

At end of jubilee year, figure of St. Paul stands in clearer focus

VATICAN CITY - After 12 months of special liturgies, conferences, Bible reflections, indulgences, concerts and pilgrimages, the Year of St. Paul has left the Apostle a more clearly defined figure on the Catholic landscape.

Even before Pope Benedict XVI led final closing ceremonies in Rome June 29, Vatican officials declared the jubilee year a success.

"The result has been positive, even beyond the most optimistic predictions," Cardinal Andrea Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo, archpriest of the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls, said at a Vatican press conference June 26.

At the Pauline basilica, which had often been overlooked by pilgrims to Rome, overflow crowds came to visit and pray at the tomb of the Apostle, the cardinal said. Thanks to some architectural finessing, a portion of the tomb, a rough-hewn marble sarcophagus buried beneath the main altar, was for the first time made visible to visitors.

It was Pope Benedict who almost single-handedly gave the jubilee its content. In weekly talks, homilies and liturgical celebrations, he sketched a detailed portrait of the man considered the model of Christian conversion and the archetypal missionary.

St. Paul was the most prolific of the early Apostles, the man who took the Gospel of Christ into the world of non-Jews and helped set the church on a more universal path. The pope's main point was that this evangelizing spirit based on personal conversion needs to be rekindled among today's 1.1 billion Catholics.

"Dear brothers and sisters, as in early times, today too Christ needs apostles ready to sacrifice themselves. He needs witnesses and martyrs like St. Paul," the pope said when he proclaimed the jubilee.

As the year progressed, the pope found a "St. Paul angle" for his talks to bishops,

religious orders, university students and his own Roman Curia. He had plenty of material to draw upon: St. Paul's 14 letters represent nearly half of the New Testament.

On Pope Benedict's foreign trips, St. Paul came along. In Paris last year, as the global financial crisis worsened, the pope recalled St. Paul's preaching against idolatry and greed, and asked whether it wasn't relevant today: "Have not money, the thirst for possessions, for power and even knowledge, diverted man from his true identity?"

The pope's annual message for the World Day for Migrants and Refugees featured St. Paul as a "migrant by vocation" and an ambassador-at-large for Christ.

In talks to bishops from Asia, the pope suggested they try to learn from St. Paul's ability to evangelize in cultures that are new to Christianity, presenting the Gospel in ways that resonate with the traditional spiritual wisdom of their continent.

Citing the Apostle's missionary courage, he told a group of newly appointed bishops to imitate St. Paul's persistence in the face of personal mistreatment and dangers.

Pope Benedict also applied the saint's lessons to contemporary rivalries and controversies within the church community. In early 2009, during debate over several of his own decisions in the church, the pope quoted St. Paul's admonition to Galatian Christians not to "go on biting and devouring one another." St. Paul understood that church unity was the primary requisite for a credible witness of the Gospel in the world, he said.

He struck a similar theme at the ecumenical vespers service Jan. 25, the feast of the conversion of St. Paul. That liturgy marked the close of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and the pope was joined by Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican representatives in the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls.

In his homily, the pope emphasized St. Paul's message that without internal unity, Christians cannot bring peace and reconciliation to the ruptured societies across the globe.

Pilgrims who came to Rome enjoyed a special itinerary of nine sites linked to the life

of St. Paul, including ancient churches built on sites where the Apostle resided, the Mamertine Prison where he was incarcerated by Roman authorities, and the Abbey of the Three Fountains where he was beheaded on the order of the Emperor Nero.

A plenary indulgence, the remission of temporal punishment due to sin, was offered for pilgrims who crossed the threshold of the “Pauline Doors,” prayed at the tomb of St. Paul, confessed their sins, received the Eucharist and prayed for the pope’s intentions. It was also offered to Catholics participating in local events marking the jubilee year.

A series of concerts was offered in the Basilica of St. Paul throughout the year. Cardinal Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo said that when he broached the idea to Pope Benedict, to make sure there was no objection, the music-loving pope simply replied: “Are you inviting me?”

The cardinal said it was decided that at the ceremonial closing of the Pauline year, the “Pauline flame” that has burned in the basilica during the past 12 months would be kept lit, to symbolically keep alive “all that’s been positive during this year.”