

14. PAUL: PRISONER AND MARTYR



St. Paul by Rembrandt

When it was heard that Paul was approaching Rome along the Appian Way, a group of Christians went out to fraternally welcome him (Acts 28:15-16). Thus Paul made his first contact with a community he had not founded, even though he knew several of its members.

A little information about the foundation of the Christian community of Rome: St. Irenaeus of Lyons, an early Father of the Church, writes about “the church founded and established in Rome by the two glorious apostles Peter and Paul” (Adv. Haer. 3,3,2). But we know that neither Peter nor Paul founded the Church of Rome. Instead, it was the Church itself that wanted to associate itself to the two apostles. Other testimonies come from Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who simply says that both Peter and Paul went to Rome, without specifying any particular dates. The founders of the Christian community of Rome can be traced back to the Jewish or pagan converts to Christianity who, from Palestine, Asia Minor

and Greece, migrated to the Empire’s capital. We have an example of this in Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul first met in Corinth and then again in Rome. The conclusion of Paul’s letter to the Romans (16:1-16), written from Corinth during the mid-50’s, lists some of the people who welcomed Paul among them and bolstered his courage. The Apostle’s mention of so many co-workers at the conclusion to his letter reveals his ability to involve everyone in his mission. He mentions 29 people—27 by name, including 8 women (plus another two who remain unnamed—the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus). Paul declares that some of the women referred to—Maria, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis, who were probably slaves converted to Christianity—“worked hard in the Lord” for their brothers and sisters. His greetings also reveal the existence of small Christian communities that gathered in private homes—the so-called “domestic churches”:

1. the home of Aquila and Priscilla (cf. 16:3-5: “My greetings to Prisca and Aquila...and to the church at their house”);
2. the house of “Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers and sisters who are with them” (16:14);
3. the house of “Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all God’s holy people who are with them” (16:15).

We can perhaps add two more domestic churches to this list since Paul mentions “all the household of Aristobulus” and “those who belong to the Lord in the household of Narcissus” (16:10-11). These groups of people were probably the slaves of their respective masters, who gave them permission to meet together.

Since the house of an affluent person in those days could accommodate about 15-20 people at the most, we can calculate that in Paul’s time there were about 200 Christians in Rome, out of a total population of approximately 1 million. The Jews (about 40,000) were scattered in various parts of the city. Tradition tells us that Paul lived in a Jewish enclave located in the Trastevere area, near the Tiber River (the 14th and last district of the city). Priscilla and Aquila, who had returned to Rome from Ephesus, helped Paul find a place to stay.

We do not know if the Apostle was freed after two years of house arrest, thus enabling him to fulfill his dream of taking the Gospel to “the ends of the earth.” It can be assumed that if his case had not come to trial after two years, he was released because the time limit had expired. Two things might have happened afterward: either Paul was martyred during the persecution of the Christians under Nero, or else the Apostle did indeed go to Spain and was martyred after he returned to Rome.

Luke does not say anything about Paul’s death in Rome but his silence bears witness to the historical and symbolic dimension of the Apostle’s martyrdom. The Apostle’s death in the capital of the Empire is the fulfillment of the mission entrusted by the risen Lord to his disciples because, from this center, their testimony to the Christian



St. Paul’s Martyrdom
Icon of Teresa Groseļj, fsp

Faith would spread throughout the world. Another reason Luke does not recount the death of Paul could be because as long as disciples faithful to the Apostle remained, they would continue to proclaim his message to people of all times and to encourage Christians to be faithful to the Lord.

According to Tradition, Paul was beheaded at the *Acque Salvie* (also known as the “Three Fountains”) and was buried in the Ostiense district, where a basilica was erected in his honor. Eusebius of Caesarea says: “I can show you the trophies of the Apostles. If you go to the Vatican or to the Ostiense highway, you will find the relics of the founders of the Church.” Over the years, three basilicas were erected successively on the site of St. Paul’s tomb: the first by Emperor Constantine, the second by Emperor Theodosius (which was destroyed by fire on the night of 15 July 1823) and the current basilica. When reconstruction work was begun on the second basilica after the fire, workers uncovered the base of a column inscribed with the words *SALUS POPULI*, and two fragments of marble bearing the words *PAULO APOSTOLO MARTYR*. They also uncovered the remains of the first basilica. In December 2006, the sarcophagus of the Apostle Paul was discovered under the basilica and today it can be visited by pilgrims.

FOR DEEPER STUDY

Read Romans 1:1-14 and note how Paul presents himself (v. 1), whom he says he is announcing (vv. 2-4), how he views his mission (v. 5), how he wants to live it (v. 9), the audience he wants to reach and why (v. 14). Then read Romans 16:1-16 and note the individuals Paul names and what he says about each of them.