

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of Saint Paul

Part 2: The Spirituality of St. Paul¹

Raissa Maritain, the wife of the philosopher Jacques Maritain, described beautifully the *imminence*² of God when she wrote the following words in her prayer journal on June 27, 1916:

At the first invocation, *Kyrie eleison*, obliged to absorb myself, my mind arrested on the Person of the Father. Impossible to change the object. Sweetness, attraction, *eternal youth* of the heavenly Father. Suddenly, keen sense of his nearness, of his tenderness, of his incomprehensible love which impels him to demand our love, our thought. Greatly moved, I wept very sweet tears.... Joy of being able to call him Father with a great tenderness, to feel him so kind and so close to me.³

One of the characteristics of Saint Paul's writing is that he was keenly aware of the *imminence* of Christ. The "*imminent* Christ" refers to that personal, mysterious Presence of God and intimate encounter with Christ that God allows us to experience. This experience was at the heart of Paul's spiritual life. He had a very authentic and powerful sense of his union with the unseen Christ. We read about Paul's experience of the imminent Christ in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he writes that he had "visions and revelations of the Lord," and was "caught up to the third heaven," into "Paradise," where he "heard ineffable things, which no one may utter" (2 Corinthians 12:1-4).⁴

It was most certainly Paul's frequent encounter with the imminent Christ in prayer that gave him the courage to endure the many hardships that his ministry entailed. Just before he wrote about his prayerful encounter with "Paradise," Paul wrote about what his suffering involved—

Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure. And apart from these things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.

-2 Corinthians 11:24-28

There is nothing as powerful as our personal—imminent—encounter with Christ! It is the very thing that gives us encouragement, strength, and perseverance through the hardships of life. This encounter is not something we can ever take for granted since it does not come easily. It requires our constant surrender to love through contemplative prayer and selflessness. There is no better time for us to open ourselves up to the imminent Christ than during this "Year of St. Paul," when we look to his example and ask for his intercession.

¹ In honor of the "Year of Saint Paul," this is part two of a ten part series on his life and writings.

² Theologians make the distinction between the "imminent" God and the "transcendent" God. The former is our personal experience of the God who has chosen to live within us and the latter refers to the reality that God is the One outside of us, Who will come to judge the world.

³ Jacques Maritain, ed., *Raissa's Journal*, Albany, NY. Magi, 1974, pg. 35

⁴ While the English translation of these verses makes it sound as though Paul is describing someone else as having these experiences, the Greek and the context allows us to know that Paul is referring to himself.