



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

San Damaso courtyard
Wednesday, 30 June 2021

[Multimedia]

Catechesis: *Paul, the true apostle*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

We are delving into the *Letter to the Galatians*, a little at a time. We have seen that these Christians find themselves in conflict on how to live the faith. The Apostle Paul begins writing his Letter by reminding them of their past relationship, his unease at being far from them, and the unchanging love he retains for each one of them. However, he does not fail to point out his concern that the Galatians should follow the correct path: it is the concern of a father, who has generated the communities in the faith. His intention is very clear: it is necessary to reaffirm the novelty of the Gospel, which the Galatians received through his preaching, to build the true identity on which to base their existence. And this is the principle: to reaffirm the newness of the Gospel, which the Galatians had received from the Apostle.

We immediately discover that Paul has a profound knowledge of the mystery of Christ. From the beginning of his Letter he does not follow the shallow arguments used by his detractors. The Apostle “flies high” and shows us, too, how to behave when conflicts arise within the community. Only towards the end of the Letter, in fact, is it made explicit that at the heart of the diatribe is the

question of circumcision, hence of the main Jewish tradition. Paul chooses the path of going deeper, because what is at stake is the truth of the Gospel and the freedom of Christians, which is an integral part of it. He does not stop at the surface of problems, of conflicts, as we are often tempted to do in order to find an immediate solution that gives us false hope that everyone can agree with a compromise. Paul loves Jesus and knows that Jesus is not a man-God of compromises. This is not how the Gospel works, and the Apostle chooses to take the more challenging route. He writes: "Am I now seeking the favour of men, or of God's?". He does not try to make peace with everyone. And he continues: "Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ" (Gal 1:10).

Firstly, Paul feels it is his duty to remind the Galatians that he is a true apostle not by his own merit, but by God's call. He recounts the story of his vocation and conversion, which coincided with the apparition of the Risen Christ during the journey to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:1-9). It is interesting to observe what he affirms of his life prior to that event: "I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal 1:13-14). Paul dared to affirm that in Judaism he surpassed all others, he was a truly zealous Pharisee, "as to righteousness under the law blameless" (Phil 3:6). Twice he emphasises that he was a defender of the "traditions of the fathers" and a "staunch upholder of the law". This is the story of Paul.

On the one hand, he insists in underlining that he had fiercely persecuted the Church and that he had been a "blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" (cf. 1 Tim 1:13). He spares no adjectives: he describes his own self in this way. On the other hand, he highlights God's mercy towards him, which led him to experience a radical transformation, well known to all. He writes: "I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea; they only heard it said, 'He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith'" (Gal 1:22-23). He converted, he changed, he changed his heart. Paul thus highlights the truth of his vocation through the striking contrast that had been created in his life: from being a persecutor of Christians for not observing the traditions and the law, he was called to become an apostle to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But we see that Paul is free: he is free to proclaim the Gospel and he is also free to confess his sins. "I was like that": it is the truth that gives freedom to the heart, and it is the freedom of God.

Thinking back on his story, Paul is full of wonder and gratitude. It is as if he wanted to tell the Galatians that he could have been anything but an apostle. He had been brought up as a boy to be a blameless observer of Mosaic Law, and circumstances had led him to fight the disciples of Christ. However, something unexpected had happened: God, by His grace, had revealed to him His Son who had died and rose again, so that he could become a herald among the Gentiles (cf. Gal 1:15-16).

How inscrutable are the ways of the Lord! We experience this every day, but especially if we think back to the times when the Lord called us. We must never forget the time and the way in which

God entered our lives: let us keep fixed in our hearts and minds that encounter with grace, when God changed our existence. How often, in the face of the Lord's great works, does the question spontaneously arise: but how is it possible that God uses a sinner, a frail and weak person, to do his will? And yet, none of this happens by chance, because everything has been prepared in God's plan. He weaves our history, the story of each one of us: he weaves our history and, if we correspond with trust to his plan of salvation, we will become aware of it. The calling always implies a mission to which we are destined; that is why we are asked to prepare ourselves seriously, knowing that it is God himself who sends us, it is God himself who supports us with his grace. Brothers and sisters, let us allow ourselves to be led by this awareness: the primacy of grace transforms existence and makes it worthy of being placed at the service of the Gospel. The primacy of grace covers all sins, changes hearts, changes lives, and makes us see new paths. Let us not forget this.

Special Greetings

I cordially greet the English-speaking faithful. I pray that the coming summer holidays will be a time of refreshment and spiritual renewal for you and your families. Upon all of you I invoke the joy and peace of the Lord. May God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. Yesterday we celebrated the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. May the example and the constant protection of these pillars of the Church support each of you in your effort to follow Jesus.

My Blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Saint Paul's Letter to the Galatians, we now reflect on Paul's exercise of his apostolic authority. With fatherly care, Paul reminds the Galatians of his preaching on the new life brought by Christ, and reiterates the Gospel message of freedom from the commands of the Mosaic law. Paul defends his authority as an Apostle, describing with honesty his own journey of conversion – from fierce persecutor of the Church to his call by God's mercy to know the Risen Jesus, and to become an Apostle to the nations. In emphasizing the power of the Lord's mercy at work in his own life, Paul invites us to reflect on how God enters into our lives, surprising us, renewing and radically transforming us by the Holy Spirit, and strengthening us to become missionary disciples for the spread of the Gospel and its

liberating message.

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