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The Apostle Paul to the Bishops of Oceania

Brendan Byrne SJ*

7 ... (W)e have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear
that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from
us.
8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not
driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not
destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the
life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ... 
13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with
scripture—‘I believed, and so I spoke’—we also believe, and so we
speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will
raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. 15
Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and
more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (2 Cor
4:7-10, 13-15 [NRSV])

My brothers in Christ, as something of an afterglow of the Year of Paul
(2008-09), I have been asked to share some thoughts about what St Paul might
have to say to you assembled as the Bishops of Oceania. When I asked myself
what text of Paul might best respond to your thoughts and feelings in the present
situation it was that passage from 2 Corinthians chapter 4 (vv 7-15) that sprang to
mind. I am sure we are all convinced that in our knowledge of Jesus Christ as the
embodiment of God’s love, in our possession of the Gospel we proclaim in his
name, in the teaching and sacramental life of the Church, we do indeed have a
treasure. But perhaps, as never before in our life-time, have we in recent days
become so sharply aware that we hold that treasure in clay vessels, vessels all too

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frequently broken, seemingly beyond repair. I am only too conscious as I begin this talk of how difficult it must be to be a bishop today—even though I am sure there are many areas where you can point to signs of life as well as diminishment.

Before we leave this text, let me linger on the last sentence. In several respects I think it goes to the heart of Paul: ‘everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God’ (v 15). Paul sees his mission as entirely at the service of God’s grace (charis), that is sweeping over the world in a great flood, offering it reconciliation and restoration of friendship with God in the place of alienation and captivity to sin. The upshot is that the ever-wider prevalence of grace ‘may increase thanksgiving (eucharistia) to the glory of God’. The ultimate goal of Paul’s mission is that human beings, on an ever larger scale, should respond in thanksgiving to God. In the final analysis, what God wants from human beings is their thanks: eucharistia in response to charis, grace-filled people becoming gracious people.

I have lingered on Paul’s sense of God as a God of grace because I find it difficult to talk about Paul without being, as he constantly is, theological in the strict sense: that is, continually in his writings and directives appealing to and speaking out of a distinctive vision of God. I know you would prefer that I drew from Paul some practical pastoral strategies rather than going on and on about his theological vision. The difficulty is that the differences between the situation of the churches Paul addressed in his day and the social and pastoral situations you face as successors to his apostolic charism in Oceania today are so vast that making one-for-one applications on the practical level becomes a hazardous and largely arbitrary exercise. That was the conclusion I came to after re-reading the 2001 post-synodal document Ecclesia in Oceania in preparation for this talk. True, there are some constants: raising money was something that occupied a good deal of Paul’s energy and concern; seeing that the Eucharist was properly celebrated—though it was the social context rather than the rubrics that he found fault with in Corinth (1 Cor 11:17-34). But surely, in our line of work, there’s nothing so practical as theology—provided it is good theology—because ultimately what are we on about other than communicating to people a sense of God as One who enfolds them with grace?

So, for the remainder of this talk, I am going to speak, first, about Paul’s sense of God, then about a fresh understanding of his view of the Church, and, finally, to touch lightly upon his mode of addressing his communities as Missionary and Pastor. I believe that in all three areas Paul has something significant, and indeed encouraging to say to us, in view of the present crisis situation facing the Church.

Paul’s Sense of God

As apostle to the nations (‘Gentiles’ in Jewish parlance), Paul faced from the outset a huge theological issue. Either at the moment of his encounter with the
risen Lord en route to Damascus or in his subsequent reflections soon after, this fanatical young Jew was convinced that God was graciously calling the nations of the world to citizenship in the people of God not as converts to Judaism first, through circumcision and observance of other rituals of Israel's Law, but precisely as Gentiles. It is clear from the Letters to the Galatians and to the Romans, as well as from later accounts in Acts, that this view was by no means universally shared in the early Church. It was one Paul had to justify and fight for against considerable opposition from fellow believers. James, 'the brother of the Lord', who became the leader of the mother church in Jerusalem after Peter had moved on, is portrayed in both Galatians and Acts as not imposing circumcision but hardly as making this ruling with great enthusiasm. Peter seems initially to have been closer to Paul but then to have wavered back to adhere far more closely to the view of James. For James—and, it seems, subsequently for Peter—while Gentile converts need not be circumcised, there was no way that the strict Jewish food laws were to be relaxed so as to allow believers of Jewish origin and uncircumcised Gentiles to eat together—including, presumably, sharing the one Eucharist. This was the issue that blew up at Antioch as Paul recounts it in Gal 2:11-16.

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?' [NRSV]

What Paul is saying in that last protest is that Peter ('Cephas'), by separating himself from the common table, is making the believers of Gentile origin feel like second-class citizens and so putting pressure on them to take on the full yoke of the Law.

Paul continues his remonstration to Peter by recalling what I believe is the 'conversion conviction' that Jews like Peter and he himself had undergone in coming to full faith in Christ.

15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;
16 yet, coming to know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, we have put our faith in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing
the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

17 But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18 But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor (NRSV, somewhat adapted).

The first sentence (v 15) states the attitude of superiority that they, as observant Jews, have previously shared: it lumped all Gentiles simply into the ‘sinner’ category, sharply distinguished from the ‘holy nation’, Israel. The next sentence (v 16) expresses the experience of conversion: justification (finding right relationship with God) comes about, not through performance of the ritual prescriptions of the Law, but through abandoning oneself in faith to the God of grace reaching out to me as a sinner and drawing me into right relationship (‘righteousness’) through the redemptive work of Christ. It meant casting down the barrier that had been so strong in my mind between ‘holy nation’ (‘Jew’) and ‘ unholy rest’ (‘Gentile’). It meant acknowledging that I too, despite my belonging to Israel, am part of that world of sin that Christ as embodiment of God’s grace (charisma [Rom 5:15, 16]) has come to confront and overthrow. In the face of an objection to the effect that that amounts to making Christ a ‘minister of sin!’ (v 17), comes Paul’s vigorous retort: ‘I’ll tell you what sin (‘transgression’) really is: it’s building up again the barrier that Christ cast down’ (v 18), that barrier that once seemed so fixed between ‘holy nation’ (Israel) and ‘ unholy rest’ (Gentiles). And Paul, speaking not just for himself but for every Jew who had come to faith, continues:

19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. [NRSV]

To go back to separate tables, to re-erect symbolically in that way, the sense of ‘holy nation’, is to rebuff, to ‘nullify the grace of God’; it bears the unthinkable implication that Christ—who loved me and gave himself up for me at such cost—died to no purpose (v 21).

What Paul argues here in personal conversation with Peter is the same truth that he sets out on more expansively in the early chapters of Romans. The positive core of the Gospel as he proclaims it is the redemption that God is offering the world in the Christ-event received by faith. Before he can assert that convincingly (in Rom 3:21-26) he has to established the universal need for such a redemption. In particular, he has to sweep aside any sense that observance of
the Law of Moses gave Jews a status of holiness that rendered the action of Christ unnecessary in their case. He has to establish—in a long prophetic declamation (2:1 - 3:20)—the truth he pointed out, by way of reminder, to Peter at Antioch (Gal 2:15-16): that there is no ‘holy nation’ set apart from the rest of the world, that ‘all have sinned, and stand deprived of the glory (= ‘righteousness’) of God’ (Rom 3:23). All, Israel included, are involved in a ‘solidarity’ of sinful alienation from God, but all (Jew and Gentile) are being embraced by a solidarity in grace. The reason there is hope is that the latter—the solidarity in grace (brought about in Christ)—is ‘much more’ powerful than the solidarity in sin.¹

Now this is all very well. But Paul is conscious that in so ‘levelling’ (if that is the right word) Israel down to the status of ‘Gentile sinners’, he is open to the accusation of impugning the faithfulness (‘righteousness’) of God to Israel. He would reply, ‘Yes, God, as covenant partner of Israel, has obligations to Israel. But, as Creator of the world, God has obligations to the world as a whole’. What God is doing in Christ is fulfilling the promise to Abraham that in ‘his offspring’ (Christ) all the nations (‘Gentiles’) of the world would be blessed’ (Gen 12:2-3; 18:18; Gal 3:8-9). Almost half of Romans is caught up with Paul’s wrestling with this issue: how can God be faithful as Creator to the nations of the world and faithful at the same time to the special relationship with Israel—especially when, as was clearly the case at the time Paul was writing Romans, the great bulk of the Jewish people had not come to faith in Jesus as Israel’s Messiah? Has not Paul’s thesis of the ‘sinfulness’ of Israel, alongside that of the Gentile world, impugned God’s faithfulness to his people?

I cannot here go into the tortuous path Paul treads in the latter chapters of Romans (esp. chapters 9-11) in order to sort that out. Ultimately, whatever solution he finds rests upon his sense of God as a God who wishes to relate to human beings, all human beings, as a God of grace and mercy (Rom 4:16; 11:28-32), a God who in a sense can deal with us best as sinners than as those who stand on their righteousness, their virtue, their ‘holiness’. It is the same vision of God that Jesus promotes in the great parables of the Lost (Sheep, Coin, and Son) told in Luke 15.

If Paul were here today speaking to you in view of the present crisis in the Church, when the sinfulness of some of its members has been so painfully exposed, and its leadership held up for ridicule so extensively on that account, I think he would say, in line with his reminder to Peter at Antioch, this is a moment to recall and experience God as a God of grace, a God who comes to us precisely at that moment when one’s sense of belonging to a ‘holy nation’ set apart from the rest falls away.

¹ This is the point of the famous ‘Adam’/‘Christ’ comparison/contrast in Rom 5:12-21; see further Brendan Byrne, Romans, Sacra Pagina 6 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 173-182.
Of course, as you may well retort, but Paul does address believers as a ‘holy nation’, as ‘saints’, set apart. Yes, true, but on what grounds, on what foundation? The Church is holy in the union of her members with Christ and in the grace of God that flows in her veins through Christ. But that holiness is not incompatible with, is in fact consistent with, a continual conversion that makes our Nobis quoque peccatoribus no purely formal gesture.² Perhaps we are being led to let go of a misplaced sense of holiness that has actually become unconvincing to our contemporaries in order to regain a true holiness flowing from a deeper conversion of heart.

**Paul’s Sense of the Church**

I will let you in on a big secret of New Testament scholarship. That word ‘church’ (Greek: *ekklēsia*) that is so important for us—we are not really sure where it came from. I mean how this term came to be the standard self-description that early believers in Christ applied to their movement and their local gatherings. It may have some biblical background in the designation of the Exodus community of Israel at the time of their long wandering in Sinai.³ More likely, in choosing to describe themselves as *ekklēsia* the early communities looked to the meaning of the word in secular Greek. In this context *ekklēsia* referred to a gathering of the free citizens of a Greek city state, summoned out of their homes and workplaces by the civic herald to assemble in the amphitheatre: to hear a solemn proclamation from the ruler, to deliberate about some key issue, to decide on action to be taken in view of some emergency, and so forth. They became an *ekklēsia* as people ‘called out’ to gather and be addressed in this way. One can understand the appeal of such a term to believers who understood themselves to be people ‘called out of darkness’ into a new ‘citizenship’ (*politeuma* [Phil 3:20]), and summoned to gather and hear the address, not of the Roman emperor or any local ruler, but of their true Lord, Jesus Christ.

Paul understands his role as apostle to be at the service of that call. The Gospel he proclaims to the nations is the summons to respond in faith to the good news of God’s grace reaching out to them in reconciliation and calling them into a new citizenship under the lordship of Christ.

17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the

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2. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church §827, citing Lumen Gentium 8 §3 and Paul VI, Credo of the People of God §19.
3. The problem here is that the term used for the community of Israel in the Hebrew original, *qahal*, is sometimes rendered by *ekklēsia* in the Greek (Septuagint) translation, but that translation far more regularly employs for this purpose another Greek word: *synagōgē*—a designation that the early Christians avoided like the plague.
ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him who knew no sin into sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (NRSV, slightly altered).

Where others in the church, as we have seen, believed that those summoned in this way, had to become fully members of the nation of Israel, Paul read out of Scripture a different view of the renewed People of God. There was to be a nation of believing Gentiles alongside Israel, making up one composite people, ‘together with one voice glorifying God’ (Rom 15:7).

A development that I have found interesting in the last few years is a suggestion that Paul’s understanding of the community of believers was akin to and in continuity with Israel’s understanding of itself in relation to the nations of the world. As is well-known, in the wake of the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BC and increasingly in the following centuries, Judaism flourished not only in its ancestral land, Palestine, but also in a ‘Diaspora’ spread widely in the Middle East and the Mediterranean cities of the Greco-Roman world. This Diaspora existence evoked within Judaism a sense of being a people quite distinct from the nations and peoples among whom it now found itself but having nonetheless a vocation in their regard. This vocation did not aim at converting the nations, certainly not en masse at least, but of bearing witness before them of faith in the one true God and of the humane pattern of life flowing from observance of the Mosaic Law. In the phrase coined by (Second) Isaiah, God had made them a ‘light to the nations’ (Isa 42:6; 49:6; cf. 60:3; Luke 2:32). A late oracle in the Book of Jeremiah gives remarkably positive expression to this ‘diaspora’ situation:

4. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; ... multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:4-7: NRSV)

In a sense this is how Judaism has seen itself ever since—not a missionary

religion, in the sense of striving to bring everyone into its fold, but a witness
religion, with a unique role.

I find myself more and more inclined to the view that Paul saw the spread
of his Gentile churches in a similar ‘diaspora’ mode. On this understanding he
did not necessarily hold that each and every Gentile was meant to become a
member of the Church. The Gospel had to be proclaimed in every place—or at
least in every large city. Those Gentiles that God had chosen for ‘citizenship’ in
the people of God would respond and form the ekklēsia in that locality. There,
on the parallel with Israel, they would ‘model’ before their non-believing fellow
citizens what it was to live in the light of the Gospel, owing primary allegiance
to Jesus Christ, as risen Lord, and living in the hope and watchfulness of his
return in glory.

Amongst other things, this understanding accounts for Paul’s constant
moving on as a missionary from one city to another. Otherwise, how can we
understand his explaining to the community in Rome his aim to pursue further
missionary work in the far west, in Spain, on the grounds that, having preached
the Gospel from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum, there is no further
place for him in the regions of the East (Rom 15: 19, 23)? Surely there were vast
tracts of the hinterland of the Greek cities whose population he could reach. But
Paul, like Francis Xavier many centuries later, kept pressing on. Such missionary
‘restlessness’, if it is appropriate to name it such, is more understandable on the
‘diaspora’ view of the communities he was establishing. He did not have to reach
each and every human being. He did have to proclaim the Gospel to the ‘ends
of the earth’.

Personally, I have been tempted to associate this ‘diaspora’ model of the
Church with the view of the future church put forward by the great German
theologian Karl Rahner over fifty years ago. In a lecture given in Cologne on 1
October 1954, published in English in 1963, Rahner proposed that the present
situation of Christians can be characterized as that of a ‘diaspora’ in a wider non-
Christian or post-Christian society.\(^5\) Christianity, he foresaw, would cease to be
a religion of growth (from cultural forces) and become a religion of choice,\(^6\) with
the laity taking a primary role and the clergy deprived of socially privileged
status. The Church would not cease to be missionary—to commend its Gospel
and seek to implement its values in wider society\(^7\)—but all this would have to be
done in a spirit of dialogue rather than imposition from the position of privilege
historically enjoyed by Christianity in the West. Though considered by many
fellow theologians at the time as overly pessimistic, Rahner’s forecaste has, at
least in the West, proved remarkably prescient—and not least in regard to our

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in Mission and Grace: Essays in Pastoral Theology Vol. I (London & New York: Sheed and
Ward, 1963), 3-55.
own situation, certainly in Australia and New Zealand, and perhaps in many other areas of Oceania as well. It seems to cohere with images and descriptions of the Church that emerged afresh at Vatican II: the Church as 'the People of God' (rather than all-inclusive 'Ark of Salvation'), the Church as 'Sacrament'—a sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humankind.

It is no secret that, especially in the post-conciliar decades, the Church has wrestled with the tension between the missionary impetus imprinted upon her by the risen Lord (Matt 28:16-20) and the obvious fact that opportunities for missionary expansion have greatly decreased in comparison with the previous two centuries. We are perhaps being confronted with the question as to whether, at least in statistical terms, being a full member of the Catholic church is the 'normal' mode of salvation or the 'extraordinary'. In an increasingly pluralistic world where, despite growth in some areas, notably Africa, the proportion of practising Catholics to the surrounding population is diminishing day by day, we have to ask ourselves, what is the vocation of the Church within the wider human body—not only on a universal scale but, still more pressingly, in the local church. In this area perhaps there is much to be said for recapturing Paul's sense of the local communities as 'diaspora' within the wider human community.

Let me add that, despite the impression that some evangelical Christian movements may give, Paul was no 'hard-sell' evangelist. He had a great respect for the human conscience and also left much space for the role of the Holy Spirit, who communicates with the human spirit (Rom 8:16) in a variety of ways. Let us hear him again early in the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians:

1 Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. [NRSV]

I am inclined to think that his more normal mode of evangelization was 'sideways' dialogue with a fellow tentmaker, rather than the grand public speech, as in Luke's depiction of him before the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). I think he relied for the growth of the church in each locality very much on the witness of the believers he left behind as he moved on—such people as, most notably, the married couple, Prisca and Aquila, and other exemplary figures, many of whom feature in the long list of those to whom he sends greetings in the concluding chapter of Romans (16:3-23).

**Paul as Missionary Pastor**

There are so many other aspects of Paul on which I could enlarge. Let me

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8. *Lumen Gentium* §§1, 9; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§774-76.
just, as a third and final point, address simply one aspect of Paul as pastor to the communities he founded. It emerges naturally from the consideration of the role of the local churches that we have just been considering. Paul consistently addresses the recipients of his letters in the second person plural. Clearly, there are leadership structures in the churches (1 Cor 16:15-16; Phil 1:1). Yet—setting aside the post-Pauline Pastoral Letters—Paul does not single out leaders and tell them to act. He always addresses the community as a whole: as ‘you’ (plural). He frequently has much to commend, much to correct, at times much to deplore. (How grateful we should be, however, that the Corinthians were so remiss in their celebration of the Eucharist. Otherwise, we would not have that earliest and so precious account of the eucharistic tradition in 1 Corinthians 11.) Yet Paul, even in Galatians, where he is so palpably angry, never sails in guns blazing in high moral tone without reminding the community of the dignity of their calling, how truly they are the objects of God’s love and favour, how rich they are in the gifts of the Spirit. Any exhortation or correction is always issued in the light of a prior reminder of and appeal to the Gospel. While firmly committed to the values enshrined in the Law, he is adamantly opposed to their imposition purely as external law rather than as internalised and energised by the power of the Spirit (Rom 7:7 - 8:13), which for him is barely to be distinguished from the ongoing love of the risen Lord, pulsating within the life of the community and individual believer (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:13-14).

Perhaps our present situation—or the one to which we seem to be moving—is an opportunity to address our churches, in particular our parishes, as ‘you’ (plural), rather than as a group of individuals. If we have a single Eucharist in a locality, rather than a series of several Masses across a weekend, we have the opportunity to move away from a ‘smorgasbord’ approach to the sacramental life of the Church: that is, an approach where individuals fulfil their ‘obligations’, offer their individual prayers, and seek to gain their individual graces. I am not denying that, ultimately, we do stand as individuals before God. But there is surely much to be gained from a situation where we can say, ‘What is this Gospel saying to us?’, rather than, ‘What is it saying to me?’ Paul’s pastoring mode summons each and every member of the community to discern their gift from the Spirit and to place it at the service of the building up of the community in love. There are no passengers in the Pauline churches. Each one is summoned to growth in Christian adulthood by employing their spiritual gift for the upbuilding of all in faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 12-14; Rom 12:3-8).

**Conclusion**

Let’s face it. Paul is not the most congenial New Testament figure for Catholics. He has not been our man in the sense that he clearly has been for the Protestant churches, who rediscovered him at the Reformation, a rediscovery from which, we as a church pulled back until Vatican II. Now I discern a variety of currents flowing in the Church, flowing very strongly and by no means all in
the same direction. It is a turbulent time—in the view of some the greatest crisis since the Reformation. I have just tried to put before you some ways in which I think Paul can speak anew to us in this situation—one which contains hopes and new possibilities, as well as diminishment and distress.

If we are to continue to hear Paul today—and admittedly the assignment of his texts to the 'unwinnable' middle slot of the Sunday readings does not make that easy—it is not primarily because the concrete directives he gave to his communities are all that relevant to us, living and pastoring as we do in very different situations. It is because of the power of his constant evocations of Christian dignity and destiny, his sense of God and the love of God made visible in Christ (Rom 8:39). If we can hold our present situation before that reality and plumb its mystery more deeply, then, out of the present darkness, we may hope to find new life.