

HOMILY

Fr. Paul Francis Spencer

In coming to this chapel today, we are re-enacting a visit made by St Paul of the Cross on his first journey to Rome in September 1721. St Vincent Mary Strambi speaks of this in his biography of Paul of the Cross. He tells us that it was before the picture of Mary in this chapel that Paul felt inspired to make a vow to promote the Memory of the Passion and to gather companions to do the same. Strambi writes that Paul made this vow “*as if offering it by the hands of our Blessed Lady, with the greatest consolation of soul.*” (Strambi, *Vita*, II, XVII)

Paul had felt inspired to make this journey to Rome during his forty day retreat at Castellazzo. On the fifth day of his retreat (27 November 1720) he wrote in his Spiritual Diary:

*I know that I had a particular urge to go to Rome for this great and wonderful work of God.... I know that I tell my beloved Jesus that all creatures shall sing his mercies.*

This idea of going to Rome remained in Paul’s heart. In March of the following year, he wrote to Bishop Gattinara:

*I should inform Your Excellency that I feel an ever stronger inspiration to leave for Rome.... Reverend and dear Pastor, for the love of Jesus Christ I beg you to be kind enough to grant me this permission so that I may follow the inspirations of my Spouse, Jesus Christ. I will say nothing about companions as I know for sure that when I am at the feet of His Holiness, God will make the whole world see his mercies. So much do I trust in my crucified Lord that I am more than certain everything will turn out well.*

We should note here that while, in Paul’s mind, the idea of his going to Rome was to place himself “*at the feet of His Holiness*” and ask approval for his Congregation, it was also linked to his desire to gather companions which Bishop Gattinara seemed to be resisting.

Eventually the Bishop agreed to the trip and Paul set out for Rome, full of confidence that *“everything will turn out well”* and *“God will make the whole world see his mercies”*. His brother John Baptist was less optimistic. He had wanted to travel with Paul and, when Paul said he would go alone, John Baptist replied: *“You may go, but you will find no peace without me.”* (Strambi, *Vita*)

We all know what happened in Rome. Paul arrived at the Pope’s palace and was refused admittance. Strambi records the words of the doorman: *“Do you know how many loiterers come here every day? Be off with you.”* Strambi also tells us what happened next:

*As he walked away from the palace, feeling the want of some refreshment for his weak body, he retired into a court where there was a little fountain, intending to eat there the small pieces of bread which had been given to him that morning at the Trinita [the pilgrim hostel where he had stayed the night]. But God, who desired to try the charity of His servant, so disposed that a poor man should approach just then to ask an alms. Paul’s youth, as well as his long fasting, had given him so great an appetite that he could have eaten five loaves instead of one; nevertheless, doing violence to nature, he parted with half his bread for the love of God, whom he never failed to recognise in the person of the poor.* (Strambi, *Vita*, I, IX)

It seems to have been after this encounter with the poor man that Paul made his way to this great church of St Mary Major. At this point, his journey to Rome must have seemed to St Paul of the Cross to be an experience of disappointment. He came to this city full of hope, believing that the Pope would bless what he called *“this great and wonderful work of God”*. What he was looking for from the Pope was a confirmation that his inspiration (we would say his charism) came from God. While he was in quarantine at Civitavecchia, Paul had written out a clean fresh copy of the Rule, possibly hoping to present it to the Pope. However, he didn’t get to meet the Pope. Instead, God presented him with a poor man, a beggar.

When Paul came into this chapel, his head must have been spinning. His hopes were not fulfilled and, instead of meeting the man at the top of the ladder, he met the man at the bottom. He must have done a lot of reflecting and discerning in this chapel. What was he to do? Where was the confirmation he wanted going to come from? Paul's response could have been to walk away, to decide that this idea of a Congregation was all a fantasy. After all, he was its only member, and not even a member at this point. But, instead of walking away, he commits himself before God to his mission and takes a vow to promote the Memory of the Passion and to gather companions to do the same. Strambi says that he made the vow "with the greatest consolation of soul". The confirmation or consolation he was seeking on his journey came not from the Pope as he had expected but from the inner conviction that what God wanted of him was a deeper commitment to the inspiration, the charism and mission with which he had been entrusted.

The Gospel today puts before the figures of Martha and Mary, representing two dimensions of being a disciple: the dimension of doing and the dimension of being, or we might say discipleship as mission and as communion. The vow St Paul of the Cross made here was a vow with two dimensions: to promote in the hearts of the faithful the Memory of the Passion of Jesus and to gather companions for this mission. In this chapel Paul committed himself to a specific charism, to mission and to community. From here he would return to Castellazzo and ask the Bishop to clothe his brother in the black habit. He would no longer work and live alone. Within a year, they would go to Monte Argentario where they would live and pray together and then go out to bring the healing memory of Christ's sufferings to the poor and the abandoned of that neglected region, those people who, in an expression Paul uses in the Diary, "*do not experience the fruit of the Passion of Jesus*" (Diary, 4 December 1720).

The vow first made in this place nearly three hundred years ago has brought Paul's companions to many parts of the world to share with others "*the fruit of the Passion of Jesus*". Among them was Blessed Dominic Barberi whose living out of our mission touched the life of Blessed John Henry Newman whose feast we celebrate today. And

now today it is our turn. As we celebrate this Eucharist in the context of our General Chapter, a Chapter whose theme is “*Renewing our Mission*”, we can, like Paul, commit ourselves once more to our charism and mission. Today, in our own hearts, we do as Paul did in this place. In spite of whatever disappointments we have experienced or what difficulties we face, we thank God for our past, we embrace the future with hope and we entrust our work to God, offering it by the hands of Mary, Mother of the Lord.