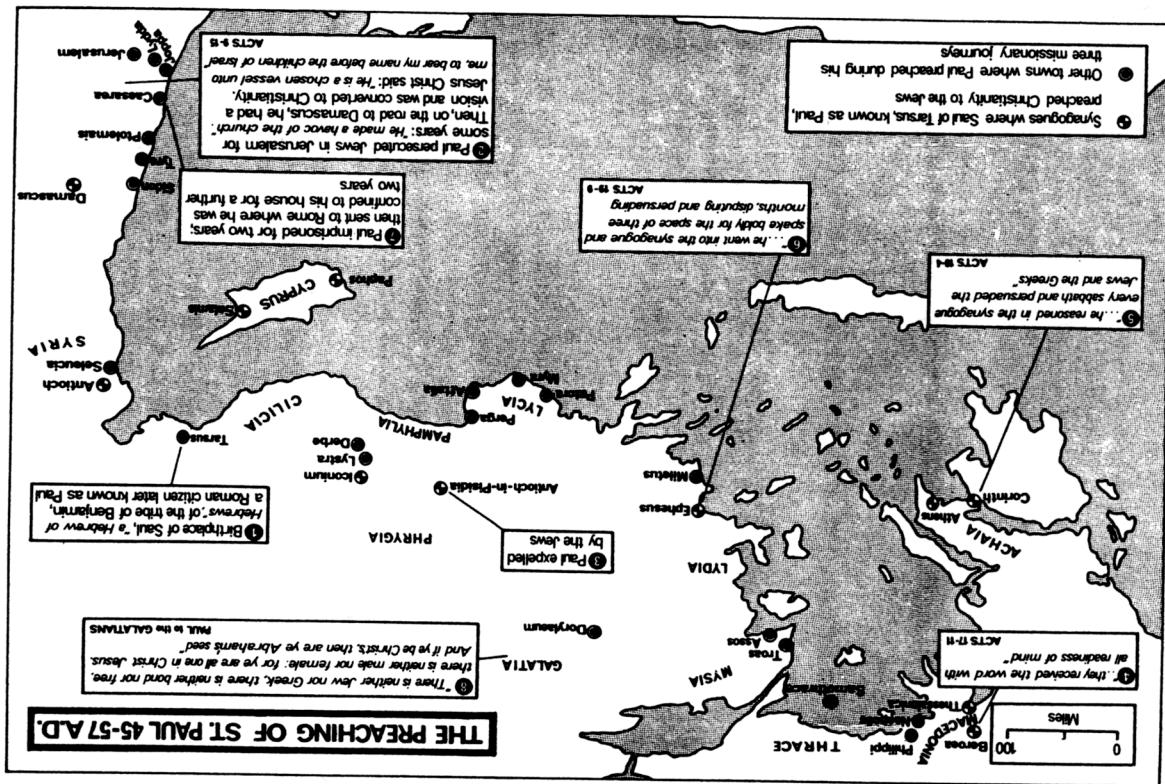


The Letters of St Paul

The *Letters of St Paul*, which complemented his preaching, were written to instruct and exhort new Christians, and sometimes to take them to task or to clarify some difficult points of doctrine. St Paul is the New Testament writer about whom most is known. A good two-thirds of the *Acts of the Apostles* has to do with his life and, together with the *Letters*, they show us, in detail, his early background, his conversion and then his amazing apostolate among the Gentiles.

We learn, for example, that St Paul was born in Tarsus of Cilicia of Jewish parents who were zealous and faithful followers of the Law (Acts 23:6). His early education was in Hebrew, but he also learned Greek in Tarsus and became familiar with hellenic culture. The very fact that he is sometimes called Saul and sometimes Paul reflects this mixed cultural background and the two sides of his personality. His religious training was rounded off in Jerusalem, where he was taught by Gamaliel (Act 22:3), an upright and religious man, and he became a thorough Pharisee (Acts 23:6).

St Paul was also passionately in love with the things of God. His commitment was total: God meant everything to him; therefore he served him unconditionally and with total loyalty. His vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1ff) radically changed his life. His conversion was not something emotional or psychic; it came about due to a very special grace from God, which as he puts it, ‘made me his own’ (Phil 3:12). From that moment on all his zeal for God and for his neighbour was expressed in a life of complete self-giving to him who had called him and whom he loved with his whole soul. Effort, privation, suffering and even mortal danger could not separate him from ‘the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 8:35-39). This love was to lead him to total identification with the passion and cross of his Master (2 Cor 4:10-11; Phil 3:10), to the extent of dying to himself, so that he could say, ‘I have been crucified with



to bring everyone the teaching of Jesus, and of his self-denial and 'anxiety for all the churches' (2 Cor 11:28).

St Paul made three great missionary journeys. The first (45-49) took place after the Holy Spirit chose him for this mission, along with Barnabas (Acts 13:2). He went to preach to the Gentiles, covering Cyprus, Perga in Pamphylia, Pisidian Antioch and three cities in Lycania — Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Despite the many difficulties he met, mostly due to resistance from the Jews to whom he preached in the first instance, he established Christian communities of Gentile converts in all those places.

On his return from this journey, the Council of Jerusalem was held (Acts 15:1ff) to sort out the question posed by Judaising Christians about whether Gentile converts to Christianity should be obliged to keep the Mosaic law. The agreement arrived at, ratified by Peter, James and John, confirmed Paul and Barnabas in their ministry. There was no longer any question of its being necessary to practise the old Law in order to enter the Church.

Accompanied by Silas, the Apostle set out on his second journey (50-52) after the Council of Jerusalem. From Antioch he crossed Cilicia and visited in Lycania the Church he had previously founded there. In Lystra he was joined by Timothy. He went through Phrygia and Galatia and, despite illness, preached the Gospel wherever he went. The Holy Spirit led him to Troas and from there into Europe, passing through Macedonia, where he founded the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Due to strenuous opposition from Jews, he then moved to Corinth, where he preached for a year and a half. There he met Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish married couple who had been expelled from Rome by Claudius' persecution. While in Corinth, and before returning to Antioch, St Paul wrote two letters to the *Thessalonians* (these are regarded as the first canonical books of the New Testament).

He began his third journey (53-58) in Antioch. He crossed Phrygia and Galatia and reached Ephesus, where he wrote *Galatians* and *1 Corinthians*. After his sudden departure from Ephesus (Acts 19:23ff) we find him in Macedonia with Titus, who gives him disturbing news of the church of Corinth: this provokes him to write his second letter to the *Corinthians*. At the end of the winter of 57 he arrives in Corinth, the last stage of his third journey. There he writes the letter to the *Romans*.

Then, due to accusations made by the Jews, he was imprisoned in Jerusalem and led under arrest to Caesarea. After failing to obtain freedom (he spent two years in captivity) and after interrogations by

two procurators, Felix and Festus, he appealed to Caesar, as was his right as a Roman citizen. Towards the end of the year 60 he started out for Rome, under guard, and spent another two years in captivity of sorts: he was able to preach the Gospel with his accustomed vigour. During this first Roman captivity (61-63) he wrote the letters to the *Ephesians*, *Philippians*, *Colossians* and to *Philemon* (these are known as the Captivity Letters).

From what St Luke tells us in *Acts*, it is quite possible that after these two years he was free to make the journey to Spain which he had been looking forward to for so long; this would have taken place in the same year, 63. On his return it is also probable that he made a last journey east (according to *1 Timothy* and the letter to *Titus*, both written in Macedonia). From *2 Timothy* we learn that he is once more in prison in Rome; and the very earliest tradition is that it was in Rome in 67 that he suffered that martyrdom for which God had long been preparing him.

As far as the Letters are concerned, this seems to have been the chronological order in which they were written:

1. During his first journey (50-52) he wrote *1 and 2 Thessalonians*.
 2. During his second journey (53-58): *1 and 2 Corinthians*, *Galatians* and *Romans*.
 3. During his first captivity in Rome (61-63): *Ephesians*, *Philippians*, *Colossians* and *Philemon*.
 4. Towards the end of his life (65-67): the pastoral letters to *Timothy* and *Titus*. The letter to the *Hebrews* will be discussed separately.
- Although the Letters appear in the Bible in a different sequence (*first Romans*, and *1 and 2 Thessalonians* at the end, before *Hebrews*), we are going to deal with them in a different order, as follows:
- pre-captivity letters
 - captivity letters
 - pastoral letters.

PRE-CAPTIVITY LETTERS

1 and 2 Thessalonians

St Paul first came to Thessalonica — modern Salonika — around the year 50 (early on in the course of his second apostolic journey). It was one of the most important cities in the Roman province of

Macedonia. Its very busy port, its strategic position on the main highway between Rome and its provinces in the East, and its position on the route from Thrace to Acadia meant that many people, mainly Greeks, gravitated to Thessalonica in search of employment; it had a sizeable Jewish community, with its own synagogue. Zealous as ever, St Paul spoke in this synagogue on three consecutive sabbaths, explaining that Jesus was the true Messiah, in whom the Old Testament prophecies found their fulfilment. Only some of these Jews accepted the Gospel, but many Greek proselytes became Christians as well as "not a few of the leading women" (Acts 16:25-17:4).

The Apostle was immediately persecuted and had to flee the city by night, leaving his catechetical work unfinished. As soon as he reached Athens he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, and Timothy soon returned with good reports. By this time Paul was already in Corinth and from there, happy to hear of the Thessalonians' firmness in the faith and of their affectionate regard for himself (despite what detractors were saying about him), he wrote to them to console them and clarify some points of doctrine; two points, particularly — the lot of those who die before the Parousia* (the second coming of the Lord) and the disruption caused by those who refused to work and constituted a burden on the Christian community in that city.

1 Thessalonians After thanking God for the steadfast faith of the Thessalonians, St Paul vigorously defends the supernatural character of his mission. Contrary to what some people were alleging out of greed and vanity, he had brought them the Gospel "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1:5): "we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts" (2:4).¹ A proof of this is the fact that during the time he spent among them he worked with his own hands, to avoid being a burden on them (2:9-10). Therefore, he insists on the mutual love they should have for one another — and everyone's responsibility to pull his weight, to do his daily work and obey those whom God has placed over him. Finally he touches on the Parousia and on what happens to those who have already died when the Parousia comes. The Thessalonians were in no doubt about the resurrection of the dead, nor did they think that the Parousia was imminent; but they

¹ St Paul never tried to derive any personal advantage from his preaching, was never deceitful in his teaching or ever tried to impose it on people. "From the very beginning of the Church the disciples of Christ strove to convert men to confess Christ as Lord, not however by applying coercion or the use of techniques unworthy of the Gospel but, above all, by the power of the God" (Vatican II, Decree *Dignitatis humanae* 11).

wanted to know what the position of the dead would be, for they thought that those who were still alive at the time of the Parousia would have some kind of privileged position. St Paul sets their minds at rest by assuring them that everyone — the dead and the living — will share in the Lord's triumphant cortege because "we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep" (4:15).

2 Thessalonians The Thessalonians were very happy with the first letter, but they began to ask themselves further questions, which left them uneasy. St Paul had not told them anything about when the Parousia would happen, and some of them, who were perhaps naturally nervous or impulsive types, were making out that the Parousia was in fact imminent. This sort of thinking made them disinterested in things around them.

This is the new theme of Paul's second letter, written some months later, a letter which is a logical extension of the first. A maritime city like Thessalonica, with a sizeable proportion of unemployed and idle people, was just the sort of place where gossip, intrigue and false rumours thrived. And naturally, among recent converts to Christianity, there were some people who felt disinclined to do a solid day's work — and more inclined to speculate about the future and discuss predictions than to take St Paul's teaching seriously and follow the example of his hardworking and orderly life.

In this letter, the Apostle, after encouraging them to remain steadfast in the faith, goes into more detail about "the day of the coming of the Lord".² He tells them that it is not around the corner, for first two main things must happen — the great rebellion and the advent of Antichrist. These have not happened yet, so why should they make the mistake of thinking that the Parousia is imminent? We do not know who or what this Antichrist is, or what power restrains him: St Paul reveals nothing about this. All he does is warn them not to be impressionable and not to be alarmed by mere rumours, because this could undermine their perseverance in the faith. "If any one will not work, let him not eat" (3:10), he tells them; they should follow the example he himself has given them. This shows that it is wrong to say St Paul thought that the Lord's coming, the end of the world, was imminent, and that he spread this false idea among

² The "day of the coming of the Lord" — the Parousia — refers to Christ's second coming, when his triumph over death will be revealed and he will be glorified in his saints, raising the dead to life and presenting them to the Father. This day will bring to an end, forever, the earthly stage of the kingdom of God (cf. 1 Thess 4:14-17; 1 Cor 15:22-28).

the early Christians. What these letters do contain is an echo of Jesus' prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 17 and Mt 24) and of the persecutions the Church will experience until the end of time.

1 and 2 Corinthians

In St Paul's time, Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaea and the seat of the Roman proconsul. Julius Caesar built it (44 B.C.) on the ruins of a Greek city of the same name. It had two ports in the isthmus where it was sited — one in the Aegean Sea and one on the Gulf of Lepanto. Its excellent geographical position soon made it a prominent centre of commerce, with a much higher standard of living than its neighbours. But it was also a loose-living city, rendering religious cult to the goddess Venus, a serious threat for those — Jews or Christians — who worshipped the true God.

St Paul established a Christian community at Corinth during his second missionary journey (50-52). He preached the Gospel there for a year and a half, aided by Silas and Timothy. Due to his remarkable zeal, quite a number of people were converted to the true faith, some of them Jews. Very soon many Jews in the city became openly hostile to the Apostle's preaching, but since they had little social influence they failed to obstruct his work. This may explain why the proconsul Gallio refused to listen to the charges they brought against Paul (Acts 18:12ff).

After he left Corinth, the city had a series of apostolic visitors. Apollos, a brilliant preacher (Acts 18:24-26), arrived about a year after Paul left. He made many additional converts and confirmed the Corinthians in their faith. It is likely that around this time St Peter paid a short visit to Corinth. Up to that point, the Corinthian church was at peace and there was no sign of any doctrinal difficulties.

Almost two years later, some Christian Jews from Palestine arrived in the city, people who had previously been very apostolic but had now clearly gone off the rails of sound teaching. St Paul does not hesitate to call them "false apostles" (2 Cor 11:13), even though they boasted of being colleagues of the Twelve. They tried to undermine St Paul's work. They were over-tolerant of Christians fraternizing with pagans, failing to warn them of the risks involved. They became very influential, with the result that the Corinthians began to take things easy.

Paul heard about this soon afterwards (he was in Ephesus at the time; the year was 57). Three influential Corinthians brought him a letter in which they and others asked for guidance on matters they found problematic. They probably filled out the information given in the letter, asking him to go quickly to Corinth.

1 Corinthians St Paul preferred to postpone going to Corinth in order to give everyone more time for reflexion and repentance; this is why he wrote his first letter, shortly before Easter 57. It is not a doctrinal treatise like the Letter to the *Romans*: it is more like an acknowledgment of their letter, but availling of it to answer about the things which were worrying them. He begins by taking to task Christians who had been unfaithful, but does this with great tenderness and charity, presumably to win over people who were confused in their minds by the preaching of the false apostles.

From a doctrinal point of view the letter centres on these points:

1. The need to reject false human philosophy and pretentiousness, to embrace Christ's cross, the source of all wisdom. God chose to confound the wisdom of the world by choosing for servants humble people, poor and uneducated. Thanks to their humility they responded to grace and spread the Gospel far and wide, showing that God was working through them. "For the divine work which the Holy Spirit has raised them up to fulfil transcends all human energies and human wisdom."³

2. Their obligation to avoid every kind of greed; and an invitation to perfect continence — the excellence of virginity. He outlines the duties of married couples and of widows. It should be stressed that St Paul does not despise the body: he regards it as the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is why he stresses the importance of Christian purity. As Vatican II has put it: "It is not lawful for man to despise his bodily life. On the contrary, he must regard his body as good and honourable, since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. However, wounded by sin, man feels rebellious stirrings in his body. Therefore, human dignity demands that man glorify God in his body and forbid it to serve the evil inclinations of his heart."⁴

Hence the excellence of virginity. Everyone must faithfully follow the calling he has received from God, but "perfect continence embraced on behalf of the kingdom of heaven has always been held in particular honour by the Church, as being a sign of charity and

³ Vatican II, Dec. *Presbyterorum ordinis* 15.

⁴ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 14.

stimulus towards charity, and an exceptional source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world.”⁵

3. Criteria about attendance at pagan rites (this is not permitted) and about eating food offered to idols.

4. Criteria about how agapes should be celebrated.

5. Confession of faith in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, which Christians should approach with a clear conscience, because it is the Body and the Blood of the Lord that they are receiving.

The Apostle speaks very explicitly about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:26-29), reflecting the faith of the first Christians: the Eucharist is not a mere commemoration but the very sacrifice of Calvary, offered now in an unbloody manner through the priestly ministry. Priests, “acting in the person of Christ and proclaiming his ministry, unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ their head, and in the sacrifice of the Mass they make present again and apply, until the coming of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 11:26), the unique sacrifice of the New Testament, that namely of Christ offering himself once and for all a spotless victim to the Father (cf. Heb 9:11-28)”⁶.

6. Mentioning various gifts, he recommends in chapter 13, as the most excellent of all, charity. Faith and hope, being theological virtues, have to do mainly with the Christian’s life here and now, preparing him for his definitive meeting with God in heaven. But they disappear once a person sees and possesses God, whereas charity, the first among the virtues, lasts forever: in heaven it attains its perfection, in that uninterrupted embrace which unites the soul to God forever.

7. Finally, he reaffirms faith in the resurrection of the dead. Thus, for example, in chapter 15 St Paul deals with the last and most important subject of controversy at Corinth — the resurrection of the bodies of the dead, a basic article of Catholic faith. For “we believe that the souls of all those who die in the grace of Christ — whether they must still make expiation in the fire of purgatory, or whether from the moment they leave their bodies they are received by Jesus into paradise like the good thief — go to form that people of God which succeeds death, death which will be totally destroyed on the day of the resurrection when these souls are reunited with their bodies.”⁷

⁵ Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* 42.

⁶ Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* 28.

⁷ Paul VI, *Creed of the People of God*, 6.

Paul’s letter was well received at Corinth; it convinced many wavering and some of those who had rebelled against his authority; but a minority, allied to the Judaizers, remained unconvinced. Titus brought him a report on the reaction to his letter (Paul was probably in Philippi at the time). He was very pleased (2 Cor 7) to know that he could count on the fidelity of the Corinthians and he set about winning over the remaining objectors.

In the meantime, however, the false apostles had been intriguing, twisting what Paul had said in the first letter. They accused him of being all talk, irresponsible, and ambitious, pointing out that he had not made his promised visit to Corinth. There was every chance, therefore, that the church at Corinth would begin to stray again.

2 Corinthians To deal with this situation, as a preliminary to his visit, the Apostle wrote a second letter, very shortly after the first, probably towards the end of 57 or at the beginning of 58. In it he first apologizes for not being able to visit them, but he feels confident that he has behaved throughout as a minister of Christ.

The Corinthians must have been very disappointed to learn that Paul was postponing his visit and was heading for Macedonia (1 Cor 16:5-7). Now he tells them that in doing so he had not acted capriciously or like a “worldly man”, suiting himself: he felt he did the best thing in the circumstances: his “yes” follows the example of Jesus, who is always straightforward (2 Cor 1:17-18). He calls on his own conscience to witness that he has never acted in a worldly way but always with holiness and godly sincerity (2 Cor 1:12). In fact he does not live his own life, does not follow his personal preference, for “while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor 4:11). Paul identifies himself with Christ, and suffers along with Christ over the rejection of his teachings by the recalcitrant members of the Corinthian church. Yet his suffering is nothing compared with what Christ had to suffer on our behalf; and his love for the people at Corinth is such that he leaves until the end of his letter the harsh words he has to speak in fidelity to the teaching of Christ.

St Paul did not want his own personality to obtrude. Self-praise is deeply repugnant to him, yet he has to praise himself in order to expose the false apostles. He vigorously defends the apostolic ministry God has given him; he simply cannot allow the truths of faith to be diluted, and therefore he gives a short summary of what Christian commitment entails, exhorting them “not to accept the grace of God

in vain" (2 Cor 6:1) — that constant stream of graces which God gives everyone to enable him fulfil his obligations in the Church and in the world. Although the Apostle seems to be referring to those who are still rebellious, his teaching can apply to anyone who is lukewarm or apathetic.

Finally, St Paul justifies his attitude by showing what it means to be chosen by the Lord for the work of evangelization; but he speaks in all humility, because he recognizes that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (4:7).

Probably no other letter of St Paul gives us such insight into his personality. Warmhearted, extremely understanding and affectionate, he also has great courage and decisiveness. This explains his prudence and patience in biding his time when he is under personal attack, and his intervention with the full force of his apostolic authority when God's honour and the community's good are at stake. This, in fact, is the principle on which these two letters are based — the unity of the Church and the communion of saints (which always go together and which form the framework of Christian holiness).

The Gospel and the Mosaic law, between the Old Covenant and the New. He tries to get them to see that the key point is this: accepting Mosaic doctrine would mean in practice renouncing the justification won for us by Christ — and therefore denying the value of the redemption; it would imply renouncing freedom, because they would be submitting to the yoke of the Law, which is slavery; it would mean rejecting the grace and salvation which faith in Jesus Christ brings with it. The universality of the Church would be destroyed and Christ's doctrine irreparably damaged.

The Judaizers, for their part, were arguing that God himself had instituted the law of Moses, which Christ had come not "to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). They even went as far as to invoke the authority of the Twelve against Paul, ignoring (because they did not want to obey them) the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem which had gone into this whole question and with whose teaching St Paul was in line (Acts 15:28-29).

With characteristic energy and zeal, Paul defends his apostolic authority and denounces the error of the Judaizers, into which many of the Galatians had fallen. He ends by telling them in no uncertain terms: "if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you" (5:2).

However, the content of the letter — which is reminiscent of *Romans* — ranges much more widely than this. For example, it makes the following points:

1. While recognizing St Peter's pre-eminent position as visible head of the Church, the letter stresses that the Church is one and universal, a community entered into through Baptism, one in teaching and government, under the infallible and absolute authority of the Apostles (1:9; 2:9; etc.).
2. Transition from a state of sin or alienation from God to a state of grace happens only through faith in Christ, who by dying redeemed us from all sin — original sin and personal sin. Faith makes us truly children of God — who share in God's own life — and heirs of heaven, in keeping with God's promises.
3. This faith in Jesus Christ is the only faith by which we can be saved; through it we attain the grace of forgiveness and the true freedom proper to the children of God. Therefore, as the Apostle says, anyone who submits to the observances of the Mosaic law falls back into the slavery of the Law and denies the redemption wrought by Christ.

Galatians

At the beginning of this third apostolic journey, around the year 53 (Acts 18:23), St Paul passed through Galatia to visit the Christian communities he had established in the area (Acts 13:14ff), which he had also visited during his second journey (Acts 16:1-5). The communities in question were in the southern part of Galatia — Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Derbe and Lystra. The Galatians had responded very well to Paul's apostolate and the churches were flourishing.

However, on this last journey St Paul was very surprised to find that the Galatian Christians — most of whom came from a Gentile background — had been led astray by "false brethren", Judaizers, who made out that Christians should conform to the Mosaic law and, therefore, should be circumcised.

Perhaps because he was short of time, the Apostle was unable to go into the matter in detail; at any rate, when he reached Ephesus (53-54) he wrote the Galatians a letter refuting the errors involved, in which he goes into the whole question of the relationship between

4. Christians, whether of Jewish or Gentile background, are the true children of Abraham, according to the spirit, because through faith in Christ they have been justified and incorporated — through Baptism — into his Church, the new people of God.

5. Jesus Christ, true God and true man, died on the cross as the representative of all mankind, to make satisfaction for all sin — not only sins against the Mosaic law but also those against the natural law. 6. Following in Christ's footsteps, Christians also must die to the old Law if they want to live for God (2:19); this is the death of the old man brought about through Baptism, which enables us to live a new life, the life of grace, so we can "walk by the Spirit" (5:24) and not under the Law (5:18).

7. Only in this way will Christians attain the true freedom of the sons of God — which requires that we mortify our vices and the concupiscence of the flesh to become "a new creation" (6:15) and reproduce in ourselves the life of Christ, of whom we are both a member and a temple.

8. This new life, the life of grace, makes Christians yield the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). The Law no longer has any power; what matters is faith in Jesus Christ, which works through love (5:6).

based on faith in Jesus Christ, and that it was not necessary to keep the Mosaic law. St Paul feels that they need a more theological induction into that Christian teaching which they have already accepted and this he now gives them, at the same time announcing his forthcoming visit.

There are two parts to the letter — a dogmatic part, centering on the question of justification (1:18-11:34), and a moral part, which spells out the duties and obligations of Christians (12-15).

On the matter of justification (that is, salvation) St Paul starts with the fact that all men, and not just Gentiles, are sinners (3:23) and as such are deprived of God's grace. Pagans were abandoned by God because of their idolatry, which led them into ever more serious sin, exchanging natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. They reached this sorry state because they drowned the voice of their own conscience, foolishly refusing to listen to the law God had engraved on their hearts (1:18-32). They were unable to make their way from experience of created things to the maker and creator of those things. The Jews, for their part, also cut themselves off from God (2:17ff) in spite of the gifts and privileges they received: they had the law of Moses, which prepared the ground for the coming of the Saviour; this law told them God's will, and they expounded this law to others; however, most of the Jews, even though they knew the law, did not practise it — and far from freeing them from God's judgment this made them even more blameworthy in the sight of their own conscience.⁸

To escape from this situation and attain salvation, the only route, for Gentiles as for Jews, is, St Paul states, faith in Jesus Christ: our Lord by his passion and death has made expiation for us (5:25) so that through faith in him (4:5) all of us can be justified. St Paul uses the example of Abraham to illustrate his teaching. Abraham was justified by faith, not by works (circumcision did not yet exist) and "in hope he believed against hope" (4:18). He believed in God's promise that he would be the father of many nations. God did not grant him this inheritance as a reward for fidelity to the articles of

Romans

Written by St Paul from Corinth around the year 58, this is the most didactic of all his letters and the most doctrinally profound. It is also very beautifully written, from a stylistic point of view. It contains a summary (naturally, an incomplete one) of Christian teaching, starting with the Old Covenant and an outline of God's plans for man's salvation after the fall of our first parents.

The letter is explicitly addressed to the Christians at Rome, whom St Paul plans to visit on his way to Spain (15:25). He writes to preach the Gospel of God (1:1), for that is the mission to which God has called him; in particular he writes to the Christians at Rome "whose faith is proclaimed in all the world"; most of them are Gentile converts and they are being told by Jews resident in Rome that salvation comes through the law of Moses, whereas they had been taught that it was

⁸ In Rom 1:26-33 St Paul lists a series of vices which follow on logically from people refusing to give God glory by recognizing him as the beginning and end of all things. "What revelation shows us agrees with experience. Examining his heart, man finds that he too is inclined towards evil and is immersed in a whole series of evils which cannot come from his God Creator. By often refusing to recognize God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal and at the same time has become out of harmony with himself, with others, and with all created things" (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 13).

a contract (the Law), but in view of the faith with which he accepted that God's promise would come true. St Paul wants to emphasize that the Old Law was orientated towards a higher and more perfect law, which Jesus Christ, the Messiah, would inaugurate through his redeeming death.

In this letter the concepts of *justice* and *justification* refer to the cancellation of a previous state of injustice or sin. The justification which Jesus Christ merits for us is the same thing as forgiveness of sins: all the sins of mankind are totally forgiven; it is not just as if God turned a blind eye to them. This is what is called *objective redemption* (5:15), meaning that Jesus has overcome sin (6:6). Along with this should come *subjective* or *personal redemption* whereby Jesus' merits are applied to the individual to free him from the stain of original sin and regain his lost friendship with God. Justification is attained through faith and baptism (intimately linked to one another), which allows us to die to the 'old man' and be reborn to a new life in Jesus Christ. This is what Baptism is about: the Christian is immersed in water and there the "old man" is buried along with all his sins so he can die with Christ. United with Christ, we are reborn to a new life, the life of Grace, which makes us true sons of God. Thus, "by Baptism, men are plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ: they die with him, are buried with him, and rise with him; they receive the spirit of adoption as sons, 'by virtue of which we cry: Abba, Father'" (Rom 8:15).⁹

This new life of grace is what makes us truly to be God's children and allows us to share in the intimacy of the three divine Persons (8:11). We do not just seem to be, we in fact are his children, for "it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (8:16-17).

This fact of being sons of God means that we should seek to Christianize our whole life. In this letter, the Christian life is expressed in mainly two ideas — holiness (sanctity) and sanctification, which parallel, on the level of personal application, the concepts of justice and justification.¹⁰ Holiness means striving to identify oneself with Jesus Christ and to direct towards God everything which previously

had been under the law of sin and therefore had become profane, cut off from God (6:19, 22; 15:16).

The sin of our first parents (Gen 3:17) also affects the whole of creation. Creation is in disarray and it can be put in order again to the extent that every man is converted and directs everything he does to God's glory. As St Paul put it, "the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now" (Rom 8:22) but it will be set "free from its bondage of decay" (v. 21) by those who are and behave as sons of God.

The Apostle also reveals that the Jewish people will be converted (11:25-26). When this will happen is a mystery of faith and of hope, for God keeps his promises and his rejection of Israel was neither absolute nor permanent. But we do know that first the Gospel must be preached to the whole world, "until the full number of the Gentiles come in [to the Church] and so all Israel will be saved."

In the second part of the letter, St Paul draws out the consequences of these principles. The Christian, a citizen of the world, should be known for the virtues of humility and simplicity as befits someone who realizes that everything he has received from God (12:3). Also, he should give an example of charity towards everyone, without any trace of hypocrisy, being understanding and forgiving, never vengeful; he should readily obey lawful authority, because that is God's will (13:1); he should avoid passing judgment on his neighbour, unless he has a special obligation to do so (14:10); rather, he should put up with the failings of the weak (15:1), thereby imitating Christ. St Paul ends the letter by recommending to the Christians of Rome (and indirectly to us) "to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:6).

THE CAPTIVITY LETTERS

Under this heading are included the four letters written by St Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome (61-63 A.D.) to the churches of Ephesus, Colossae (Asia Minor) and Philippi (Macedonia) and the letter to Philemon (a Christian at Colossae).

The letters show considerable homogeneity. Most non-Catholic critics argue against Pauline authorship (especially for *Ephesians* and

⁹ Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 6.

¹⁰ "Justification", the Council of Trent teaches, "is not only forgiveness of sins but also sanctification and renewal of the inner man by free acceptance of grace and gifts, which changes man from unjust to just, from enemy to friend, making him heir to eternal life" (Dz. 799).

Colossians), whereas almost all Catholic scholars support it. The earliest Christian tradition says that they were written by Paul and this is supported by internal evidence. The text also supports Rome as the place of composition: cf. the references to the spread of the Gospel among the praetorian guard and even in Caesar's household (Phil 1:13; 4:22); St Paul's hope and even certainty about being set free soon (Phil 1:25; 2:23; Philem 22); also, the relative freedom enjoyed by the Apostle at the time suggests that he was in Rome, a prisoner for Christ as the end of *Colossians* shows (4:18). As far as the teaching contained in these letters is concerned, it all concerns the problems which have arisen in these young churches. Over-emphasis on Mosaic practices linked with the special importance of angels, and the need for a certain basic pastoral organizational structure, lead St Paul to centre his argumentation on Jesus Christ, the one and only mediator, to whom even the angels are subject; within his Christology he develops his teaching on the Church. The Church is Christ's mystical body. Christ, the Head of this body, gives it life; it is he who makes all the faithful living members of this body. Through incorporation into this body we appropriate the grace of redemption. Whatever form pastoral organization takes, it must be compatible with this theology of the Church.

there are no personal references in it, nor does it have the opening greeting and the sign-off which are so characteristic of the Apostle's letters. Without the heading (which is not included in some codexes), this theory makes sense. However, the more common opinion, among ancient and modern scholars alike, is that the letter was addressed in the first instance to the Ephesians — not just because of the title it bears but because this is confirmed by St Irenaeus, the Muratori fragment, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and others.

St Paul's main purpose in writing seems to be to explore the great mystery of the redemption, of which Christ himself is the cornerstone (2:20), the foundation of the entire spiritual building into whom all Christians should be built. The letter therefore divides into two main parts:

a) *Dogmatic section* (1:2-3:21): here St Paul shows that the benefits of the redemption are available to everyone: everyone is predestined from before the creation of the world to become sons of God; both Jews and Gentiles are called, without distinction, to be one in Christ Jesus, to make up one body, the new people of God, the Church. This union of all in Christ is the express will of God the Father; it is merited through the redemption wrought by the Son and brought to fulfilment in people's souls through the action of the Holy Spirit.

To proclaim this mystery to the Gentiles God chose Paul. A direct implication of this teaching is that Christians should have an open, universal, ecumenical outlook. "If the Church is to be in a position to offer all men the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, then it must implant itself among all these groups [people who do not know the Gospel message] in the same way as Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the men among whom he lived."¹¹

Towards the end of his second apostolic journey (in the year 52) St Paul stayed for a while in Ephesus (Acts 18:19ff), one of the great cities of Asia Minor, where he preached and founded the church to which this letter is addressed. Shortly after this, a distinguished personality, Apollos, appeared in Ephesus; he received instruction from Aquila and his wife Priscilla, two disciples of Paul (cf. Acts 18:24-26) and he, in his turn, prepared the ground for Paul's preaching (54-56). Paul's visit was not without incident (cf. Acts 19:20); he was forced to leave the city because of an uproar caused by Demetrius the silversmith.

Paul did not forget the Ephesians, however, and, from Rome, he wrote them this letter. Some scholars think that this was really a circular letter, addressed to all the churches — on the grounds that

b) *Ethical section* (4:1-6:9): in the second part of the letter the Apostle exhorts all Christians to live one and the same faith, to be consistent with their faith; that is, he encourages them to practise solidarity, to seek always what unites and avoid anything which gets in the way of the peace and love which should flow from this solidarity, this unity, which is one of the characteristics of the true Church. He specifically reminds them of duties involved in marriage and family life — teaching which still applies today: referring to Christian married couples Vatican II says that "in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony by which they signify and share (cf. Eph 5:32) the mystery of the unity and faithful love between Christ and his Church, they help

¹¹ Vatican II, Decree *Ad gentes* 10.

one another to attain holiness in their married life and in the rearing of their children. Hence by reason of their state in life and of their position they have their own gifts in the people of God.”¹²

Philippians

In Philippi, a city north of the Aegean Sea called after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great (360 B.C.), St Paul founded the first Christian church in Europe around the year 51, during his second apostolic journey. He lived in Philippi for some years and had special affection for the Philippians, which they reciprocated. He suffered imprisonment and the lash on their account, as St Luke records in Acts 16:1-40, and the Philippians for their part sent Epaphroditus to Rome to look after Paul when he was imprisoned there for the Lord. The Apostle, typically, was very appreciative of this affection. However, Epaphroditus, who was a great help at first, soon became seriously ill, and once he was on the way to recovery St Paul decided to send him back home. When he left, Epaphroditus carried with him a letter from Paul to the Philippians, a letter written during his imprisonment in 61-63. This letter is not didactic or apologetic in purpose: Paul simply expresses his gratitude to the Father of all consolation and to the Philippians for the kindness and attention they showed him and for never being a source of worry to him but rather of consolation. The letter, which overflows with joy, is an intimate conversation of a father and his children. Full of tenderness, it encourages and exhorts the Philippians to be ever better athletes of Christ until they reach their final goal — holiness.

St Paul uses a simile taken from the games, which enjoyed great popularity during this period. He compares the virtues a Christian has to live, with athletic competitions: just as an athlete does not look behind but has his eyes always on the goal, so a Christian should forget himself, his past life, and trust in God's grace: but, like a good athlete, he should never feel satisfied until he has reached his goal. In the course of this very familiar letter, St Paul writes one of the most profound passages on Christology, when he proposes Christ as the model of humility and self-denial:

218 In the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped; but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

According to the general opinion of the Fathers, the expression “the form of God” means that Jesus is by nature divine; he is true God, the living image of the Father (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3), consubstantial and co-eternal with him. Despite this he, as it were, emptied himself and took on human nature, becoming like us in all things but sin.

Colossians

From the relative freedom he enjoyed during his Roman imprisonment, St Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians some time in 61-63. Colossae was a city in Phrygia, about 200 kilometres (125 miles) from Ephesus, very close to Laodicea. Although this church, composed of Christians mostly of Gentile background, was not founded by St Paul himself — it was founded by a disciple of his, Epaphras (1:7) — Paul was well informed about how it was faring.

In fact, a visit by Epaphras to Rome was what occasioned the letter, because he reported to the Apostle about erroneous doctrines which had recently made their way into the church at Colossae, threatening both faith and morals. False teachers were introducing a series of outdated Mosaic practices — such as observance of the law of the sabbath, identification of certain foods as unclean, and an exaggerated emphasis on the role of angels as intermediaries between God and men, which threatened to undermine the true doctrine of Christ as the only mediator. Christians hold that Christ's mediation, his redemption, is something infinite: no one's personal suffering can add anything to it. However, any Christian, since he is a member of Christ's mystical body, can unite himself to our Lord's sufferings which are ongoing in the Church: ‘you suffer as needs be to contribute through your suffering to the sufferings of Christ, who has suffered in our head and who suffers in his members, that is, in yourselves’ (St Augustine).

St Paul uses the occasion to instruct the Colossians and to restate

for them the truth about the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ, as beginning and end of all creation. He is the true creator, conserver and redeemer, for he is the Son of God. That is to say:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he ought to be pre-eminent (Col 1:15-18).

This text speaks of the activity of the Son prior to his appearance on earth. Paul particularly stresses the pre-existence of the Word, thanks to which all things were created by him; and this pre-existence is based on the fact that he is God, co-eternal with the Father. The “beloved Son” of Col 1:13 is now described as “the first-born of all creation” — an expression which, given the context, must be taken in a comparative sense: that is, he is *before* all creation or, which is the same thing, he exists from all eternity.

It is very far from Paul’s thinking, therefore, to present the Son of God as the first among creatures — an error into which Arius fell through misinterpreting this text. St Paul, on the contrary, describes Jesus Christ as the Creator in the widest and fullest sense of that word, which is proper to God alone. Thus, he calls him “the image of the invisible God”, to underline his complete identity of nature with God, concluding that “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9); divinity and humanity are united in Jesus Christ in his own person, which is divine, in the same kind of way as the soul is the form of the body and with the body constitutes one single principle of operation. Through his sacrifice on the Cross, Jesus has become the universal mediator reconciling all men to God. Thereby he becomes the supreme Head of the Church, which is rightly called the Body of Christ. From effective union with the Head the Christian receives the new life which should imbue all his actions; this requires us, since we have a share in the life of the risen Christ, to die to the old man, that is, to reject worldly living, which is something for people who do not know Christ. Therefore, the Colossians should not focus on matters of food or on things merely external to man, but on the very heart of man’s personality; thereby they will learn the way to upright living. Hence the programme which God inspires St Paul to outline:

Now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Put on, then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,

compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another [...], forgiving each other (Col 3:8-13)

The Apostle describes the way they should practise charity in their dealings with others: their conversation — the test of true fraternity — should be seasoned with salt, that is, with prudence and refinement, which will advise them what to say to each person at any particular time (cf. Col 4:6).

Philemon

Philemon was a wealthy Colossian; a personal friend of Paul, who converted him to the faith. He had a slave called Onesimus, who stole from him and then ran away to escape punishment. Later he in turn met Paul and became a Christian.

After Onesimus had been in Rome a short time, Paul asked him to go back to Colossae, to his master, bringing with him a letter from the Apostle. This short letter is a fine example of the art of letter-writing, full of sensitivity and refined charity. St Paul makes no demands in it; he simply makes a humble appeal to Philemon.

The letter, which has been described as the *magna carta* of Christian freedom, touches on a subject of special importance in ancient times — that of slavery.

St Paul does not directly denounce slavery — then the basic structure of labour relations — but he does establish the groundwork for its abolition. By stressing the dignity of the human person, he shows that slaves’ real master is Christ, even if they render service to Christ through obedience to their masters: as he puts it elsewhere, they should act not as “men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart” (Eph 6:6). This is a direct consequence of the freedom which Christ won for us, which makes us his sons and therefore brothers of those who share our faith — on a level of equality with other Christians, without any distinction of race or colour or class or condition. Centuries later, when this teaching imbued the civil law, slavery would become a thing of the past.

PASTORAL LETTERS

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus

St Paul's two letters to Timothy and his letter to Titus have been described from earliest times as "pastoral letters" because they are written to pastors of the churches of Ephesus and Crete respectively. They contain a series of rules and recommendations for the good government of those young communities, whose members mostly were of Gentile background.

Around the year 66, St Paul wrote from Macedonia his first letter to Timothy and the letter to Titus. Worried about the damage being done by false teachers, he wanted to do what he could to help these two pastors carry out their serious responsibility.

Sometime later, during his imprisonment in Rome, he wrote the second letter to Timothy. He senses that his end is approaching and feels the need for Timothy's help. It is not, therefore, his first imprisonment (61-63), from which he obtained release and probably was able to make his planned journey to Spain (cf. Rom 15:24-28), going on later to the East — which would have been in 65. His second captivity would have been shortly before his martyrdom in the year 67. This letter, therefore, is his last and can be regarded as his spiritual testament.

Some critics have questioned the Pauline authorship of these pastoral letters (an attribution confirmed by tradition and by the Magisterium of the Church) on the grounds of their literary style and doctrinal content, arguing also that the Church's organization evidenced in the letters is much more advanced than that to be seen in other letters of the Apostle. They also point out that the frequent references to "sound doctrine" (1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 1:13) or the advice he gives about guarding "the truth that has been entrusted to you" (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14) do not seem to fit in with Paul's style. These objections disappear if one bears in mind that the differences of style — the style is simpler and less rich than that of other letters — fit in with St Paul's being already an old man, as can be deduced from internal textual evidence. The new teaching which these critics see in the letters — the Apostle puts special emphasis on good works — can also be explained by the practical or pastoral character these letters have. If he makes much of the need for "sound doctrine" and for guarding the deposit of faith, it is because he realizes that his end is near and he wants to put Timothy and Titus on their guard

against erroneous and very dangerous new doctrines which threaten to make "shipwreck of their faith" (1 Tim 1:19). There is no sign here of Gnostic teachings which would appear much later on, in the second century. It is, rather, a matter of "a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words" (1 Tim 6:4), favoured by certain Judaizing Christians, the result of influences emanating from hellenized Judaism and syncretism, which Paul had to deal with years before, as he says himself in his letter to the Colossians.

The teaching he gives in these letters is rich and abundant, though he does focus particularly on practical or pastoral aspects. He was evidently very concerned about matters internal to those young communities. One of the basic points that needs attention is precisely the way the hierarchy should be organized. Far from implying — as some suggest — that church structures have reached an advanced stage (which would be the case in a later period) these letters reflect an organization-structure which is only incipient, in which, for example, the designation "bishops" and "elder" are not yet defined and even sometimes seem to mean the same thing (Tit 1:5-7) — as was the case years earlier (cf. Acts 20:17-18). But the fact that the descriptions are not distinguished does not imply that there was confusion about the role of or about the levels in the hierarchy, for both Timothy and Titus were in fact bishops and acted as bishops: it is they who ordain the elders or presbyters (1 Tim 5:19-22; Tit 1:5-7).

What initially had to do with the specific mission of the Apostles was little by little being passed over to those they chose to be their successors. This was done by means of episcopal ordination and consecration. For example, St Paul will say to Timothy: "what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men" (2 Tim 2:2). The mission which Timothy received — on the day of his episcopal ordination — was one of passing on everything to do with the deposit of faith, which was the charge St Paul himself received from the Lord. This passage indicates the critical importance of the role oral tradition played in the instruction of the faithful.

The letters to Timothy and Titus reflect precisely the period of transition when the Apostles' authority — the episcopacy established by our Lord — was being passed on to immediate successors of the Apostles. Very soon after this — in the second century — the term "bishop" would become the established way to describe one who held the fulness of the priesthood — governing the college of presbyters and the other members of the faithful in a particular community, thus clearly differentiating the three levels in the hierarchy, bishops, priests and deacons.

These three letters also bring out the central points of Christian dogma — faith and hope in Christ, the mediator between God and man; the redemption and God's desire that all men be saved; the Church as God's household and the pillar and ground of truth: one, holy, universal, that is to say, catholic in the sense that everyone is called to belong to it, irrespective of race, language or nation. The consequence of this is that while it is on earth the Church is composed of all kinds of people — unfaithful as well as faithful. In this one piece of material (Rom 9:21), some are saints or at least on the way to becoming saints, and others are not, because their infidelity prevents grace from acting in their souls: St Paul in this way says it is wrong to think that the Church has room only for saints and sinless people; no one should be scandalized when he sees evidence of Christians' human shortcomings.

Hence the need to pray for everyone, living and dead; hence, also, the necessary part played by good example if any effective apostolate is to be done, and the dangers inherent in the active life if interior life and the pursuit of virtue are neglected. Everything St Paul recommends echoes what our Lord taught his disciples and what the Magisterium of the Church also teaches today.

HEBREWS

The *Letter to the Hebrews* appears in the New Testament after the thirteen Pauline letters and before the seven catholic letters. Early tradition, in the main, attributed this text to St Paul, but the western Church did not accept its Pauline authorship until the fourth century; and even in the east some (including Clement of Alexandria and Origen) had reservations about whether its literary style coincided with Paul's. Internal examination of the text does show that it is in many ways different from the rest of St Paul's writings. For example, it is more elegant, more eloquent, it does not carry the usual greeting and introduction, and it does not quote Scripture in the way Paul does. Its doctrine is Pauline but the way it is expounded makes it difficult to attribute its direct authorship to Paul.

The letter's canonicity is not in doubt; it was included in the canon by the Council of Trent (8 April 1546) among the other writings of St Paul, although the Council chose not to state categorically that it was written by Paul. The Pontifical Biblical Communion in a decree

issued on 24 April 1914, reaffirmed its canonicity. It answered the question: "Has the Apostle Paul to be regarded as the author of this letter in the sense that not only must one hold that he conceived it and expressed it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but that he gave it the form in which it has come down to us?" Its reply was: "No, not unless the Church decides so in the future".¹³ This is probably why there is no direct reference to St Paul as author of this letter in recent liturgical books. However, St Paul can be regarded as the indirect author of *Hebrews*. Researchers are free to explore this matter. Some scholars think it may have been written by Barnabas or Silas, disciples of St Paul; others suggest Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew noted for his eloquence (cf. Acts 18:24-28), in view of the way it quotes the Old Testament and its beautiful style and language. In any event, this is a secondary question which has nothing to do with matters of faith.

Date and purpose We have no definite information about where and when *Hebrews* was written, or to whom it was addressed. Probably the author wrote it in Italy (cf. "Those who come from Italy send you greetings" — 13:24), although this could mean it was written in a place where Christians from Italy were living.

The date of composition can be deduced with a certain degree of probability from the reference it contains to the temple of Jerusalem and the worship offered there — implying that the temple is operational. Since it warns Christians against the temptation of returning to the ancient Levitical form of worship, it would seem to have been written before 70, the year the Temple was razed. On the other hand, the letter is aware of Paul's captivity letters, which it uses. Therefore, *Hebrews* must be later than the year 63, and very probably was written towards 67 in view of its urgent call for perfect faith, "all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (10:25).

It was obviously written to people whom the author knew to be steeped in the Old Testament, people who were in all probability converts from Judaism, and who may previously have even been priests or Levites. After becoming Christians, because of the difficult circumstances of the time, they had to abandon Jerusalem, the holy city, to seek refuge in some coastal city, possibly Caesarea or Antioch. In their exile they look back with nostalgia on the splendour of the cult they played a part in prior to their conversion. They feel deceived and are tempted to give up their new faith, in which they are not

yet well grounded. In addition to this they are discontented by the persecution they suffer because of their faith. Obviously, they are in need of help and in particular of clear doctrine to bolster their faith and enable them to cope with temptation to infidelity.

Content The basic teaching of *Hebrews* centres on showing the superiority of the Christian religion over Judaism. The argument develops in three stages:

1. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, the King of the universe, "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (1:3) and is superior to the angels (1:4-2).
2. Christ is also superior to Moses, "as the builder of a house has more honour than the house" (3:3).

3. Moreover, Jesus, the Son of God, is the great high priest who has passed through the heavens (4:14); his priesthood is of the order of Melchizedek, superior to the priesthood of Aaron, from which the Levitical priesthood derived.

These Christological principles lead on to conclusions to do with the redemption, which stem from the Word's taking on our human nature in order to save it.¹⁴ These conclusions are, in summary:

1. With Christ, and through the redemption he has brought, we are released from the slavery to the devil which sin and death imply.
2. What makes Christ's death meritorious is his obedience (5:8; 10:9); through it those who were under the yoke of sin are redeemed (9:12 and 15).

3. In other letters the emphasis was laid mainly on the power of Christ's resurrection as the source of his glorification; here the stress is put on his entry into the heavenly sanctuary (9:11-12), where he is seated at the right hand of God the Father. Christ's sacrifice — which is a once-for-all sacrifice — is distinguished from the sacrifices offered by the priests of the Old Law, for which they entered the earthly sanctuary once every year.

4. Hence, when man approaches Christ in a spirit of faith, he is in fact approaching the mediator of the new Covenant. Through union with Christ the individual attains salvation or sanctification: he acquires grace which he should preserve, for it is the principle of

¹⁴ "The Fathers of the Church constantly proclaim that what was not assumed by Christ was not healed. Now Christ took a complete human nature just as it is found in us poor unfortunates, but one that was without sin" (*Vatican II, Decree Ad gentes* 3).

life, the cause of the soul's salvation and the ultimate goal of human existence.

Towards the end of the letter, the sacred author asks: How does man attain this principle of life? A person can become a friend of God, with the help of grace, only by the act of faith, for "without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (11:6). The Council of Trent in fact quotes this verse when it defines that 'faith is the beginning of man's salvation, it is the foundation and the root of all justification'.

But theological faith is closely linked to hope. The letter says that 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (11:1).

This text does not so much give a theological or essential definition of faith as a descriptive definition, which stresses one of the main effects of faith in the soul of the believer — the assurance, the guarantee, that one will attain what one hopes for. It does not explicitly say what the material object of faith is (the truths revealed by God) or the formal motive of the act of faith (the authority of God revealing). The First Vatican Council defined the act of faith as "a supernatural virtue by which, with the inspiration and help of God's grace, we believe that what he has revealed is true — not because its intrinsic truth is seen by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God who reveals it, of God who can neither deceive nor be deceived."¹⁵

Final salvation, to which faith leads us, can only happen after death, when man sees God face to face, to the degree his charity allows — in other words, to the extent that he has put his faith into practice. This is indicated in chapter 11, which gives an impressive account of the saints of the Old Testament, who were men of heroic faith, confident of the day when the divine promises would be fulfilled. Through the suffering, difficulties and obstacles they experienced in this life — and which they accepted with unshakeable faith — they eventually attained the reward which God had promised them.

¹⁵ *Vatican I, Dogm. Const. De fide catholica* (Dz 1789).