

Conversion of St. Paul

25 January 2009

The **conversion of St Paul** is one of the most **dramatic events** in the whole New Testament.

- ✍ Paul was an up-and-coming young rabbi zealously devoted to **his idea** of God's plan for salvation.
- ✍ And that idea **did not** include the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- ✍ So when he heard the Apostles preaching the gospel, he became **furious**.
- ✍ They were simply obeying Christ's last request, to "**proclaim the gospel** to every creature."
- ✍ But for the well-educated, popular, and **arrogant** Paul, that doctrine was **blasphemous**.
- ✍ So he put all his intelligence, willpower, and connections at the service of **wiping out** this new religion, even to the point of having Christian men and women **put to death**.

It is impossible to imagine someone **more fully against** Jesus Christ and the Church.

Saul's every waking moment was spent working hard to exterminate those Christians – who had become a mortal threat to Judaism.

But on the road to Damascus, in the middle of his **fury and passion**, all of that **changed**.

- ✍ Jesus **appeared** to him.
- ✍ Jesus **spoke a word** to his heart and let a **ray of his divine light** shine into the darkness of Paul's self-centered mind.
- ✍ And from then on, things were **different**.
- ✍ From then on, Paul was **gradually freed** from the self-centered, self-indulgent ambitions that made him such a **destructive force**.
- ✍ From then on, Paul became an **ambassador** of God's saving grace, a **light** of hope and mercy for sinners of all nations and races, a **faithful messenger** of God's unconditional goodness.
- ✍ From then on, all of Paul's natural, God-given **gifts** were put to use in building up **Christ's everlasting Kingdom**, not in building up **his own personal and perishable kingdom**, which, as he wrote in today's Second Reading, was part of "the **world in its present form**," which is "**passing away**."

This is the **power** of God's grace; this is the **power** of the gospel: it really can **transform lives**, even the **most unlikely** ones.

Sometimes we don't **believe** in this transforming power of God's grace because we have the **wrong idea** of how it works.

We think it should work like a **Hollywood movie**, in which a horrible sinner can become a magnificent saint in **just two hours**.

But God's work in our soul usually takes **more** than two hours.

- ✍ St Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was a **real, powerful, and transforming** experience, but it was only the **beginning** of a long spiritual journey.
- ✍ Certainly he stopped persecuting Christians **right away**, but he didn't become the wonder-working missionary preacher until **ten years later**.
- ✍ During that time he spent **three years** in prayer and silence in the **Arabian Desert**,
- ✍ And then he spent another **six years** back in his home town of **Tarsus**, practicing his trade of tent-making and **studying the Bible** in light of what he was coming to learn about Jesus.
- ✍ Only after these years in which he allowed God's grace to **spread** into every corner of his mind and heart did he receive his missionary call.
- ✍ And that's how God's grace **usually** works.
- ✍ Look at the example of the **Twelve Apostles**.
- ✍ Jesus spent **three years** teaching and training them **full time** before he gave them the **great commission** to convert the world, which we heard in today's Gospel passage.

The transforming power of God's grace is **real**, but it **takes time**.

- ✍ For Saint Paul, the moment which *began* his process of conversion was here on the Road to Damascus – and it all seems to be caught up in two simple questions: “Who are you?” and “What shall I do?”
- ✍ As the light appears and Saul is thrown from his horse, he asks, “Who are you, Sir? ‘I am Jesus, whom you persecute.’”
- ✍ In giving this answer, Jesus identifies Himself with the Church in an intimate way – Saul never MET Jesus, yet it is Jesus he is persecuting in persecuting the Christians followers of Christ – this becomes a profound moment of understanding for Saul – when he realizes that the Church IS Christ’s Body – the mystical Body of Christ. When the Church acts, where the Church exists – THERE IS CHRIST! This is a profound reality and understanding of our Catholic Church – founded in this moment of Paul’s conversion.
- ✍ But then Saul asks another question: “What shall I do, Lord?”
- ✍ Having recognized that he is persecuting, not just a group of people, but Jesus Christ Himself, Saul realizes that this revelation DEMANDS action: “What shall I do, Lord?”

What about us in our own lives of conversion? I think each one of us has had *some* experience similar to that of Paul’s – albeit less dramatic. We’ve had that moment when something seemed to touch us in the depths of our hearts – something moved us and convinced us of the reality of God, of Jesus in our lives. Now, have WE asked (and answered) Saul’s two questions?

- ✍ Who are you? Who is Jesus? And, closely connected, What is the Church?
 - Do we recognize Jesus as God’s Son, the Lord of life and history?
 - Do we believe the teachings of the Church and the Bishops (no matter how hard they may be) to be Jesus’ teachings? (or are they just another “suggestion” that we can disregard and throw away?)
 - The Bishop’s teachings during the election were VERY clear – the priority of life – but it seems even many Catholics believed that a president has little influence on abortion decisions – and voted for him anyway
 - yet, as of Friday our tax dollars are now paying for abortions overseas – **the Bishops were right!** And they were ignored.
 - And now you and I will pay to help woman kill the children in their womb.)
- ✍ Who are you, Jesus? Do we believe He is God? Is Jesus TRULY – now, answer honestly in your heart – is He TRULY the MOST IMPORTANT THING IN YOUR LIFE?
 - How many times I ask someone, “Why weren’t you at Mass last week?” Oh, we were busy, or I had a game, or I had to ... [fill in the blank]
 - “Oh,” I respond, “so shopping or the game or [fill in the blank] is MORE important than God?”
 - It may not be what we consciously think – but it IS what we believe if that is how we behave.
 - Maybe, if this is the case, WE are still in need of conversion – of answering the question, “Who are you, Sir?”
- ✍ Then, have we asked, “What am I to do, Sir?”
 - Saul immediately followed up his experience on the road with **action**.
 - If we’ve become convinced about who Jesus is, than we cannot allow ANYTHING nor ANYONE to come between me and the fulfillment of God’s will in my life – and in the world.
 - If we’ve really come to complete conversion, then the deepest desire of our souls, the entire orientation of our lives is to **serve Christ unconditionally**. It’s about our service to God and others – our love for God and others – much like the “great commandment:” Love the Lord with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.
 - Our greatest and deepest desire, if we have truly come to conversion, must be to **serve Christ unconditionally**.

THIS is why, today, our Catholic Schools Celebrate Service. THIS is what we strive to instill into the heart and soul of every pupil. Yes, Catholic Schools have a reputation for excellence in education and discipline (and Sacred Heart School is NO EXCEPTION – our students consistently perform WELL ABOVE the national average on tests), but greater and more important than all the excellent education the students receive is the FORMATION they receive.

- ✍ Our Catholic School students are instilled with a sense of service – to Christ and the Church and to others in the community.

- ✍ The Catholic church has a long and rich tradition of direct service to those in need, as well as social justice efforts to end social ills like racism and gender inequality.
- ✍ The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy focus on things that every one of us can do to help others, like feeding the hungry and instructing the ignorant.
- ✍ Let me give you ONE example of someone who exemplifies how our Catholic Schools celebrate Service – AND how our personal conversion calls us to action:

Liz McCartney was named the “CNN Hero of the Year 2008” for founding the St. Bernard Project, a non-profit service organization that helps families rebuild homes near New Orleans. She is a 1990 graduate of Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, a Catholic women’s high school run by the Sisters of the Visitation in Washington, D.C. She is just one of thousands of Catholic school graduates who have chosen to make community service an important part, or even the primary activity, of their adult life.

Catholic schools are known for teaching civic values along with religious virtues and requiring community service hours. Liz McCartney is just ONE example of how values learned as a student in a Catholic School continue into adulthood. She credits her Catholic education for inspiring her efforts to help others.

“My [education at Visitation Catholic School] put me on this path in life. I want to make sure that the sisters, teachers, students and alumnae at Visitation know how much their support, patience and efforts have played in helping the St. Bernard Project rebuild families' homes and lives.”

In the spring of 2008, Catholic students raised more than 2 million service hours to honor Pope Benedict’s birthday and his April visit to the United States. This accomplishment inspired the theme for Catholic Schools Week 2009 – Catholic Schools Celebrate Service.

The lives of others can often become a beacon of hope for the rest of us – whether we are inspired by people like Liz McCartney or one of the great saints, like Saint Paul, whose conversion we celebrate today.

Paul’s life can become a beacon of hope for all of US who say that we can’t overcome our faults – that it’s just too difficult – that I don’t have the strength.

- ✍ Remember, it is not God who hinders our response and whole-hearted conversion, it is OUR lack of response to God’s grace.
- ✍ God’s grace in our lives is ALWAYS sufficient, all it needs to be effective is our full-hearted assent and cooperation.
- ✍ So, perhaps as we celebrate Service in our Catholic Schools, as we remember St. Paul’s Conversion, as we recognize the call to serve Christ UNCONDITIONALLY, maybe we can ask ourselves:

- Where do I need to struggle harder?
- Where to I need to change my behavior?
- Many times EVERY day, ask yourself, “Lord, what do I need to do?”

St. Paul’s had a zeal for souls because, as he wrote, “I know whom I have believed.” St. Paul endured SO MUCH to proclaim the Gospel of Christ:

- ✍ 5 times he received 40 lashes of the whip
- ✍ Once he was stoned and left for dead
- ✍ 3 times he was shipwrecked
- ✍ He spent one day and night adrift at sea
- ✍ He was in danger from rivers, robbers, his own people, the Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, from the false brethren
- ✍ He spent MANY sleepless nights
- ✍ He experienced hunger, thirst and exposure...
- ✍ And ALL because he “knew the one whom he believed.”

Who is Jesus for you? What is the Church for you? And, responding to those questions, What are you to do?

Perhaps the best way we could celebrate the conversion of St. Paul today would be for every one of us to ask and answer these questions in the depths of our hearts – then celebrating Paul’s conversion to the faith by bearing witness to the Truth that WE have come to believe.