Sexagesima 2014

“Je préfère donc bien volontiers me glorifier de mes faiblesses,

afin que la puissance du Christ habite en moi.” (2Cor 12)

Near the beginning of the Great Seventy Days instituted by the Church as a preparation for Easter, we are confronted with the extraordinary life and witness of St. Paul—to keep us, as it were, from boasting of our own merits, and to bring some sort of perspective on the true nature and purpose of our daily crosses.

In the first place, the Apostle chooses to “speak foolishly” to the Corinthians of the many things he suffered for the sake of Christ. He says “foolishly”, because he is well aware that the strength to endure such hardships was not due to his own merit, but rather to the Work of Christ in him. Let us hear but a short sample from the glorious catalogue of today’s Epistle: “24 cinq fois j’ai reçu des Juifs quarante coups de fouet moins un;  25 trois fois, j’ai été battu de verges; une fois j’ai été lapidé; trois fois j’ai fait naufrage; j’ai passé un jour et une nuit dans l’abîme…27 les labeurs et les peines, les nombreuses veilles, la faim, la soif, les jeûnes multipliés, le froid, la nudité!” Every year we hear these same words—but have we yet learned to be ashamed of our petty complaints? Our tales of woe? Our litanies of the injustices we suffer at the hands of our neighbor? Have we yet learned to suffer such things in silence, or do we yet “boast foolishly” of such things? If we truly meditate on the suffering of St. Paul, we will find our tongue less eager to speak of our own sufferings or complain of the actions of others.

Lest we be overcome by this revelation, let us ask ourselves why God permitted St. Paul to suffer in such a way? For this answer, we must look to Acts 9, wherein we find St. Luke’s account of the Blinding of Saul on the Road to Damascus, and of his subsequent miraculous healing through the prayer of Holy Ananias. Ananias, like us, wants to make sure that God knows what a bad person his neighbor is—in this case, Paul of Tarsus. In rebuking Ananias, God reveals the mystery of Paul’s suffering: « Va, car cet homme est un instrument que j’ai choisi pour porter mon nom devant les nations, les rois et les enfants d’Israël; je lui montrerai en effet tout ce qu’il doit souffrir pour mon nom. » ‬To become worthy of this great vocation, Paul of Tarsus had first to be transformed in the crucible of suffering—to be conformed perfectly to Christ in all things—and in so doing, “to fill up those things that are wanting/lacking of the sufferings of Christ” (Col 1:24).

Therefore, as we begin to train for the race of the Great Forty Days—a training which consists in prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and all works of charity—let us not be sad, but rather rejoice, “that we have been judged worthy to suffer” something for the sake of Christ! (Acts 5:41) May each one of us cooperate with the Grace of God to become Saints—the true athletes of God—who compete not “pour une couronne périssable [mais] pour une impérissable” (1 Cor 9:25).