

A visitor to the Eternal City, Rome, is likely to visit the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, the second largest church in Italy and an architectural gem. Perhaps the most notable sacred object in the basilica are the chains that were used to bind saint Paul as a prisoner in Rome late in his missionary career, probably in the early sixties of the Christian era. The chains can be found in a reliquary near the apostle's tomb.

On the feast day of Saint Paul, the chains are carried in procession around the basilica. The pilgrims who witness the annual event are likely edified and inspired by the sight of the chains, and are not likely to forget the sufferings Paul endured for the sake of the gospel.

Many scholars are of the view that Paul's letter to the Ephesians, one of the 'captivity epistles,' was composed by Paul from a prison in Rome.

In today's second reading Paul identifies himself as "a prisoner in the Lord" (Eph. 4:1). The great missionary was in chains for his faith. It was his glory to be imprisoned, not as a murderer or a thief, but for the sake of his Lord, Jesus Christ.

He willingly embraced imprisonment for his people as well. His sufferings were for the Ephesians immense glory. (St. Thomas Aquinas)

In Saint Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians, he writes, "If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation, and if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement which enables you to endure the sufferings that we suffer" (2 Cor. 1:6).

In the course of history, many famous Christians have written letters from prison with the hope of consoling and strengthening the resolve of Christ's people.

Martin Luther King, wrote a number of letters from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama in which he gave comfort to civil rights activists. His letters were subsequently published.

Thomas More, the sixteenth century English martyr, wrote letters to his learned daughter Margaret, while he awaited execution in the Tower of London.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor, who was executed by the Nazis in 1944, wrote letters in the darkest period of his life, so that his fellow Christians would not lose heart in the face of indescribable brutality.

A story; One morning Pope Paul VI, who reigned as Pontiff from 1963 to 1978, received in audience Bishop Fulton Sheen, one of the outstanding American clerics of the last century. Sheen found the pope dispirited and weary. The pope had suffered from intense criticism from every imaginable quarter. He was a beaten down man. Bishop Sheen said to him, "Your holiness, you are well named, Paul. Just as your namesake was unrelentingly harassed, criticized and rejected, so too you have had the same experience. Your suffering is a badge of honor".

In a memorial mass for the pope following his death, Sheen remarked, "Paul, we did not love you!

Saint Paul urges the young Christian community to live in a manner of the call they have received the believer must never stand still. He must walk in the steps of their master. Their virtues must include humility, gentleness and patience. (Eph. 4:2). Christians are called to a very high standard of behavior. Discipleship is demanding. To live as the pagans is to do a disservice to the gospel of Christ.

Those who have been called by God should live up to their calling, regardless of the consequences.

Let us not forget the growing number of Christians in chains around the world for their faithful example. Only recently Christian pastors were thrown in prison for resisting the lockdowns. Their courage is praiseworthy.

With the help of God, let us imitate the courage and tenacity of our Christian heroes. The vitality of the church largely depends on our faithful witness.