

June 28, 2009

Brothers and Sisters of Saitama Diocese

Saitama Diocese
Bishop Tani Daiji

CLOSING MASS FOR THE YEAR OF ST. PAUL

In order to commemorate the 2,000th Anniversary of the Birth of St. Paul, Pope Benedict XVI declared that for one year starting on June 29, 2008, the Church would celebrate a Pauline Year. On this June 28th at Sunday Masses in the various parishes, I hope that you will celebrate a Mass in Commemoration of St. Paul, (or a Commemorative Liturgical Service) to bring the Pauline Year to a close. On that day, I will be leading the Commemorative Mass at Omiya Church whose patron saint is St. Paul. I hope that during the Masses at your local parishes on Sunday, you will join with me in prayer. (This year pastors in the various parishes are free to decide whether or not to use the liturgical text for June 29th, the Feast of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, on Sunday June 28th).

I think that during the past year many parishes had planned study groups, lectures, "Journey with the Scriptures," or pilgrimages to churches with St. Paul as the patron saint, in order to become more familiar with St. Paul. Through all of these activities, much has been learned from St. Paul and we have become more empathetic to him. Here I would like to share with you my own empathy with St. Paul, so that we can journey to the close of the Pauline Year together.

"Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4)

Jesus spoke words like these to Paul. Paul in turn, not only shared his own experience of this encounter with Jesus, and spoke about his conversion in his letters (Galatians 1:11), but he also talked about and shared this experience with many other brothers and sisters in person as well. Through sharing in this way he probably gained the empathy of many other people. In Acts (9:1-30) he spoke in detail about his experience in such a way that it is easy to understand the deep emotional response he evoked. For Paul whose mission was Gospel evangelization, his own personal experiences were the very starting point of his Gospel evangelization.

Do we also get chances to share the story of our own encounter with Jesus, or to talk about our conversion? From time to time, I myself have been asked, "Why did you become a priest?" When time has permitted, I have tried to share my story with others. I think that not only priests but also members of the laity have at times been asked similar questions as well. "Why were you baptized?" For those who were baptized as infants some have been asked, "Why do you go to church?" At these times, how about unabashedly and without hesitation, sharing the story of your personal encounter with Christ, your conversion, your encounters with other people and your encounters with the Word of God?

The telling of your own story is sharing and this is the beginning of evangelization. I hope that it will be possible for you and I as well to have the time to leisurely share our stories together. For this sharing is the starting point of our own evangelization.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.” (Romans 12:15-16)

When the three who were seen as pillars of the community, James, Cephas and John, commissioned Paul to evangelize the gentiles, they did so with one order. The order is recorded in the following verse, “Do not forget the poor.” Paul too had already taken the poor to heart when this order was given. (Galatians 2:10).

Paul could never forget the “poor” as he had already done concrete ministry for them. When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he encountered the fugitive slave Onesimus, who was fleeing for his life from Philemon, one of the leading lay leaders. This fugitive slave had been condemned to death (on a cross). However, Paul gave Onesimus shelter and he treated him like a loving brother, and baptized him. Furthermore, he did not want him to live a hidden life forever, so in order to return him to a regular life in society, he even wrote a letter to safeguard his return to his master, Philemon. This is the, “Letter to Philemon.” It is clear from reading this letter that in Paul’s every day life he treated each of those who had been “marginalized” with great care.

Paul also called for donations to be collected for the “holy ones” in Jerusalem, (Corinthians 16:1), and also expressed the wish that he too could take part in this service of charity, (Romans 15:25). Here the term, “holy ones” refers to the “marginalized” and the “poor,” (see: explanatory note).

Peter also visited the “holy ones” who lived in the city of Lydda, (Acts 9:33-35). In the Early Church the term “holy ones” was used with a special meaning in mind. Here it is important to note that Paul referred to the “marginalized,” as the “holy ones.” Paul explained this in the following way. “The Gentiles have come to share in their (the holy ones) spiritual blessings.” Interaction with the “marginalized” had made their community more spiritually abundant. This is the very reason they were called the “holy ones.”

I would expect that those who are ministering in solidarity with the various “marginalized people,” starting with the members of Open House and Easter Village, and including those who visit the Ushiku Detention Center, or those who visit the sick or the elderly, will immediately understand the spiritual abundance to which I refer. I think that the same could be said for those who have been journeying along with those who have cut off from their jobs since the beginning of the financial crisis last year.

In 1999, the Saitama Diocesan Priests’ Senate, in preparation for the 21st Century, developed a vision statement for the diocese. The main theme was, “being with all people, especially being with those who have been marginalized.” Saitama Diocese has been journeying in line with this vision statement. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart because you have gladly sacrificed to minister in this way for the diocese. For all of us who have journeyed together so as to concretize Paul’s admonition, now is a time for rejoicing in the many blessings that we have received from God.

“I cannot forget your tears.” (2 Timothy 1:4)

There would be no end to the quotes if I were to offer you all the examples from Paul’s journeys for which I have empathy. The above words are from a section of a letter addressed personally to Timothy but through these kinds of words, each and every one of them, we can understand just how much Paul cared for each individual person and how he had deep personal interactions with the people that he encountered. It is my hope that I too can interact with each one of you in the same way that Paul did.

At the end of the Second Letter to Timothy, Paul reveals a bit of weakness and asks Timothy for help. Paul journeyed with weakness and suffering. We are all human beings and therefore we all have weaknesses. I would be very happy if we can journey together as a community of brother and sisters, who help one another, forgive one another, rejoice together and weep together.

I have shared with you three of my selections from the words of St. Paul. I hope that in each parish and in each block, you too will share together in this way.

Explanatory Note: Looking at the scriptures in detail, the words “holy one” (singular) and “holy ones” (plural) have different meanings. In the singular form, the meaning is as the word is written. But in the plural form it refers to those who lived outside the cities, the “marginalized” and the “poor”.