

St. Paul demonstrates the value of letter writing

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On the eve of the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, June 28, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed a Pauline Year to honor St. Paul in preparation for the 2000th anniversary of the great apostle's birth. The Pauline Year will run from June 29, 2008 to June 29, 2009 to highlight Paul's contribution to the spread of Christianity in the first century.

Church historians reckon that St. Paul was born about 10 A.D. in Tarsus, now located in present-day Turkey. Following his conversion to Christianity, he became the Church's foremost evangelizer in spreading the Gospel among the Jews and the Gentiles.

Pope Benedict XVI, on his first official venture outside the Vatican in April 2005, visited the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls to pray at the tomb of the great apostle and to honor his missionary legacy.

On that occasion he reflected that "The Church is by nature missionary; its primary task is evangelization. At the beginning of the third millennium, the Church feels with renewed strength that Christ's missionary mandate is more pressing than ever."

St. Paul's letters

The inspired letters of St. Paul are a primary source of the history and teaching of the nascent Church and clearly influenced its early development.

With today's rapid and varied styles of communication, St. Paul would have a field day with his extensive contacts for the growth and development of the Church. The awesome ease of electronic communication would hold spellbound this inveterate letter writer of the New Testament and master evangelizer.

However, the demanding and rigorous conditions of letter writing in St. Paul's day in no way diminished his passion for this labor of love.

In the beginnings of Christianity the "city churches" communicated with Paul and other leaders of their time and with each other by letters. Unfortunately, many of these letters have been lost. Some of Paul's letters are responses to letters he received, and in his letters he instructs, solves problems, and offers encouragement to the local Christian communities.

Letter writing in ancient times

Just what did it take to write a letter in the era of the New Testament's formation? The biographical study, "Paul the Apostle," published in the mid-19th century by the noted Italian scholar Giuseppe Ricciotti, details some aspects of ancient letter writing.

Usually letters were written on parchment, which was worked leather, or on papyrus. Papyrus was a composition of thin, crossed strips of an Egyptian river reed. It varied in thickness and smoothness, and was formed into sheets measuring about 10 or 12 inches wide. Neither parchment nor papyrus offered the smooth writing surface we expect in paper today.

A pen was made from a split reed or a goose quill. The sticky ink was a mixture of carbon and glue or gum. With rough quality, papyrus writing was very difficult and the scribe struggled intently to form each letter.

Short letter

With a short letter, such as Paul's message to Philemon (25 verses), the finished letter was folded, then sealed with wax or pitch. The name of the intended receiver was written on the outside along with the name of the bearer and the intermediate stops. A long letter would be rolled and enclosed in a sealed envelope, or wrapped in another sheet of papyrus, then tied with a small cord and sealed.

The actual composition and writing of the letter posed some difficulty. Determining the content of the

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message, plus the length of the text, required considerable effort, writing space, and time. On average each papyrus sheet held about 140 words. To write three syllables required about one minute, and an hour's work produced about 72 words.

St. Paul's earliest letter, the oldest text in the New Testament, is the First Letter to the Thessalonians. Scholars estimate that this required about 11 sheets of papyrus and 20 hours of writing.

A labor of love

His letter to the Romans, his longest, needed 50 sheets and 100 hours to complete. His shortest letter contains 335 words to Philemon, but required three sheets and more than four hours. Letter writing was not an easy task. But it was a labor of love.

Because writing was a tedious task, only two or three hours in a working day could be devoted to a letter. It is estimated that the Letter to the Romans must have occupied Paul and his secretary at least 32 days at three hours a day, or a maximum of 49 days at two hours a day.

These approximate calculations hold special importance for a correct interpretation and understanding of St. Paul's letters. Apparent interruptions in the development

of thought, abrupt transitions, and repetition complicate Paul's theological reflections and exhortations.

Considering the time involved in actually composing and writing, and factoring in postponements and interruptions, no wonder Paul's content and style are not always easy to follow or to read aloud.

Another New Testament letter writer, St. Peter, admitted frankly that in the letters of "our beloved brother Paul . . . there are some things hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Value of letter writing

Reviewing these conditions might serve as a reminder for us about the importance of letter writing. This seems to be a lost art among most of the young. The known effects of a handwritten or typed personal letter are remarkable.

We are not all like St. Paul, but we do have the ability and opportunity to cheer, console, cajole, congratulate, and encourage each other. Letter writing is a valuable apostolic venture.

Remember that St. Paul inspired and supported Church vocations by his letters to Timothy and Titus, and in all his letters exhorted all the baptized to be faithful to their baptismal consecration.

Writing a personal letter is a wonderful and warm expression of thoughtfulness and courtesy and appreciation. Letter writing is an inspired apostolate of expressing God's love for us, and our love for one another. Let's take a page from St. Paul and renew this practice in our own lives.

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