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Jan. 26, St. Paula of Rome

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NCR Today

Today is the feast of St. Paula of Rome, beloved friend of St. Jerome.

Paula was an aristocratic Roman matron, one of those who impoverished herself to help the early Church. "Paula spent the lion's share of her inheritance building a monastery in Bethlehem."

Women "were critical participants in late ancient Christianity, as they funded, translated, and interpreted a new Christian culture. Paula and her daughter Eustochium, for instance, became proficient enough in Hebrew and Greek that Jerome came to them for translation assistance. For such women, 'literacy' consisted not in the ability to compose or author works but in activities that might be useful in the support of male clerics: translation, copying, and disseminating texts . . ."

--from *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christianity*, by Nicola Denzey

"Paula--one of Jerome's closest friends--took her youngest daughter Eustochium with her to the Holy Land. As she was leaving, her son Toxotius 'howled with the terror and aching sorrow of being abandoned by his own mother from the shore of the Tiber, stretching his arms out to her.' . . . Paula remained unmoved by her small son's suffering; she kept in mind the gospel, 'He who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me' . . ."

In spite of her coldness to Toxotius, Paula was overcome with grief when her daughter Blæsilla died. Jerome wrote one of his most famous letters to Paula at that time, ending with "the prophecy (since more than fulfilled) that in his writings Blæsilla's name shall never die".

He wrote: "Who can recall without a sigh the earnestness of her prayers, the brilliancy of her

conversation, the tenacity of her memory, and the quickness of her intellect? Had you heard her speak Greek you would have deemed her ignorant of Latin; yet when she used the tongue of Rome her words were free from a foreign accent. She even rivalled the great Origen in those acquirements which won for him the admiration of Greece. For in a few months, or rather days, she so completely mastered the difficulties of Hebrew as to emulate her mother's zeal in learning and singing the psalms."

Letter XXXIX. To Paula.

Paula and Jerome were buried beneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

The mosaic above The Altar of St. Jerome in St. Peter's Basilica, beneath which lies the body of Pope John XXIII, depicts St. Paula standing behind St. Jerome as he receives his Last Communion.

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