

Pope announces special year dedicated to St. Paul

ROME - Pope Benedict XVI announced a special jubilee year dedicated to St. Paul, saying the church needs modern Christians who will imitate the apostle's missionary energy and spirit of sacrifice.

The pope said the Pauline year will run from June 28, 2008, to June 29, 2009, to mark the approximately 2,000th anniversary of the saint's birth.

He made the announcement while presiding over a vespers service at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome June 28, the eve of the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, patron saints of Rome.

"Dear brothers and sisters, as in the (church's) beginning, today, too, Christ needs apostles ready to sacrifice themselves. He needs witnesses and martyrs like St. Paul," the pope said.

The Pauline year will feature numerous special liturgies and events in Rome, the pope said, but should also be celebrated in local churches and in the sanctuaries, religious orders and other institutions that have a special link to St. Paul.

In a special way, the Pauline year will be ecumenical, reflecting the saint's commitment to the unity and harmony among all Christians, he said. The pope's announcement was met with applause in the crowded basilica.

Seated near the altar were representatives of other Christian churches, in particular a delegation from the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The pope made a point of greeting them warmly and reiterating their "common commitment to do everything possible to hasten the time of full communion between the Christian East and West."

Beneath the basilica's main altar, Vatican experts in recent years have unearthed what they say is evidence that a roughly cut marble sarcophagus was indeed the tomb of St. Paul, who was believed martyred nearby.

Pope Benedict went even further, saying in his sermon that the sarcophagus “according to the common opinion of the experts and unopposed tradition holds the remains of the apostle Paul.”

He said that during the Pauline year particular care should be taken to welcome Catholics from various countries who may want to make penitential pilgrimages to the saint’s tomb.

St. Paul was born in Tarsus, in what is now Turkey, at the start of the Christian era, sometime between A.D. 7 and 10, according to church historians. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, he became one of the church’s foremost evangelizers, first among Jews, then among Gentiles.

The pope said the commemorative year would include symposiums and special publications devoted to the writings of St. Paul. The saint’s letters are a primary source of information about the life of the early church and have strongly influenced church thinking through the centuries.

In his sermon, the pope said St. Paul’s success as an evangelizer was not credited to skills as a speaker or to a “refined strategy” of missionary argumentation.

His achievements had more to do with his extraordinary personal involvement in announcing the Gospel and his total dedication to Christ, despite problems and persecutions, he said.

St. Paul’s life holds a lesson for modern Christians, the pope said.

The action of the church is credible and effective only to the extent that Christians are willing to “pay personally for their faith in Christ, in every situation,” he said. Where this commitment is lacking, the appeal of the Gospel will be weaker, he said.

The pope recalled that St. Paul was once a violent persecutor of Christians who experienced a lasting personal conversion.

“He lived and worked for Christ; he suffered and died for him. How current is his example today,” he said.

The pope also noted that, according to a long-standing tradition, Sts. Peter and Paul

met near the basilica before they were martyred, and they hugged and blessed each other.

They were very different figures, with different roles in the church, and there were sometimes tensions between them, the pope said, but together they helped build the church and showed the world a new way of being brothers.