



*Pastoral
Letter*
2018

**“My Grace
is sufficient for you”**

(2 Corinthians 12:9)

BISHOP PAUL HINDER O.F.M. CAP.



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Born 22 April 1942 in Bussnang TG, Switzerland, Bishop Paul joined the Capuchin Order in 1962 and was ordained to the priesthood on 4 July 1967.

Prior to his appointment as Apostolic Vicar by Pope John Paul II on 21 March 2005, Bishop Paul served as Auxiliary Bishop under Bishop Bernard Gremoli (2004-2005), General Councillor of the Capuchin Order (1994-2003) and Provincial Superior of the Capuchins in Switzerland (1986-1994).

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Bishop Paul Hinder O.F.M. Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. Peace be with you! When I started to write this pastoral letter, I was staying at the infirmary of the Capuchin Friars in Switzerland recovering from a successful hip surgery. It was an experience of fragility and dependence. For a few weeks, many things we normally take for granted were simply not possible. I was dependant on the assistance of others for the simple things of daily life. It reminded me of how easily we forget our human fragility as long as we are in good health. Such an experience helped me to understand better what people who live with a handicap which limits their freedom of action have to go through. We all wish to have good health as long as possible and to be independent and masters of our life. However, the reality is that many people do not have the good health they wish to have, and all of us will sooner or later experience that our body and mind are subjected to limits and restraints which are no longer in our hands to overcome.

God's work continues in the midst of human failures

2. Today's culture gives us the illusion that almost everything is possible and feasible immediately or at least within a short time. The consequence is that we are losing the capacity to wait and to endure. This is true not only regarding our physical life where we are always hoping for a speedy recovery if something does not work as it should. It is true also for our spiritual life. We wish to see quick progress in our faith-life. We want to be perfect and

therefore do not like to look at the shadows and sins. And if we do it, we still try to appear better in public than we really are. The same may apply to our life as Church. We want to see a community which is visibly going forward and can be seen as a model of spiritual growth and exemplary love. However, we know that normally it does not work that way. And even if we see sometimes in the life of a person or a community a speedy and radical change, only the test of time will prove its lasting validity once the initial enthusiasm of a turnaround is gone.

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3. The word of Jesus teaches us that, in the kingdom of God, things do not work like a business or the manufacture of goods. Listen to the gospel of Mark: "The kingdom of God is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26-29). In this parable, which we find only in the gospel of Mark, Jesus makes it clear that the full grain is not the result of human effort but the work of God who lets the seed sprout and grow night and day, even when the sower is sleeping.

There is no way to make it grow faster and no way to stop it. God's work is going on "automatically", as it is said in the original Greek text. The only thing required is the courage "to scatter the seed on the land", regardless of whether a part of the seed will have the chance to grow as it is said in another parable of the Lord. Although we want to see in many regards 100% success, we have to live with the fact that it will never be the case because of our human limitations and because of our sins and shortcomings. The great Jewish thinker Martin Buber once said: "Success is not one of the names of God!" However, God will always reach the goals he has in mind even through the meanderings and errors of our life.

Grace and its strength in the face of human weakness

4. In fact, there is not a single human being in this world who does not have to struggle in one way or another. We all are passing through painful moments in our lives. I am not only thinking about the serious problems of sicknesses, accidents, social unrest, wars, persecution, joblessness and the like. These all are painful events that deeply trouble us, yes. However, very often there is another more serious pain in ourselves when we experience our own weakness, guilt, and helplessness. Often, we feel ashamed that we are not the master of our own situation and we feel humiliated. We would like to be perfect and blameless, but experience that we are anything but clean. This reminds me what Saint Paul says about his own experience in his second letter to the Corinthians. After speaking about the extraordinary graces he had been given by the Lord, he continues: "But

I refrain, so that no one may think more of me than what he sees in me or hears from me because of the abundance of the revelations. Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Co 12:6-9)

5. We do not know in what the “angel of Satan” consisted in the life of Saint Paul. There have been many theories about that. It must have been something that humiliated Paul in certain moments - even in public, as he mentions it in the letter to the Galatians (cf. Gal 4:13-14). Paul was a perfectionist already as a Pharisee and wanted to do things without any accompanying failures. He was a perfect persecutor of the “new way” before he was caught by Christ. And he wanted to be a perfect follower of the Lord once he had been called by Him on the way to Damascus. The experience of everything not working out as he would have liked, taught him the lessons of humility that he needed and made him discover better the grace of God. Thus, he can humbly write to the Philippians when he speaks about his adherence to Christ: “It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Brothers (and Sisters), I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize

of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:12-14). Not looking back but forward with trust in God's grace was the secret of Saint Paul's extraordinary fruitfulness as an Apostle of Christ Jesus.

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6. Paul had sufficient reasons to look back on his life with more than mixed feelings. He does it a few times, not in order to fall into depression about what had been wrong, but rather to praise the grace of God who made him a new person. In contrast to many of us, he was not complaining day and night about his wrongdoings in the past and living in fear before God. Once he had experienced the grace of God appearing in Jesus Christ, he knew that nothing could separate him anymore from the love of God. Read the wonderful passage in his letter to the Romans about this: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am

convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:31-39) Paul knew that the life of the faithful was permanently threatened by all kind of perils. However, he had experienced in himself that the grace of God was sufficient and therefore “power is made perfect in weakness”.

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Have the courage to go out to the peripheries

7. I like the following passage in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (n.49): “Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should

rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).” Pope Francis calls us not to look first of all for security and perfection; rather he encourages us to expose ourselves to the risks of the real world even at the price of getting dirty. Jesus made himself dirty and ritually unclean when getting in touch with sick people, paralytics, possessed, tax-collectors or prostitutes. Religious people thought that it was not decent what Jesus did and very soon planned to kill him because he called into question their well-established but incorrect understanding of God.

8. Of course, it is neither the mind of Jesus nor the intention of Pope Francis to justify our sins and shortcomings in a spirit of liberalism which very often follows the principle of “anything goes”. What is at stake is the fact that very often for fear of sin and imperfection, or for fear of being blamed by the so-called perfect people, we no longer have the courage to go to the periphery where people need to be heard, consoled, strengthened, and redeemed from all kinds of misery. It might be an environment which looks everything but clean and proper

and perfect. Yet this is the place Jesus wanted to reach when he came into this world, and where he wants his followers to be as well. I thank everyone who is reaching out to the periphery when and where ever it is possible, by going to labour camps, prisons, hospitals, seafarers, isolated people, families in their struggles, victims of human trafficking, people who need assistance in order to resolve problems and to be repatriated, and so on.

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9. We have seen in the history of the Church up to and including the most recent time that the real sins were not committed where the faithful reached out to the needy, the poor, and the sinners. Rather, the big sins were committed when the Church and her members protected themselves behind the facade of security and pretended perfection. Suddenly all kind of abuses took place because people had lost the real commitment with which Christ has charged his disciples. Behind the curtains, very often money, power, and sex became the true issues and finally neutralised the power of the gospel. Pope Francis, following the word of Jesus, wants us to avoid this hypocrisy which always is lurking just around the corner.

God's choice of the weak and the imperfect

10. Glancing through the Bible, we notice that the great figures of the story of God with humanity were, most of the time, not perfect human beings. They were people with limits and with sins, able to commit crimes, to lie, and to betray. In fact, God calls people with handicaps, with physical, psychological, and moral limits. Moses started as a killer and had to flee. When he was called by God in the scene of the burning bush, he revealed himself as one who was stammering and not able to speak properly. God did not bother about his past and his handicaps, he simply called him: "Go, I am sending you to the Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Ex 3:10) All the objections and arguments of Moses were rejected by God. "Go!" was the last and final word of God, disregarding the limitations of Moses and the difficulties he would have to face. God did not call a perfect prophet, he simply called one who would do the divine job despite his limitations and errors. And finally, he would make it!

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11. Take David, the king, portrayed in the Bible as the ideal king, although we know from the text itself that he was everything but an angel in a human body! During the time of king Saul, he became the leader of a gang of people "in

difficulties or in debt, or embittered” (1 Sam 22:2). When he finally succeeded Saul and was in power, he took Bathsheba the wife of Uriah, fathered a child out of wedlock, killed her husband and later married her (2 Sam 11). His biography is full of stories, bad and good ones. However, God wanted him to be the king of Judah and Israel and made him, despite all his limitations, a model for later generations. He had become an instrument in the hands of God.

12. Take Jeremiah who among the prophets is probably the most integrated person. However, he had a speech impediment and stammered. In his suffering, he cursed the day his mother conceived and gave birth to him. But God did not care about his protest, because he did not want a superman but simply one who had to tell the people unpleasant truths at the risk of his own life. Although suffering terribly, Jeremiah had to tell others what God told him and not what he most probably would have liked to say on his own.

13. If you look through the New Testament, you will discover the same logic of God. Jesus did not call supermen and superwomen as his followers. He took people like you and me and made them his instruments. He did not care about their shortcomings. Take Peter who would more than once turn against his master and finally deny being his disciple. Nevertheless, Jesus took him as the rock, on which he wanted to build his church. Look at Mary of Magdala who became the first witness of Jesus’ resurrection. She had been a woman possessed by bad spirits. Jesus healed her so that she could become

one of his followers. Keep in mind Paul: after his death and resurrection, Jesus called Saul, a fanatic Pharisee and persecutor of the young Christian community, on the way to Damascus. The Lord did not shrink but called his enemy to become his friend and defender. That is why he told Ananias: “Go, for this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites, and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name.” (Acts 9:15-16).

Treasure in earthen vessels

14. If we looked with a business mind at all these people called by God, we would say: “Lord, with such people you will not be very successful.” Why? Because most of them would have made a bad impression in a job interview and probably not passed the test. However, we should not forget that God can use a fragile vessel for a great task. Because “Lord, you are our father, we are the clay and you our potter: we are all the work of your hand” (Is 64:7). The question, therefore, is not whether someone has his or her limitations, shortcomings, weaknesses and so on. The question is whether we recognize and accept our weaknesses, fully trusting the Lord’s word to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” God does not look first for spiritual acrobats and powerful orators. He calls limited human beings, telling them simply: “Now go, I am sending you...”, as he did with Moses (Ex 3:10) without paying attention to his objection.

15. Why am I writing all this? Because it is important for

our personal faith life and for us as a Church. With good intentions we aim at the perfect, the best, the divine! However, we do it with limited tools and capacities. Saint Paul tells the Corinthians: “We hold this treasure (i.e. the glory of God on the face of Christ) in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us” (2 Co 4:7). Very often our sense of honour leads us to give ourselves a clean record. We do not like to be seen in dirty clothes. We find it difficult to admit openly that we are not perfect. We prefer to shine at the cost of the truth of our lives. This happens both in our lives as individual Christians, and also in the Church as a community. The Old and the New Testament were much less anxious about this point. There are many pages in the Bible which show without hesitation the limitations of human beings and that God can act in a constructive way even where sin and negligence are at work.

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16. Once we understand the mind of God we shall be much less tempted to defend ourselves by hiding the truth or embellishing reality. It gives us the freedom and the courage to look at the bad things in our lives and in the life of the Church without being overly scandalized, because we believe the word of the Lord addressed to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in

weakness.” What counts at the end of the day is not the question how many times we denied knowing the Lord like Simon Peter, or how long we were opposing the work of Jesus like Saul, but if we are able to accept the call of the Lord and to renew our commitment of love and faith as did the two great Apostles.

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God’s grace is not something that is “earned”

17. We have to learn again and again that God does not display his power in a worldly way. Otherwise he would not have let his Son be crucified. God’s grace is not the salary for our good conduct. The opposite is true: our good conduct is an act of gratitude towards the preceding grace. Therefore, we do not earn the love of God through our pious and virtuous acts. The love of God makes us discover our real status as sinful men and women. One of the most beautiful stories in the Bible that we find in this regard is in Luke (and only in his Gospel). It speaks about the pardoning of the sinful woman, when Jesus is at table in the house of Simon, a Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50).

The Pharisee is shocked that Jesus accepts the gestures of tenderness from a woman of dubious reputation. Jesus, knowing the hidden thoughts of the Pharisee, gives him a teaching which has not lost its relevance even in our own day. He simply asks him who is it that loves more, the one who has been forgiven a little debt or the one who has been forgiven a huge and unrepayable debt. The answer seems to be logical: the one who has been forgiven more. Reading the text, we could conclude that the love the woman showed to Jesus was the reason for the forgiveness extended to her. However - and this is essential - the opposite is true: the woman is able to show her love because she has already been forgiven. Listen to the teaching of Jesus: "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Luke 7:47-48).

18. The traditional opinion that we must gain God's love by good conduct is turned upside down by Jesus who provokes the opposition of the religious leaders and pays for it with his death on the cross. The whole preaching and actions of Jesus show the gratuity of God's love and is an invitation to human beings to reply to God's love with our own love. Once Paul had understood this, he became the teacher of justification "by faith in Christ and not by works of the law" (Gal 2:16). The letters to the Romans and to the Galatians are the fundamental charters of his teaching in this regard. And he applies it to himself: "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given

himself up for me” (Gal 2:19-20). On the basis of this truth, everyone can receive a fresh start in his or her life, trusting the Lord “who has loved me and given himself up for me”.

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Living open and true lives

19. Looking at the life of many of our faithful, I notice that there is a lot of commitment, piety and real faith. At the same time, we would be blind not to see the shadows very often hidden behind the curtains. We are too ready to bring to the light the shadows of the others and to criticize or even to judge them. All too often, the faults of the others are the welcome stuff of gossip that poisons relationships between human beings. Are we equally willing to bring to light our own shadows, very often hidden? Have I the courage to look at my situation in the light of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ, and even to speak about it in an honest confession and to make a U-turn? It is the business of Satan to suppress and to hide our real weaknesses. It is the business of the Redeemer to free us from shame and to bring to light what is wrong because we believe that “power is made perfect in weakness”.

Have I the courage to look at my situation in the light of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, and even to speak about it in an honest confession and to make a U-turn?

20. Hypocrisy seems to be a hallmark of our time. If we look at what is going on in business, advertising or in politics, we do not need to be specialists in order to discover how much lies and falsehood are part of "the business". Cheating, lying and twisting the truth have very often become standard behaviour, not only in the worlds of economics and politics, but also in the relationships between people, even among Christians. Very often, this poisons the life in families, between working colleagues, and in the Church and its groups. Nobody wants to lose face. Many seem to think that, in order to save face, it is right to use any means necessary. However, people who think in this way are only cheating themselves. Jesus accused the Pharisees not because of their piety and obedience to the law, but rather because of their hypocrisy. I think that he still would have a lot of work to do in this regard among us. As we have his word as our guide, we can undergo for ourselves the process of conversion.

Conversion from hypocrisy

21. Conversion starts with honesty towards God, towards ourselves, and towards others. It can happen that we think we are being honest and true to God without realizing that

it can be an act of hypocrisy. Look at the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the temple: “Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, ‘O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income. But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’ I tell you the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14). The sin of the Pharisee consists in a threefold dishonesty. He is not clear about his true relationship with God as he looks only at his own works. He is not true with his neighbour, in our case with the tax collector, as he does not take him as an equal human being but as an underdog. And finally, he is not true with himself, because he does not see anymore that pride is corrupting his religious life and falsifying his relationship with others. On the other hand, the tax collector is far from being an ideal Jew. However, he has the courage to be true. He knows that he has nothing to present to God other than his weakness. He does not compare himself with the Pharisee but considers his personal responsibility before God. And finally, he has the courage to admit his limitations and sins without embellishing anything. Could it not be a good exercise for ourselves? Have you never experienced when you were in the church, that you started to observe others and to

compare with them, instead of being true and honest with yourself? You may have looked at the dress of the others or at their improper behaviour, thinking to yourself: “I am not like him or her”. Yet in doing that, you have already distanced yourself from God.

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22. Honesty and transparency in our lives are compromised by our hypocrisy. The first reaction of Adam and Eve after acting against God’s command was to hide and to shift their responsibility onto others. There is no other way to be healed than to come out of the hiding place of our hypocrisies and lies and to appear with an open face before God. The second step will be to face ourselves honestly for who we are and not for who we imagine ourselves to be. This helps us to take the next step and to face our fellow human beings without falsehood. We have to learn to look at them with the eyes of God, just as we wish that they look at us with the eyes of God.

Humility – the fruit of a true conversion

23. Once we have gone through this process, we become humble and let go of all pride. It is at this moment that God can do great things with us, as he did with Simon Peter, with Paul and with many others. In a particular way we can see it in the Virgin Mary, who was not showing off before God as the Pharisee did in the story I quoted above. She simply saw herself truthfully as the humble handmaid of the Lord. Accepting her eminent role in the history of salvation, she did not see it as the result of her own merit but the extraordinary action of God: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (Luke 1:46-49).

Dear sisters and brothers, rejoice in the Lord. He is looking with love upon you. Open up your heart, let him enter. Never forget his word to Saint Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Bishop Paul Hinder, O.F.M. Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Abu Dhabi, 15th August 2018 (Assumption of our Lady)

REGULATIONS

1. Holy Days of Obligation on which the faithful are obliged to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist are:
 - Sundays or Fridays (where it has been decided);
 - the Nativity of the Lord (December 25);
 - the Assumption of B.V. Mary (August 15).

2. 2017-8 Special Celebration days on which the faithful are encouraged to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist are:
 - Immaculate Conception of the B.V. Mary (Dec 8);
 - Mary, Mother of God (Jan 1);
 - Our Lady of Arabia (Jan 13);
 - St. Joseph (March 19);
 - Sacred Heart (June 8);
 - Ss. Peter and Paul (July 1);
 - All Saints (Nov 1);
 - Dedication of the Parish Church (Oct 28);
 - Parish Titular Saint.

3. Observances transferred to the following or preceding Sunday are:
 - Epiphany of the Lord;
 - Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi);
 - Ascension of the Lord;
 - Ss. Peter and Paul.

4. Fasting is prescribed for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday for those who have completed 18 years of age and up to the beginning of the 60th year. One meal a day is eaten. A smaller quantity of food, sufficient to maintain strength, may be taken at two other times in the day.

5. Abstinence from meat (milk products, eggs or animal fat not included) applies to those who have completed 14 years of age. It is

prescribed for Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and every Wednesday that is not a Solemnity. However, on Wednesdays outside of Lent, abstinence from meat can be substituted by another act of penance, such as prayer or a work of charity.

6. During Lenten weekdays and Days of Prayer, abstinence from meat, almsgiving, fasting and other works of prayer, penance and/or charity are encouraged according to ability.

7. Eucharistic Fast: The faithful must abstain from food and drink, aside from water and medicine, for one hour before receiving Holy Communion. The sick, infirm and elderly (and their caregivers) may receive Holy Communion even if they have eaten something within the preceding hour.

8. Paschal (Easter) Precept: The faithful who have made their First Holy Communion should receive Holy Communion at least once a year during the Easter Season. Within the Vicariate, this precept may be fulfilled at any time between the First Sunday of Lent and Trinity Sunday (Sunday after Pentecost). One who has reached the age of discretion is also obliged to confess one's grave sins at least once a year.

9. General Absolution: may be given on Good Friday and the Midnight Mass(es) of Christmas, if large numbers of parishioners make it impossible for all to avail of the increased opportunities for the sacrament of Reconciliation in the weeks preceding Christmas and Easter. The faithful are to make an individual confession of grave sins at the next available opportunity (C.I.C. 962).

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Front Cover Image:

“Jesus assures Paul of His unfailing protection”

Frescoes of the life of St. Paul, Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, Rome



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