



Thoughts on the Mission of Saint Paul

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Let's start with the obvious: A really thorough discussion of St. Paul's mission, which is my theme today, would keep us here for a week. And then I'd never get invited back.

So in speaking about Paul and the challenges he faced, I'll focus instead on one key question that my friend Mario Paredes suggested as a talking point: *What lessons can we learn from Paul about our own mission as Christians in today's society?*

It's a good question. Here's my answer: Very much like ourselves, Paul lived in complex times. Rome was the dominant superpower of the day. But the *Pax Romana* was a great deal messier and bloodier than our history books sometimes suggest. Yet Paul responded so well to the *demands* of his time because he had two extraordinary gifts. And we can cultivate those same gifts in ourselves today.

First, Paul was a man of his world in the best sense. He was educated, skilled and cosmopolitan. Unlike most Jews, he was also a Roman citizen. While he was rigorous in maintaining his Jewish identity, he also valued Roman learning and law. From the perspective of our 21st Century, he was a "man for all seasons." But Paul was also a man of *his own season*. In other words, he was a man with a keen grasp of his cultural circumstances -- a man with a shrewd understanding of his own people, of wider Roman society, and of the yearnings of the Mediterranean world.

Second, Paul was a man who deliberately and zealously committed himself to pursuing the truth. And he was prepared to pay -- as he finally did - the ultimate price in pursuing the truth: his own martyrdom. Paul proclaimed his faith "in season and out of season." He was always ready to "convince, rebuke, exhort, [and] be unflinching in patience and in teaching" (2 Tim 4:2-3). He was willing to "fight the good fight" (1 Tim 1:18). He also had no fear of consequences, because "when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now" (1 Cor 4:12-13).

Paul was a determined man. As even St. Peter discovered, Paul never let shallow courtesies interfere with his witness for Jesus Christ. In fact, by today's standards, Paul's passion for Jesus borders on the unseemly. But of course, that says more about us than about him.

Now, why would Paul go to such extremes? There's a simple reason. Paul not only "knew" the truth as a collection of doctrines; he was *possessed* by the God of truth, who gives life to those doctrines. Because of this he could write: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal 2:20).

St. Augustine once summarized Paul's personality with this powerful phrase: *Cor Paoli, Cor Christi* -- "The heart of Paul is the heart of Christ." And of course he was right. There has never been, and there never will be, a greater missionary for Jesus than St. Paul. Through Paul, the Gospel reached the world. And our job as believers today is to be Paul once again to the world around us. So starting from these two Pauline qualities - his keen sense of his times, and his intense zeal for the truth -- I'd like to make two simple points that may help us live out the example of St. Paul in our own lives.

Here's the first point: If we're serious when we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, then we need to understand our own times as well as Paul did his.

That's a lot easier said than done. Here's why. The tools we rely on to inform us, are the same tools we use to delude ourselves about the real world. The American news and entertainment media, which now so often overlap, are the largest catechetical syndicate in history. They teach us how to think and what to think about. But the culture they've helped to create - a culture based on immediacy, brevity, visual stimulation, celebrity and self-absorption - is very different from anything in our country's past. And that has very big implications not just for our democratic public life but for the Christian's place in American society.

We can't really know our times until we first know how our mass media work -- and especially *how they work on us*. A drunk can't get sober until he stops drinking. It's a good lesson to remember when we switch on the evening news. Obviously we can't turn our backs on TV, the internet and all the other information technologies that crowd into our lives. But we can learn to judge them soberly and critically. And if we don't, the consequences may be very unhappy.

The American Founding and all of our democratic institutions come from print-based patterns of thought. America is the child of book literacy, critical reasoning and one other key factor that I'll turn to in a moment. My point is this: The more sensory, immediate and emotional our culture becomes, the farther it gets from the habits of serious thought that sustain its ideals. And yet that's exactly what our mass media promote. Their profits *depend* on creating a constant spirit of urgency and change in their audience, a constant illusion of need that demands our attention. And what's the result? We become restless and stupid.

It's tempting to blame the media too harshly for this "dumbing-down" of American life. There's plenty of fair criticism we can point in their direction. But mainly we've done this to ourselves. If you take home just one suggestion from our time together tonight, let it be this: Get a copy of Daniel Boorstin's book, *The Image*, or *What Happened to the American Dream*, and read it. And then *think about it* -- with your computer, your television and your iPod turned off.

Boorstin was an accomplished historian and a former Librarian of Congress. He saw very clearly that there's a significant link between print culture and the foundations of American political life - a link too many people ignore. He wrote *The Image* in 1962, 48 years ago, with a growing worry about the direction of American culture. At the time, it was an important book. But it's even more important to reread it today. Listen to the first few sentences:

"In this book I describe the world of our making, how we [Americans] have used our wealth, our literacy, our technology and our progress to create the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life. I recount historical forces which have given us unprecedented opportunity to deceive ourselves and to befog our experience.

"Of course, [American success] has provided the landscape and has given us the resources and opportunity for this feat of national self-hypnosis. But each of us individually provides the market and the demand for the illusions which flood our experience.

"We want and we believe these illusions because we suffer from extravagant expectations. We expect too much of the world. Our expectations are extravagant in the precise dictionary sense of the word - 'going beyond the limits of reason or moderation.' They are excessive."

To put it another way: Our success as a nation made us greedy. Then greed made us stupid about who we are, what we deserve, what we can have -- and also blind to the human limits that we can't escape when we try to reshape our world. The writer Robert D. Kaplan once said that America has done so well for so long because her Founders had a tragic sense of history. In other words, they had a realistic grasp of human nature as a mix of nobility, weakness and flaws that need to be constrained. American ideals *require* a certain kind of citizen to make them work. Or as John Adams said, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

A moment ago I said that America is the child of book literacy, critical reasoning and one other key factor. I think you already know what that last factor is: religious faith. In writing about America at the beginning of the 19th Century, Alexis de Tocqueville saw two major features to American life: People were highly literate; and they practiced their Christian faith in a widespread, serious way. Intellect, *faith* and citizenship were closely tied. Together, and only because these factors reinforced each other, they made the new republic work.

Now, obviously Americans have always had *non-sectarian* public institutions. We've never had a nationally established Church, and that's a good thing. In principle, our country has always welcomed people of every religion and no religion. But it would be foolish and delusional to deny our nation's Christian roots.

The great British historian, Paul Johnson, once observed that "America was born Protestant." He said that "it's important to grasp that American society embraced the principles of voluntarism and tolerance in [religious] faith in a spirit not of secularism but of piety." America was never imagined, therefore, as a "secular state; it might more accurately be described as a moral and ethical society without a state religion."

Religiously informed thought and language pervade the American Founding. Christian ideas shaped most of our political structures and many of our key national documents. The point is this: We can't cut our nation off from those roots today without hurting the rights and liberties we all take for granted.

A few months ago, in Ireland, someone asked for my thoughts about today's "post-Christian" culture. I said then as I say again now, that "post-Christian" society may *seem* very similar to the pagan world that St. Paul first confronted. But in fact, it's much worse. Why? Because the pagan world had an excuse. We don't. There's really no such a thing as a "post-Christian" era. The redemptive mission of Jesus Christ is unique, unrepeatable and forever. Christ is the center and meaning of history. There is *nothing* after Jesus Christ except a void.

The modern turning away from Jesus is not a return to the pagan past. It's an apostasy, and when Scripture tells us that Christ will spit the lukewarm out of his mouth (Rev 3:16), we need to reflect very soberly on what that implies for people who once knew him, but then repudiate him. The early pagans had an alibi in their ignorance. Today's paganism involves a specific choice *against* Jesus Christ.

This is why I found some words of President Obama so interesting on his recent trip to Turkey. You'll remember that the President's supporters stressed his religious credentials pretty hard in courting the Christian vote last year. But in seeking common ground with Turkey, a NATO ally whose own secularist revolution was often brutal and intolerant, the President said: "We do not consider ourselves a Christian nation."

Now it would be easy -- and also unfair -- to take those words out of context. I think some of the President's critics have jumped on his comment inappropriately. The point the President was *trying* to make is this: The United States "has a very large Christian population." But we consider ourselves "a nation of citizens," not a sectarian state. That's obviously true. The trouble is, the President made his remark at a time when the attitude of our leadership classes toward religion in general and Christianity in particular is very different from the past, and much less friendly.

Woodrow Wilson, speaking at a Denver rally in 1911, stressed that "America was born a Christian nation." Franklin D. Roosevelt described the United States as "the lasting concord between men and nations, founded on the principles of Christianity." And Abraham Lincoln, in his March 4, 1861, inaugural address, stated, "intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty." None of these men was evasive or apologetic about saying the simple facts: America was built largely by Christians. Its national consciousness was shaped overwhelmingly by Christian and Christian-influenced thought.

President Obama's remark in Turkey was much more tentative than his predecessors. And this is useful because it highlights two serious problems for anyone interested in evangelizing American culture. First, the public witness of many American Christians is softening. Second, some groups are working very vigorously to secularize - or more accurately, *de-Christianize* -- our public life and our popular culture.

The information from recent studies on U.S. religious trends is sobering. The percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen in the past two decades. The number of people who see the United States as a Christian nation has dropped to 62 percent, down from 69 percent last year and 71 percent in 2005. The number of Americans who think faith will help answer the country's current problems has dipped to a historic low of 48 percent, down from 64 percent in 1994.

For *Catholics* who actually practice their faith, this news probably doesn't come as a surprise. For the past 40 years and longer, too many American Catholics - and I mean not just average laypeople, but Catholic clergy, scholars and religious as well - have worked frantically to fit into American culture. We succeeded. Now we can see the results. Too many of us are happy with our complacency, vanity, compromises, comfort and bad formation. And something similar is obviously happening with many of our fellow Christians.

By the way, this habit of vanity and compromise is really what the argument is about in Notre Dame's decision to honor President Obama at its commencement. The issue is *not* whether the President is a good or a bad man. He's obviously a sincere and able man, and we always have the duty to respect our public officials -- even when we disagree strongly with them. But the President's views and actions on sanctity of life issues - and remember that the right to life is the foundation of every other right - run directly against Catholic belief. And a Catholic institution should not honor that kind of behavior.

What's also revealing is what most self-described Catholics think about the controversy. Of Catholics who've heard about it, 50 percent support Notre Dame's invitation to the President, and 28 percent oppose it. But those numbers are misleading. When we look at Catholics who *actually practice* their faith through weekly worship, only 37 percent support Notre Dame's decision and 45 percent oppose it. The important point is this: It's not enough to say you're Catholic, or Christian, or anything else. You also need to *conform your heart and your actions* to what the label requires. Otherwise you're living a version of the self-deceit and illusions Daniel Boorstin warned about so clearly.

Of course even in the best circumstances, our sinfulness *always* weakens our Christian witness. Even a culture that might explicitly describe itself as Christian, and then actually strive to be Christian, would still always be a mix of light and dark, virtue and evil. That's part of our human condition. What's new about our current moment is that too many Christians have made peace with that sinfulness, baptized it with the language of personal conscience, and stopped trying to convert anybody -- including themselves.

The American Christian landscape is weakened further by deliberate efforts to secularize our public life. Scholars like the late Christopher Lasch in *The Revolt of the Elites*, and Christian Smith and his colleagues in *The Secular Revolution*, are well worth reading. They demonstrate that some modern elites find the influence of religion, and especially Christianity, inconvenient. They'd like it to go away as a public force in American life. And they're working to make that happen.

I also find it strange that our media so often overlook or misrepresent the role of religious faith in world affairs, despite the power it *still* has in the lives of most Americans. Here's an easy example. When Somali pirates recently held an American ship captain prisoner, most news organizations ignored the fact that: (a) the ship was manned by Christians trying to bring relief supplies to Kenya as an act of Christian charity; (b) that the crew explicitly linked the captain's spirit of sacrifice to his Christian faith; and (c) that they regarded his liberation on Easter Sunday as a gift from God.

Earlier I said I'd make two points to help us apply the example of St. Paul in our own times. My first point was this: We need to understand our own age as well as Paul understood his.

Now I'll conclude with my second point, and I'm very pleased to steal it from Karl Marx.

Here's my second point: Interpreting our culture isn't enough. Understanding our world isn't enough. The point, as Marx said, is to change it.

Marx was simply repeating -- and deforming -- what every serious Christian has known since apostolic times. Baptism is a mandate to act. When Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19), he was talking to you and me. Here. Today. *Now*. We're missionaries. The mission is hardwired into our Christian gene code. When St. Paul says, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16), he's giving a voice to what *all of us* should feel if we really understand our faith.

From a Pauline point of view, whether America is really 80 percent or 50 percent or 10 percent Christian is unimportant. The only thing that matters is what you and I do right now with the gift of faith we've been given. God will do the work; he's got a pretty good track record when we don't get in the way. Our job is to become the best cooperators and instruments of his will that we can be.

One of the best things we can do for our own faith is to simply turn off the noise around us one night

a week. Computers, televisions, cell phones, DVD players, radios, iPods - turn them all off. Not every night. Just one night. This is a very fruitful habit we can borrow from Mormon families: one night a week spent reading, talking with each other, listening to each other and praying over Scripture. We can *at least* do that much. And if we do, we'll discover that eventually we're sober again and not drunk on technology and our own overheated appetites.

Obviously we can't ignore the forces that are reshaping our culture and its vocabulary. I have no idea what American life will look like in 50 years. But unless Christians get involved in public life and work to advance their convictions in the public square, our nation could be very different from anything the Founders intended.

Many of you will live to see that future. In fact, many of you will help create it by your choices. I'm in my mid-60s. The way that I look at the world has been formed by the printed word. It's up to you to find a way to pour the Word of God and the person of Jesus Christ into human hearts shaped by different tools and new knowledge. You can't do that by repudiating or withdrawing from the world. You need to engage it. And if Paul could begin the conversion of an empire with nothing but a love for God - well, at least you have nothing less than he did to work with.

The lesson of St. Paul, now and for every generation, is that we need to engage the world with intelligence, a creative spirit and, most importantly, charity, which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (I Cor 13:7).

But real charity depends on truth; not shallow courtesies and not false compromises. Paul reminds us that charity "does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the *truth*" (I Co 13:6). In fact, no greater gift of love exists than sharing the truth with others. Only God's truth sets us free. Respect for others is always a Christian duty. But it's never an excuse for indifference to our mission. It can never be separated from a zeal for God's truth about human nature and dignity.

Staying loyal to the truth in today's unfriendly culture, which is so badly wounded by what Pope Benedict XVI calls a "dictatorship of relativism," is a tough task. The nature of truth is vital not only to Paul's theology, but to the substance of our faith. Jesus himself did not claim to "preach" the truth but to be the truth. That's why a Christianity based only on technique or useful ideas or a system of good social principles will always fail. Christianity can only be anchored in a love for Jesus Christ.

The cross of Jesus Christ is not a "philosophy." It's an instrument of killing stained with the blood of a Person who was once dead but *is now alive*. Only if we really believe the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in our bones, only if we endure in proclaiming that truth, we will be able to repeat with St. Paul's relief and joy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day" (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Thanks, and God bless you.