

Bishop urges Catholics to study about St. Paul

WILMINGTON, Del. – In a pastoral letter on “Celebrating the Year of St. Paul,” Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli of Wilmington has called on the faithful in his diocese to discern “how best to study, pray and celebrate the life, inspired writing, spirituality and missionary spirit of St. Paul.”

He issued the pastoral in anticipation of the worldwide observance proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI. It will run from June 28 of this year to June 29, 2009.

In a 5,000-word letter to the people of the Diocese of Wilmington released on the eve of the Jan. 25 feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, the bishop offered six themes to consider for the Pauline year’s observance:

- Paul’s conversion experience and our personal conversion.
- Living and praying Christ.
- Praying, studying and living the inspired word of God.
- Lifting high the cross of Christ.
- Rekindling a love for the Eucharist and the church.
- The universal call to holiness and mission.

He also suggested 10 ways to observe the coming Pauline year – from studying church teachings to participating in parish devotions, discussions and pilgrimages to exploring Pauline themes in film and art.

“My hope is that St. Paul can be for us what he was for the early church – a model of evangelization which our recent Holy Fathers have called for,” Bishop Saltarelli said about the pastoral letter.

“I hope all Catholics will see themselves as missionaries proclaiming to our world

and our society the good news of Jesus Christ,” he said.

Church historians believe Paul was born 2,000 years ago in Tarsus, in what is now Turkey, between the years A.D. 7 and 10. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, he turned from persecuting Christians and became one of the early church’s leading evangelizers before his martyrdom in Rome.

Pope Benedict announced the church’s Pauline year marking the 2,000th anniversary of the saint’s birth last June 28, the eve of the feast of SS. Peter and Paul. The pontiff said the year, marked by liturgies and events in Rome, should also be celebrated in dioceses around the world.

In his pastoral letter, Bishop Saltarelli noted St. Paul’s role as an accomplice in the martyrdom of St. Stephen and Paul’s subsequent conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

“St. Paul understood how sin works in human nature and how the Holy Spirit can completely transform habits of corruption,” the bishop wrote. “St. Paul also understood how to influence non-Christian and anti-Christian mind-sets with charity so as to be able to be an instrument of another mind’s enlightenment.

“The best way that we can celebrate the Year of St. Paul is to go to the risen Lord and ask him about what deep and intimate conversion of life he is calling us to,” he said.

The Year of St. Paul offers a chance for Catholics to focus more attention on the Bible, the bishop said.

“Any investment in understanding and praying the Scriptures more deeply is at the same time an investment in a fuller, more active and conscious participation in our Catholic Mass and sacramental liturgies,” he said.

Quoting St. Jerome, Bishop Saltarelli noted, “The Word of God, drawn from the knowledge of the Scriptures, is real food and real drink” and suggested the Year of St. Paul is a good time “to rediscover the Roman Catholic Church’s contemporary biblical scholarship.”

Recent novels and films, the bishop wrote, are a wake-up call to the church to promote “biblical literacy” and daily Bible reading.

“The cross of Jesus Christ is at the center of all that Paul does,” Bishop Saltarelli writes. “He teaches us how to deal with the hardships and grief of life. Paul experienced it all: rejection, calumny, indifference, shipwrecks, imprisonment and ultimately martyrdom, symbolized in art by Paul holding a sword.”

Paul’s ability to put the cross of Christ above temptations to egoism and pride is the “true source of his effectiveness,” the bishop wrote.

Paradoxically, Paul’s “interior struggles offer us encouragement and strength to continue fighting in regard to our own character and temperament struggles,” he added.

Love of the Eucharist and the church are key elements in celebrating St. Paul, who often used the image of the body of Christ to show “how the church is a communion of individuals with specific charisms and talents which build up of the body,” the bishop said in his pastoral.

“Our reverent reception of the Eucharist is the great spark of missionary activity that leads us like St. Paul to the ends of the earth,” he said.

St. Paul’s proclamation in his First Letter to the Corinthians, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel,” reflects what Bishop Saltarelli said he believes is one of Pope Benedict’s goals for the Year of St. Paul: “to have every Roman Catholic hold up a mirror to their life and to ask: Am I as determined and as energetic about spreading the Catholic faith as St. Paul was?”