



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 31 January 2007

Barnabas, Silas (also called Silvanus), and Apollos

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Continuing our journey among the protagonists who were the first to spread Christianity, today let us turn our attention to some of St Paul's other collaborators. We must recognize that the Apostle is an eloquent example of a man open to collaboration: he did not want to do everything in the Church on his own but availed himself of many and very different colleagues.

We cannot reflect on all these precious assistants because they were numerous. It suffices to recall among the others, Epaphras (cf. Col 1: 7; 4: 12; Phlm 23); Epaphroditus (cf. Phil 2: 25; 4: 18), Tychicus (cf. Acts 20: 4; Eph 6: 21; Col 4: 7; II Tm 4: 12; Ti 3: 12), Urbanus (cf. Rm 16: 9), Gaius and Aristarchus (cf. Acts 19: 29; 20: 4; 27: 2; Col 4: 10). And women such as Phoebe, (Rom 16: 1), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (cf. Rom 16: 12), Persis, the mother of Rufus, whom Paul called "his mother and mine" (cf. Rom 16: 12-13), not to mention married couples such as Prisca and Aquila (cf. Rom 16: 3; I Cor 16: 19; II Tm 4: 19).

Among this great array of St Paul's male and female collaborators, let us focus today on three of these people who played a particularly significant role in the initial evangelization: Barnabas, Silas, and Apollos.

Barnabas means "son of encouragement" (Acts 4: 36) or "son of consolation". He was a Levite Jew, a native of Cyprus, and this was his nickname. Having settled in Jerusalem, he was one of the first to embrace Christianity after the Lord's Resurrection. With immense generosity, he sold a

field which belonged to him, and gave the money to the Apostles for the Church's needs (Acts 4: 37).

It was he who vouched for the sincerity of Saul's conversion before the Jerusalem community that still feared its former persecutor (cf. Acts 9: 27).

Sent to Antioch in Syria, he went to meet Paul in Tarsus, where he had withdrawn, and spent a whole year with him there, dedicated to the evangelization of that important city in whose Church Barnabas was known as a prophet and teacher (cf. Acts 13: 1).

At the time of the first conversions of the Gentiles, therefore, Barnabas realized that Saul's hour had come. As Paul had retired to his native town of Tarsus, he went there to look for him. Thus, at that important moment, Barnabas, as it were, restored Paul to the Church; in this sense he gave back to her the Apostle to the Gentiles.

The Church of Antioch sent Barnabas on a mission with Paul, which became known as the Apostle's first missionary journey. In fact, it was Barnabas' missionary voyage since it was he who was really in charge of it and Paul had joined him as a collaborator, visiting the regions of Cyprus and Central and Southern Anatolia in present-day Turkey, with the cities of Attalia, Perga, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (cf. Acts 13-14).

Together with Paul, he then went to the so-called Council of Jerusalem where after a profound examination of the question, the Apostles with the Elders decided to discontinue the practice of circumcision so that it was no longer a feature of the Christian identity (cf. Acts 15: 1-35). It was only in this way that, in the end, they officially made possible the Church of the Gentiles, a Church without circumcision; we are children of Abraham simply through faith in Christ.

The two, Paul and Barnabas, disagreed at the beginning of the second missionary journey because Barnabas was determined to take with them as a companion John called Mark, whereas Paul was against it, since the young man had deserted them during their previous journey (cf. Acts 13: 13; 15: 36-40).

Hence there are also disputes, disagreements and controversies among saints. And I find this very comforting, because we see that the saints have not "fallen from Heaven". They are people like us, who also have complicated problems.

Holiness does not consist in never having erred or sinned. Holiness increases the capacity for conversion, for repentance, for willingness to start again and, especially, for reconciliation and forgiveness.

So it was that Paul, who had been somewhat harsh and bitter with regard to Mark, in the end

found himself with him once again. In St Paul's last Letters, to Philemon and in his Second Letter to Timothy, Mark actually appears as one of his "fellow workers".

Consequently, it is not the fact that we have never erred but our capacity for reconciliation and forgiveness which makes us saints. And we can all learn this way of holiness. In any case, Barnabas, together with John Mark, returned to Cyprus (Acts 15: 39) in about the year 49. From that moment we lose track of him. Tertullian attributes to him the Letter to the Hebrews. This is not improbable. Since he belonged to the tribe of Levi, Barnabas may have been interested in the topic of the priesthood; and the Letter to the Hebrews interprets Jesus' priesthood for us in an extraordinary way.

Silas was another of Paul's companions. "Silas" is a Greek form of a Jewish name (perhaps *sheal*, "to ask, to invoke", which has the same root as the name "Saul"); from which the Latin form *Sylvanus* also derives. The name Silas is attested to only in the Book of Acts, while the name "Silvanus" appears only in the Pauline Letters. He was a Jew from Jerusalem, one of the first to become a Christian, and he enjoyed high esteem in that Church (cf. Acts 15: 22), since he was considered a prophet (cf. Acts 15: 32).

He was charged to inform "the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia" (Acts 15: 23) of the decisions taken at the Council of Jerusalem and to explain them. Evidently he was considered capable of bringing about a sort of mediation between Jerusalem and Antioch, between Jewish-Christians and Christians of pagan origin and thereby of serving the unity of the Church in the diversity of rites and origins.

When Paul separated from Barnabas he took Silas with him as his new travelling companion (Acts 15: 40). With Paul, he reached Macedonia (and the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea), where he stopped, while Paul went on to Athens and then to Corinth.

Silas joined him in Corinth, where he cooperated in preaching the Gospel; indeed, in the Second Letter that Paul addressed to that Church, he spoke of "Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I" (II Cor 1: 19). This explains how he came to be the joint author, together with Paul and Timothy, of the two Letters to the Thessalonians.

This also seems important to me. Paul does not act as a "soloist", on his own, but together with these collaborators in the "we" of the Church. This "I" of Paul is not an isolated "I" but an "I" in the "we" of the Church, in the "we" of the apostolic faith. And later, Silvanus is also mentioned in the First Letter of Peter, in which we read: "I have written [briefly] to you... by Silvanus, a faithful brother" (5: 12). Thus, we also see the communion of the Apostles. Silvanus serves Paul and he serves Peter, because the Church is one and the missionary proclamation is one.

Paul's third companion, whom we want to recall is Apollos. This name is probably an abbreviation

of Apollonius or Apollodorus. Although this is a pagan name, he was a fervent Jew from Alexandria, Egypt. Luke, in his book, the Acts of the Apostles, describes him as "an eloquent man, well versed in the Scriptures... fervent in spirit" (Acts 18: 24-25).

Apollos' entry on the scene of the first evangelization took place in the city of Ephesus. He had gone there to preach and had the good fortune to come across the Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila, who introduced him to a fuller knowledge of the "way of God" (cf. Acts 18: 26).

From Ephesus he went to Achaia and reached the city of Corinth: where he arrived with a letter of recommendation from the Christians of Ephesus, in which they charged the Corinthians to give him a good welcome (cf. Acts 18: 27). In Corinth, as Luke wrote: "he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus" (Acts 18: 27-28), the Messiah.

His success in that city, however had a problematic sequence since there were certain members of that Church who, fascinated by his way of speaking, opposed the others in his name (cf. I Cor 1: 12; 3: 4-6; 4: 6).

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul expressed his appreciation of Apollos' work, but reprimanded the Corinthians for wounding the Body of Christ by splitting it into opposing factions. From this whole affair he drew an important teaching: Be it I or Apollos, he says, we are none other than *diakonoi*, that is, simple ministers, through whom you have come to the faith (cf. I Cor 3: 5).

Everyone has a different task in the field of the Lord: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.... we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (I Cor 3: 6-9).

After returning to Ephesus, Apollos resisted Paul's invitation to return to Corinth immediately, postponing the journey to a later date of which we know nothing (cf. I Cor 16: 12). We have no further information about him, even though some scholars believe he is a possible author of the Letter to the Hebrews which Tertullian believed Barnabas had written.

These three men shine in the firmament of Gospel witnesses as they are distinguished by one common feature as well as by individual characteristics. They had in common, in addition to their Jewish origin, their dedication to Jesus Christ and the Gospel, besides the fact that all three were collaborators of the Apostle Paul.

In this original evangelizing mission they found their purpose in life and as such stand before us as shining examples of selflessness and generosity.

Moreover, let us think again of St Paul's phrase: both Apollos and I are servants of Jesus, each

one in his own way because it is God who gives the growth. These words also apply to us today, to the Pope, the Cardinals, Bishops, priests and laity. We are all humble ministers of Jesus. We serve the Gospel as best we can, in accordance with our talents, and we pray God to make his Gospel, his Church, increase in our day.

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To special groups

I welcome the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the students and Professors from the Minsk State University. May your visit to Rome strengthen your commitment to be generous witnesses to Christ's love and truth. Upon you all, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Today the liturgy commemorates St John Bosco, father and teacher of the young to whom he proclaimed the Gospel with tireless zeal. May his example encourage you, dear *young people*, to live your Christian vocation authentically; may it help you, dear *sick people*, to offer up your suffering in union with Christ's for the salvation of humanity; may it sustain you, dear *newly-weds* in your reciprocal commitment to building your family faithful to the love of God and neighbour.

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