Comment:

Paul's Wife

Paul has always been overshadowed by Peter, in the Roman Catholic Church. A joint feast for SS Peter and Paul is observed, in the East as well as in the West, on 29 June, in addition to the feast of the Conversion of St Paul on 25 January in the West. In his great struggle against Gnosticism, in the second half of the second century, St Irenaeus of Lyons appealed to the tradition of the church of Rome 'founded and constituted by the two glorious apostles Peter and Paul'. The development of the papacy owed a good deal to the custom of going on pilgrimage *ad limina Apostolorum*—'to the thresholds of the Apostles'—to venerate the tombs of the two martyr-apostles. But, as basilicas go, St Peter's outshines St Paul's without the Walls. Even visitors repelled by the stupendous architecture of the former are not likely to prefer the latter—'like a very ugly railway station', as Augustus Hare said, built after the disastrous fire of 1823. From very early days, we hear of Peter's anxiety about the writings of 'our beloved brother Paul'—'There are some things in them hard to understand, which the unlearned and wavering twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures' (2 Peter 3:15-16). It is as if Peter were issuing a little *monitum* to warn the faithful against reading Paul. And no doubt Martin Luther's adoption of, and virtual self-identification with, Paul incited Catholics to build up devotion to the figure of Peter.

Paul V, Pope from 1605 until 1621, though he did not inaugurate the project, played an important part in the pre-Bernini years of the new St Peter's. But it cannot be entirely accidental that he was the last pope to place his ministry under the patronage of St Paul until Giovanni Battista Montini did so in 1963, intending, symbolically, to retrieve the 'Pauline' side of the Roman tradition.

Since then, the 'image' of St Paul has undergone something of a revolution. For one thing, as becomes clear in the epoch-making study by E.P Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), there is no need any longer to accept the thesis that Paul opposes 'works of the law' and 'justification by faith' in a way that would support Luther's contrast between the 'works righteousness' of the Roman Church and the 'evangelical liberty' of the Reformation. There is no need, either, for

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Christians of whatever tradition to denigrate the Jewish faith as inherently 'legalistic'. Furthermore, new approaches to his letters,in terms of the rhetorical techniques and the sociology of the communities addressed, together with critical use of the Acts of the Apostles, have brought fresh understanding of the ministry and message of St Paul. No study is more interesting, and even exciting, than *Paul: A Critical Life* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, £35, pp. 416), by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP, an Irish Dominican who has taught for many years at the École Biblique in Jerusalem. Even in quite small ways, this splendid biography offers unexpected insights.

Paul—so Murphy-O'Connor argues—was probably married. Eusebius, writing his history before 325, quotes Clement of Alexandria's claim that Paul alludes to his wife in Philippians 4:3: 'true yoke-fellow (*syzyge* in the Greek)'; but Murphy-O'Connor rightly dismisses this on straight grammatical grounds ('true' is in the masculine form). Ingeniously, he claims that Paul is really asking a man named Syzygus to be a 'partner' to the women, Euodia and Syntyche—it's a pun, in the Greek. The fact that the only mention of Paul's wife in ancient literature is so easily dismissed, however, does not rule out his being married. On the contrary, since Jews placed a high value on marriage, and the marriageable age for a man was between 18 and 20, the likelihood is that he was indeed married. By the time of his conversion he would have been about 40 and the fact that he never mentions her only shows that he had lost her many years earlier. Perhaps he divorced her, Murphy-O'Connor suggests; more likely, however, she and their children died in an accident or an epidemic. His anger at the loss could not be directed at God, for theological reasons; but by 'a well-known psychological mechanism' he would have switched his 'pent-up desire for vengeance' into hostility towards Christians. 'Redirected anger is but a possible answer', it is conceded, 'whose plausibility none the less is enhanced by its ability to explain Paul's silence regarding his wife'. His zeal to persecute the Church is thus explained by displaced grief at the death of his loved ones. The idea, hitherto taken for granted, that it was natural for a Pharisee to harass the followers of Jesus is groundless: 'This gospel portrait of the Pharisees is now recognized as being without historical foundation'. Psychology of bereavement steps into the vacancy created by better historical scholarship. In this, and in many other ways, this new biography certainly encourages us to look again at our image of St Paul.

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