

St. Paul and the New Aeropagi: A Nigerian Perspective¹

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Introduction

I am most grateful for the honour done to me by His Eminence, Ivan Cardinal Dias, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, who has invited me to make a short contribution to the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2009 Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. I have been asked to offer my reflections “on the basis of my pastoral and missionary experience in my country, emphasizing those aspects and particular insights which could be shared with other representatives of the missionary world.” I shall try to do this in two sections. First I shall highlight some relevant aspects of the life and mission of St. Paul. Then, I shall attempt to draw some lessons which I believe we should take note of in view of a Nigerian missionary enterprise.

Part One: St Paul, the Apostle and Missionary

The New Testament gives us copious information about St Paul, his life and his mission, both in the Acts of the Apostles as well as in the letters that go by his name. Also, lots of books and studies abound in libraries and bookshops on this great Apostle of the Gentiles. In this context and for the purposes of my assignment, I will only draw attention to some aspects of the life and mission of St Paul.

¹ This work started life as a Contribution to the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2009 Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

1. “Hebrew of Hebrews”

“I was born of the race of Israel and of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents” (Phil. 3:5). This is how St Paul described himself, namely as an authentic Hebrew, no less Hebrew than even the most fanatical Jew. He was raised up in the best tradition of the Jewish faith and Jewish Theology. He prided himself with the fact that he studied at the feet of the great Gamaliel, the Jerusalem professor of Jewish doctrines and law. He was also a fanatical defender of the Jewish faith, especially of the destiny of the Jewish race as the chosen people of God. He was dedicated to the practice of the law and even described himself as being without reproach in this regard (Phil. 3-6).

2. The “Conversion” of St Paul

It is important to note in what precisely consisted the conversion of St Paul. His case is certainly not like that of St Augustine or of Mary Magdalene, public sinners who changed their way of life and began to live well. St Paul was never an immoral person. He was never a fornicator or an adulterer less still an idolater. He was an honest, very devout Jew. Precisely because of this, he could not tolerate the essence of the Christian faith, which, according to his understanding, hit at the root of his faith as a Jew. The basic of this faith is that God has chosen the Jewish race and that it is through Israel that the whole world is to get salvation. The preaching of Jesus and the continuation of that preaching in the *kerygma* of the early church, which declares that God has started something new, went against his most solemnly held position. That was why he was enthusiastically involved in the persecution of the early church. We already saw him at the martyrdom of St Stephen, approving the stoning of the proto-martyr, and kept the clothes of those who actually threw the stones (Acts 7:58).

His conversion was more a spiritual conversion from the spiritual arrogance of the Jew who had no room for the novelty of the Christian faith to a person ready to open himself to the grace of God. His conversion was not as a result of theological or rational argument. All the arguments even of St Stephen only went further to provoke him. Rather, his conversion came about by the direct intervention of God and of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who knocked him down on the way to Damascus, a journey he was undertaking in order to go and arrest all those who followed the Christian way (Acts 9). This event stamped the life of St Paul for the rest of his earthly existence. He realized that it was God himself who forced him to change his mind – ***Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*** (Acts 9:4) From there, it became clear to him that Jesus Christ was present in the church which he left behind. The event also indelibly drilled on his mind and heart the primacy of grace in the life of the Christian. Only the grace of God is able to give us the faith that we need in order to follow and accept Jesus.

It is no wonder then that the early church found it difficult at first to accept St Paul as a true convert. “*He who was a persecutor had now become a defender of the faith*” (Gal. 1:18). It took the prestige and authority of a man like Barnabas to be able to introduce him to the early church in a way that he was welcome.

Once he saw the light, St Paul did not look back any more. He continued with the same zeal with which he persecuted the church to spread the good news of Christ’s kingdom, first to Jews and later on to all and sundry.

3. St Paul, Well Equipped for His Task

He was well equipped as a Jew: Because of his indisputable authority as regards Jewish theology, he was able to present the Christian message in a language familiar to those of his fellow Jews who were ready to listen to his arguments. His sermons as recorded in the Acts

of the Apostles as well as in all the Epistles attributed to him are full of references both to the Jewish Scriptures as well as to the Jewish religious traditions. He gave very much thought to the meaning of Christ, as this relates to the promises made by God to Israel. The whole Epistle to the Hebrews addressed these thorny matters in great detail. The failure of the Jewish religious establishment to embrace and adopt Christianity wholesale was a cause of great anguish to him. However, he continued to insist that the promises of God can never be revoked and that even in the new dispensation, the Jewish race has its mission within the plan of God. He has no doubt that the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel will take the form of an eventual conversion of Israel to the Christian faith. When this will be and how, is left in the mind of God.

St Paul was well equipped as a Roman citizen: On more than one occasion, he invoked the prerogatives of Roman citizenship when it was appropriate (Cf Acts 16:37; 21:39; 22:25). St Paul lived at a time when the Roman Empire held sway in much of the Middle East and Europe. This can be seen as a providential preparation for the spread of the Christian message. The Roman Empire was by no means a Christian Empire. Indeed the Christian church suffered a chain of persecutions under different Roman Emperors. And yet, the first and the critical period of development and growth of the church took place within the context of the Roman Empire. The ***Pax Romana*** which ensured security of movement from one end of the Empire to the other created the environment for the gospel of the Lord Jesus to be preached by Paul and other missionaries "from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, Galilee and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:18). The word moved swiftly, from the modern day Turkey right across to Spain and from Cologne right down to Ethiopia. This indeed is the Lord's own doing and it is wonderful in our eyes.

St Paul was well equipped with Greek Culture: While the political power of the day was based in Rome, the cultural environment was Greek. St Paul wrote all his letters in the Greek language and as he

went from place to place preaching, he was able to speak freely not only in the Hebrew language to Jews but above all in the Greek spoken language of the day, to the widest audience. Again this is a providential arrangement which made it possible for the Gospel to be preached far and wide. St Paul was very familiar with the Greek literary culture and philosophy, as well as the religions of the Greco-Roman Empire. He was therefore able to present the Christian message using this culture as vehicles.

Thus, St. Paul moved freely in three worlds. We recall that when the Lord Jesus was nailed to the cross, his title, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, was written in three languages: Hebrew, Latin and Greek (John 19:19-22). This represented the cultural complexity of the Holy Land at that time. St Paul was a living example of this complexity; a Jew, a Roman citizen, steeped in the Greek culture.

4. The Apostolate of St. Paul

The apostolate of St Paul was both by teaching and by witness. He spent a lot of time preaching “in season and out of season” (2Tim. 4:2). He wrote extensively letters and theological treatises. He was highly successful as he freely expounded the message of Christianity as a fulfillment of the Old Testament but also as a message addressed and meant for all men and women, Jew and Greek alike. For St Paul, preaching was a pre-eminent occupation: “***Woe to me if I do not preach***” (1Cor. 9:16). He could not see his life in any other way except as one who is always busy telling a story of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. “For me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21).

Jesus Christ carried out his mission both by words and by deeds. St Paul followed the same example. He not only preached but made his very life a witness to the gospel. His zeal was admirable, so much so that like Jesus, he hardly had time to rest. On one occasion, when he was provoked, he proudly demonstrated that he had worked harder than any of his opponents and detractors (I Cor. 15:11). He continued

to zealously carry out his missionary task even when he suffered all kinds of persecution. His personal life style was a great sermon to all those who cared to observe him. He had the courage and the moral authority to declare: *“Take me for your model as I take Christ”* (I Cor. 11:1). How many of us preachers can with a clear conscience say it so clearly? His lifestyle was very modest. He himself declared that he worked with his own hands to earn his living as well as to support his missionary work. It was not that he had no right to demand it. But he preferred to work for his own living (1 Cor. 9:1-18). We are told that his occupation was that of a tent maker and he continued working even when he was in captivity. He certainly did not preach for the sake of money. In fact he had serious warnings against the avarice and the love of money which often destroy both the credibility and the effectiveness of preachers of the word.

Part Two: Lessons for the Nigerian Mission

1. The Imperative of Mission

Everywhere in the world, it is now well known that the church is very vibrant in our country, Nigeria. Our churches are full on Sundays, our worship is vibrant, and our lay faithful are very active and generous in the support of the church. We are building big churches, constructing elaborate structures as well as being involved in many social development works. In particular the trend of vocations in Nigeria both to the priesthood and the religious life has gone beyond any natural explanation. We must indeed acknowledge that God is doing something special in our land and if it is so, it must be for a purpose. The purpose cannot be anything less than the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

But the growth of the church cannot end with big churches and bursting seminaries. No church can be considered as having reached maturity unless it is also a church that participates fully in the missionary mandate of the church. Therefore, the Nigerian mission

should be a natural development of the fast growth of our church. Like St. Paul, we too must say: “Woe to us if we do not evangelize!”

2. Our Conversion

We remarked above about the specific content of the conversion of St Paul. There is a parallel also with the conversion of our people to the faith. Before we received Christ’s gospel message, our people had a religion in which the central point was a belief in the one true God, creator of everything. Our people’s conversion to Christianity therefore was not a conversion from arrant paganism to Christianity or abandoning of false gods in order to embrace the true God. Unfortunately, in the history of the Christian missions in our lands, this mistaken attitude to conversion has very often been the main thrust of missionary enthusiasm. Many a missionary left Europe “to save souls” that were, in their conviction, ignorant of the true God and heading for eternal damnation by their millions. The intention was very holy and heroic, but still mistaken. Of course, they were men and women of their times, used by God to achieve his own divine purposes.

Now after many years and especially with the embrace of Christianity by the Nigerian peoples themselves, we understand better what God has done for us. My late father, God rest his soul, became a Christian at the age of almost 20, after full initiation into the religions of our ancestors. He often told me that his conversion to Christianity did not entail taking on a new God. In the Yoruba language: **God is one** and it is this same God **Olorun**, whose name we have adopted in our Christian faith. We did not have to look for another name for God, the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Conversion, therefore, consisted mainly in getting to know Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, who came, lived on this earth, died for our sins, buried and rose triumphant sitting now at the right hand of God the Father. This is the crux of our conversion to the faith.

This point has a significant missiological consequence. I am convinced that the fact that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God that our ancestors worshipped is one of the reasons why the Christian faith has become very attractive and congenial to our people. By way of comparison, if we look at what has happened to Christian missions among the great oriental Asian religions with a radically different concept of the divinity, then we can appreciate the point being made here. For example, in Japan, 500 years after St. Francis Xavier preached the faith there, Christians are still under 1% of the population. In Nigeria, in less than 200 years, Christians are already about 50%. The same faith in the one God is also what is preached by Islam, with a similarly positive result as in Christianity. The importance of this basic faith in One God, which cuts across Christianity, Islam and our Traditional Religion cannot be over-emphasized. We should continue to see it as a major foundation for mutual understanding, dialogue and cooperation across our religious lines.

3. Mission “*Ad Gentes*”

The church has always emphasized the need for people who will go out beyond their own lands to spread the faith. Even after 2000 years, the need for those who will carry the faith into other parts of the world continues to be pressing. Even today, we have to continue to carry the Christian message away from our homeland to other lands. But Mission *Ad Gentes* today has its own very special challenges which the life of St Paul calls us to reflect upon.

3.1. The God ahead of us

The first point we should notice is that St Paul carried the Christian faith to people whom he acknowledged to have already an element of the truth. As far as the Jewish people all over the world was concerned, he simply went back to their scriptures to prove that everything said of Jesus was already in the Old Testament. Therefore

those who were listening to him were not supposed to be a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate, knowing nothing about God until St Paul came to them. The same is true not only of the Jewish hearers of the gospel but also of the so called pagans of those days. In Athens, he spoke of “the unknown God” (Acts 17:23). Even in the pagan cities of Lystra and Derbe, he drew their attention to Him, “the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that they contain,”who “sends you rain from heaven, makes your crops grow when they should and gives you food and makes you happy” (Acts 14:15-17) This is the God who makes himself known to everyone who cares to listen to him. This theme is well developed also in the letter of St Paul to the Romans (Rom. 1:20-21).

We too ought to recognize in our missionary endeavour that God is already ahead of us wherever we may go. We will do well to make every effort to acknowledge and to discover the spirit of God acting already in the minds and hearts of people who may not have formally accepted and embraced the Christian faith.

3.2. Mission to the Poor

Our experience of missionary work in our nation was historically one of missionaries coming from relatively rich developed nations to preach to us in a relatively underdeveloped and poor environment. And so the missionaries to many parts of Africa came not only to bring the gospel message but also were very much involved in bringing to the people, human development often described as “civilization”. Some even talk of “Christian civilization”. Good health care, an increased awareness about personal dignity, freedom, democratic instincts; all these came along with the Christian faith. That was the classical scenario of missionary work from Europe to Africa. And if we add to this the fact that the white European missionary belonged to the race and “tribe” of the colonial masters, it was clear that the missionary was operating from a position of strength.

Our own mission indeed could entail a similar scenario as we try to go from Nigeria to other African countries that are poorer than ourselves. We could indeed carry the Christian faith along with a little bit of whatever human progress we can bring to the people who are suffering more than we are, not only in Africa but in other parts of the world that are in a similar situation, for example in the Pacific islands like Papua New Guinea.

3.3. Mission to the Rich

However, there is also the challenge today of mission from our land to the so called rich countries. Already Nigerian missionaries are in the United States of America and in Europe. Many people are not sure what to make of this movement. We need to discern motives and strategies very carefully in this regard.

In our globalized world, there is no more clear cut boundaries between Christian lands and non-Christian lands since human beings have now spread all over the world living side by side everywhere. It means, therefore, that mission land can be everywhere. It also means that any group of people can also engage in mission anywhere in the world. That people from a poor country should go and preach in rich lands may appear strange today. But when we look at the experience of St Paul, this seems to be indeed the normal aspect of his missionary apostolate. He left Antioch in Syria and Jerusalem in Palestine to carry the faith to the centres of Greek culture in cities like Corinth, Athens, Thessalonica, and right into the centre of the Roman Empire in the city of Rome itself. In all these great cities where St Paul preached, he was addressing a people who were far more advanced in culture and in economic level of life than those in the land from which the message emanated.

Therefore, if we from poor nations today find ourselves having to go to preach the gospel to people in the so called rich nations, we are in good company with St Paul. There is of course an added factor namely that often we find ourselves going to preach in nations which

were traditionally Christian before and are now no longer practicing it. This is all the more difficult than if one were preaching to pagans or those who have no faith whatsoever. But willingly or unwillingly, welcome or unwelcome, we must continue to preach the good news.

This means that we, on our part, will have to be clear in our minds about what is the name of game. We need to be careful not to restrict our missions to places where we have good financial returns. It is of course legitimate for people in richer lands to share their material resources with others who are in poorer lands. St Paul did this. However, if we go on mission mainly in order to raise funds and make money, even if for the most holy of projects, there is cause for grave concern. This is valid for all our missionaries, male and female, priests and sisters. The concern is perhaps more pressing for female religious from poor countries whose “missionary work” in rich lands consists largely in working for pay in places like schools, hospitals and homes.

In this connection we need to mention a very positive dimension, when missionaries from poor lands raise funds from rich nations in order to finance their missionary apostolate in poorer areas. For example, the Nigerian Missionaries of St. Paul are working in South Sudan in collaboration with the St. Patrick’s Missionaries, who are running the project from funds raised in more affluent Ireland. The international missionary institutes have been doing this all along. For example, Nigerian Spiritans are working in Papua New Guinea, with funding through the Spiritan Generalate. The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples might consider giving more support and encouragement to this kind of arrangement. The bottom line is this: where ever there are missionaries ready to work in poor lands, they should not be handicapped by lack of funds.

3.4. The Sending Community

Another lesson we learn from St Paul the missionary is that he was sent by a community. This is specifically mentioned on the very first missionary journey when he was sent out by the Church of Antioch (Acts 13:2-3). They prepared him and they gave him the resources to make the journey and he came back to report to that local community. Today, the situation is not as straight forward as that. Generally, we have missionaries leaving our country to go abroad either as *fidei donum* priests sent by their bishops or as members of a religious community going on mission sent by their religious superiors. Canonically, this arrangement of course must continue because anybody going on mission must be sent.

However, there is also a national dimension to this whole issue. We thank God that in the last few years, a National Missionary Council has been established in the country. The Nigerian Church, as a People of God, ought to be part and parcel of the sending out of missionaries to other lands. Therefore, we need to have structures which will facilitate our local church sending out missionaries to other local churches. Sending also entails supporting, both by prayer and when necessary by material resources. The missionaries we send to Europe and America may not need to be fed by us. But we cannot limit our missionaries only to places where they can be fed. We must now think seriously of how to support our missionaries who go to where there is no adequate material support to maintain them. So far, not much has been done in this regard. I believe the time has come for all those who are sending Nigerian missionaries abroad to compare notes, bring their heads together and coordinate their activities with the church at the national level. I am quite convinced that resources are available in our country to maintain our missionaries in poor nations if we do the right things. Considering how much money is raised in our local churches, to build new churches and other structures, a mere fraction of all this will go a long way towards a budget for maintaining our missionaries.

Conclusion

This year of St Paul gives us an opportunity to look more closely at the life and teachings of St Paul as well as to draw lessons from his life. We have tried to draw attention to a few elements both in the life of St Paul and the lessons for our land. My prayer is that during this year of St Paul, our faith and zeal for God's kingdom will be increased. Our hope too is that the Nigerian mission will move unto a fresh level of commitment and zeal.