

# A Mind for God: St. Paul's Exhortation for Thinking Catholics

Salvatore J. Ciresi

It is surprising at times to find among Christians men who have great literary, artistic, or scientific culture, but who have merely a rudimentary and superficial knowledge of the truths of religion, a knowledge mingled with many prejudices and errors. It is a surprising disproportion, which makes them, as it were, spiritual dwarfs.

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*Three Ages of the Interior Life*

## **Intro**

The “Beatitudes” of St. Matthew’s Gospel pronounce, upon the properly disposed, God’s benevolence to the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the pursuers of righteousness, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, the persecuted, and the reviled. No such favor appears to be granted to the foolish or ignorant. To the contrary, Sacred Scripture urges the Church Militant to intellectually grasp divinely revealed truth. St. Paul the Apostle, in particular, had much to say on this subject. We will survey some of the relevant Pauline passages, with the goal of motivating us (per one’s state, vocation, or mental ability) to comprehend the dogmas and doctrines of the Catholic Faith.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Early Church and Catholic Truth**

St. Paul is a monumental figure in the book of Acts. Beside his dramatic conversion recorded in Acts 9:1-9, the book reveals the Apostle’s impressive missionary activity over three main journeys in Acts 13—14; 15—18; and 18—21. Throughout these excursions, one discovers ample testimony of St. Paul’s emphasis on teaching and guarding the purity of doctrine, and its significance for the faithful. We will examine a few episodes from his second journey and subsequent travels.

Acts 17:16—18:11 records part of St. Paul’s second mission in the area of Greece; with specific visits to Athens and Corinth. In the latter, the Apostle engages in the activities associated with Christian religious instruction, and the allied meditation upon such revealed truths. St. Paul “argued in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4) of the Gospel. Hence, he was “occupied with preaching,

testifying” (Acts 18:5) and devoted significant time to “teaching the word of God” (Acts 18:11). Consider the key terms: “argued” (Gk., *dielegeto*), “persuaded” (Gk., *epeithen*), “testifying” (Gk., *diamartyromenos*), and “teaching” (Gk., *didaskōn*).<sup>2</sup> Such phrases reveal St. Paul was engaging in either apologetics (i.e., the defense of the Faith), evangelization (i.e., the spreading of the Faith), or catechesis (i.e., the teaching of the Faith). In other words, the Apostle sets the example — the faculty of the intellect (that which knows), and the faculty of the will (that which chooses), are to be placed at the service of the Triune God. Igino Giordani’s small but useful book from a generation ago, *St. Paul: Apostle and Martyr*, provides a succinct comment on this Pauline strategy in Corinth. Giordani notes that speech is the essential means of evangelization for the Apostle, whereby faith comes from hearing, and not from material promises or insidious allurements.<sup>3</sup>

We move ahead to St. Paul’s third mission, where for a period he was in Ephesus per Acts 20:17—21:1. This is one of the most stirring episodes in the Apostle’s life. He gives a vindication of his work to the Ephesian clergy, explaining his ministerial actions to advance the Gospel by “declaring” and “teaching” and “testifying” and “preaching” (Acts 20:20-25). St. Paul then states he must depart from the congregation in Ephesus, to undergo certain imprisonment and afflictions that await him. He closes the address with the following gravity:

Take heed to yourself and to all the flock, in which the Holy Ghost has made you bishops, to care for the Church of God which He obtained with the blood of His own Son. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).

This is as clear a warning as one will find in the Bible on the necessity of orthodoxy, and the danger of false teachers. Such admonition would make little sense unless the hearers (and future readers of Acts) have a comprehension of Catholic doctrine.<sup>4</sup> This alone is a sufficient reason to acquire a sound knowledge of the Faith; such knowledge is a way to identify, answer, and repel error.

One final point from Acts deserves attention. The book discloses that St. Paul spent significant time in chains in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome (cf. Acts 21:17—28:31). The inspired tome ends with the Apostle arriving in the Eternal City to begin his first Roman imprisonment. Acts 28:31 closes with St. Paul “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered.” This is notable: even under adverse conditions, the Apostle didn’t shrink from passing on Catholic doctrine. This is to say, he directed his intellect and will, and those same faculties of his audience, toward the counsel of God. Archbishop MacEvilly’s classic commentary tells us what occupied St. Paul’s teaching at Rome: the divine economy of the New Law, and the truths related to the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

### **Action Put in Writing**

During the apostolic endeavors of St. Paul mentioned above, the Apostle composed writings that address various doctrinal and pastoral matters. What St. Paul practiced in his own life, he conveys via the charism of Biblical inspiration to those under his spiritual care. In tandem with the scenes we have examined in Acts, one discovers in the Pauline compositions the same plea for the Church Militant to be “thinking” Christians. Several key passages are worthy of examination.

Romans 12:2 commands: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” St. Paul connects the comprehension of the Faith with the ability to carry out God’s will. In other words, the training of the mind has a direct influence upon one’s supernatural life. What should not be overlooked is that in the preceding verse (Rom. 12:1), Christians are told to present their very bodies to God as “a living sacrifice.” Furthermore, the Apostle is aware of our fallen human nature’s tendency toward pride, thus reminds us in Romans 12:3 to exercise clear-headed judgment to ward off thinking too highly of oneself. Origen (d. 254), the renowned master of the “Catechetical School” in Alexandria of Egypt, comments on verse 2 by insisting that mind renewal occurs by three means. They are the practice of wisdom, reflection on the word of God, and the spiritual understanding of His Law.<sup>6</sup>

Departing from the book of Romans, let us look at the correspondence to the Ephesians, which St. Paul composed during his captivity in Rome. Ephesians 4:17-18 says in part: “Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them.” The Apostle draws a sharp contrast between the thought pattern of the believer and the non-believer. Notice that ignorance is not bliss, nor a virtue. Then, to drive the point home, St. Paul urges: “Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24). The distinguished Capuchin, Henri Bernardine de Picquigny (d. 1709), interprets those verses as follows: the believer has laid aside the old life, and is transformed into a new man with new dispositions and aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

### **Fraternal Episcopal Guidance**

The three letters of St. Paul labeled “Pastoral Epistles,” two to St. Timothy and one to St. Titus, are basically one pastor writing to another.<sup>8</sup> Both Timothy and Titus were the Apostle’s spiritual children in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4).<sup>9</sup> The Pastorals are a goldmine for both priest and bishop; each letter addresses a variety of circumstances within ecclesiastical life today.

Consider the illuminating passage of 2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” Several exegetical points may be drawn from this verse. Firstly, there is the implication that the pastor of souls will give an account of his priestly ministry; receiving either approval or disapproval from the Sovereign Judge. Secondly, the sacerdotal office requires mental exertion and places demands on one’s time; no one learns saving truth by osmosis. Thirdly, the possibility of God’s chosen minister mishandling divine revelation is not a figment of the imagination, but a terrifying reality. St. Thomas Aquinas explains the text’s relevance for the guardian of souls: he must

scrutinize his intention to insure being moved by good zeal, he must make his preached doctrine firmer by his works, and he must have a care for truth by teaching correct and profitable things to his audience.<sup>10</sup>

It is certain that the requirement for study and meditation is greater for the ordained priesthood than for the laity. At the parish level, the priest is the primary teacher of Catholic doctrine, and his preparation and competence sets the tone for his entire parish. If the priest emphasizes the importance of possessing a mature knowledge of the truths of the Faith, then his flock will inevitably acquire such an outlook. This same principle applies to the bishop at the diocesan level.

### **Meditation and the Supernatural Life**

St. Paul, no doubt, is explicit on the need for the study of Catholic doctrine. Just as crucial for the Apostle, however, is for meditation to accompany this acquisition of revealed truth. Before we examine two Pauline passages, we must, for the sake of clarity, define “meditation.” This word, in the traditional Catholic sense, means a kind of mental prayer that reflects on a given subject; with the practical aim of stirring the will to make acts of faith, love, humility, etc., and to form resolutions.<sup>11</sup> In light of this meaning, we appreciate St. Paul’s inspired utterance that “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8). The Douay-Rheims Bible, under the skilled compiler Father Geo. Haydock, says this verse pertains to general precepts of morality, which the faithful should make their study and concern.<sup>12</sup>

Continuing this line of thought, the Apostle writes in part in Colossians 3:1-2 for the Gospel adherents to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” The great St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) had this Pauline segment in view while instructing catechumens for baptism, charging them to change their thoughts from earth to heaven, from visible things to the invisible.<sup>13</sup>

## Final Thoughts

St. Augustine (d. 430) wrote in his monumental *Confessions*: “For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”<sup>14</sup> Some of this restlessness is quelled by turning our thoughts from the secular to the sacred; through the interaction with the mysteries of our holy Christian religion. Catholics, by God’s grace, can put time aside daily for some study and meditation upon Sacred Scripture, Tradition, or the Magisterial pronouncements. If one is looking for an endorsement of such a practice, then look no farther than St. Paul the Apostle.

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<sup>1</sup> This observation on the Beatitudes is based on A. G. Sertillanges, O.P., *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*, trans. M. Ryan (Westminster: Newman, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> See the Greek terms in Richard E. Whitaker, comp., *The Eerdmans Analytical Concordance of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 53, 805, 827, 1084. The Latin expressions in the Nova Vulgata are *disputabat* (argued), *suadebatque* (persuaded), *testificans* (preaching), and *docens* (teaching), and may be consulted online at The Holy See’s official web site.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Igino Giordani, *St. Paul: Apostle and Martyr*, trans. C. Maranzana and M. P. Williamson (NY: Macmillan, 1946) 63.

<sup>4</sup> The Pauline exhortation is for the Ephesian clergy, but the warning is still applicable to the laity.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. John MacEvilly, *An Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1895) 276.

<sup>6</sup> See Origen’s “Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans” 5.30-36 in Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI: Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 308.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. H. Prichard, trans. and ed., *Catholic Standard Library: An Exposition of the Epistles of St. Paul by Bernardine À Piconio* (London: John Hodges, 1890) II:278-9.

<sup>8</sup> The designation “Pastorals” is traced to some extent to St. Thomas Aquinas in the 1200s, but the term became popular with D. N. Berdot in 1703 and Paul Anton in 1726-7. See R. J. Foster’s “The Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus” in Bernard Orchard, et al., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (NY: Nelson, 1953) 1142; and Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction: Revised Edition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 607.

<sup>9</sup> Additional passages for consideration are Acts 16:1-3; Romans 16:21; 1 Corinthians 16:10-11; 2 Corinthians 1:1, 19; 2:12-13; 7:5-15; 8:6, 16-24; 12:18; Galatians 2:1-3; Philippians 1:1; 2:19-24; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 3:1-6; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Timothy 4:10; and Hebrews 13:23.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Chrysostom Baer, O. Praem., trans. and ed., *Thomas Aquinas: Commentaries on St. Paul’s Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s, 2007) 117.

<sup>11</sup> See the entry in Donald Attwater, ed., *A Catholic Dictionary* (NY: Macmillan, 1949) 317.

<sup>12</sup> Consult the rich footnote for Philippians 4:8 in Geo. Leo Haydock, comp., *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: With a Comprehensive Catholic Commentary* (Monrovia: Catholic Treasures, 1991) 1553.

<sup>13</sup> See St. John Chrysostom’s “Baptismal Instructions” 2.28 in Paul W. Harkins, trans., *Ancient Christian Writers, No. 31: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (NY: Newman, 1963) 53-54.

<sup>14</sup> F. J. Sheed, trans., *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (NY: Sheed & Ward, 1942) 3. This quotation near the beginning of *Confessions* may be the most well known line in all Patristic literature.