, filled with anger towards them, they began to persecute this New Way. First Peter and John, and later all the apostles, found themselves in jail for speaking about Jesus as Israel's awaited Messiah.

The God revealed on the Cross and in the Resurrection was not received by the Chosen People. Was this a disaster for them? Or perhaps God's wisdom had foreseen such a course of events, had foreseen the fact that the same words of witness would convert and transform some while others would remain in their resistance. Maybe today somewhere in our hearts we hold the conviction that the final victory of God will come when everyone believes in Jesus. Maybe we are more and more scandalised that today so many Christians in Europe give up the practice of their faith. Practicing Christians are fast becoming a minority. But in the context of the beginnings of the Church described in the Acts, this question comes up: Was there ever a time when all believed in Jesus? Or does the value of Jesus' death on the Cross diminish because of those who do not believe? The disciples of Jesus were just a handful of people compared to the whole of Israel and the pagan world, but they were ready to die for their faith. Precisely for this reason, that they stood wholly for Jesus, they were credible for their listeners and became a channel for the action of God's grace. Maybe the theme of the weakening of faith around you, in your family or your religious community, might hold your attention during meditation. Has my own faith lost its radiance, its burning desire to know Jesus better and to be his joyful witness in spite of everything?

## 2. The first mention of Paul

We find the first mention of Paul in Luke's description of the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen. When he was led out of the city and stoned, "... The witnesses left their cloaks in the care of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). A little further on, Luke defines Paul's attitude towards the death penalty imposed on Stephen: "And Saul approved of his murder" (Acts 8:1). In this, we come to know one of the names of the future Apostle of the Gentiles, surely given to him on the day of his circumcision – the name Shaul, rendered in English as Saul. The first king of Israel bore this name. We know, however, that Saul also used another Hellenised name, Paulus, that is Paul. He therefore did not change his name after the Damascus event – rather, living as a Jew in a Hellenised world he simply had two names from childhood, and in contacts with pagans he most often used the name Paul.

Returning, however, to the text of Acts itself, we see clearly that Luke contrasts Stephen's faith in Jesus with the unbelief and blindness of Saul. In that stage of Paul's life, the mystery of Jesus was completely hidden and unapproachable for him. He was so near to this mystery when Stephen, as a faithful witness, first preached Jesus and then gave him life for Him. But it was not yet Paul's moment of grace.

"That very day the church in Jerusalem began to suffer cruel persecution. All the believers, except the apostles, were scattered throughout the provinces of Judea and Samaria ... But Saul tried to destroy the church; going from house to house, he dragged out the believers, both men and women, and threw them into jail" (Acts 8:1,3).

What was the deepest motivation of Paul's action at the time, of his battle with Jesus' disciples? He surely had an above average intelligence, formed by an education in the spirit of Greek philosophy and with a knowledge of Roman law. His stay in Jerusalem formed him in the dimension of religious knowledge, as Luke writes: "... as a student of Gamaliel..." (Acts 22:3), a doctor of the law. So, Saul knew three cultures – Greek, Roman and Hebrew, however he confessed with conviction his faith in God – Yahweh. This faith, as confessed by the Pharisees, had a fundamental value for him; it determined his life's identity. When a group of people appeared who held that the Messiah had already come, a group condemned by the High Priest and elders, Saul zealously joined in persecuting them. In the world of his faith in the one and only God Yahweh, such behaviour seemed to fulfil God's will. He judged that he was defending the very identity of the nation from a sect, from people who had earlier been Jews but had now fallen away from the Covenant and, still more, were deceiving others. We can look at Saul before his trip to Damascus as an uncompromising defender of the purity of faith. His intelligence – let us



pay attention to this – his ordered and systematic worldview became an obstacle to receiving the Good News of salvation. If we look at this from the perspective of a pre-disposition to conversion, Saul belonged in the group of the most difficult cases. He was close to the Word of God that was preached even then in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Damascus. Analysis of the text – Acts 9:1-19

“As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him:

- Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?

- Who are you, Lord? - he asked.

- I am Jesus, whom you persecute, - the voice said. - But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9:3-6).

The description of the event near Damascus appears three times in the Acts of the Apostles: in chapter 9 (verses 1-19), in chapter 22 (verses 3-21) and in chapter 26 (verses 4-23). There are certain differences in these descriptions, however all of them place one truth in the centre: the Risen Jesus appeared to Paul, Paul saw Him and heard His voice, a voice which penetrated his mind and heart to such an extent that he could not believe. Paul returned to the event near Damascus in his letters also, but we will refer to them in the introductions to contemplation<sup>6</sup>.

When we read Luke’s description of Paul’s conversion, what specially holds our attention?

1. The Lord Himself chose the time of this meeting. Saul had no intuition. No inkling that he was starting a new stage in life. He was completely concentrated on the defence of the purity of the faith of his fathers, and for the violation of this faith he was ready to imprison and kill Christians. An important truth about God’s dealings with man, about the beginnings of being a Christian, is revealed in the manner that Jesus acts with Paul. Pope Benedict XVI grasped this truth thus: “Also for us, Christianity is not some new philosophy or new morality. We are Christians only when we meet Christ. Of course he doesn’t know Himself to us in such an overwhelming and brilliant way as He did for Paul, to whom he appeared in order to make of him an apostle to all nations. But we too can meet Christ by reading the Scriptures, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch the Heart of Christ and sense that He touches ours. Only through a personal relationship with Christ, only by a meeting with the Risen One do we truly become Christians”<sup>7</sup>. Today, on the first day of our retreat, it is worthwhile to reflect during meditation on the quality of our personal relationship with Christ. Has my prayer with the Word of God and my participation in the

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<sup>6</sup> See 1 Cor 15:8, 1 Cor 9:1; Gal 1:15-17

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Catechesis of 03.09.2008

sacraments allowed me to really meet the living Jesus recently? The Lord himself has chosen the time of this retreat, of these days of prayer for each one of us.

2. "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute Me?" Jesus identified Himself with His disciples. The sufferings of those who received faith and baptism were then, and are even now, the sufferings of Christ. The community of believers in Jesus as the God-Man makes up one spiritual body. The Risen Jesus Himself lives and acts in His disciples and witnesses. Writing later about the Church and explaining to the Corinthians her nature, Paul surely had in his mind and heart the first words of Jesus near Damascus. He writes to the Corinthian: "In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptised into the one body by the same Spirit, and we have all been given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12:13) and further: "All of you are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it" (1 Cor 12:27). The present time has laid bare so many sins of those in the Church. These sins are a scandal for us all, especially for the little ones, those with simple hearts. As we suffer spiritually on account of those who yielded to the prince of this world, we must not lose sight of the truth of our faith concerning Christ who identifies Himself with us as the community of disciples. Suffering because of evil, we need to draw near to the Heart of Jesus which does not cease to beat within the Church wounded by sin.
  
3. "Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes but could not see a thing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. For three days he was not able to see, and during that time he did not eat or drink anything" (Acts 9:8-9). Physical blindness became a symbol of Paul's spiritual blindness. Without Christ, he could see neither the world nor God properly. Yet before he even neared Damascus, it seemed to him that he knew the truth, that he knew the Scriptures of his fathers, that he knew the Greek and Roman world in which he had grown up. "But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake. Not only those things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ" (cf. Phil 3:7-8)<sup>8</sup>. Understanding which lacks the light of faith does not reach its fullness and, especially in the world of values, is condemned to temporary solutions, without settling them on solid foundations. Meeting Jesus changes everything; it also gives the reason new strength and light. May the first sentence of St. John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, which in some way expresses the goal of our following of the Apostle of the Gentiles, lead us to personal prayer in this stage of meditation: "Faith and reason (*Fides et ratio*) are like two wings by which the human spirit raises itself to the contemplation of truth. God Himself

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, Catechesis of 03.09.2008

implanted in the human heart the desire to know the truth, a desire which has as its final goal the knowledge of God Himself, so that man – knowing and loving Him - might reach the full truth about himself” (nr.1). We open ourselves to this full truth about ourselves when we allow the Word to “read” our lives.

## INTRODUCTION TO ORATIO

During *meditatio* we pass along the way from mind to heart, the way from the inspired text written many centuries ago, to the voice of God who “reads” the present situation of our lives and vocations. Sometimes it happens that the process of meditation takes us more time than the hour given in the retreat program. On the path of *lectio divina*, we try to follow the Word, and it is the Word that indicates to us the time when we are ready to respond to God from the level of the heart and not only the intellect. Let us then try every day of our retreat to catch, to discern our readiness to pass from *meditatio* to *oratio*.

“There was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. He had a vision, in which the Lord said to him: - Ananias!

- Here I am, Lord - he answered. The Lord said to him: - Get ready and go to Straight Street, and at the house of Judas ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying ...” (Acts 9: 10 - 11).

The encounter with Jesus put Paul into an existential crisis. If Jesus is living, if He is the Messiah, then what are the high priest and doctors of the law doing in Jerusalem? What was I myself doing in persecuting Jesus' disciples? Although Paul had not stopped believing in the God of Israel, now he had to let Jesus teach him to believe anew. Though Paul's crisis surely had its human psychological dimension, the core of it took place in the apostle's soul. Paul prayed for three days in Damascus. He needed to be near God, for only God could explain to him what had taken place as he approached Damascus. That time of prayer, without sight and without food and drink, was saturated with the presence of the Person of Jesus. Paul learned to know this Person, and surely, he also struggled within himself, so that he could learn to count as "rubbish" all that in the dimension of faith had no relation with Christ. From Paul's experience we too receive an important lesson, a Christian can experience a crisis in prayer, even when this is a battle and hard labour. After a time of battle, the Lord sends us his angel – some messenger, friend, spiritual director – with whom we begin to overcome the time of crisis. Ananias was such an angel to Paul, and it is worthwhile for us to look carefully at his attitude.

The Lord says to him: - Ananias, and he answers: (in English) - Here I am, Lord (in Polish, - Słucham, Panie; i.e. - I am listening, Lord). Ananias' answer, translated in Polish as “I am listening, Lord” corresponds to the word *Hineni* (Here I am) in the Hebrew language. We know this

expression very well from the decisive events recorded on the pages of the Old Testament. When God began His most difficult dialogue with Abraham, speaking of offering Isaac in sacrifice, He called Abraham by name, and he responded precisely with the word *hineni* (here I am) (cf. Gen 22:1). Likewise Moses, when he saw on Mt Horeb the burning bush which was not consumed, heard his name, and answered *hineni* – “Here I am” (Ex 3:4), beginning the path of his personal relationship with God with this confession - God who is pleased with the way of the Word. Samuel's vocation, his journey of coming to know the Lord, also began with the confession *hineni* (cf. 1 Sam 3:4,6,8,10).

The word *hineni* and the attitude from which it springs are important for us on the first day of our retreat with St. Paul. As David Stern pertinently observed: “Today anyone can tell God *Hineni!* if he consents to the fact that God speaks through the Bible, if he repents of his sine, receives God’s forgiveness through the expiatory death of Jesus and offers himself unconditionally to God in obedient and holy service”<sup>9</sup>. We have a model of the attitude about which Stern writes in St. Paul – who turns away from the sin of unbelief in Jesus and violence toward Christians and confesses the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

“Hineni, Here I am, Lord” – am I ready today to speak these words from my heart in front of Jesus? Here I am with all that fills my life and vocation; with that which is beautiful and noble, and with that which is fragile, sinful, untrue. Just as Jesus at Damascus embraced the entire reality of Paul, so he wants to embrace, to penetrate and to warm with love all that which makes up “me” today. But the key for Jesus is my *hineni* – without my readiness to go further the seed of the Word will not become a full ear of grain in me.

“Ananias answered: - Lord, many people have told me about this man and about all the terrible things he has done to your people in Jerusalem. And he has come to Damascus with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who worship you.

The Lord said to him: - Go, because I have chosen him to serve me, to make my name known to Gentiles and kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:13-15).

God's ways are not man's ways. From the human point of view, Ananias was completely right. Both his mind and his experience told him to fear Paul and regard him as an enemy. Already at that time, “many” knew about Paul 's activities and the danger he posed for the disciples. At the same time we see how concrete Jesus is in his dialogue with Ananias! He doesn't explain himself, he doesn't clarify all the details, he simply repeats the word, “Go!”. In such moments, human ideas, and God's actions clash, and it depends upon man, the listener of the Word, to

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<sup>9</sup> D. Stern, *A Jewish Commentary to the New Testament*, p. 403

which he will respond. Many times to us as well our minds, experience and emotions say: - "Don't trust him!", - "He hurt you, don't give him another chance". Faith in God certainly does not lead us to a naive consent to evil or harm. However faith always demands that we listen first to God. For when human standards say: "Don't trust the one who deceived you", the Spirit of Jesus might say: "Risk it, give him a chance, maybe something will revive in your relationship". In these times of discernment will we feel afraid? Indeed we will, and sometimes very afraid. Are we able to listen to God in spite of fear? David Stern writes: "God does not expect blind obedience from us, nor obedience in spite of paralysing fear. But if we humbly turn to Him, He will soothe our fears and make us into useful instruments for Himself"<sup>10</sup>. In His dialogue with Ananias, Jesus also pointed out an important feature of Paul's vocation and of the vocation of every preacher of the Gospel: "And I myself will show him all that he must suffer for my sake" (Acts 9:16).

Pope Benedict XVI, theologian, and sage, reads Jesus' prediction as follows: "The mission of preaching the word and the vocation to suffering for Christ are indivisible. The vocation to become the teacher of the Gentiles in its essence is at the same time a vocation to suffering in union with Christ who redeemed us by His passion. In a world where falsehood has great power, one pays for the truth by suffering. He who wishes to avoid suffering, to push it away, pushes away life and its greatness; he can be neither a servant of the truth nor a servant of faith. There is no love without suffering - without the suffering that demands renunciation of self, transformation, and purification of one's own "I", in order to achieve true freedom. Where there is nothing worth suffering for, life itself loses its value"<sup>11</sup>. How true are those words: "Where there is nothing worth suffering for, life itself loses its value..."

If our *meditatio* made us linger over the attitude of Ananias, perhaps during oration we could tell the Lord something about our fears today. The Lord knows about them, but we will know them better when we name them – both before God and before people. We could also ask that the Lord send us now His Spirit, the Giver of Peace, so that the world of our emotions and the thoughts springing from them do not become a barrier in listening to God's Word. "So Ananias went, entered the house where Saul was, and placed his hands on him.

- Brother Saul - he said - the Lord has sent me - Jesus himself, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. He sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. At once something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see again. He stood up and was baptised; and after he had eaten, his strength came back" (Acts 9:17-19). Saul needed a community which was already living its faith in Jesus and celebrating His presence in the Eucharist. Despite the special gift of grace, despite the mysterious action of Jesus in his soul, Paul needed the community of the Church. Ananias is the representative of this community,

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<sup>10</sup> D. Stern, *A Jewish Commentary to the New Testament*, p. 403

<sup>11</sup> Homily of Benedict XVI during Vespers in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, 28.06.2008

which has Jesus as its centre, the same Jesus who appeared to Saul. Through Ananias' ministry, Saul's blindness passes, and so he opens his eyes so as to see the world from then on with the eyes of Jesus. This never changes in Paul's life, and we find an expression of his bond with Jesus in, for example, these words from the Letter to the Philippians: "My deep desire and hope is that I shall never fail in my duty, but that at all times, and especially right now, I shall be full of courage, so that with my whole being I shall bring honour to Christ, whether I live or die. For what is life? To me, it is Christ. Death, then, will bring more" (Phil 1:20-21).

Within the community of disciples, Paul is baptised and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. Significantly, the value of baptism stands higher than the need for food and drink! In this order of events too, Luke stresses the zeal of Saul, who, won by Christ and received by the community of the Church, doesn't hesitate a moment. Baptism had freed him from the burden of sin and justified him before God. Paul helps Christians understand the meaning of this sacrament, writing, for example, in the Letter to the Romans: "By our baptism, then, we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life" (Rom 6:4).

Today too the unique community of salvation is the Church which preserves the treasures of the sacraments, the Word of God, and the truth about man. It is worthwhile in today's prayer of *oratio* to talk with Jesus about the Church in which we live. It is worthwhile to speak out your gratitude for this community of faith, as well as your concerns and your pain because of the sinfulness of those in the Church. No subjective spiritual experience can substitute for the community of the Church, for which we must more and more pray and do penance, especially today.

May the words of Benedict XVI lead us to the prayer of *oratio*: Paul grasped that, despite his own immediate relation with the Risen One, he must join himself to the community of the Church, must allow himself to be baptised, must live in harmony with the other apostles. Only in this communion with all the others could he be a true apostle, as he writes so clearly in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "So then, whether it came from me or from them, this is what we all preach, and this is what you believe" (1 Cor 15:11).

#### INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPLATIO

The fourth stage of our daily prayer, that is *contemplatio*, allows us to deepen the experience of meeting Jesus in His Word. We will try to remain prayerful while keeping in mind the most important passages of the Word, those which stood out to us and nourished our souls and gave

us light to see with our spiritual sight. Worshiping Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, we also worship Him in the Word of God, who permits us to be close to and stay with Him, allowing us to experience something of the Father's guidance.

Do we find traces in what Paul tells us of his experiences of contemplation of the mystery of Jesus? Very cautiously, without focusing our attention on this dimension of the gifts he received from God, Paul writes about his mystical experiences, about being "... snatched up to the highest heaven..." and "... snatched to paradise (again)..." (see 2 Cor 12:1-4). He was therefore a mystic, in the face of all the realism of the mission he had undertaken and all the difficulties in carrying it out. Whatever he wrote and surely also whatever he said was founded in prayer and meditation on the mystery of Jesus. Paul repeatedly returned – directly or indirectly – to the event near Damascus; for he knew that there he was captured by Jesus. In the First Letter to the Corinthians in the place where he places himself in the ranks of the apostles who saw the Risen Jesus, he also reflects on the fruits of his ministry: "But by God's grace I am what I am, and the grace that he gave me was not without effect. On the contrary, I have worked harder than any of the other apostles, although it was not really my own doing, but God's grace working with me" (1 Cor 15:10). "His grace", that is to say the encounter with the living Jesus, bore fruit in Paul's life. He sees his own efforts and commitment, as he is looking back, but he puts God's plan first. Perhaps it would be worthwhile during today's *contemplatio* to follow Paul's example and look at the fruits that coming to know Jesus has borne and still bears in our lives. We have preserved the grace of faith received in baptism, strengthened by the other sacraments and, for some of us, also by religious vows. Faith in Jesus is the most precious gift we have. The fact that we look at our lives in the light of the Resurrection changes everything. St. Paul will continually send us back to the truths of the Christian *kerygma*, so that we don't get stuck in other important but secondary truths: "... and if Christ has not been raised from death, then we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe" (1 Cor 15:14). St. John Paul II describes the reception of Jesus as Saviour in this way: "The act of faith is the most important choice in a person's life; indeed it is in this act that freedom arrives at the certainty of truth and resolves to live in that truth"<sup>12</sup>. We have made that act of faith, the most important choice in our life. Today during *contemplatio* we can thank Jesus for that moment of our vocation when we consciously chose the way of faith. In order to believe, we have received special help from the Father and from Jesus. We put our faith in the message of the Gospel proclaimed by the Church; we opened ourselves to Revelation contained in the Holy Scriptures. We have arrived at the truth, but at the same time we constantly live with the feeling that Jesus the Truth is beyond us. And this feeling will remain, because "... the truth which revelation permits us to recognise is not the mature fruit

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<sup>12</sup> Fides et ratio, nr.13

nor the highest achievement of thought worked out by the intellect. It appears rather as a free gift which provokes thought and demands acceptance as an expression of love"<sup>13</sup>.

What would our life look like without Christ and His Gospel? What does life look like for our brothers who never developed the grace of their baptism and have stopped recognising or maybe never recognised the presence of Jesus in the Church? Or perhaps they see in Jesus someone who can help them, but only in this earthly life. Paul met such people, since he so powerfully says: "If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world. But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised" (1 Cor 15:19-20).

As we saw in Luke's description of Saul's conversion, the path of faith leads from a personal meeting with Jesus to accepting faith in him within the framework of the community which is the Church. Let us turn with gratitude to the minister of our own baptism, to our parents who passed on their own faith to us, or to those who in this transmission of faith took our parents' place. If we remember our own Damascus, a single distinct experience of transformation and conversion, let us worship God working with such power in that experience of our lives. Only when we notice the fruits of faith in Jesus in our own lives do we become credible and zealous preachers of that Gospel which transformed us.

Where did Paul's apostolic passion and zeal come from? Pope Benedict XVI answers like this: "Only the soul truly fascinated by the light of the Gospel, in love with Christ, and strengthened by the deep conviction that he must bring the light of Christ to the world and preach the Gospel to all, is capable of such commitment". Only love for the Gospel "allows us to understand that it is great and beautiful - and even more - that we all deeply need it"<sup>14</sup>.

Let us worship Jesus, then, through the fruits borne in our lives by faith. Surely, many of these fruits exist and new ones constantly appear, as life with the Lord does not repeat itself. Instead, it contains the freshness of life, a life which has conquered the power of death.

TEXT FOR DAY 2: Acts 9:19-31 also Gal 1:13-24

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<sup>13</sup> Fides et ratio, nr.13

<sup>14</sup> General Audience of 27.08.2008, *The life of St. Paul*