

## Church History: St. Paul the Evangelist

Sal Ciresi

Biblical history reveals many interesting facts concerning St. Paul the Apostle: born in Tarsus (cf. Acts 22:3), descended from the tribe of Benjamin (cf. Phil. 3:5), raised to a Pharisee (cf. Acts 26:5), and a zealous adherent to “the Law” (Gal. 1:14). These traits would culminate in a stunning conversion from a persecutor of Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9) to a great advocate of the Gospel (cf. Rom. 1:14-15). After this *metanoia* (change of heart) on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9:1-8), which occurred in the mid to late A.D. 30s, St. Paul’s missionary endeavors would change the world and become an incalculable grace to the Catholic Church.

In preparation for his Apostolic office, St. Paul conveys that he learned the Gospel from Jesus Christ, via personal revelation (cf. Eph. 3:3). Elsewhere, St. Paul mentions a face-to-face encounter with the Divine Savior (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1). Time was also spent conferring with the other Apostles (cf. Gal. 1:18—2:2). Fittingly, St. Paul devoted a period to prayer and meditation in the desert of Arabia (cf. Gal. 1:17). The Apostle leaves us an important lesson — all “physical” works for God must be joined to “spiritual” works of prayer; that necessary communion with the Blessed Trinity. This union of prayer and work produced many fruits in St. Paul, especially as an “evangelist” or “missionary.”

St. Paul the evangelist is usually credited with three extended missionary journeys: recorded in Acts 13:4—14:27; 15:36—18:22; and 18:23—21:15, respectively. Antioch of Syria acted as a kind of “headquarters” for these excursions (cf. Acts 13:1; 14:26; 15:35; 18:22). The Apostle’s first journey, spanning the mid to late A.D. 40s, started from Antioch and reached as far west as Attalia of Pamphylia. Part of this trip visited the island of Cyprus (cf. Acts 13:4), Antioch of Pisidia (cf. Acts 13:14), and Iconium of Lycaonia (cf. Acts 14:1). Near the end of this evangelistic crusade, St. Paul attended the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15:1-30, which addressed the controversy over Gentile admission into the Catholic Church. Incidentally, this gathering was a testimonial to the Papal primacy of St. Peter.

During the early A.D. 50s, the second missionary expedition took place, beginning again in Antioch of Syria and extending as far away west as Berea of Macedonia. Various stays included Derbe in Asia Minor (cf. Acts 16:1), Troas of Mysia (cf. Acts 16:8), Philippi of Macedonia (cf. Acts 16:12), Thessalonica on the Thermaic Gulf (cf. Acts 17:1), Athens of Attica (Acts 17:16), and Corinth of Achaia (cf. Acts 18:1). A highlight on this second journey occurred in Athens, where St. Paul had his great confrontation with idol worship at the Areopagus, putting forth a memorable *apologia* (defense or answer) for Christianity in Acts 17:16-34. Here is another important lesson from St. Paul: the necessity of uncompromising firmness coupled with genuine charity during “dialogue.”

Originating in part from Antioch of Syria (as in previous missions), a third evangelization wave took place in the mid A.D. 50s, reaching westward to Macedonia. This journey

interacted with the locales of Ephesus of Asia Minor (cf. Acts 19:1), Miletus of Ionia (cf. Acts 20:17), the island of Rhodes (cf. Acts 21:1), and Tyre of Phoenicia (cf. Acts 21:3). A memorable event was St. Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, where the Apostle warns the faithful to beware of heretical doctrines and false teachers (cf. Acts 20:17-38). Timeless advice.

After returning east to Jerusalem after this third mission, a number of fascinating events would transpire in the life of St. Paul. These activities would be the occasion for the Apostle to compose several of his inspired writings. The last installment on St. Paul will review these influential events and survey St. Paul "the theologian," one of the greatest in ecclesiastical history.

*Ciresi serves on the faculty at the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College.*