



Turkey: with Saint Paul to enter in the Present Deals

Fr. Domenico Bertogli, OFM Cap

I am the parish priest of Antioch's Catholic Church (the ancient Antioch of Syria, the Church founded by Barnabas and Paul) and this year, for the Pauline Year that opened last 21 June in Tarsus, I had an opportunity to see how it is being experienced in Turkey and around the world. Here in Antioch, on 28 June the eve of the Feast Day of Sts Peter and Paul, a mini symposium was held for the city's Christians, chaired by the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Aleppo, Mgr Paul Yazici, and the Apostolic Vicar of Anatolia, Mgr Luigi Padovese. It was a meaningful occasion to remember one of the founders of our Church. In all the churches of the Apostolic Vicariate of Anatolia posters of Saint Paul are on display illustrating his life and apostolic journeys.

The arrival in the past few months of pilgrims from around the world to tread in the saint's footsteps has impressed me. So many groups have come with their bishops as well as New Testament scholars to help them reflect upon this event.

For my part I was always available before the celebrations to talk about the current situation of the Church in Antioch, explaining why the pilgrimage here is so important for Christians given their many "roots" in this city.

I think that a pilgrimage to the various places visited by Saint Paul means remembering our past to better see our identity and this will help us live the present in a more evangelical way. Today about a thousand Christians live in Antioch, mostly Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox. Their patriarch is based in Damascus. There are about 70 Catholics but they have always tried to live in harmony with their Orthodox brothers. For this reason since 1988 we have been celebrating Easter on the date set by the Orthodox Church. Caritas also opened a small office in town and charity work is done in close co-operation with the Orthodox. The Feast Day of 29 June is celebrated ecumenically in front of St Peter's Grotto with bishops, priests and many Christians as well as Sunni Muslims and Alevi (who are half of the population in Antioch). City authorities also take part in an event that offers a chance to send a strong signal of unity.

Many Orthodox, especially among the young, come to the Catholic church because our liturgy is in Turkish and it is easier for them to understand and participate in. In 1988 we began teaching the catechesis according to the Neocatechumenal Way and today we have four small communities, made up mostly of Orthodox. Our goal is to help them discover the Word of God, the value of the Mass and reconciliation and the importance of community in the Christian experience. And in it is inside these communities that several non Christians were able to find the Lord and after some years receive the baptism.

We have always encouraged the Orthodox to attend their own celebrations to which I, as a Catholic priest, participate every Sunday. On special occasions I also join the abuna (Orthodox priests) on weddings or

funerals. Several times Catholic weddings and funerals have been held in the Orthodox church because of lack of space in ours.

The Catholic church, located behind a mosque and near the synagogue, is in the old Jewish neighbourhood that dates back to early days of Christianity. It is here that we were called Christians for the first time; it is here that the Gospel was announced for the first time to the 'Greeks' (pagans); it is here that Barnabas called on Paul to set up the first community of non-Jews; and it is from here that Barnabas along with Paul and Mark set off on the first apostolic journey. Because of the situation in Antioch—where discussions were held to determine whether new believers had to adhere to Judaism before becoming Christians or not—the Council of Jerusalem was held. It was in this community that Caritas (sharing) was born. Famine had broken out in Jerusalem and Paul and Barnabas raised funds which they personally delivered to their fellow Christians in that city. In Antioch the Gospel was announced by ordinary lay people and in the Church today we are discovering the importance of the laity. . . . Finally Biblical scholars agree that the Gospel of Matthew and the Didachē were written in Antioch.

All these roots are important to better situate ourselves within the Church of the third millennium and better remember where we come from and what paths we must follow to be true disciples of Jesus. Paul in his letters reminds us that unity is an inalienable good that is part of our identity and credibility as Bartholomew I said last week during the meeting of Orthodox patriarchs in Istanbul. In his address on 10 October, the ecumenical patriarch presented the Apostle Paul as the "first theologian of unity," adding that "we cannot not honour Saint Paul adequately if at the same time we do not work for the unity of the Church" (Zenit, translated from Italian).

In conclusion we can say that for Turkey's Christians, irrespective of their denomination, the Pauline Year must be a time to reflect upon the witness they offer to the Muslim world. If we lack unity and charity we end up placing ourselves beyond the Gospel's line and Paul's teachings, many of which were addressed in writing to the first Christians who once called ancient Asia Minor, today's Turkey, home.

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