

New Brighton, Saturday 14th January 2023

General introduction to the text of the Epistles The epistles to the Thessalonians & Corinthians

Thanks to the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we know quite well the missionary work of St Paul, from his conversion until his trip to Rome as a prisoner. We also know some of his teaching through this same text, but the main source for us remains the 14 Epistles he wrote to the local churches of the newly born Catholic Church.

These epistles are his written work, but remains occasional, often written to answer a question, to solve an issue. However, they remain the crowning of his missionary work. Through these epistles, which are, as the whole Bible, inspired by the Holy Ghost, the Jew, who converted on Damascus' way, went throughout History, and they remain today as true and actual as when they were written 2000 years ago. The teaching of St Paul remains eternal, as it is the teaching of God.

Before finally starting the study of the 14 epistles, which will be the subject of all our lessons from now, let's have a look at some more general considerations that we may find in all the writings of the Apostle, and will help us to appreciate more the explanations of the Apostle upon our Faith.

1 General overview of the 14 Epistles: Authenticity, style...

1.1 The Canon of Scriptures

Since the 2nd century, everybody agrees on the final display and number of the epistles of St Paul: 14. Amongst these, only the real author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is sometimes contested, without denying St Paul's influence in its writing.

From the 18th and 19th centuries, with the influence of modern critics and rationalism, the authenticity of the epistles was seriously challenged, or denied. The Germanic and Netherland biblical studies were mostly at the origin of this.

Let's do a quick overview about this question, keeping in mind that we must always receive the text of the epistles as it was approved in a definite way by the Holy Council of Trent:

“The sacred and holy, ecumenical, and general Synod of Trent,–lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the Same three legates of the Apostolic See presiding therein,–keeping this always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church; which (Gospel), before promised through the prophets in the holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature, as the fountain

of all, both saving truth, and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand; (the Synod) following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both –as also the said traditions, as well those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.

And it has thought it meet that a list of the sacred books be inserted in this decree, lest a doubt may arise in any one’s mind, which are the books that are received by this Synod.

[...] Fourteen epistles of Paul the apostle, (one) to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, (one) to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, (one) to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; [...]

But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately condemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema.”¹

1.2 Authenticity

The purpose of the following is not to put any doubt in your minds, but to enquire about the status of the question amongst various specialists.

¹ General Council of Trent, 4th Session, 8th April 1546, *Decretum de Canonicis Scripturis*.

“Sacrosancta oecumenica et generalis Tridentina Synodus, in Spiritu Sancto legitime congregata, praesidentibus in ea eisdem tribus Apostolicae Sedis Legatis, hoc sibi perpetuo ante oculos proponens, ut sublatis erroribus, puritas ipsa Evangelii in Ecclesia conservetur: quod promissum ante per Prophetas in Scripturis Sanctis, Dominus noster Iesus Christus, Dei Filius, proprio ore primum promulgavit, deinde per suos Apostolos, tamquam fontem omnis et salutaris veritatis et morum disciplinae, omni creaturae praedicari iussit: perspicuensque hanc veritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus, quae ipsius Christi ore ab Apostolis acceptae, aut ab ipsis Apostolis Spiritu Sancto dictante, quasi per manus traditae, ad nos usque pervenerunt: orthodoxorum Patrum exempla secuta, omnes libros tam Veteris quam Novi Testamenti, cum utriusque unus Deus sit auctor, nec non traditiones ipsas, tum ad fidem, tum ad mores pertinentes, tamquam vel ore tenus a Christo, vel a Spiritu Sancto dictatas, et continua successione in Ecclesia catholica conservatas, pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia suscipit ac veneratur. Sacrorum vero Librorum indicem huic decreto adscribendum censuit, ne cui dubitatio suboriri possit, quinam sint, qui ab ipsa Synodo suscipiuntur. Sunt vero infra scripti. [...] *quatuordecim epistolae Pauli Apostoli: ad Romanos, duae ad Corinthios, ad Galatas, ad Ephesios, ad Philippenses, ad Colossenses, duae ad Thessalonicenses, duae ad Timotheum, ad Titum, ad Philemonem, ad Hebraeos;* [...] Si quis autem libros ipsos integros cum omnibus suis partibus, prout in Ecclesia catholica legi consueverunt, et in veteri vulgata latina editione habentur, pro sacris et canonicis non susceperit, et traditiones praedictas sciens et prudens contempserit, anathema sit.”

There is no question about the authenticity of the following epistles: 1st Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon, Romans, 1st & 2nd Corinthians, Galatians. St Paul is truly the author of these 7.

Some reasons were said against the authenticity of the 2nd Thessalonians, but nothing serious to pay attention to. We can therefore add this one to the previous 7 we mentioned.

The origin of the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians is still debated, even between Catholic scholars, but, following the continuous tradition of the Church, we must declare them as truly from St Paul. However, he probably used a scrivener to write them on his behalf, like for the Epistle to the Romans. But everything in the composition, style, language and words are definitely from St Paul himself.

As for the previous listed, the authenticity of the epistles to Timothy (1st & 2nd) and Titus was challenged since modern time. But, here as well, we can see anything serious: they are from St Paul, as in the textual appearance as in the exposed teaching. With these, St Paul truly reveals his soul, but also his talent.

To conclude this brief exposure of the modern critics, we must stick with the continuous teaching of the Church, saying that all these 14 epistles are from St Paul. However, we need a special mention about the epistle to the Hebrews, who is probably not from St Paul himself, but definitely of his inspiration, and therefore to be integrated with the 13 others, amongst St Paul's writings.

You will probably hear, or heard before, that some other letters of St Paul were possibly written, but are now lost. If we were to find these texts again, should we consider them as part of the others, and then, included in the Revelation? **The answer is undoubtedly no!** And this negative answer is part of our Faith, and we must adhere to it! If only we dare to answer with a yes to that question, it would be like admitting Revelation could be completed, amended, which is impossible, as we know. Such theories about the progress or completion of the Revelation since the death of St John, the last of the Apostles, were strongly condemned several times by the Magisterium of the Church, especially through the teaching of Blessed Pope Pius IX and St Pius X.²

Once said and admitted the 14 Epistles being of St Paul, let's briefly mention the transmission of the text itself, which was much smoother than the text of the Gospels, or the Acts. We can't find many differences between different manuscripts, or if there are, they are minors and secondary details.

1.3 Letters or Epistles?

Although it looks a question without interest or artificial, this can help us to seize the real original character of the Epistles. Should we say epistles, or, according to a more recent way, letters?

A letter looks more personal, as another way to continue an oral discussion, and would be more intimate, confidential. An epistle would not be that confidential, and be more like semi-public literature.

² Cf Beatus Pius, IX, *Syllabus complectens præcipuos nostræ ætatis errores*, 8th December 1864; St Pius X, Decree *Lamentabili Sane Exitu*, 4th July 1907; Ibid, Encyclical letter *Pascendi Domini Gregis*, 10th September 1907

Asking this question allows us to realize how the epistles of St Paul fulfil both denominations, being both written for a wide audience, the Church, but also, some intimacy and private revelation coming straight out of the heart of the Apostle, and therefore, from the Sacred Heart of Jesus, true author hidden behind the wording of the Apostle. This would also find a justification in the common use of that time, as the letters of Pliny the Younger, which are a treasure of great historical value.

1.4 Structure and writing

At first sight, we can read the multiple variety of style in St Paul's writing:

- Apologetic teaching³,
- Sure and mature explanation⁴
- Hymns and psalms⁵
- Doctrinal or liturgical canticle⁶

We deliberately put apart the epistle to the Hebrews, which looks like more to a sermon than a letter.

In a general way, all epistles are displayed in a similar way, as many profane letters of that time:

- At the beginning, St Paul always addresses to those he's writing, mentioning himself as the sender, generally accompanied by a greeting word, such as grace and/or peace, using sometimes the Hebrew word Shalom, which also proclaims the peace coming from and through the Messiah.
- Then, St Paul, most of the time, make a thanksgiving prayer to God for the graces and blessings received by the community and himself, urging the reader to joy and prayer.
- The teaching of the epistle itself. Two ways to display it: St Paul may deliver a doctrinal teaching, followed by a moral one, mostly introduced as a consolation, or a pressing invite. This is for example the Epistles to the Romans, Ephesians, or Colossians. St Paul may also mix teaching on doctrine, spiritual life and moral upon various subjects, such as with the epistles to the Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, or the pastoral epistles.
 - o However, St Paul never separates dogma and moral. Both moral and spiritual life have their roots in the Christian mystery that we believe in through the virtue of Faith.
- Most of the time, St Paul concludes his epistle with precise indications. One of the best examples may be found in Romans, XVI.

It's highly probable that St Paul, following the common use of his time, and before him, use a scrivener whom he read out his teaching. Whether this scrivener was faithful to the exact word of the apostle, or did put his personal input, doesn't affect much our understanding. But it is for sure that St Paul hand wrote some excerpts, to give a more authentical character to his teaching, or to underline the moral or doctrinal importance of these excerpts.

³ Rom.; Gal.; I Cor.

⁴ Captivity epistles: Eph., I-III; Col., I; Phil., II-III; II Cor., V, 14-21; I Cor., II, 6-16

⁵ I Cor., XIII; Rm. VIII, 31-39

⁶ Phil., II, 6-11; Col., I, 15-20; Rm., XI, 33-36

The influence of his Jewish and Greek education can clearly be seen throughout the text, with the exposure of ideas and doctrine, but also thank to his way of thinking. If we only remain on a literature level, St Paul always wrote in Greek language, but not in Hebrew. We find some Hebrew words such as *Abba*⁷, *Maranatha*⁸, *Pascha*⁹, *Amen*¹⁰, or *Satanas*¹¹, but the use of the Greek language allows him to deep in the intimacy of the Mystery, thanks to the philosophical formation he received. Without Greek language, how St Paul could talk about *Κυριος* (Lord), *Παρουσία* (Parousia), *Πνευμα* (Spirit), or many other? The vocabulary seems to be richer than with St John, despite several repeats, due to the oral style of an epistle. However, these repeats increase the strength of the teaching of the Apostle, as they're stressing for us the importance of such and such points. As an example, we can quote the beautiful hymn to charity, in I, Cor., XIII:

“If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity is patient, is kind: charity envieth not, dealeth not perversely; is not puffed up; Is not ambitious, seeketh not her own, is not provoked to anger, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth with the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never falleth away: whether prophecies shall be made void, or tongues shall cease, or knowledge shall be destroyed.”¹²

St Paul is a speaker and a teacher. We can easily imagine him preaching to the crowds and trying to give and expand throughout the people the sacred fire burning his heart. His living style is quick, sharp and simple, as is his personality. We can say with certainty that the influence of Gamaliel and his studies were a great help for the Apostle. He knew how to preach and convince people. The text of the epistle is not flat: St Paul directly speaks to the reader, and make himself present to us, as if he would speak in person.

His eloquence and rhetoric will stay forever as high as is his Love for God and his Gospel.

2 The two epistles to the Thessalonians: the Gospel of Parousia (*second coming of Christ*)

Beginning of the New Testament. Many biblical scholars gave this qualification to these two epistles, that we can easily make it ours. Probability is very high for these two were written before year 50. They could even be the first written texts of the New Testament.

⁷ Gal., IV, 6; Rm., VIII, 5

⁸ I Cor., XVI, 22

⁹ I Cor., V, 4

¹⁰ Rm., I, 25

¹¹ Rm., XVI, 20

¹² I Cor., XIII, 1-8

2.1 To whom are they written

In Acts, XVI, we read (cf. our second lesson¹³) that during his second missionary trip obey the angel who told him to cross the Detroit and bring the Gospel in continental Europe. This is how St Paul, Silas, and probably Timothy¹⁴, arrived in Thessalonica¹⁵ around year 49.

Thessalonica was a free city, and the metropolis for the roman province of Macedonia. St Paul preached three Sabbath in a row in the Synagogue, but most of the converted people of that church came from the darkness of paganism¹⁶. They remained most faithful to Christ and St Paul praised their fidelity¹⁷. Early, Thessalonica became a radiating center for the Gospel, thanks to the preaching of St Paul and Timothy, who stayed there, during St Paul's trip to Athena¹⁸.

The success of that mission was so obvious, that the Jews began to express more their jealousy and hate, and forced the Apostle to flee away, but the bond he built with this community remained strong. Therefore, nothing should surprise us, that, soon after leaving them in hurry, St Paul wrote them his first letter. We can also easily understand that their formation was not fully completed, and some more precisions were still lacking.

2.2 The 1st Thessalonians

There is no doubt about its authenticity. As we said, it was challenged from the 19th century, but nothing to worry us anymore.

2.2.1 Date and reason for writing

St Paul just left in hurry Thessalonica and is worried that his work couldn't be finished. To strengthen the young community, he sent them Timothy¹⁹. When he returned, St Paul was appeased with fresh news, saying that the community was growing in Faith and Charity. St Paul was in Corinth when he received the news, and from that city, sent his first letter. The joy of the news can clearly be read through the lines of the three firsts chapters. But, as we said, he also had a few teachings in chapter 4, about the Parousia, the second coming of Jesus-Christ, and how we should prepare for it, through practice of the virtues, especially chastity, and daily duties.

2.2.2 The Doctrine

The first part of this epistle is made with the three chapters we mentioned. St Paul expresses his feeling about the young community, thanking God and his grace for the work which was accomplished. He reminds about the mission in Thessalonica, insisting upon the mission to preach the Gospel. St Paul knows he's an apostle and wishes to be a witness of Christ.

¹³ 22nd October 2022: [St Paul – His life, his missions \(2nd part\)](#)

¹⁴ Ac., XVII, 14-15

¹⁵ Ac., XVII, 1

¹⁶ I Thess., I, 9

¹⁷ II, Thess., I, 3-5

¹⁸ I Thess., III, 2

¹⁹ Ibid.

Then he speaks again about the strong faith he found in the city²⁰, but also explains why he sent them Timothy²¹, and the joy he had when he came back to him²².

The prayer which concludes this first part is a thanksgiving again for past and present blessings, which allow the apostle to face with confidence the future of the young community. This prayer introduces us to the second part of the epistle.

St Paul exposes in there what are his views and God's plan for the future of the community. Progress is needed through holiness which is the accomplishment of God's will upon us²³. Holiness is required in all aspects of our life, not only in moral and marriage²⁴, but also in our work and fraternal charity²⁵.

St Paul continues with teaching about the last coming of Christ, and the resurrection of the bodies²⁶, but still links it to our personal holiness here on earth.

“For yourselves know perfectly, that the day of the Lord shall so come, as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, peace and security; then shall sudden destruction come upon them, as the pains upon her that is with child, and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. For all you are the children of light, and children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep, as others do; but let us watch, and be sober.”²⁷

St Paul concludes his first letter with several recommendation about spiritual battle, which is won mainly through joy and prayer²⁸, and finally greets the community.

St Paul started his teaching with the real life of the Thessalonians and brought it back where it should belong: the source of faith, which was also the beginning of his letter. From God to God, he ended the race.

2.3 The 2nd Thessalonians

Some modern scholars challenged its authenticity, saying that it was just a copy of the 1st Thessalonians, by a copyist, who amended the original text. For example, a foreign modern translation of the bible says the author was a Christian author who knew very well St Paul's teaching²⁹.

But most of bible scholars agree upon its authenticity, and being different from the 1st Thessalonians. This difference is mainly explained with the evolution of the community in between the two letters.

²⁰ I Thess, II, 13-16

²¹ I Thess., II, 17 – III, 6

²² I Thess., III, 7-10

²³ I Thess., IV, 3

²⁴ I Thess., IV, 3-8

²⁵ I Thess., IV, 9-12

²⁶ I Thess., IV, 13-18, Epistle for the Funeral Mass

²⁷ I Thess., V, 2-6

²⁸ I Thess., V, 1-22

²⁹ *Un écrivain chrétien pénétré de l'enseignement de St Paul*. Introduction to the 2nd Thessalonians, TOB, Ecumenical Translation of the Bible in French, 1st published in 1975

2.3.1 Date & reason for writing

It is still hard for us today to give a date as precise as we could make one for the 1st Thessalonians. However, it seems it was written relatively shortly after the 1st one, probably around end of year 50, or beginning 51 A.D. Major changes happened within the community: Faith had grown, but also some people thought the day of the second coming of Christ was to happen shortly, or already happened. Saint Paul felt the need to awake them again and avoid sloth and idleness³⁰.

2.3.2 The Doctrine

Here again, two main parts: a doctrinal one, and a pastoral exhortation.

Same as 1st Thessalonians, St Paul begins with a greeting³¹ and thanksgiving. The Thessalonians grew in Faith and Charity, and remained faithful in time of persecution³². But he corrected something he saw going wrong about the Parousia³³. He more clearly than in his first letter says about the kingship of the Antichrist, and the general apostasy of the last times. Then, he urges them to remain strong in their Faith³⁴, and ask for prayers for themselves, but also for his own ministry³⁵.

Straight after that, Saint Paul make his mind in a more severe way, and urges the idlers, who caused disorder, tepidity and lukewarm: “we have heard there are some among you who walk disorderly, working not at all, but curiously meddling.”³⁶

To remedy this issue, he recommends work, as he did himself:

“For yourselves know how you ought to imitate us: for we were not disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for nothing, but in labour and in toil we worked night and day, lest we should be chargeable to any of you. Not as if we had not power: but that we might give ourselves a pattern unto you, to imitate us.”³⁷

For the weak who needs to be corrected, St Paul urges Charity, as they remain our brothers, and not our enemies³⁸.

He finally concludes with a prayer and triple blessing.

2.4 Mains themes of the two epistles

We can summarize them in three mains things:

³⁰ 2 Thess., III, 6-15

³¹ 2 Thess., I, 1-2

³² 2 Thess., I, 3-12

³³ 2 Thess, II, 1-12

³⁴ 2 Thess, II, 13-17

³⁵ 2 Thess, III, 1-5

³⁶ 2 Thess, III, 11-12

³⁷ 2 Thess, III, 7-9

³⁸ 2 Thess., III, 15

2.4.1 Christian life

St Paul makes his point upon theological virtues, Faith Hope and Charity, which can always grow. Christian life is a vocation, a special call to holiness, that we must practice a virtuous life. Saint Paul make a special focus upon the virtue of Hope, according to the presentation he made about the last judgment, and the reward we may obtain according to our merits. More than Hope, St Paul mentioned about constancy, underlining that Christian life in a constant battle against the evil, and the continuous difficulties the devil will place on our way to divert us from Heaven.

2.4.2 Being a witness of Christ

These two letters are giving us precious elements about the missionary life of St Paul, but also about the spirituality which should be the root of any missionary of the Gospel. Saint Paul's work is not only for and about the word itself of the Gospel, but also the obedience to the influence of the Holy Ghost, who inspires our actions, and allows us to live from that same word.

Preaching the Gospel requires abandon, and to never withdraw from the grace, which is the invite to never follow the idlers.

2.4.3 The second coming of Christ

Saint Paul, as most of the first Christians, was sure Christ' second coming was near to happen. However, his teaching gives us two tips to help our expectation:

- How we should behave, while we're waiting
- The date it will happen

Saint Paul is sure to be right and preaches the Gospel of Christ, but his saying about the date of the last coming can only be read as a possibility, as no one knows the day not the hour. Therefore, Saint Paul can say, as any of us, he might still be part of the living when it will happen.

"Paul describes Christ's parusia in especially vivid tones and with symbolic imagery which, however, conveys a simple and profound message: we shall ultimately be with the Lord for ever. Over and above the images, this is the essential message: our future is "to be with the Lord". As believers, we are already with the Lord in our lifetime; our future, eternal life, has already begun.

In his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul changes his perspective. He speaks of the negative incidents that must precede the final and conclusive event. We must not let ourselves be deceived, he says, to think that, according to chronological calculations, the day of the Lord is truly imminent: "On the question of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we beg you, brothers, not to be so easily agitated or terrified, whether by an oracular utterance, or rumor, or a letter alleged to be ours, into believing that the day of the Lord is here."³⁹

³⁹ Benedict XVI, General Audience, Wednesday 12th November 2008, Saint Paul (12) Eschatology: the Expectation of the Parusia.

3 The two Epistles to the Corinthians

3.1 Generalities

3.1.1 To whom are they written

Corinth was a prosperous city, well placed at the crossroad of the Greek peninsula. The isthmus of Corinth had been a traditional way for trade and exchange throughout antique times: Crossing the isthmus meant avoiding the long trip around Peloponnese and was the mandatory trade city between Sparta and Athens. Emperor August chose Corinth to become the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. With its two harbours, one upon each side of the isthmus, Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, but also known for its corruption. A quite important Jewish community was present.

Saint Paul preached for the first time during his second missionary trip, around year 50, and because of the success, he was dragged in front of the Roman procurator, who denied his competence⁴⁰ in judging the jealousy and hate of the Jews against St Paul and let him continue his work. But St Paul, being wise, left Corinth, asking Apollos to continue his work.⁴¹

St Paul remained intimately bonded to that community he founded and loved, despite all their defects, always practicing fraternal correction and charity, denouncing corruption of its members⁴², or errors during the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries⁴³. He also tried to put some order into the numerous charisms⁴⁴, and asked for their prudence in all matters⁴⁵.

3.1.2 General circumstances of their writing

As St Paul did with Thessalonians, he first tried to convert and bring the Gospel to the Jewish community. Afterward, he went to the pagans, who became the biggest part of the Corinthian Christian community. Therefore, the two epistles are mainly addressed to former pagans⁴⁶. As mentioned earlier, it is possible St Paul wrote them more than the two letters we received in the New Testament. We could read that from other verses of different epistles of St Paul⁴⁷.

⁴⁰ Ac., XVIII, 12-17

⁴¹ Ac., XVIII, 24 - XIX, 1

⁴² I Cor., V, 1-3

⁴³ I Cor., XI, 17-34

⁴⁴ I Cor., XII - XIII

⁴⁵ I Cor., VIII, 1 - XI, 1

⁴⁶ I Cor., XII, 2

⁴⁷ I Cor., V, 9; II Cor., II, 3; VII, 8

3.2 The first Epistle to the Corinthians: The Gospel of Christ crucified

The authenticity was never denied, even by some modern scholars. However, some pretended it was a compilation of several excerpts from different letters. This last idea is to be rejected, as it would deny the unity of the letter, as it was always received by the Church.

3.2.1 Date & reason for writing

Following the text of the epistle itself (“or I will not see you now by the way, for I trust that I shall abide with you some time, if the Lord permit. But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost.”⁴⁸), St Paul most probably wrote the first epistle to the Corinthians around year 55 or 54, before the feast day of Pentecost.

Several reasons may be said to explain why the apostle sent that long letter. St Paul was to answer the questions of one of the high ranked women of the community, Chloe, and also was in need to justify his work against various critics which were said amongst the community.

These critics are to be understood with the common background of the young Christian communities at that time. Several groups of people from various religious origin were gathering and sometime competing against each other:

- Former Jews, converted to Christian faith, who, most of the time, rejected St Paul's teaching and his attitude towards Moses' Law.
- The Jews, who were often opposed to St Paul's teaching.
- The pagans, often contemptuous about this rivalry.

3.2.2 Doctrine

When we put aside the introduction (I, 1-9) and conclusion (XVI), we can clearly read four parts in this 1st Epistle to the Corinthians:

- Against divisions (I, 10 – IV, 20)
- Against defects (V – VI)
- Answers to questions (VII – XIV)
- Resurrection of Christ, promise and token for our own resurrection (XV)

These four parts are allowing us to read about the way St Paul understood his mission, his preaching, his apostolate. He always drags everything towards heaven, Christ. As said previously, Saint Paul often offers us antithesis to explain himself. In this 1st Corinthians, it's clearly about the opposition between heaven and earth.

In the first chapters (I, 10 – IV, 20), Saint Paul rejects the opposition facing him, and recalls who is the real person Christians are belonging to: Christ, and not one or another who preached on His behalf. The true apostle is not living for himself, but for Christ only. The mystery of Christ resides in the mystery of the Cross, scandal for the Jews, madness for pagans, but wisdom of God, and revealed by the Holy Ghost to those who humbly accept God's teaching.

⁴⁸ I Cor., XVI, 8

In chapters V and VI, St Paul strongly condemns corruption and sins he heard being committed within the community: sins against 6th Commandment⁴⁹, or trials between Christians brothers⁵⁰. These are to be ended immediately, and those doing such thing are not worthy being called Sons of God.

Saint Paul continues his teaching by answering questions made to him. Three main themes appear:

- **About marriage:** is it wise to get married?
 - o With a great wisdom and prudence, St Paul give the evidence of primacy of celibacy and consecrated life over marriage life, regarding the perfection of the evangelical counsels (Chastity, Poverty, Obedience). However, even if they are holier, they remain advices, eligible by choice. When they're chosen for God, they become duties and obligations. But when someone is getting married, he does not commit any sin, of course. In the Epistle to Ephesians, Marriage is also said by St Paul similar as the union of Christ and the Church, and therefore to be considered holy. However, his state of life remains inferior to consecrated and religious life. St Paul ends his answer with the special status of widows:

“A woman is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband die, she is at liberty: let her marry to whom she will; only in the Lord. But more blessed shall she be, if she so remain, according to my counsel; and I think that I also have the spirit of God.”⁵¹

- o Saint Paul teaches about indissolubility of Marriage⁵², and speaks about marriage between Christians and non-christians people, not recommending them, and place the first rules for what the Tradition and Canon Law call “Pauline privilege.”⁵³

The scandal of the weak: Is it allowed to eat meats which were offered to idols?

- o From his answer, St Paul knew that the future of the evangelisation was in balance. Twice⁵⁴, in the 1st Corinthians and once in the epistle to the Romans⁵⁵, St Paul will answer this question. Idols being vain, eating meats dedicated to them can't

⁴⁹ I Cor., V, 1-12; I Cor., VI, 12-20

⁵⁰ I Cor., VI, 1-11

⁵¹ I Cor., VII, 39-40

⁵² I Cor., VII

⁵³ I Cor., VII, 10-15; St Paul's answer was initiated to address a serious pastoral problem in the Church in Corinth where problems developed in marriages between believers and unbelievers. Therefore, in instances where the unbaptized spouse left the newly baptized spouse, he allowed the latter to enter into a new marriage. In case of polygamy, this was only about the first marriage, all following unions being considered as null and never happened.

Cf CIC (Codex Juris Canonici), § 1143-1147:

Can 1143: §1. A marriage entered into by two non-baptized persons is dissolved by means of the pauline privilege in favour of the faith of the party who has received baptism by the very fact that a new marriage is contracted by the same party, provided that the non-baptized party departs.

§2. The non-baptized party is considered to depart if he or she does not wish to cohabit with the baptized party or to cohabit peacefully without affront to the Creator unless the baptized party, after baptism was received, has given the other a just cause for departing.

Cf also Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, [Norms on the Preparation of the Process for the Dissolution of the Marriage Bond in Favour of the Faith](#), 30th April 2001

⁵⁴ I Cor., VII, 11-13; X, 23 - XI, 1

⁵⁵ Rm., XIV-XV

be a sin in itself, but beware of the scandal of the weak, these who might not understand the action, as they might be ignorant on that point.

- St Paul's answer was used several times by theologians, to answer the named scandal, but also for the difficult issues missionaries encountered in their work across the globe, when they met with new pagan peoples.

Neglect in the liturgy, particularly the Holy Mass:

- St Paul asked women to cover their head:

“But every woman praying or prophesying with her head not covered, disgraceth her head: for it is all one as if she were shaven. For if a woman be not covered, let her be shorn. But if it be a shame to a woman to be shorn or made bald, let her cover her head.”⁵⁶

- St Paul insists upon the dignity of all who desire to receive the Body and Blood of Christ during Mass. It's not a simple supper, but the Holy Banquet, the same Sacrifice the Lord offered upon Calvary:

“What, have you not houses to eat and to drink in? Or despise ye the church of God; and put them to shame that have not? What shall I say to you? Do I praise you? In this I praise you not. For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread.”⁵⁷

- In this third answer, St Paul delivers his well-known teaching about charisms⁵⁸, which are given not for the person herself, but to be exerted for the benefit of the community. Charisms are given by the Holy Ghost to proclaim Jesus' Divinity. They aren't all equals, some are higher than others, but the only one that truly matters in Charity, which is the first and most important above all: “And now there remain faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity”⁵⁹
- These gifts are to be entrusted to a real discernment, and obedience.⁶⁰

St Paul finishes his teaching with chapter XV, telling the Corinthians about the Resurrection of Christ and their own. He intimately bonds the two events, one from the past, token and promise for the one of the future, final rewards for faith and fidelity throughout life on earth.

Once again, St Paul is answering special questions of his time, but he elevates the answers in such way that they address also to us, throughout age.

⁵⁶ I Cor., XI, 5-6

⁵⁷ I Cor., XI, 22-23

⁵⁸ I Cor., XII-XIV

⁵⁹ I Cor., XIII, 13

⁶⁰ I Cor., XIV, 40: “But let all things be done decently, and according to order.”

3.3 The second Epistle to the Corinthians: the Gospel of Reconciliation

As for the 1st Corinthians, authenticity was never challenged, and some doubt of the modern times can't be seriously received for real.

3.3.1 Date and occasion for writing

In between the two letters to the Corinthians that we received through the Sacred Text of the Bible, it is possible St Paul wrote another letter, which wasn't transmitted to us. He probably refers to that letter in the 2nd Corinthians (II, 3-9 & VII, 8-12):

“And I wrote this same to you; that I may not, when I come, have sorrow upon sorrow, from them of whom I ought to rejoice: having confidence in you all, that my joy is the joy of you all. For out of much affliction and anguish of heart, I wrote to you with many tears: not that you should be made sorrowful: but that you might know the charity I have more abundantly towards you.”⁶¹

This probable lost letter was possibly to deal with issues St Paul mentioned in the 2nd Corinthians as now solved, mainly about a member of the community who didn't follow a christian life.

The 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians was written from Macedonia, around year 57, once St Paul received good news from Corinth, thanks to his disciple Titus, whom he sent there.

3.3.2 Doctrine

A very common structure is displayed in this epistle. Apart the initial greeting (I, 1-11) and the final blessing (XIII, 11-13), we can easily find three main parts:

- St Paul justify himself and his missionary work (I, 12 - VII, 16)
- Invitation to pray and support the persecuted Christians in Jerusalem (VIII - IX)
- Defence of his apostolic and missionary work (X, 1 - XIII, 10)

The 2nd Corinthians is unfortunately not as well-known as the first one. It's a real damage, which could be explained with an unusual style from St Paul. The letter seems not as well organised as the others. We can't find either the great doctrinal explanations St Paul used to write, such as these we just read in the 1st Corinthians, about the Cross, Marriage, Holy Eucharist and Resurrection of the bodies.

However, this epistle gives us a special way to understand St Paul's personality, his soul, unveiled to us. Of the fourteen epistles, the 2nd Corinthians is probably one of the most intimate, where St Paul unveils himself to us, showing his intimate life with Christ, revealing secrets and sorrows, facing difficulties and pains of his ministry.

In the first part of the epistle, St Paul begins to thank God for the blessings he already received⁶², and desires to justify himself against some accusations which were made against him

⁶¹ II Cor., II, 3-4

⁶² II Cor., I, 3-11

by some members ~of the Corinthian community. But before justifying his actions, he forgives these, and explains the reasons he had to act that way⁶³. Knowing he's being challenged, St Paul explain his mission as an apostle of Christ, with all trials and duties attached to such role⁶⁴.

“But in all things let us exhibit ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in tribulation, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in prisons, in seditions, in labours, in watchings, in fastings, In chastity, in knowledge, in longsuffering, in sweetness, in the Holy Ghost, in charity unfeigned, In the word of truth, in the power of God; by the armour of justice on the right hand and on the left; By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet known; As dying, and behold we live; as chastised, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as needy, yet enriching many; as having nothing, and possessing all things.”⁶⁵

St Paul concludes his first part expressing his joy after he heard peace and confidence were back within the Corinthian community⁶⁶: these good news were brought to him by Titus.⁶⁷

The two next chapters demonstrates the solicitude of St Paul for the persecuted Christians of Jerusalem. He recommends charity being expressed to them from the Church of Corinth, and thank them for the collections being made to support them.⁶⁸

The last part of the epistle is dedicated to a second defence of himself, against the arguments which were issued against him. This last part seems being particularly addressed to these who might be seduced by these reasons. He firstly denies accusations of weakness and personal ambition, saying his strength resides in Christ⁶⁹. The only ambition he has is to serve Christ and preach His Gospel:⁷⁰“But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.”⁷¹

In this last part of the epistle, we can read about the well-known revelation St Paul was granted several years before:

“I know a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not: God knoweth), That he was caught up into paradise, and heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter.”⁷²

Then he explains why his weaknesses, which the Corinthians were attacking him for, are the reason for him to glorify himself, “For when I am weak, then am I powerful,”⁷³ as Christ is living in him. But to remind him that he must never take that glory for himself, the Lord has

“given me a sting of my flesh, an angel of Satan, to buffet me. For which thing thrice I besought the Lord, that it might depart from me. And he

⁶³ II Cor., I, 12 – II, 17

⁶⁴ II Cor., III, 1 – VI, 10

⁶⁵ II Cor., VI, 4-10

⁶⁶ II Cor., VI, 14 – VII, 4

⁶⁷ II Cor., VII, 5-16

⁶⁸ II Cor., VIII & IX

⁶⁹ II Cor., X, 1-11

⁷⁰ II Cor., X, 12-18

⁷¹ II Cor., X, 17

⁷² II Cor., XII, 2-4

⁷³ II Cor., XII, 10

said to me: My grace is sufficient for thee; for power is made perfect in infirmity.”⁷⁴

Before his last greetings, St Paul urges one more time the sinners to take seriously the way of penance and conversion, and announces a third visit in Corinth.

4 Conclusion

Real and true letters, the epistles to the Thessalonians and Corinthians are giving an answer to several issues the evangelisation was facing at the very beginning of the Church. They are giving a real doctrinal teaching, and in the meantime, unveils a bit more the personality of the Apostle of the Gentiles.

These four first epistles reveal us the soul of St Paul, all burning of the Fire of the Love of God: “For the charity of Christ presseth us.”⁷⁵ Since his conversion upon Damascus’ way, St Paul can’t stand any longer the coldness of Moses’ law. At Damascus, the old man had died, and was totally submitted to his new Master, Jesus-Christ.

St Paul wanted the Jews to understand that, and the epistles to the Galatians and Romans, more polemical in a way, were his answers for these who were part of the elected people of God. He reminds them about the salvation, granted through Faith, but accomplished by Jesus, dying upon the Cross, to Whom we all belong through baptism, whoever we are, wherever we’re coming from.

⁷⁴ II Cor., XII, 7-9

⁷⁵ II Cor., V, 14