

Some Lessons from the Life and Work of St. Paul

A Shorter Version of a talk delivered at St. Joseph's Church, Cockeysville, MD, Dec. 21, 2008

by Thomas Storck

On June 28, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI announced that beginning on June 29, 2008, the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, and lasting until that same feast in 2009, the Church would observe a year in honor of St. Paul, apostle, writer of much of the New Testament, martyr and revered as co-founder, together with her first bishop, St. Peter, of the church of Rome. Paul's activity as missionary for the Faith is better known to us than the work of any of the other apostles, for along with his own letters, the Acts of the Apostles chronicles much of Paul's missionary activity and gives us many details about his personality and teaching.

Life and virtues of Paul

A year in honor of St. Paul is surely a great grace for the Church. It gives us an opportunity to reflect both on the virtues exemplified in his life, virtues which I think are very much needed in the Church today, as well as on his teachings, teachings which are central to the most important doctrines of the Church, although they are often claimed and misinterpreted by Protestants.

Paul, or Saul as he was originally known, was born in Tarsus, today in Turkey, and educated as a strict Pharisaic Jew in Tarsus and Jerusalem. Shortly after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost Saul returned to Jerusalem and, full of zeal for the Jewish religion of his fathers, helped in the persecution of the infant Church, including assisting at the martyrdom of St. Stephen. Then with a commission from the High Priest he traveled to Damascus to arrest Catholics there, but on the way underwent his famous conversion, hearing the voice of Jesus Christ, an event recounted in the Acts of the Apostles (9:3-8). After some time in Damascus and later in Tarsus and Antioch, Paul went on his first missionary journey with St. Barnabas. A few years later, on another journey to preach the Gospel, Paul received a vision to cross over into Europe and begin the evangelization of that continent. Yet another missionary journey brought him again into Greece and Asia Minor, after which, back in Jerusalem, he was arrested and taken to Rome. Although the Acts of the Apostles stops at this point, evidence both from his own letters and from early Church traditions credit him, after his release from house arrest, with more missionary activity, including a trip to Spain, and eventual martyrdom

in Rome in 67 A.D.

Paul's zeal for the Faith

In choosing St. Paul God chose a man whose natural talents and character already inclined him to zealous activity. The only question was, on whose behalf was that zeal to be exercised, Jesus Christ or the religion of the old covenant? It is Paul's zeal, then, that I want to discuss first, for not only is it one of the chief marks of his life and work, but it is something which seems to me both lacking and needed in the Church today.

St. Paul's epistles, especially his letters to the church of Corinth and to the Galatians, are intensely personal, abounding in details about his apostolic work. And from this, as well as from the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles, we can learn much about his zeal for souls, for the Church, for the glory of Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, he recounts some of the hardships he underwent in these causes.

From the Jews five times I received forty lashes less one. Thrice I was scourged, once I was stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I was adrift on the sea; in journeyings often, in perils from floods, in perils from robbers, in perils from my own nation, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils from false brethren; in labor and hardships, in many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those outer things, there is my daily pressing anxiety, the care of all the churches.

And there is his famous "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9), apparently some sort of chronic or recurrent illness, which he prayed three times to have taken away, but was told in reply that God's grace would suffice for him. Paul even remarks that he had striven more than the other apostles on behalf of Jesus Christ. "I am the least of the apostles, and am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace in me has not been fruitless - in fact I have labored more than any of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1 Corinthians 15:9-10). So zealous was he for the salvation of souls, that "rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:4-18), he refrained from

accepting monetary support from the faithful and instead supported himself through his work as a tentmaker while on his missionary journeys (Acts 18:3), although he knew that he was entitled to support from the Church while preaching the Gospel.

Now what can we learn from such a life of zeal? Simply that we must try to regain some of that great desire to spread the Catholic Faith to the whole world which was so characteristic of Catholics in the past. And not just to far-off lands and continents, but to our own fellow-countrymen, to everyone who is not a Catholic.

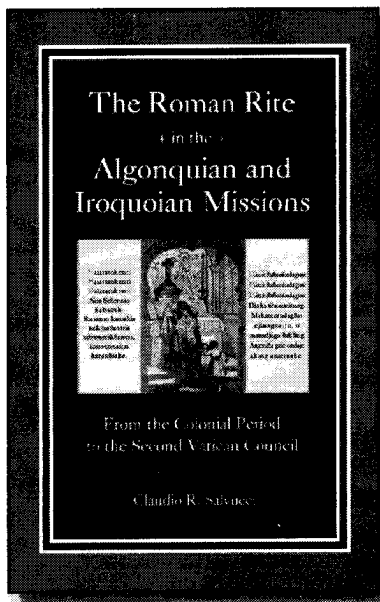
Because of a misunderstanding of what the Second Vatican Council meant by ecumenism, many Catholics have lost much of that zeal for spreading the Faith which our ancestors had. When Pope Benedict announced the Year of St. Paul, he noted Paul's concern for the "unity and harmony of all Christians." But what sort of unity should we aim at? Well, the decree on ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council is very clear, the aim of ecumenism is nothing less than "the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ," which the Decree states is "Christ's Catholic Church...the universal help towards salvation."² Perhaps without fully realizing it, we are apt to think that ecumenical efforts intend only some kind of loose federation of different Christian

communities, or even just an increase of goodwill toward one another. But that is not what the Council taught, not to mention subsequent statements by the Supreme Pontiffs which make clear that the Church can never abandon her missionary activity and her desire to spread the Faith.³

Zeal for purity of doctrine

Connected with a zeal for spreading the Faith must be a zeal for purity or orthodoxy of doctrine. Zeal for purity of doctrine is not some old-fashioned or rigid attitude of mind. Rather it is a manifestation of love for Jesus Christ. "If you love me, keep my commandments," said Jesus Christ (John 14:15). But how can we keep his commandments unless we know what they are? As Catholics we believe that the doctrines of the Church on both faith and morals are the teachings of Jesus Christ. Therefore to have a zeal for that doctrine is not something misplaced, but something that should characterize the Catholic Church in every age.

St. Paul himself was faced with a number of serious heresies during his lifetime. One of the chief of these was that of the Judaizers who taught, contrary to the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), that the newly-converted gentile Catholics must undergo circumcision



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and obey the law of Moses. Paul is vehement against the Judaizers' activity. He devotes an entire letter, his epistle to the Galatians, to the subject, and recounts how he had occasion to rebuke even St. Peter on this point, because the latter had yielded to human respect and outwardly went along with those who treated the gentile Catholics as second-class citizens.

But in fact concern for true doctrine is present in all of Paul's letters. In the epistle to the Colossians he seems to be dealing with a form of Gnosticism, a heresy that shortly afterwards became widespread and which denied the reality of the Incarnation and went so far as to worship created spiritual beings, such as angels (cf. Colossians 2: 18). The epistle to the Romans is a long exposition of some of the chief points of the Church's teaching, especially on salvation and the relationship between the old and the new covenants, and the epistle to the Hebrews, which if not Paul's own work at the least closely reflects his theology, is another careful explanation of the fundamentals of Christian doctrine and the saving work of Jesus Christ for our salvation.

We find then in St. Paul no tendency to compromise or water down doctrine, no tendency to state it in an ambiguous manner so as to create a specious unity. In fact, Paul sums up his uncompromising attitude toward error with some rather stark words,

Preach the word, be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, entreat, rebuke with all patience and teaching. For there will come a time when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but having itching ears, will heap up to themselves teachers according to their own lusts, and they will turn away their hearing from the truth and turn aside rather to fables.

(2 Timothy 4:2-4).

And at another point he calls certain false doctrines the "doctrines of devils" (1 Timothy 4:1). We are not accustomed to hear erroneous teaching denounced in such a way today. But perhaps for that very reason we should look closely not just at what St. Paul says, but at how he said it, for there is always a danger that Catholics will become so comfortable with the world around us that we will be afraid to offend anyone, either anyone outside the Church or those inside the Church who sadly have embraced doctrinal error.

Paul and the Christian life

Before I say something about St. Paul's teachings, I want to touch on one more characteristic of his life. This is his utter seriousness toward the Christian life. That is, Paul

knew well that the final outcome for each struggling soul on earth is an eternity with Christ or without him. One might think that someone in the position of Paul would have no concern about his own eternal salvation. After all, had not God especially selected him, indeed described him as "a chosen vessel" (Acts 9:15)? But at least twice Paul makes clear that he did not take his own salvation for granted. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 he wrote, "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection, lest perhaps after preaching to others I myself should be rejected." And later in that same letter he taught, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (10:12).

We rightly have great faith and hope in the mercy of God, and we rightly emphasize his great love for each member of the human race and his desire for the salvation of all mankind. But that does not change the truth that, as the *Catechism* puts it, "To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice" (CCC 1033). Unfortunately it seems today that some Catholics, not excluding some members of the clergy, regard their religion more as a game than as the divinely ordained means of escaping hell. Whether we like to mention it or not, hell remains a reality and a possibility for each one of us. So here also we can learn some lessons from St. Paul's life and teachings for our own lives. We can learn that, without becoming morbid or scrupulous, we must approach the daily struggle of the Christian for virtue and against sin as a very serious matter whose result will be eternal life or eternal death.

Paul's doctrine

Next I will discuss in more detail some of St. Paul's teachings, the doctrines with which he filled both his preaching and his letters. I have already mentioned some of his teachings, such as his attitude toward those who would subject Catholics to the observance of the law of Moses. Paul's teachings are very important to understand, at least in outline, both because they will nourish our own relationship with Christ, but also because typically they are used by Evangelical Protestants to justify their own errors of faith. Martin Luther appealed to Paul in justification for his doctrinal innovations, and to this day Evangelicals look to Paul's doctrines as the chief support for their theology. If there is this confusion about St. Paul's doctrines we might suspect that he is not always easy to understand. And this is true. In fact, the very text of Sacred Scripture warns us of that fact. St. Peter, in his second epistle writes as follows: "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as

he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (2 Peter 3:15b-16). These are remarkable words which ought to give pause to anyone who comes up with a novel interpretation of Pauline doctrine. They ought to have given pause to Martin Luther. Only if we interpret Scripture according to the mind of the Church can we be sure that we are not misinterpreting it.⁴

The two major doctrines which Evangelical Protestants claim to take from St. Paul are what are generally known as *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. It is very important for Catholics to know not only what the Church teaches on these points, but to know exactly how Protestants go wrong.

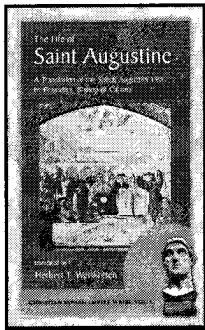
Sola scriptura

The foundation of Protestant theology is the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, or "by Scripture alone," that is, the notion that Sacred Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and morals. Needless to say, *sola scriptura* is not taught anywhere in the Bible itself. Evangelicals cite as their chief support for that doctrine 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which runs, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for

teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." The first thing to note about these verses is that although they state that all Scripture is inspired they do not assert that only Scripture is inspired. Thus there is no contradiction of the teaching of the Catholic Church that "Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence."⁵

Not only do these two verses not teach *sola scriptura*, but we can see that that doctrine cannot possibly be true.⁶ Clearly the infant Church had no knowledge of such a doctrine. For the Church existed before the New Testament and she was already preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, disciplining her members and defining her beliefs before one word of the New Testament was written. The early Church instead appealed to the teaching of Christ, as handed down to the apostles and preached by them as her rule of faith and morals, supplemented when necessary by authoritative decisions rendered by the Church herself, as in the Council of Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15. This is everywhere simply assumed in the New Testament, but can be seen clearly from several biblical passages, including Matthew 28:19-20, Romans 16:17, 2 Corinthians 11:4, Galatians 1:8-9, 1 Thessalonians 4:

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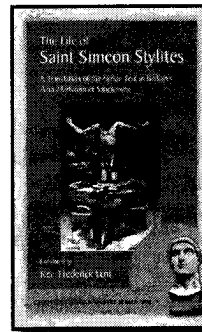
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1 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15. And of course, this is not to mention that we could not even be certain what books belonged in the Bible if we did not have an authoritative definition by the Church on this matter.

Sola fide

Equally important to the Evangelical Protestant theological outlook is their doctrine of justification by faith alone, or *sola fide*. In contrast to this Evangelical doctrine, the Catholic Church teaches "that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith" (CCC 1021). As we might expect, Sacred Scripture teaches the same doctrine as the Church. This is abundantly clear if we look at our Lord's words in many passages of the Gospels,⁷ at the words of St. James (James 2:14-26), and even at many passages from St. Paul, as we will see. But first let us briefly look at some of the texts that Evangelicals try to use in support of their teaching.

Evangelical Protestants appeal to passages such as the following in support of their view that our external acts have nothing to do with our eternal salvation.

if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. (Romans 10: 9-10)

Or,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - not because of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)⁸

There are two reasons why we can confidently say that the Evangelical Protestant doctrine which they claim is based on passages such as these is not a correct understanding of Paul's words. In the first place, in seeking to interpret the teaching of the New Testament, as I noted above, we must always remember that the Church came before the New Testament. Thus Scripture must always be seen as a product of the Church's work and must be understood according to the mind of the Church.

Secondly, if we look at the text of Paul itself, not to mention the other texts I cited above, we will find that the Evangelical understanding of Paul contradicts what he himself says in other passages. For example,

For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who

are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (Romans 2:6-8)

Or,

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)⁹

St. Paul, then, does not teach that we are saved by faith alone in the sense that it is not necessary for us to strive to avoid sin, especially serious sin, if we are to attain heaven. What he *is* teaching in the passages that Protestants misunderstand is that we cannot earn our salvation by our good works. That is, no sinner could ever merit eternal salvation by himself simply by doing good deeds, even if he spent his whole life doing the good works that Mother Teresa of Calcutta did. Without the saving death of Jesus Christ on the cross nothing I do could possibly avail for my salvation. Salvation is a free gift from God because of the death of Jesus on the cross, but it is a gift that we must accept by our baptism and that we can lose by freely choosing to commit serious sins. This is the teaching of St. Paul as it is the teaching of our Lord, of the whole New Testament and of the tradition and Magisterium of the Church.

Faith and human reason

I mentioned before that Paul had a vision in a dream appealing to him to cross from Asia into Europe to evangelize Macedonia. This is recounted in Acts chapter 16. St. Luke writes, "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, 'Come over and help us.' And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:9-10).

Pope Benedict XVI, in his Regensburg address in September 2006, said that this vision of St. Paul's "can be interpreted as a 'distillation' of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek inquiry."¹⁰ That is, by being the first to bring the Faith, which originated in Palestine, to Europe, Paul symbolically began that great synthesis of faith and reason which is one of the glories of the Catholic religion. It is true, of course, that Greek culture and philosophy had spread beyond the confines of Greece itself into both Asia and Africa and in fact "this rapprochement had been going on for some time," as Pope Benedict himself notes. But still it was Greece itself, in fact Athens, that was the focal point of

Greek philosophical study.

We have in fact a very interesting account of Paul's visit to Athens in chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles. What is especially noteworthy about it is the attempt by Paul to appeal to some of the best of Greek thought as a means of opening men's minds to the Gospel. But it is not just to Greek philosophical thought that he appeals.

For while walking around Athens he notices a shrine dedicated "To an unknown god" (17:23). Later in the market place he engages in argument with Jews and is overheard by some of the Greek philosophers who ask him to explain his teaching. Paul, realizing that he is confronting men who have little or no acquaintance with the religious tradition of the Old Testament, begins by mentioning the shrine to the unknown god. He identifies this unknown god with the true God, creator of all things. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you," he says (v. 23). Then he proceeds to quote from two pagan Greek authors, Epimenides and Aratus. The first was a mystic and poet, the second a writer on astronomy. Thus Paul places the Christian faith in relation with both Greek religion and Greek intellectual inquiry. He seeks to interest pagan Greeks in the Gospel by linking their own traditions with the new revelation of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. He briefly expounds the Gospel without reference to the prior revelation to the Jews (v. 23-31), a revelation that would have been unknown and meaningless to most pagans. Instead he speaks of the God "who made the world and everything in it," a concept which would have been familiar to Greek thought. This discourse of Paul's in Athens has immense significance for the Church's missionary activity even to this day, for we can always appeal both to what is true in any nation's religious thought, as well as to human reason, the common property of all mankind, as a way of beginning our preaching of the Gospel.

Moreover, St. Paul did not limit his appeal to philosophical reason to his contacts with non-believers. One of the most famous passages of the New Testament is a statement by Paul of the possibility of knowing the existence of God by unaided human reason.

In Romans 1:19-20 he writes,

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.

This passage is quoted by the First Vatican Council in its dogmatic constitution, *Dei Filius*, which teaches that the

existence of God can be known by human reason. This is a fundamental tenet of the Catholic faith, and without it we would be greatly hampered in our presentation of the Faith to those outside the Church. Catholics need not appeal simply to subjective faith as we present the Gospel to the world, rather we can begin with a firm appreciation of human reason as showing the existence of the one true God.

Witnesses of the Resurrection

Nor is it only in the matter of the existence of God that St. Paul renders important service to the Church in her communication of the Gospel. When Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, probably in the year 36 A.D., none of the four Gospels had yet been written; indeed, not one book of the New Testament was in existence. Where then did Paul get his knowledge of the life and work of Jesus Christ? He got it from the living teaching of the Church, as he himself recounts in 1 Corinthians 15.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Paul here appeals to the living tradition of the Church, and to many living contemporaries who had seen Jesus Christ alive in the flesh after his resurrection. We can learn two important things from this. First, that we are not dependent on the written New Testament for our faith. The Church was already proclaiming the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ before any of the New Testament writers put down one word. And secondly, that the Church looks upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a real event, able to be verified by many witnesses, and that thus she can proclaim her faith to the world, even today, as founded on actual historical events. Neither in the matter of the existence of God or in the resurrection of our Lord does the Church ask Catholics to make a blind act of faith. Rather the Church invites us to make an act of faith that is "in accordance with reason" (CCC 156). In this we differ from many of our Protestant brethren who often urge people to make an act of faith in Jesus Christ based mainly on subjective criteria.

The Church and the individual believer

In November 1997 Archbishop (now Cardinal) Francis George of Chicago noted that Americans generally "are culturally Calvinist, even those who profess the Catholic faith." American society, he said "is the civil counterpart of a faith based on private interpretation of Scripture and private experience of God."¹¹ We have already looked at the practice of private interpretation of the Bible, but the second of these, "private experience of God," is equally harmful to a healthy religious life, as none other than St. Paul makes clear.

Americans Evangelicals are often portrayed as having a Me and Jesus attitude toward religion, focusing so much on one's personal relationship with Jesus Christ that the rest of one's fellow believers are effectively ignored. But you will not find such an approach to Christianity in St. Paul. For Paul, more than any New Testament writer can be called the apostle of the Church, the apostle of a corporate and communal Christian life. It is Paul who often calls the Church the Body of Christ,¹² who speaks of the various gifts of the Holy Spirit given "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7), and who a few verses later insists that every member of the Church exists for the benefit of every other member, not for himself alone. He repeats this same doctrine in Romans chapter 12. "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (vv. 4-5).

Now what are the practical implications of this Pauline teaching for our spiritual life? Obviously it does not mean that private prayer or a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are wrong. Rather it means that our personal relationship with Jesus Christ is within the Church and part of the life of the Church.

It is in the Church, in communion with all the baptized, that the Christian fulfills his vocation. From the Church he receives the Word of God containing the teaching of "the law of Christ." From the Church he receives the grace of the sacraments that sustains him on the "way." From the Church he learns the example of holiness and recognizes its model and source in the all-holy Virgin Mary; he discerns it in the authentic witness of those who live it; he discovers it in the spiritual tradition and long history of the saints who have gone before him and whom the liturgy celebrates in the rhythms of the sanctoral cycle. (CCC 2030)

This is simply a part of what we can learn from studying St. Paul during this year dedicated to him. But equally important is to recognize that he is not just an historical figure whose writings we can read. He is a saint who

intercedes for us in heaven and for whom we can cultivate devotion. So let us read his works and invoke his prayers to obtain his virtues both for ourselves and for the whole Church.

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(Endnotes)

- ¹. A shorter version of a talk delivered at St. Joseph's Church, Cockeysville, Maryland, December 21, 2008.
- ². Unitatis Redintegratio, no. 24 and no. 3.
- ³. Cf. Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, especially no. 54, where the duty of presenting the fullness of the Faith to non-Catholic Christians is noted, and John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, especially no. 55, which concerns evangelization and inter-religious dialog.
- ⁴. Cf. 2 Peter 1:20-21 and CCC 113 and 119.
- ⁵. Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum, no. 9. (Cf. CCC 82.)
- ⁶. See my article "Sola Scriptura, an Impossible Theory," New Oxford Review, vol. 67, no. 11, December 2000.
- ⁷. E.g., Matthew 7:21, 10:22b, 16:27, 24:13, 25:31-46; Mark 10:17-20, 13:13b, Luke 10:25-28.
- ⁸. Other passages of Paul's that could be alleged (wrongly) to teach this doctrine include Romans 1:17, 3:20, 3:28, 5:1, 8:1, 8:38-39; Galatians 2:16, 3:10-14.
- ⁹. Other passages from St. Paul that teach the necessity of avoiding sin to achieve salvation include Romans 11:22, 1 Corinthians 9:27 and 10:12, Galatians 5:19-21 and Colossians 1:21-23.
- ¹⁰. Available at www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?id=94748
- ¹¹. Stated at the Synod for the Americas.
- ¹². Cf. especially I Corinthians 10:32, 12:27-28; Galatians 1:13; Ephesians 3:10, 3:21; Philippians 3:6; Colossians 1:24; I Timothy 3:15.

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