



Conference on Paul of Tarsus: The Apostle of the Gentiles

by Giacomo Maniscalco

On Wednesday, May 6, in the evening, the American Bible Society Auditorium was packed. Among those 250 people filling the seats (as well as much unofficial standing room area) were bishops, priests as well as many nuns and brothers from various religious orders, Franciscans, Dominicans, Sisters of Life, and others. The reason for their gathering was a conference sponsored by Crossroads Cultural Center in close collaboration with the American Bible Society focusing on the topic of Saint Paul, the title, “Paul of Tarsus, the Apostle of the Gentiles: A conference on Saint Paul’s faith and his unique role in the diffusion of Christianity.”

A distinguished panel was invited to try to shed light on the importance of Saint Paul from both an historical standpoint as well as what the teachings and experience of this great Christian figure mean to us and call us to today. The first speaker on the panel was Father Peter John Cameron, Dominican priest and the editor-in-chief of *Magnificat*, and the second speaker was Archbishop Charles Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., Archbishop of Denver.

But the event was officially kicked off by Mario Paredes, member of the Board of Trustees for the American Bible Society, who proclaimed that the only mission of the American Bible Society is to spread the Bible, the Word of God by humanizing our society, before handing the microphone over to Rita Simmonds speaking on behalf of the Crossroads Cultural Center for the official introduction. Simmonds brought those present back to the comments made by Pope Benedict XVI regarding St. Paul’s faith; quoting the Holy Father she said that Paul’s faith coincides with “the experience of being loved by Jesus Christ in a very personal way.” In truth this would turn out to be the key point, that is Paul’s unique and unbelievable *closeness* to Jesus, to God made man, which would allow him to do everything that he did. Simmonds added that the idea of viewing St. Paul as a Christian ideologue, taking Jesus’ teachings and formalizing them into a doctrine, could “not be further from the truth,” as Paul is “all about Jesus.”

Then it was Monsignor Albacete’s turn to become moderator and introduce Fr. Cameron as the first speaker, and so he did.

Father Cameron immediately set the tone for his contribution by placing a question to think about in the minds of his audience: “Why was St. Paul’s conversion to Christianity so instantaneous?” He went on to delve into the person of Saul made Paul, and see why in fact, this man so intent on hating Christianity had then converted so quickly and so decisively. This was because, said Fr. Cameron, as a Pharisee daily reciting the Psalms, calling out to God to come to him, when Jesus reached him, Paul saw the face and heard the voice he had been begging for all his life. And that event, the conversion at Damascus, the bright flash knocking Saul off of his horse, becomes the point of reference for Paul, hanging on to this fact, to Christ’s presence is his life. Father Cameron then shared his theory that St. Paul probably took home some dirt from that very site in Damascus in order to keep it and use it every single moment to become ever more aware of the presence of Christ, the presence that changes everything. It is this level of awareness that we are all called to in following Paul.

And it was nothing other than this that pushed Paul to write letters. It is believed that Paul was the originator of letters as a means of spreading Christianity, and they are so effective because through Paul's letters we too can become eyewitnesses to the great encounter, we too are addressed in them, directly.

Father Cameron went on to say that Paul was interested in the life of Jesus, and when he preached he took it upon himself to preach his friendship with Jesus; "He preached the PERSON who had sought him out *personally*." Cameron then spoke of 1 Corinthians 13, the great hymn to charity, to love, "but how exactly did the world's expert hater ever become the all-time, definitive, unsurpassed authority on love? It is because Saint Paul knew what Saint John knew: that God is Love. Essentially what Paul is saying is 'If you want to know what love is, look at me! Look at what I have seen of Jesus. Look at the difference that love has made in me! Christ has made me a New Creation!'" And Paul introduces all of this by pointing to a way, a means and that is solely Jesus Christ. All Paul does is constantly point to the presence of Jesus in his life, so much so that he can even say, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ." Father Cameron concluded by saying that this is "because my weakness makes me return to my encounter with Christ. And I experience that encounter with Christ whenever I remain attentive to his Presence in the companions that Christ puts on my path.

Archbishop Chaput then took the stand and introduced his discussion also by posing a question: "What lessons can we learn from Paul about our own mission as Christians in today's society?"

He began by defining Paul as "a man of his time," educated, aware, even a Roman citizen, as few Jews were, involved in Roman culture and Roman law, but mostly as a man completely interested in the truth of things, "possessed by the God of truth." Archbishop Chaput went on to say that there "has never been, and there never will be, a greater missionary for Jesus than St. Paul," that through him the Gospel reached the world and that we, as believers are called to nothing less than that.

This reflection brought the Archbishop to his next point, that all us Christians have a duty to understand the times we live in as well as Paul understood his. And this of course, is not an easy task. Chaput pointed out that the way our society, our media, is structured nowadays, they really try to "to teach us how to think and what to think about." Chaput views this as a call to understand how this all works, to be aware of mass media's impact on us and society in order to be able to *do our job* within it.

But if we look at the roots of our country, its history, what it is in truth based upon, Chaput says that it is exactly what the country as a whole is being pulled away from and exactly what we need to try to steer it back to: "American ideals *require* a certain kind of citizen to make them work."

Despite never having had a state established Church and being welcoming historically to all religious practices, Archbishop Chaput stressed the fact that America is founded on strong Christian ideals. And so, in truth, this makes today's pagan society even more difficult for us to live in than the pagan society in which Paul found himself. This of course is because today's society has decided to turn away from Jesus Christ. "Today's paganism involves a specific choice *against* Jesus Christ," and, Chaput added, "Christ is the center and meaning of history. There is *nothing* after Jesus Christ except a void."

He went on to speak about President Obama's statement in seeking common ground with Turkey, a NATO ally whose own secularist revolution was often brutal and intolerant, when he said: "We do not consider ourselves a Christian nation." While understanding the President's reasons and intent, Chaput highlighted that still this is the situation that we find ourselves in and we need to take action because, "too many of us are happy with our complacency, vanity, compromises, comfort and bad formation. And something similar is obviously happening with many of our fellow Christians."

And this was exactly his second and final point, "Interpreting our culture isn't enough. Understanding our world isn't enough. The point, as Marx said, is to change it." Chaput then called his audience back to the great apostle as an example by saying "The lesson of St. Paul, now and for every generation, is that we need to engage the world with intelligence, a creative spirit and, most importantly, charity, which 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.'"

Monsignor Albacete spoke next, and, pressed by time, tried to conclude by commenting on the contributions from the panel. What he chose to do was speak about his personal experience of working with *Frontline* for a show on John Paul II. He said that what struck most working on the show, way beyond all of the Pope's actions, was the realization that he was very much a "man of prayer," and "the second point was his relentless and utter confidence that between Jesus Christ and the desires of the human heart, there is no conflict whatsoever. And we have to give up nothing of the human in order to be united with Christ." So this immediate association between Jesus and humanity as a whole is truly astounding, but "the problem is when it hits, when it happens, we need to point immediately to a community, to a friendship, to a group, as we saw with Saint Paul."

It is a matter of facing the presence of Christ and reliving it every single day, said Monsignor Albacete, pointing briefly back to Father Cameron's theory that Paul used to sprinkle dirt from his conversion site at Damascus so as to truly relive Christ's coming in his life every day. Monsignor then concluded by calling all those present back to the concreteness of Christianity saying: "We've got the best message...the Grace of God. It will not fail. You can't put Jesus back into the tomb! Come on! He's risen! We need to have a witness so that people can be accompanied, and here is the key to everything...otherwise everything else fails."