

A COURAGIOUS APOSTLE OF THE GOSPEL

In a Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments dated 25 January 2019, Pope Francis has established that the Memorial of Pope Saint Paul VI be inserted into the General Calendar of the Roman Rite, taking account both of the universal importance of his actions and the example of holiness given to the People of God. The Feast Day will be 29 May, the anniversary of the date of his priestly ordination in 1920, given that 6 August, the day of his birth to eternal life, is the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord. A *saint* is someone who brings divine grace to fruition in what they do, conforming their own life to Christ, Pope Saint Paul VI did this by responding to the call to holiness as a Baptised Christian, as a priest, as a Bishop, and Pope, and he now contemplates the face of God. He always underlined that “only in a sincere search for God, made with prayer, patience and with a conversion of one’s whole being can the true successes of Christian and apostolic life be assured, and the first and constant call of the Lord to holiness be put into practice: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel’ (Mk. 1:15). ‘You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mat. 5:48)” (*Address to the Sacred College on the occasion of his name-day greetings*, 21 June 1976).

As a priest, in 1931, when he had already begun his service for the Holy See, after having written that he did not wish “any extraordinary addition, or way of life” that would distinguish him as other than a normal Christian, he added that he would like to cultivate “a particular love for that which is essential and common in Catholic spiritual life”. “Thus” he wrote, “the Church will be the Mother of Charity: her Liturgy will be the preferred way for my religious spirituality”. Meditating on the Eucharist and reflecting upon the words in the Rite of Ordination of a Priest “imitate what you celebrate” he came to the resolve that the “immolation of one’s own life at all times” is a necessary requirement pointing to “the living out of the Mass” as being an act of “always giving thanks”. (*Notes for Spiritual Exercises* at Montecassino).

Together with the Decree, the texts to be added to the Liturgical Books (Calendar, Missal, Liturgy of the Hours, Martyrology) are published. The Collect prayer resonates with all that God accomplished in his faithful servant: “you entrusted your Church to the leadership of Pope Saint Paul VI, a courageous apostle of your Son’s Gospel”, and it asks: “grant that, illuminated by his teachings, we may work with you to expand the civilisation of love”. Here is synthesised the principal characteristics of his pontificate and his teaching: a Church, which belongs to the Lord (*Ecclesiam Suam*), dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel, as recalled in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, and called to bear witness that God is love.

The biblical readings for the Mass are also indicated, chosen from the Common of Popes, and for the second reading at the Office of Readings some passages from the homily given during the last public session of the Second Vatican Council on 7 December 1965, summarised by the theme: *To know God one must know Man*. Before and after becoming Pope, Saint Paul VI lived with his gaze constantly fixed on Christ whom he considered and proclaimed as a necessity for everyone. He demonstrated this in his first Pastoral Letter as Archbishop of Milan, taking the title from a phrase of Saint Ambrose: *Omnia nobis est Christus* (To us all is Christ).

In a reflection from 5 August 1963, one and a half months after his election to the See of Peter, he wrote: “I must return to the beginning: relationship with Christ... that must be the source of the most sincere humility: ‘leave me, for I am a sinful man...’; be it in availability: ‘I will make you fishers...’; be it in the symbiosis of will and grace: ‘for me to live is Christ...’”. Love for Christ and love for his Church. With good reason he could write in *Pensiero alla morte*: «I pray that the Lord will give me the grace to make of my approaching death a gift of love to the Church. I can say that I have always loved her and I feel that I have lived my life for her and for nothing else”.

When the Holy Spirit chose him as the Successor of Saint Peter, someone already taken by the figure and apostolic activity of Saint Paul, he did not spare his energies in the service of the Gospel of Christ, of the Church and of humanity, seen in the light of the divine plan of salvation. As his teachings show he was a defender of human life, peace and true human progress. He wanted the Church, inspired by the Council and implementing its normative principles, to rediscover ever more her identity, overcoming the divisions of the past and by being ever more attentive to the new age. He wanted the Church of Christ to place the centrality of God and the preaching of the Gospel in the first place, even when she spends herself in the service of the brothers and sisters, in order to build that “civilisation of love” begun by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In *Notes for my Last Will and Testament*, Paul VI wrote: «No monument for me». Even if a monument was erected in the Duomo of Milan in October 1989, the true monument to Saint Paul VI is the one built by his witness, his works, his apostolic journeys, his ecumenism, his work on the *Nova Vulgata*, in the Liturgical renewal and his many teachings and examples by which he showed forth the face of Christ, the mission of the Church, the vocation of contemporary humanity and reconciling Christian thought with the requirements of the difficult moment in which he, with much suffering, had to guide the Church.

Robert Card. Sarah

Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments