

25. January 2022

## The Conversion of St. Paul, Apostle

*Acts 22:3-16*

*In those days, Paul said to the people: 'I am a Jew and was born at Tarsus in Cilicia. I was brought up here in this city. It was under Gamaliel that I studied and was taught the exact observance of the Law of our ancestors. In fact, I was as full of duty towards God as you all are today. I even persecuted this Way to the death and sent women as well as men to prison in chains as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify. I even received letters from them to the brothers in Damascus, which I took with me when I set off to bring prisoners back from there to Jerusalem for punishment. 'It happened that I was on that journey and nearly at Damascus when in the middle of the day a bright light from heaven suddenly shone round me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" I answered, "Who are you, Lord?" and he said to me, "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting." The people with me saw the light but did not hear the voice which spoke to me. I said, "What am I to do, Lord?" The Lord answered, "Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told what you have been appointed to do." Since the light had been so dazzling that I was blind, I got to Damascus only because my companions led me by the hand. 'Someone called Ananias, a devout follower of the Law and highly thought of by all the Jews living there, came to see me; he stood beside me and said, "Brother Saul, receive your sight." Instantly my sight came back and I was able to see him. Then he said, "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Upright One and hear his own voice speaking, because you are to be his witness before all humanity, testifying to what you have seen and heard. And now why delay? Hurry and be baptised and wash away your sins, calling on his name."*

There are two feasts in the Church on which the conversion of two great saints is celebrated. One, which is celebrated in the universal Church, is the conversion of St. Paul. The other, which is more characteristic of the Augustinian communities, is the conversion of St. Augustine.

And the fact is that conversion is really a decisive moment for those who were far from God, living in sin or in error, because from that experience there is a turning point in our life, so that we begin to lead it in obedience to God. For those who already know the Lord, there is also a process of conversion, which becomes deeper and deeper. There is even talk of three conversions that can be experienced on the way of following Christ.

Let us look at the character of St. Paul's conversion. He had always been a pious Jew,

an exact observer of the Law, as he himself testifies in the reading we have heard today. This means that he was already trying to serve God, and was by no means a man who lived given to the pleasures of this world. But, as this text from the Acts of the Apostles shows us, he had a false zeal and lacked the light to recognise Jesus Christ as the Messiah. This false zeal of his was very dangerous, and the Christians of that time - among them St. Stephen - had to suffer for his sake.

As wonderful as zeal and fervour for the Kingdom of God are, they must be guided by the Holy Spirit in the right direction, lest they be disfigured by fanatical elements and become a threat to other people.

The conversion of St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, is a great miracle. But in his case, one could also speak of an enlightenment, even in a literal sense, for he was enveloped in a great light and could hear the voice of the Lord. In Paul's case, knowing Jesus and being converted happened in a single moment. No sooner had the Lord spoken to him than Paul asked, *"What am I to do, Lord?"* This is the sign of a true conversion, which admits of no delay!

Through Ananias' words, Paul learns the key points of his mission: *"The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Upright One and hear his own voice speaking, because you are to be his witness before all humanity, testifying to what you have seen and heard. And now why delay?"*

To this day, we all live because of that gracious event which brought about the conversion of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Ananias' words came true. Paul became a favourite instrument for the evangelisation of the nations and was faithful to his mission until his death. The light that enveloped him and in which he recognised the Lord, was poured out on many others through his mission. To this day, we listen to and read his valuable letters.

This wonderful saint, mystic and apostle questions us through his testimony: What about our conversion? How can we make the fire of mission burn more intensely? Do we still hesitate, before surrendering ourselves totally and decisively to the will of God? Do we still hold something back before the Lord?

Certainly St. Paul would exhort us with these words, which he also addressed to the community of Ephesus: *"So be very careful about the sort of lives you lead, like intelligent and not like senseless people. Make the best of the present time"* (Eph 5:15-16a).