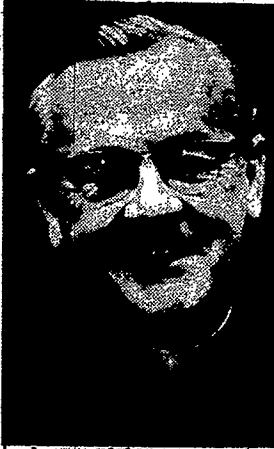


PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

# St. Paul and Easter People

In his second letter to the people of Corinth, St. Paul at first sight seems to offer a litany of boastfulness about his personal accomplishments in the service of the Lord. Does not this read like braggadocio at its best? (2 Cor. 11:24-28):



"Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches."

Were we to conclude here, we might be tempted to say: "Shut up! Enough. You're not the only one with problems. Let me enumerate my own personal litany of woes. I have had my share of troubles and anxieties. Would you care to listen to them? Let's play the matching game!"

But this enumeration of infirmities is St. Paul's way of accentuating the strength that he has received from the Risen Lord: "I will all the more boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For He was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God." (2 Cor. 12:9, 13:4) And then he adds the assurance of his joy in the Lord's service, words I have chosen as my own personal motto: "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls." (2 Cor. 12:15)

St. Paul makes for good reading; in this Easter season for he is the great exemplar of what it means to be an Easter person. So convinced was he of the primacy of the Resurrection for the support of faith that he said: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is void of content, and your faith is empty, too." (1 Cor. 15:14) And this is to say that Jesus, by His resurrection, has overcome death, has become a life-giving principle, has poured forth the power of the Holy Spirit, and has made our faith and Christian commitment possible. Without Easter, there is no Church, no Gospel, no sacraments, and no promise of abiding life.

The Gospel accounts of the first Easter are really a portrayal of Jesus prisms through the Easter faith of the Early Christian community. St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians wrote about the Easter event some 25 years after it happened and long before the

*'Without Easter, there is no Church, no Gospel, no sacraments, and no promise of abiding life.'*

Gospels appeared in writing. He identified himself with the rest of the Apostles who had seen the Risen Lord before him.

His whole life was transformed by his meeting with the Risen Christ. And his writings tell us what it means to be an Easter person.

1. Faith became his master word. If we asked him: What is the greatest blessing in the world, he would tell us, "faith in the Risen Christ."

2. And faith, to Paul, means fidelity to Jesus Christ and a loyalty which nothing can seduce — no matter the danger or magnitude of the threat of the opposition.

3. And faith to him means absolute belief that Jesus is the Son of God and the One Who never deviated from the truth. St. Paul had actually met Jesus. For him, Christ was not a person discovered in a book but Someone he knew and saw and Who gave him the strength he needed. St. Paul never said: "I know WHAT I believed." Rather he said, "I know WHOM I have believed." (2 Tim. 1:12)

4. Easter faith meant to St. Paul a willingness to take risks. His great model of a person of faith was Abraham who was living a comfortable and successful life until he was uprooted by God to serve in a strange and unknown country.

5. Easter faith he described some 164 times as a living "in Christ." He believed that his life was in Christ and Christ was in him like the very air he breathed.

If we are to be Easter people, and our Baptism and Confirmation challenge us to be such people, we must believe that Christ dwells in our hearts. We are temples of His abiding Spirit and we reverence our brothers and sisters, for Christ is present in them, too. We face the struggles and anxieties of life without fear and face the future with hope. For what is still to come has been realized in our Risen Christ, and though we perceive now "through a glass darkly," we make our way joyfully in confidence that there is still more to come, as we make our pilgrimage in the manner Paul recommends — "boasting in the Lord," despite our obvious weaknesses.



St. Paul, as depicted by a master of the Florentine School in the 15th Century.

## On the Duty of Penance

Following are excerpts from the Holy Father's address given on March 8 during a General Audience.

As man gets to know himself, and realizes that there is something irregular, unfinished, unhappy, bad in his existence, he feels the unsatisfied need of confessing his own imperfection, a need that documents an unfulfilled greatness, a betrayed duty, an inevitable remorse, and therefore a pathological misery: a need which exalts and at the same time humbles the concept that man has of himself.



We all know the wisdom of a saying on which human psychology is based: "Man's greatness is great in that he recognizes that he is wretched." (Pascal) These considerations, which recognize a painful, dramatic and even tragic condition of human existence have a precise echo in the Gospel,

like a voice which not only reawakens sad consciousness of our congenital infirmities, but which at once announces a remedy: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." And "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

*'Love covers a multitude of Sins'*

We all know how these divine words passed into the practice of the Church, into her pedagogy, not only for the exacting formation of monks and of faithful followers of Christianity, but also into the practice of the people, when the people were habitual pupils of the Church and when the way of life of society made it possible for a penitential discipline, even when prolonged as that of Lent, to have a common application.

The times have changed and not only because people no longer carry out ecclesiastical practice, but because of a different organization of human activity, especially that of work. To such an extent is this so, that the regular methodical, austere observance of Lent, in the fasting it imposes, has become practically impossible; so much so, that after the recent Council, new measures were issued, with which the traditional obligation of fasting is practically abolished.

The new regulations (on fasting and abstinence) are now very simple and well known, and all the more to be remembered if the thread of fidelity to ecclesiastical law finds us faithful and exact in observance.

But in addition to these precise regulations which are so reduced, the law of penance remains, and more so than ever, for everyone. It is always binding on every good Christian, young or old, and the more difficult the times and morals of the modern world are, the more urgent it becomes. The exterior practice of corporal mortification is greatly reduced today, but the need and the duty of mortification, especially in the spirit, in amusement, in dissipation, in evil thoughts, call for an observance that is all the more vigilant and interior.

We should recall here the ascetic practice of every good Christian. We will merely recall especially the recommendation of brotherly forgiveness for offenses that have wounded us interiorly; it is a recommendation which the Lord has made binding on us with the recitation of the basic prayer, the Our Father. It will be necessary to speak of it again.

Then we must further recall (not to mention now the sacrament of Penance) the penitential works which the Church herself suggests in replacement of the penitential exercises that in practice cannot be observed by everyone today. These works are: prayer, mortification of the senses and of pride, and, finally, charity in its many manifestations, accessible to everyone, including alms for the needy brothers, which still occupies a preeminent place.

"Love," St. Paul writes, "Covers a multitude of sins."