

6. May 2022

The great miracle of conversion

Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile Saul was still breathing threats to slaughter the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked for letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, that would authorise him to arrest and take to Jerusalem any followers of the Way, men or women, that he might find. It happened that while he was travelling to Damascus and approaching the city, suddenly a light from heaven shone all round him. He fell to the ground, and then he heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' he asked, and the answer came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do. 'The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless, for though they heard the voice they could see no one. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing at all, and they had to lead him into Damascus by the hand. For three days he was without his sight and took neither food nor drink. There was a disciple in Damascus called Ananias, and he had a vision in which the Lord said to him, 'Ananias!' When he replied, 'Here I am, Lord,' the Lord said, 'Get up and go to Straight Street and ask at the house of Judas for someone called Saul, who comes from Tarsus. At this moment he is praying, and has seen a man called Ananias coming in and laying hands on him to give him back his sight. 'But in response, Ananias said, 'Lord, I have heard from many people about this man and all the harm he has been doing to your holy people in Jerusalem. He has come here with a warrant from the chief priests to arrest everybody who invokes your name.' The Lord replied, 'Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for my name.' Then Ananias went. He entered the house, and laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, I have been sent by the Lord Jesus, who

appeared to you on your way here, so that you may recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' It was as though scales fell away from his eyes and immediately he was able to see again. So he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food he regained his strength. After he had spent only a few days with the disciples in Damascus, he began preaching in the synagogues, 'Jesus is the Son of God.'

The conversion of St. Paul... what an extraordinary work of God! Persecutors become messengers; the blinded are enlightened; the zealous destroyers of the nascent Church are transformed into tireless and fervent co-operators in the building up of this same Church... All this is fulfilled in St. Paul, of whom the Lord says: *"My chosen instrument to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel"*.

What an amazing change! A conversion on this level is a great miracle, even greater than any physical healing. Saul of Tarsus never forgot what God had done for him, and he testified to it again and again. It was he himself who later spoke of evangelisation as a duty from which he could not withdraw (1 Cor 9:16); a duty of love, imbued with enormous gratitude to God, because He had opened his eyes and he could now recognise who Jesus is. As soon as Saul recognised the truth, he immediately began to proclaim publicly that Jesus is the Messiah.

In Ananias' reaction to being sent by the Lord to Saul, we can get an idea of the great fear this man caused the Christians before his conversion, when he persecuted the "new way" to death and with threats (cf. Acts 22:4). There are those who suppose that the martyrdom of Stephen, in which Saul was an accomplice (cf. Acts 8:1), may have given him the grace of conversion. Now, after his experience on the road to Damascus, Ananias calls him "brother Saul". Yes, the murderer and persecutor becomes a brother.

If we meditate on the wonderful conversion of the Apostle of the Gentiles - who ended up working harder than all the other apostles (cf. 1 Cor 15:10), was faithful to his mission until death (cf. 2 Tim 4:7) and willingly endured the sufferings of evangelisation (cf. 2 Cor 11:24-28) - we should be encouraged to pray insistently for the conversion of the enemies of Christ. Perhaps we sometimes allow ourselves to be too impressed by their hostility, and do not even bear in mind that a persecutor can be converted, as happened in the case of Saul.

We do not know the mystery of such a conversion to its ultimate depths. This Saul, who raged against the Christians, was blinded. As a pious Pharisee, he must have thought that he was serving God by pursuing this "new way", until, on his way to Damascus, the Lord appeared to him and then he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Whoever experiences a true conversion, from a state of confusion to clarity; from a life of sin to true life; from indifference to fervour for God, does not normally forget this experience. It remains deeply engraved in him and is always present to him. After repentance for sin and confusion, comes gratitude to God for having saved him, and readiness to serve the Lord from now on in the ways He has planned.

Thus, a true conversion is a great treasure, and both the faithful and the priests should treat the new convert with great care and offer him all their help.

We can and must ask God for great things! Let us not ask Him to annihilate our enemies, to take vengeance on them and to bring about justice. Let us rather ask for their conversion and let us hold on to a promise that God the Father pronounces in his Message to Mother Eugenia Ravasio; a private revelation that I have repeatedly quoted and recommended. These are his words:

“If somebody went and talked to these souls, abandoned to their superstitions, or to so many others who call Me God because they know I exist but not that I am close to them; if somebody said to them that their Maker is their Father as well, and that He thinks of them and is concerned with them, that He surrounds them with intimate affection in their sorrows and dejection, this would obtain the conversion of the most stubborn ones, and these conversions would be more numerous and firm, that is, more persevering.”