

December 12, 2004
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

According to Luke's account of the matter, the Macedonian city of Philippi was the scene of Paul's first missionary activity in Europe and the site of the first Christian church founded there through his efforts (Acts 16:12-40). Certain features of the city's history rendered those efforts especially challenging.

Less than a century before Paul arrived there in the summer of A.D. 49, Philippi was the place where the army of Anthony and Octavian had defeated the Republican forces of Brutus and Cassius (cf. **inter alia**, Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar" Act 5). After that battle, a good number of Roman soldiers settled in the locale, and the city became a **colonia**, a military settlement with certain civic privileges. In addition, after the defeat of Anthony and Cleopatra by Octavian at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C., a number of Italians were exiled and put down roots at Philippi. Thus, during the century before Paul's arrival, the city took on something of a distinctly military and Roman character.

This special character of Philippi was reflected in the fact that its chief magistrates were called "generals" (**strategoï**-Acts 16:20,22,35,36,38), not "governors" as elsewhere. Philippi was special. Its citizens, in fact, tended very much to think of themselves as "Romans" (16:21).

Indeed, this **Romanitas** of Philippi was reflected in the very name by which Paul (and, after him, Polycarp of Smyrna) addressed the Christians there-**Philippesioï**, a Greek rendering of the Latin **Philippenses** and a term not found elsewhere in ancient literature. (The classical Greek terms were **Philippeis** and **Philippenoi**.)

When Paul came to Philippi, therefore, it was like a fresh start to his evangelism, a whole new "beginning of the Gospel," as it were (cf. Philippians 4:15). Whereas in the many cities that he visited previously, Paul had begun his missionary endeavors at the local synagogue, he could not do this at Philippi, for the simple reason that the city had no synagogue. There was only an informal "place of customary prayer" on the outskirts, near the Strymon River (Acts 16:13). Here Paul found only a few women, apparently none of the ten men required to form a synagogue.

It is arguable, in fact, whether the founding of a synagogue at Philippi would have been impossible in any case. As a "colony," Philippi was a sort of legal extension of Rome itself, and, because of a decree issued by the Emperor Claudius the previous year, Jews were no longer permitted to live in Rome (Acts 18:1-3; Suetonius, "Claudius" 25.4). If not in Rome, how in Philippi?

At the very least, we can say that the citizens of Philippi thought it impossible to be both Jewish and Roman at the same time: "These men, being Jews, exceedingly

trouble our city; and they teach customs, which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe" (Acts 16:20-21).

The Philippians' strong sense of their *Romanitas* helps explain, I think, why it was in their city that Paul first appealed to his own Roman citizenship. During his previous fourteen or so years of apostolic ministry, Paul had suffered every conceivable indignity at the hands of his opponents-"in perils of the Gentiles, imperils in the city"- but up to the year 49, as far as we know, he had not once appealed to this special privilege in order to escape such trials. At Philippi, however, he not only mentioned the fact, he made a rather big deal about it: "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out" (16:37).

The Philippians, in short, were proud of their special ties to Rome. In his later epistle to the congregation at Philippi, Paul felt compelled to remind them that there is another citizenship higher than that of Rome. Using a term that often designated a colony of foreigners, Paul told them, "Our citizenship (*politevma*) is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). Enjoying such citizenship, therefore, these Philippians were to conduct themselves (literally "exercise citizenship" - *politevesthe*) in a manner worthy (*axsios*) of the Gospel (1:27).

Polycarp of Smyrna, writing to the descendents of those same Philippians about a century later, employed the identical expression, reminding them, "if we conduct ourselves worthily (*politevsometha axsios*) of Him, we shall also reign with Him" (*To the Philippians* 5.2).

As the "colonists" of Philippi were citizens of a nobler city elsewhere, all Christians, including the Philippians, must remember that they are really the temporarily displaced citizens of that yet greater city on high.

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