

**PASTORAL LETTER ON THE OCCASION OF
THE PAULINE YEAR 2008-2009
BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA
AND THE BISHOP OF GOZO**

In the footsteps of St. Paul

Dear brethren in the Ministerial Priesthood, in Consecrated Life, and in Baptism.

When St. Paul lost his way in the Mediterranean Sea and was shipwrecked on an island called Malta, his misadventure was translated into a grace for us. St. Paul's Shipwreck among us had the providential effect that we, from a very early stage, were able to receive the good news of the Gospel and to come to know our Lord Jesus Christ. As from that time, we always considered this as a blessing and a privilege. The Christian faith has always been intertwined with that which gave us our identity as a people and nation.

For this reason, we welcomed with joy Pope Benedict XVI's invitation to celebrate, together with the universal Church, the Pauline Year on the occasion of the 2000th anniversary of the birth of the Apostle of Nations who for us is not simply one of many saints, but the one who generated us in the faith. In the light of this special link our islands have always had with our Father St. Paul, it is our sincere wish that this Pauline Year will not be just an occasion for a number of celebrations that will just pass by, but that in the shipwrecks many of us have to face in our daily life, it will serve as a driving force towards giving us a chance of rediscovering the strength that comes from the faith that we have always embraced.

Today, among the many beautiful things in life, unfortunately many of us are suffering and are hurt. In its mixture of experiences, life can also offer deception and disappointment: woe to us if we are not prepared for them. These are experiences where we feel faith being shipwrecked, and where we feel our hope being very weakened. In this year's Lenten Pastoral Letter, we have already spoken about how much we are "feeling the urgency of a sound education in faith that makes us really adult Christians". On that occasion we promised you that we were going "to work seriously towards a sound catechesis at every level". Today we reiterate this promise and wish that this Pauline Year will serve to put it into practice.

Back to the roots

At all times, the Christian community needs to rediscover its identity, especially when the situations that we find ourselves in from time to time present new challenges and demand from us new answers so that the power of the Gospel continues to be shown in our lives and our society. In this effort, the Church has to go back to her roots. In our case, there can be no doubt that our roots take us back to the first proclamation by our father in the faith, St. Paul. During the Pauline Year, we can allow St. Paul to help us rediscover what the grace of God - that hidden power which we sorely need although today we often feel tempted to live as if we do not need it - can do in us and in our lives.

That which primarily stands out in St. Paul, and which today can inspire us, is to be found in the account of the Acts of the Apostles which is so dear to us; that in the middle of the storm, Paul stood up among the rest and told them: "I ask you not to give way to despair. There will be no loss of life at all". From our heart, and as your

bishops, we would like to repeat this word of courage that many of us sorely need to hear.

Among us, there is a lot of suffering and many are suffering. There is the suffering that is a mystery of life and which, if we are not strong, confuses us and leads us to think that we have been abandoned by God. There is the suffering as a consequence of our own wrong-doing, the suffering of those who are destroyed because of the arrogance or abuse of others, because of violence or egoism, or because of the urge for unlimited profit that some people have. St. Paul has a lot to say about all this. His word for us might be the balm that brings new fragrance in our environment and cures our wounds. We would like to make a special invitation throughout this year: to allow the strength and the zeal with which Paul the Apostle used to speak and evangelise to encourage us once again, so that we never get tired to do good and never be ashamed of speaking in the name of Christ who is the Saviour.

Paul can guide us

Face to face with a pagan culture, Paul had necessarily to be radical. Being radical meant also being controversial. It was not easy for him to speak about Jesus Christ as the Lord and the Saviour with Christian communities surrounded by strong currents against the proclamation of the faith. However, Paul was not embarrassed, was not afraid, did not mince words, did not fail to be prompt. He was bold in his words with those who were playing with words and embracing compromises; he was strong with those who were the cause of divisions in the community; he was clear on moral issues with those who tried to twist the truth; he was absolutely clear on all the occasions where the truth about Christ as the Saviour used to be clouded with a lot of human wisdom and reasoning. Paul can guide us a lot in the haze of the times we live in when it comes to the truth about the faith, and where we might choose to draw back because we are afraid or otherwise embarrassed.

It was the experience Paul had on his way to Damascus that gave a new direction to his life. From a persecutor of Jesus, Paul turned into a messenger of Christ's Gospel with an enchanting power and zeal. His conversion was radical because his meeting with Christ was in truth. His recognition of Christ was so full that it led him to treat everything as a loss in comparison with this big gain: "For him I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him" (Philippians 3, 8-9).

Today we are living in a society and a culture that in many ways is similar to that of the time of St. Paul. Although we are a country where one can say that all are baptised, many among us today need to hear again that first proclamation about who Jesus Christ is. Almost all of us have received some religious teaching, but many need to have the faith being proposed to them once again. In his Letters Paul recounts how the enlightening experience that he went through not only showed him the beauty of Jesus Christ, but also brought him face to face with the darkness that used to engulf his heart. The core of this experience of faith gave Paul the strength to ask, "Who are you Lord?" This same question is being made by many among us. Woe to us, if, due to apathy, indifference or weariness that sometimes takes hold of us as a Church, there is no one able to answer this question.

Our society expects from us as, a Christian community, an answer that is first and foremost one of true and authentic witness. It is our authenticity which makes our words and our deeds credible and to be relied upon when we speak about what is

the true meaning of life or what is most important in life. Accordingly, we would like this year to be one of grace where those asking about Christ or who are sincerely searching that which is true, find an answer in the Church itself, and not only in a personal and spiritual voyage which might smell of individualism.

Witnessing to Christ

Christ is seen in his magnificence on the glorious cross. This is the Christ that was proclaimed and embraced by Paul and in whom he fully believed. "During my stay with you," he writes to the Corinthians, "the only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ" (1 Corinthians, 2, 2). That which Paul says regarding his days also has a meaning for our time when Paul writes: "There are many who are behaving as the enemies of the cross of Christ. They are destined to be lost. Their god is their food, and they flaunt what they should be ashamed of; the things they think important are earthly things" (Philippians, 3, 18). Before you, Maltese and Gozitan Christians, we would like to put that which Paul writes to Timothy: "You are never to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord, or ashamed of me for being his prisoner; but with me, bear the hardship for the sake of the Good News, relying on the power of God, who has saved us and called us to be holy" (Timothy 1, 8-9).

Paul's conviction was strong enough that he was not ashamed to speak in a different way than those around him; he did not feel less than the others when he made proposals according to the Gospel regarding the family, equality, slaves, sexuality, woman, and so many other things. He did this also when what he said was in contrast with the currents of his time. When he proposed a vision of life and a way of behaviour that were in contrast with the society of his time, he did not fear of ending up isolated. The strength of his words and of his vision should help us so that, like him, we do not refrain from proposing and building a new order in the public life of our country. Our country needs very much the yeast of conviction and the truth of the faith.

May the Maltese Islands, which so long ago welcomed Paul wholeheartedly and embraced the name of Jesus, once again today listen to this Apostle, and let the power of the Word that he proclaimed enter the hearts of many so that we shall never renounce what the faith has given us.

We impart to you our pastoral blessing as a pledge of every heavenly good.

Today, 24 June 2008, Feast of the Birth of St. John the Baptist.

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