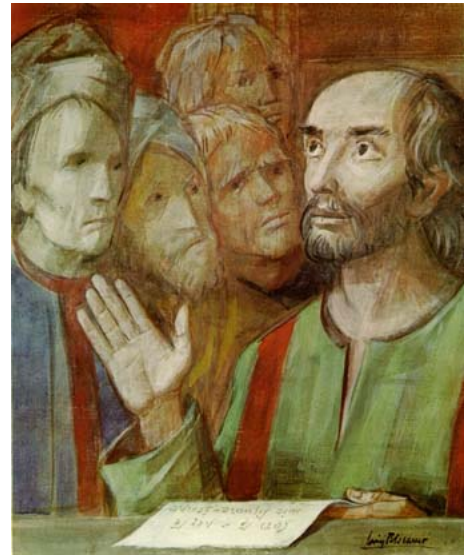


## 5. HE CHOSE ME TO PROCLAIM HIM

During Paul's second missionary trip, he developed a health problem that forced him to spend some time in Galatia, located in what is today Turkey. He says: "You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (Ga. 4:13). He infers that his condition was so bad that the Galatians, instead of welcoming him, should have refused to have anything to do with him. He interprets their unexpectedly warm reception as a sign of God's intervention in his apostolic labors to further the spread of the Gospel. This painful experience taught Paul to proclaim the Word in spite of his sufferings because they render his message fruitful. But all too soon the welcome of the Galatians was transformed into hostility. According to Paul this was because although they listened to his message with joy, they did not allow it to take root in their hearts by changing their lives so as to bring them into harmony with that Word. He says this was the reason why, after he had left the town, the Galatians were "seduced" by his adversaries and turned their backs on him. These adversaries rejected "the Gospel preached by Paul," who said that good works must be founded on absolute faith in the crucified and risen Jesus.



St. Paul – C. Marcantonio

To defend himself and the Gospel, the Apostle believes his most convincing weapon is to recount his meeting with Jesus and reveal the mission God the Father entrusted to him.

He says forcefully: "You have heard, no doubt, about how I was violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it..." (cf. Ga. 1:13-17).

Paul declares that he persecuted the Church out of ignorance. He says he was an observant Pharisee, convinced of his religious beliefs, and that he had no interest in the message preached by the followers of Jesus. Because of this, he relentlessly persecuted the Christians, determined to destroy the Church down to its very roots. But God opened his eyes and enabled him to see the true identity of the crucified and risen Jesus. He realized that the One he believed cursed under the Law (cf. Dt. 21:23) was in reality the source of blessing for all humanity. As a result of this, Paul underwent a radical change of mind and heart. From that point on he saw and understood God differently and, with the help of grace, adapted his life to this new perception.

"But when God, who had set me apart..." Having set Paul apart before he was born, at the right moment God called him and gave him the gift of meeting his Son, Jesus. "He revealed his Son in me," Paul says. He did not receive a new doctrine to replace his beliefs as a Pharisee. Instead, he received a call to establish a personal faith relationship with Jesus so as to proclaim him to others. In Paul's experience, call and mission are two sides of the same coin. He is called to carry out a mission and that mission is contained in his call.

Remembering this event years later, Paul is as deeply moved as if it had happened the day before. His words, "God, through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me" (Ga. 1:15) resound with amazement and gratitude. He realizes that his life, even in its smallest details, was planned out by God, who accompanied him and entrusted him with a special mission. Because he was well acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul knew that God's call to a person always goes hand-in-hand with a mission. This is what happened to Isaiah (Is.

49:1) and Jeremiah (Jr. 1:4). God called Paul to live in his Son for an extraordinary and completely new purpose. He had been set aside from all eternity to bring Jesus to the Gentiles (pagans/unbelievers), whom the Jews believed were excluded from divine grace. The word “gentile” derives from the Latin *gentilis*, which means “of the same clan or ethnic group.” Thus the Jews were “the People of God” and everyone else was part of “the gentiles” (the “ethnic group” that did not participate in this special relationship). They were the excluded, the pagans, the uncircumcised.

Therefore, Paul is not just any apostle: he is an apostle with “all his papers in order,” that is, he has been given a specific mission: to go to the Gentiles, those farthest away from God (Rm. 11:13). For a Jew, who could not comprehend a mission outside his own land, this was an astounding assignment.



Miniature of St. Paul

Through a revelation, God enabled Paul to “see,” that is, to profoundly grasp, Jesus. At the same time God revealed his face to him—the face of a merciful Father reaching out to every person on earth. This discovery of God’s fatherhood changed Paul’s way of thinking and transformed it into a font of interior energy and apostolic dynamism directed to all people. However, the Apostle was clearly aware of the fact that his mission came from God *through the Church* because it is specific individuals within the Church who receive the “charism of the apostolate.” Paul was one of these persons. He reminds the Galatians that after having proclaimed the Gospel to the pagans in a new way and in new terms with respect to the Gospel that was being preached in Palestine, he then went to Jerusalem to tell the Apostles

how he was evangelizing so as to be sure he was living and working in communion with them. He says that if the Gospel is proclaimed without this mutual agreement and communion, it is useless.

Paul is an authentic apostle because he was called by God, who sent him to announce Jesus to the pagans. His Gospel is authentic because he received it as a gift of God and he announces it in relation to the crucified and risen Jesus, whom he proclaims in communion with the Church.

#### FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Read Galatians 1:6-24; 3:1-2; 4:19.

These biblical passages tell us that Paul recounts the story of his call because of the situation in which he finds himself. They reveal his great pastoral heart and his yearning to proclaim the truth in love.

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