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## The conversion of St. Paul

*Acts 22:3-16*

*I am a Jew', Paul said, '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."*

It is a great joy to hear again and again the story of St. Paul's conversion and all that grew out of it! To this day we read his letters and are nourished by his teachings, as are the early Christian communities of various nations, which were formed and strengthened by him.

St. Paul was a pious Jew. As he himself testifies, he lived strictly according to the laws and precepts of the Pharisees and tried to keep the commandments of God to the letter.

But his zeal for religion was blind! In this context we could use the word "fanatic", for he persecuted Christians and was an accomplice in the death of St. Stephen (cf. Acts 22:20).

But we know that God had mercy on him!

Paul was touched by the light of the Lord and from that moment on he put himself at the service of Christ. His conversion was not from unbelief to faith, or from a life of sin to a life in obedience to the Lord's commandments. His case was different: he had an enlightenment, and in this light he recognised the error of his ways and changed his life.

He realised that Christians were not the enemies of God, as he had thought before; that they were not a threat to Judaism; but that they were those who had recognised the Messiah and in whom the promises made to the people of Israel were fulfilled.

A kind of scales fell from his eyes (Acts 9:18), and then he could truly see! His blindness dissolved instantly and he immediately became a witness of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we can find in the conversion of St. Paul a model for the enlightenment of those who, though fervent in their religion, do not yet possess the light to recognise Christ as the Messiah.

It takes the persevering prayer of the faithful for all men to recognise the Lord. It does not always have to happen in such a dramatic way as in the story of St. Paul. But again and again we hear testimonies, both from Muslims and Jews, that they meet Jesus through dreams, visions, etc.

What else can we do, apart from our prayer, to bring other people to know the Lord, even if we have not been called to proclaim the gospel to the whole world like our friend St. Paul?

It is essential that we ourselves make a serious journey of conversion. In the awareness that all men have been called by God to be His children, every sincere attempt to follow God wholly and to serve Him becomes fruitful for all men, in a mysterious way.

Moreover, we must be careful not to miss opportunities to bear witness to our faith. If we listen carefully to the Holy Spirit, He will show us when our witness is timely and important. But even if we do not identify the precise moment, we know that the Word must be proclaimed *"in season and out of season"* (2 Tim 4:2).

What we can always do is to bear witness with our being Christian, so that people can perceive that we have true peace in our hearts and can find God's love in us.

Since I have the joy of knowing that quite a few people listen to my meditations on a daily or frequent basis, I would like to confide something to you.

In the year 2022 I had the strong inner impression that, in the midst of these difficult and even apocalyptic times, the Lord will grant us a period of seven years for evangelisation (although this does not necessarily mean that the proclamation of the faith will no longer be possible afterwards).

Just a year ago, on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, I called this period the "seven-year mission". I entrusted this mission to him - to the Apostle to the Gentiles - as well as to the Archangel Gabriel. In the meantime, the first year has passed, for which the community and Harpa Dei are very grateful, as it has borne much fruit.

May I recommend this mission to your prayers? With God's grace, we want to do everything in our hands to bring the message of salvation to the people. Are we counting on you?