

October 1, 2006

St. Ananias, First Bishop of Damascus

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of the great merits of the Pauline corpus is that it reveals how a very important Christian of the first century reasoned about his faith on the basis of his experience. In the lines of his epistles we are able to discern the workings of Paul's own mind, as that mind was prompted by the conditions and circumstances of his life. The careful reader of his letters thus gains a vision into the soul of Paul.

Arguably the clearest example of this vision is related to the physical ailment of which Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure" (2 Corinthians 12:7).

The attentive student of the Bible will likely be prompted to consider a comparison with the example of Job, concerning whom we read: "Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7).

Whatever the physical ailment in Paul's case, his description indicates a bodily affliction of considerable severity. Perhaps it was epilepsy, a diagnosis suggested by comparing this text to the description of the little boy given by Mark: "And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth" (Mark 9:20). Such violent convulsions could very well be what Paul had in mind to convey by his metaphor *kolaphizei*, which indicates a beating with clenched fist.

Whatever it was, this repeated or sustained experience of physical distress was so humbling to Paul that he prayed for its removal: "Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me" (2 Corinthians 12:8). It is striking that Paul, like our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemani (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42), thrice prayed for the trial to be taken away.

With respect to that prayer of Jesus, we recall that it gained for Him more than the bare words asked for. That prayer of the Lord was most definitely heard. When Jesus, "in the days of his flesh, . . . offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death," it is a fact that He "*was heard* because of His godly fear" (Hebrews 5:7). Jesus' prayer, the author assures us, was heard, inasmuch as, "having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (5:8).

This *hearing* was true also of the prayer of Paul. He describes, in fact, the very answer he received to his prayer: "And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Through his painful

experience, and the prayer prompted by this experience, Paul discerned the working of divine grace in his life; he learned that his weakness was the locus and occasion in which the power of the risen Christ ("I pleaded with *the Lord*") was revealed. The Apostle was instructed by this prayerful experience; it taught him, in the cells and sinews of his flesh, that divine power is rendered perfect in infirmity.

This insight, the fruit of prayer, provided Paul with a permanent template, a common paradigm, for all his life in Christ. It became an interpretive key capable of opening in his life numerous doors otherwise closed. He found that this vision sustained him in every sort of suffering and misfortune: "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:9-10).

This experienced pattern of strength rendered perfect in weakness is what enabled Paul to discern that "though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day" (4:16). His prayer on the subject of his physical affliction enabled the Apostle to see that "we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (4:11).

"The power of Christ" (*he dynamis tou Christou*--4:10), in the case of Paul, was not a piece of religious speculation. It was conveyed to him, rather, in the painful experience of his mortal body, as that experience was incorporated into his prayer to the risen Christ. It became the basis, not only of how he lived, but also of what God inspired him to write.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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