

## The mystery of Christ with St Paul

### 1. Saint Paul's Gospel

“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, which he had promised before, by his prophets, in the holy scriptures, concerning his Son, who was made to him of the seed of David, according to the flesh, who was predestinated the Son of God in power, according to the spirit of sanctification, by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead; by whom we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith, in all nations, for his name; among whom are you also the called of Jesus Christ: to all that are at Rome, the beloved of God, called to be saints. Grace to you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

By these words, Saint Paul introduced himself as he started to write his epistle to the Romans, the first in the order of the Bible, although it was not the order the fourteen epistles were written.

As we read it, Saint Paul clearly introduce himself as a son of Christ, whom he received a mission, the mission to preach the gospel across the world despite obstacles and difficulties, using both his greek and jewish background as sources and justification of his explanations, and preaching to the pagans and gentiles.

Saint Paul made his, the gospel received from Jesus, when he suddenly met Him upon Damascus' way. That's why we can truly speak of Saint Paul's Gospel. He himself called it his. But we know there is only one gospel, the one, preached by Jesus, revealed, and transmitted to us by the apostles.

Saint Paul do not hesitate to appropriate, to make his, this unique gospel, as he offered a new angle, a new vision to it, like the four Evangelists wrote their in four different ways, although being very similar.

Saint Paul used his clever mind and his formation to put a new illumination upon the gospel, translating the images and parables the Lord preached with, in a theological vocabulary.

For example, the words such as grace, faith, justification, or even church are relatively rare in the four Gospels of Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke and Saint John. They are constantly repeated in Saint Paul's preaching.

Jesus doesn't often speak about the church, but about God's flock, God's family, God's life. Saint Paul constantly transposed in theological words, what Jesus said in parables.

This is where is the great input of Saint Paul in the Bible, preaching the Gospel of salvation for all, under the condition man believes in this mystery of death and resurrection of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Rm, I, 1-7

This is the Gospel of reconciliation<sup>2</sup>, the Gospel of Christ<sup>3</sup>, the Gospel of the Grace of God<sup>4</sup>, the Gospel of the Glory of Christ<sup>5</sup>.

Saint Paul called Gospel the message he preached, because it was the same doctrine taught in the Gospels. As Christ is the author of the Gospel, it cannot exist two different gospels at there is not two Christs. Therefore, we can call the preaching of Saint Paul through the 14 Epistles Saint Paul's Gospel.

Differences in style and ideas are giving to the books of the Old Testament their proper richness. So it is for the New Testament, as the message remains the same, but only different in appearance.

There is not two Gospels, but different ways to preach and explain the same gospel of Christ according to time, places, persons, and circumstances.

Saint Peter and the other Apostles mainly preached to the Jews, as we remember from the first Council of Jerusalem, but Saint Paul to the Gentiles. As the people listening were different and not educated in the same way, a different way to speak to them was required.

"Now to him that is able to establish you, according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret from eternity, (which now is made manifest by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the precept of the eternal God, for the obedience of faith,) known among all nations."<sup>6</sup>

Here is obviously depicted the three moments of the mystery:

- Hidden before, in the deepness of God;
- Unveiled by divine Providence;
- And even now, known among all nations.

Saint Paul clearly makes his preaching, and Jesus' Gospel, the same: this mystery of Christ was announced by the Prophets and put under a new light when solemnly proclaimed everywhere as Jesus himself said in Mt, X, 27: "That which I tell you in the dark, speak ye in the light: and that which you hear in the ear, preach ye upon the housetops."

If we would like to summarise St. Paul's teaching in one sentence, it could be: "All men are to be saved through Christ's mediation and by their mystical union with him."<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Sources of Saint Paul's teaching

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many rationalist critics tried to oppose Saint Paul and Jesus, telling that Saint Paul completely transformed Jesus' teaching, with his greek input, especially stressing the sacrament of Baptism and Eucharist and the participation to the Mystery of Christ.

Let's have a look to the real influence of the greek background we overviewed when we studied Saint Paul's life in the previous lessons.

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<sup>2</sup> II Cor, V, 19

<sup>3</sup> I Thess, III, 2; I Cor IX, 12; II Cor, II, 12

<sup>4</sup> Act, XX, 24

<sup>5</sup> II Cor, IV, 4

<sup>6</sup> Rm, XVI, 25-26

<sup>7</sup> F. Prat, La Théologie de Saint Paul, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vol. p. 4-5

The Greek culture reigned over Mediterranean Sea from Alexander's conquest until Rome took over, from 330 BC until 63 BC. We cannot deny its influence upon Saint Paul, as we can see it from his way of thinking, his language and style. However, this influence is limited mainly to philosophical ideas and wording. Saint Paul uses the words giving them a personal meaning according to the Christian message he is delivering.

Saint Paul was fluent in Greek. He was in permanent contact with the roman and greek culture, but showed himself highly severe and strictly against its mentality and pagan morals. Before being Roman citizen, he's Jewish. And he has been feed all along his childhood with the Old Testament and its prophecies, following probably more than any of the apostles what Dom Delatte, Abbot of Solesmes (1890-1921) called the "*Noviciat du Verbe*", the Verb's Noviciate.

This biblical education was also received alongside the most strict and uncompromising Pharisaism. We should not be surprised to find out that kind of rigidity within his teaching. Saint Paul is as faithful to Christ as he was to the Law.

No surprises either with the arguments from the Scriptures, as he knew them and use them from Gamaliel's lessons.

As other writers of the Holy Scriptures, Saint Paul belongs to his time and is impregnated with the world's culture around him.

Saint Paul kept the best from the heritage and piety of the Jews:

- A veneration for the Holy Scriptures, as a treasure entrusted by God to his people, to find in it consolation<sup>8</sup> or teaching<sup>9</sup>. This allows St. Paul to affirm the unity of the two Testaments, and therefore the continuity of God's plan of salvation.
- God's transcendence and his free gifts, as said through the prophecies: God is faithful to human race, despite being rejected by them.
- Abraham's vocation is central: because of his act of faith, he allowed the fulfilment of the promise, "when the fullness of time was come"<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. Christ in Saint Paul's teaching

We said that universal salvation was at the centre of Saint Paul's teaching. Here, we cannot forget that the origin of salvation is the Holy Trinity, and more precisely the Father, who is the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. On another hand, the Greek word *Κυριος* used by St. Paul to designate Jesus is a divine word equivalent to the *Λογος* of Saint John.

Therefore. We would better say that the centre of St. Paul's teaching is the Christ Saviour, which means both Christ crucified and Christ risen, within himself and also his members, the Church. With Saint Paul, Faith requires always in the same time, two things:

- Jesus is true God and true Man; and he is the son of God.
- We become sons through the Son of God.

For Saint Paul, his meeting with Jesus on Damascus's way was the turning point of his life: he never went backward. All of Saint Paul's teaching is coming from the mystery of Christ,

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<sup>8</sup> Rm XV, 4

<sup>9</sup> I Cor, X, 6

<sup>10</sup> Gal IV, 4

which means: from the revelation of Jesus Christ, Son of God, born of a woman, and who entrusted His Apostles, and His Church, the care for the transmission of His divine Word.

However, Saint Paul did not invent this mystery of Christ. This mystery is eternal. And St. Paul's life, his teaching, are coming inside this history of salvation, accomplished by Jesus.

Saint Paul got his foundation from Christ: his being is in and from Christ. From Christ, he received all knowledge, science and life. Saint Paul's actions are Christ's action in Saint Paul, who only lives for Christ.

Through his preaching, Saint Paul affirms that by Christ we are baptised, by our faith, we are made part of Christ, we are anointed by the Spirit, by the One anointed of God, Christ, **Ἐριστος**.

Christ is our root and we've been rooted in Him. He is the chief corner stone<sup>11</sup>, upon which we are built together into an habitation of God in the Spirit<sup>12</sup>. All who are participating of Christ's life belong to the same community, one single nation, one single body.

To better understand this idea, let's have a look to the titles given by Saint Paul to Jesus: all of them are connected to **Κυριος**, Saviour, as for a statement to say Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah and Redeemer.

In quantity, however, **Ἐριστος** is the most used title in Saint Paul's with 353 occurrences. Jesus, often attached with Christ, is 200, and Saviour **Κυριος**, only 184, while Son of God, 15 times, but only in highly important moments of doctrinal teaching.

All these titles are dragged towards the one of **Κυριος**, with which Saint Paul proclaims that in this name of Jesus "every knee should bow of those that are in heaven, on Earth, and under the Earth."<sup>13</sup>

This word **Κυριος** was the one used in the first greek translation of the Bible to translate the name of God YHWH. In Saint Paul, this word **Κυριος** is summarising his faith as well as it says his adoration and love.

Saint Paul made a synthetic explanation of the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles within the epistle to the Romans, exploring and developing his faith in Christ in two main directions:

- The eternal existence of the word of God before being humiliated.
- His activity within the creation.

Christ is the wisdom of God. Christ is the image of God.

## **A. The eternal existence of the Word**

Although Saint Paul doesn't use the word **Λογος**, as in the incipit of the Gospel of Saint John, there is no doubt within Saint Paul's teaching about Jesus being sent in mission by his Father. "Jesus Christ, being rich, became poor, for your sakes; that through his poverty, you might be rich."<sup>14</sup> Saint Paul spoke here of the richness of Christ who was before he went up on

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<sup>11</sup> Eph, II, 20

<sup>12</sup> Eph, II, 22

<sup>13</sup> Philip, II, 10

<sup>14</sup> II Cor, VIII, 9

Earth. Saint Paul stresses the deep and permanent being of Christ by opposing it to the poverty and everything He accept with a human life.

We find this same antithesis in his letter to the Philippians, that we already quoted earlier: “Christ Jesus: who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause God also hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names: that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth: and that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father.”<sup>15</sup>

We can read here a double opposition between poverty and richness, and between Christ’s sufferings and death and his glorious resurrection. Saint Paul comes down from high, moving forward the direct experience the Apostles got from Jesus, who did not know Him first as coming from the Father.

Saint Paul conclude this beautiful Hymn to Jesus by giving him this title of *Κυριος*, Saviour. Jesus, being humiliated, then elevated, deserve the same adoration which was reserved to YHWH in the Old Testament. Quoting Isaiah, XLV, 3 “And I will give thee hidden treasures, and the concealed riches of secret places: that thou mayest know that I am the Lord who call thee by thy name, the God of Israel”, Saint Paul tells about Jesus the same thing that was said of YHWH. As Jesus can't become God, which would be nonsense, he's already of divine condition which will be demonstrated in the glory of the Resurrection.

## **B. The activity of Christ within the Creation**

In several excerpts, Saint Paul develops this idea. We have evidence in the first epistle to the Corinthians, in which Saint Paul shows the primacy of Christ in the Creation and then in the Redemption, affirming that Jesus is the Redeemer because he is the Creator.

Christ is Redeemer because he is Creator, which means he is God. The Redeemer of man could only be divine to repair and satisfy the infinite offence of the sin. In Romans, V, Saint Paul compare Christ and Adam, but goes further with this idea of Christ in the epistle to the Colossians, when he speaks about Christ being the firstborn of all creatures.

He “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for in him were all things created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominations, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him and in him. And he is before all, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he may hold the primacy: because in him, it hath well pleased the Father, that all fullness should dwell; and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, making peace through the blood of his cross, both as to the things that are on earth, and the things that are in heaven.”<sup>16</sup>

This long quotation immediately calls to our memory another one similar from the book of Proverbs, VIII, 22-24: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made any thing from the beginning. I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived.”

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<sup>15</sup> Philip, II, 5-11

<sup>16</sup> Coll, I, 15-20

This primacy is not only in time as being the first of many but remaining amongst creatures. This primacy is above everything, as a principle, the origin of anything. This role as Creator for Christ is even stronger than wisdom, because everything was created in him, by him and for him.

- In him: Christ is the model for all other creatures. (Formal cause).
- By him: everything relies on him. (Active and exemplary cause).
- For him: Christ is the aim and purpose of all things. he attracts all things to Him. He governs as God does.

Being the first in the Creation, He is also the first in the Redemption. All redeemed mankind is in Christ, who reconciled the world by the Cross and the Resurrection.<sup>17</sup>

Saint Paul unveils for us the perfect unity of God's plan for salvation, from the Creation to the Redemption, with the Old and New Testament. Everything is linked through the sacrifice of the Cross, scandal for the Jews and madness for the pagans.

The gift of the Creation is continued by the gift of the Redemption, with the same kind of love, the creative love becoming the redeeming love, showing the cross at the ultimate secret of God and his government.

In Colossians, I 15-20, we have the plenary demonstration of the mission of Christ. He's divine and above all things. The incarnated Wisdom is a Wisdom of salvation, who is image of God.

The uncreated Wisdom becomes the crucified Wisdom. Saint Paul achieves here a beautiful synthesis of the Revelation, showing that we cannot separate anything from this mystery of Christ, both divine and human, both Creator and Redeemer, being the eternal blessed God and God the Saviour.

Christ, being the unique mediator, is also the only Priest of the New Covenant, as precisely said in Hebrew, V.

## 4. The Epistle to the Hebrews

Although we do not know the real author of this epistle, we cannot ignore the immense influence of Saint Paul upon its writing. The great teaching of this epistle is the statement of Christ being the only priest of the New Covenant. Christ the High Priest is above Moses and angels, because he is the son of God.

If the New Covenant is above the Old one, it's because of the mediator, who is not only a man, a servant, but the son of God, both God and man, being priest.

From the very beginning of the epistle<sup>18</sup> we get this affirmation of the perfect excellency of Christ incarnated, Son of God, Creator, Revealer, Saviour, Sovereign King and Priest of the redeemed mankind. All things we just said about Christ are repeated in this epistle. Everything is existing through Christ and his divine word. *Dixit et facta sunt*. He says and things are made.

Jesus is above us but also is amongst us, as he made himself participating of our human life, even knowing suffering and death, in order to learn as a good son, obedience, and becoming

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<sup>17</sup> I Cor, XV

<sup>18</sup> Hb, I, 2

in the same way the cause for eternal salvation. Therefore, crowned in glory, He sits at the right hand of God, and intercede for us, using his priesthood to pour over us the graces of salvation he obtained through his perfect sacrifice.

Jesus is truly the only High Priest of the New Covenant. He received our humanity to guide us to the Heavenly Temple, purified by his own blood, and not only the one of the calves and goats<sup>19</sup>, used by the priests of the Old Covenant.

## Conclusion

Starting from Christ, to get to Christ, this is Saint Paul's teaching.

After the Eden Garden, the original sin initiated the breakup with God and man become a son of anger living under the reign of Satan. Man become a slave in the flesh, and his bad tendency, which became natural from that moment, was to follow his instinct and fall into sin. That was humanity before and without Christ.

But God didn't give up, and in his divine mercy and bounty, he initiated the first move of the Redemption. Saint Paul insisted upon the idea that all men were and are called to salvation. Here we need to avoid two excesses in the interpretation:

- The jansenist one, which says that God wanted only to save a few, or, if many, not all men.
- The modernist one, which says that God saved everyone, and then Hell doesn't exist, or, if it exists, it's empty.

God sent Grace to prepare the coming of his son in mainly three different steps:

- The natural law<sup>20</sup>
- The promise to Abraham<sup>21</sup>
- The Law<sup>22</sup>

Finally, Christ repeated and recapitulated everything within his own person, being true man but also true God. Christ is the starting point, the centre, and the final point of Saint Paul's teaching.

**“By Him, and with Him, and in Him is to Thee, God the Father almighty, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, all honor and glory, World without end. Amen.”<sup>23</sup>**

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<sup>19</sup> Hb, IX, 19

<sup>20</sup> Gn, III

<sup>21</sup> Gn, XII

<sup>22</sup> Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy

<sup>23</sup> Conclusion of the Canon of the Mass