

St. Paul the Apostle

FIRST CENTURY; DIED MOST LIKELY 67
APOSTLE AND MARTYR
FEAST DAYS: JUNE 29 (WITH ST. PETER)
AND JANUARY 25 (CONVERSION)

AS THE APOSTLES began spreading the Good News to the known world, Jesus added one more to their number, St. Paul, the last apostle to whom the Risen Christ appeared: *“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me”* (1 Cor 15:8). This apparition, the thunderclap event on the road to Damascus, brought to Christianity one of the most zealous, fervent, brilliant, and holy of its saints.

Saul, a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, was born in Tarsus, the wealthy capital of Cilicia (now modern south-central Turkey), which was a province of the Roman Empire. Saul thus was also born a Roman citizen and given the Latin name Paul, which he began to use after his ordination as a priest. He had at least one sister. His parents sent him at a young age to Jerusalem to study under the great Rabbi Gamaliel the elder; later writing: *“I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers”* (Gal 1:14). He returned to Tarsus, probably before Jesus began his public life, but again went to Jerusa-

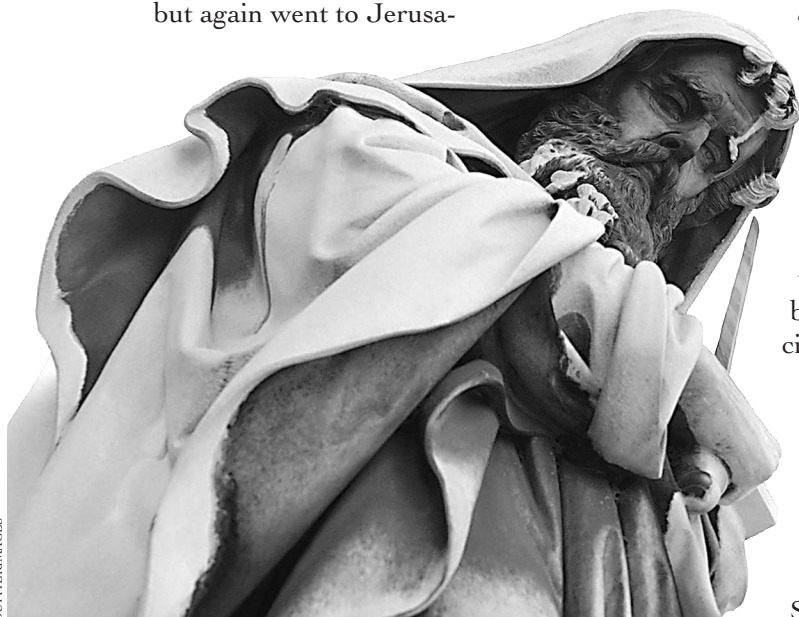
lem and became a leading persecutor of the new Christian sect. He held the garments of those who martyred St. Stephen by stoning, the event that sparked the first great persecution against the Church, and rounded up and arrested Christians in Jerusalem, causing many of them to flee the city. Saul, *“breathing threats and murder”* (Acts 9:1), obtained authority to carry the persecution to Damascus, Syria.

On this journey, Saul had one of the most momentous conversion experiences in Christianity. A brilliant light from Heaven shone

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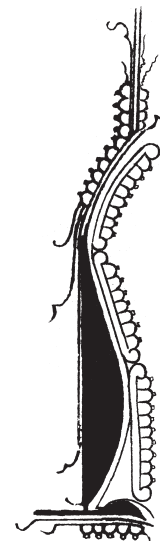
about him and he heard a voice saying, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”* (Acts 9:4). Saul asked who was speaking, and Jesus replied, *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”* (Acts 9:5). Saul then asked, *“What shall I do, Lord?”* (Acts 22:10). Blinded, he was led to Damascus, and for three days neither ate nor drank. A Christian named Ananias was sent to him by Jesus in a vision, *“for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel”* (Acts 9:15). Ananias laid hands on Saul, who regained his sight, and baptized him. Saul began to preach the Gospel, to the shock and astonishment of his fellow Jews, who were filled with such anger toward the turncoat Pharisee that they tried to kill him. He had to flee Damascus, gotten out of the city by being lowered at night in a basket from the city wall.

Saul spent the next three years in the Arabian Desert, and then went to Jerusalem to make himself known to the apostles, who feared him. This lasted until Barnabas, a Jewish Christian who by then was accounted an apostle, vouched for him. Death threats forced the apostles to send Saul to Tarsus. Nothing is known of him for



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Statue of St. Paul at the entrance to the basilica that bears his name in Rome





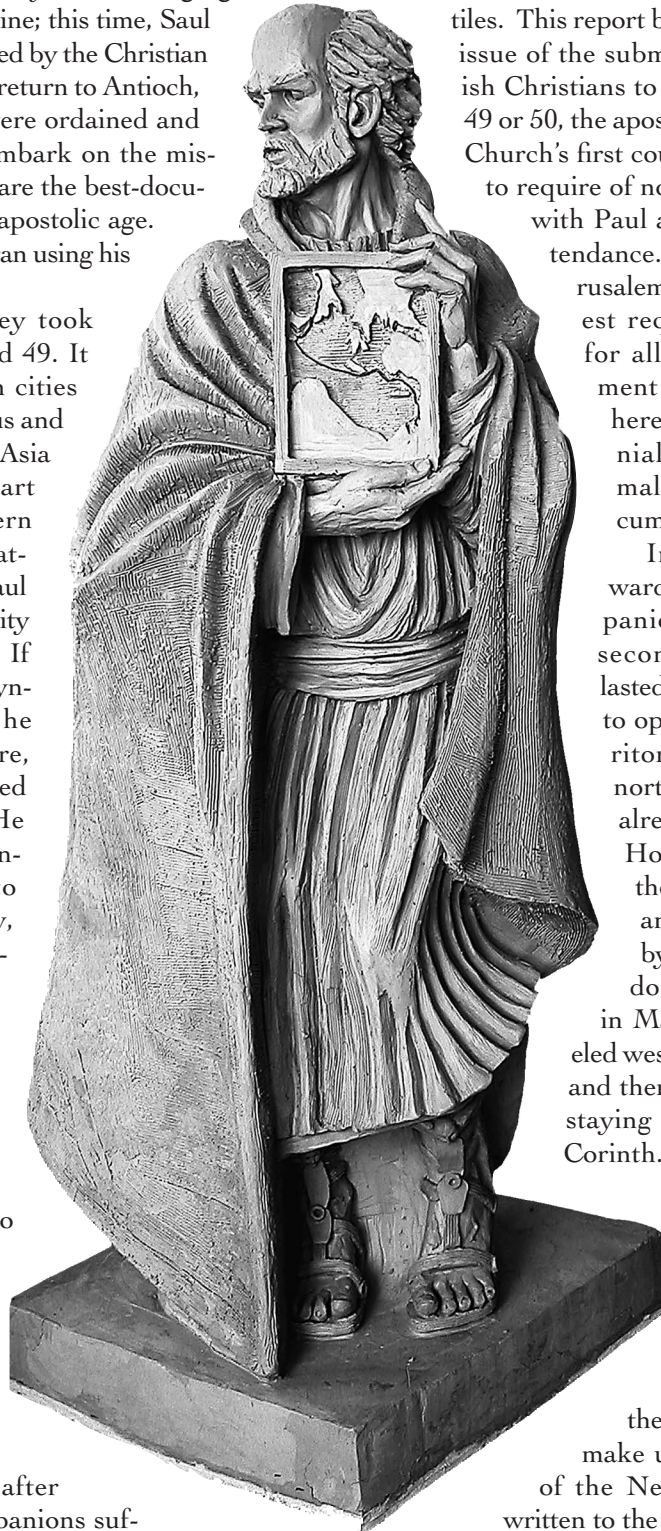
some years until Barnabas was sent to investigate the evangelization of non-Jews in Antioch, Syria. Barnabas strongly approved, sought out Saul, and together they strengthened the community that was the first to be called "Christian." They visited Jerusalem briefly in 44, bringing alms to alleviate a famine; this time, Saul was completely accepted by the Christian community. On their return to Antioch, Saul and Barnabas were ordained and thus were ready to embark on the missionary journeys that are the best-documented of any in the apostolic age. Symbolically, Saul began using his Latin name, Paul.

Paul's first journey took place between 45 and 49. It covered a half-dozen cities on the island of Cyprus and throughout a part of Asia Minor that is now part of modern midwestern Turkey. A general pattern soon emerged. Paul went to the principal city or cities of a province. If a city had a Jewish synagogue (most did), he began preaching there, and from there reached out to non-Jews. He continued making converts until forced to move on. Usually, but not always, disturbances were instigated by Jews who saw Christianity in a hostile light. Sometimes non-Jews saw the missionaries as a threat; once, silversmiths whose trade to pilgrims to the shrine of a pagan goddess was threatened by conversions were behind the agitation. City authorities most often sided against Paul. Time after time, he and his companions suffered stonings, beatings, scourg-

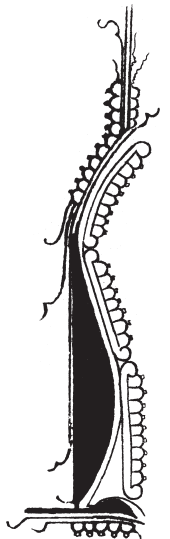
ings, and imprisonment, but by the time of their departure they left behind a local church that continued to grow.

Following the conclusion of the first journey, Paul and his companions returned and reported their remarkable success among the Gentiles. This report brought to a head the issue of the submission of non-Jewish Christians to the Jewish law. In 49 or 50, the apostles convened as the Church's first council to decide what to require of non-Jewish converts, with Paul and Barnabas in attendance. The Council of Jerusalem made only the barest requirements, ending for all time any requirement that Christians adhere to Jewish ceremonial law or Christian males to undergo circumcision.

Immediately afterward, Paul and his companions set out on his second journey, which lasted to 52. They sought to open new mission territories in Asia Minor north of those they had already visited, but the Holy Spirit prevented their move northward and Paul was called, by a vision of a Macedonian, to evangelize in Macedonia. He traveled westward to Macedonia and then south into Greece, staying eighteen months in Corinth. There Paul began the practice of writing letters to Christian communities he had previously established. The first and second of the thirteen letters that make up a significant part of the New Testament were written to the community in Thessalonika.



St. Paul, by Timothy Schmalz





Paul's third journey took place between 52 and 56. He and his companions revisited areas he had already evangelized in Asia Minor. He stayed two-plus years in Ephesus, during which the silversmiths' riot occurred. From there he traveled to Macedonia, south to Greece, and then back through Macedonia. During this time he wrote his First and Second Letters to the Corinthians from Ephesus and Macedonia respectively, his Letter to the Romans (a community he had not founded or visited) from Corinth, and his Letter to the Galatians, also probably from Corinth.

Against advice, he went to Jerusalem in 57, where he reported the successes of this journey. A week later, Paul was nearly killed in a riot over his teaching and rescued from death by the Roman garrison. To avoid trial by the Sanhedrin, the governing religious body of the Jews, he claimed the rights of Roman citizenship. An assassination plot against him was discovered by his nephew, and he was therefore sent under heavy guard to the Palestinian port of Caesarea Maritima for trial. The Roman governor avoided rendering a verdict for two years because Paul would not bribe him and he did not want to deal with the consequences of acquitting Paul. Paul eventually appealed to Rome for judgment and was sent under guard to Rome by ship. Delayed by storms and a shipwreck, he arrived in 60 or 61 and lived under house arrest for another two years awaiting trial. It was during this time that he wrote his Letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians, and to Philemon, all sent by the same messenger, and to the Philippians.

Evidently acquitted of the charges against him, Paul made a less well-documented fourth journey. He seems to have visited Crete, Macedonia, Asia Minor, and possibly Spain. During this journey, he wrote his first Letter to Timothy and his Letter to Titus, bishops he had left in charge in Ephesus and Crete respectively, both of them probably written after having left Ephesus (the same community to which St. John the Apostle came in his old age). Paul was again arrested, brought to Rome, and imprisoned. During this last captivity, he wrote his second Letter to Timothy, stating that he expected to be executed. His martyrdom most likely occurred during Nero's persecution, in about 67. He was beheaded outside the city walls of Rome (it was

illegal to crucify Roman citizens). Peter's crucifixion about the same time, Peter's position as the bishop of Rome, and Paul's martyrdom established Rome as the seat of the Church.

Paul's letters reveal the initial unfolding of Christian doctrine, the first growth from the apostolic seed to the mature tree of Catholicism. Paul's acceptance of Jesus as the promised Messiah led to his theology of Jesus as the new Adam and the Church as the fulfillment of the law and the new Israel. His comprehensive understanding of the Jewish Scriptures in light of the message of Christ led him to spell out doctrines on original sin, free will, and humanity's need for redemption and inability to redeem itself; on the unmerited grace of God's merciful love for fallen humanity; on Jesus, truly both God and man, as the savior of humanity through his suffering and death; and how by cooperating with God's unmerited gift of grace each person is justified and sanctified. From the

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depths of his sinfulness and the heights of his prayer life, he was able to call Christians to the perfection of virtue and union with God. He worked out the implications of Jesus' salvific death and laid the

foundation for the participation of every Christian in Jesus' suffering. Jesus' accusation of Paul as his persecutor led to the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ. In the letters, too, are seen the equal dignity of the baptized; the high state of marriage as a sign of Christ's relationship to his Bride, the Church; the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist; and the beginnings of the organizational hierarchy of the Church and provisions for apostolic succession.

Paul found fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures in the person of Jesus Christ. He was ever on fire and was loved or hated because, like the Jesus he preached, he cared for one thing only — the truth, the beauty, the depth, and the power of the message of salvation. He contributed immensely to the fledgling Church as one of her greatest missionaries, theologians, and mystics. His conversion on the road to Damascus was the central event in his life, and from that point everything centered on his Risen Lord. Nothing could deter him from his mission of bringing the world to Christ. During his second journey, he wrote: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

