

Talking about Our Veneration

by Scott Hahn

Many Catholics are skittish about reading St. Paul. His texts, after all, were most invoked by Martin Luther and John Calvin during the controversies of the sixteenth century. And much later anti-Catholic propaganda has also drawn heavily from the Apostle. As the theologian Frank Sheed once said, “A man can never feel quite the same about even the nicest book if he has just been beaten round the head with it.”

Yet here comes the Holy Father asking us to spend a whole year publicly venerating St. Paul! So we’re not only invoking the Reformation’s primary authority, but we’re paying him an honor that was condemned by the Protestant reformers: the veneration of the saints.

I’m reminded of the story of Bishop John England, the early-nineteenth-century bishop of Charleston, South Carolina. Once, while riding in a stagecoach, he was accosted by a young preacher. “It was nothing but Paul here, and Paul there, and how could the ‘Romanists’ answer Paul?” The bishop winced at the upstart’s casual interpretations and familiar terms, till finally he interrupted: “Young man! If you have not faith and piety sufficient to induce you to call the Apostle ‘Saint Paul,’ at least have the good manners to call him ‘Mister Paul.’”

St. Paul deserves the respect, and he himself would admit as much. Yes, he called himself “the least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:9) and “the very least of all the saints” (Eph. 3:8). Yet even these self-deprecating titles imply a special dignity and great authority. He may have been the least of saints, but he was still a saint. He may have been the least of Apostles, but that was itself an extremely elite group. As an Apostle, he spoke with the authority of “the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 7:40) and “the mind of

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Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). He acknowledged an “authority” of which he could legitimately “boast” (2 Cor. 10:8); for he was “not at all inferior to these superlative apostles” (2 Cor. 12:11). His position merited him a “rightful claim” to respect (1 Cor. 9:1–12). He held the power to “pronounce judgment” on sinners (1 Cor. 5:3).

By grace, St. Paul bore a dignity that Christians were duty-bound to observe. They looked to him as to a father in the family: “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15; see also 1 Thess. 2:11; Phil. 2:22; Philem. 10). The fourth commandment obliges us to “honor” our fathers, and that means to give them our love, respect, obedience, and, of course, imitation. An attentive reading of the letters of St. Paul shows us that he expected no less from us than this basic Christian duty.

Though he knew himself to be “the foremost of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15), Paul knew also that he must serve as a model for Christians. “Be imitators of me,” he said, “as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Paul’s favorite term for Christians was “saints” (see, for example, Col. 1:2–4). Holiness is our calling and our dignity. Yet he also distinguished between the saints on earth (Col. 1:2) and the “saints in light” (Col. 1:12)—what Catholic devotion would later call, respectively, the “Church militant” and the “Church triumphant.” The Epistle

to the Hebrews tells us that the latter are “a cloud of witnesses” around the former.

To the saints on earth who share our calling, we give our love. To the saints in light, we give a special honor called veneration. It’s not the same kind of honor we give to God alone. It is more like the profound respect we owe our parents and grandparents. We love them so much that we frame their photos and give them a prominent place in our home. We shouldn’t hesitate to ask our parents for prayer; nor should we hesitate to ask our ancestors in the faith—especially one who has the authority of an Apostle, not to mention the Spirit of God and the mind of Christ!

St. Paul told the Colossians, “We have not ceased to pray for you” (Col. 1:9). I believe that long-ago pledge still holds true. And so we should ask St. Paul’s intercession, even as he begged the intercession of other Christians (see Col. 4:3).

Some sons of the Reformation will balk at the Church’s celebration of a Pauline year. One evangelical scholar recently wrote, “To venerate Paul is to denigrate the Savior.”

But that’s not so. To venerate St. Paul is to glorify Christ for His grace made manifest in the life of the Apostle. St. Paul himself said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). ✠

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