

Today on this feast of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus - one of the most important events in the history of the world in spreading the Gospel across the known world and whose writings have deeply influenced the whole of Christianity. It is important to understand what led to his conversion, what his conversion truly was, and what it means for our conversion.

First, St. Paul's conversion seems to be, at least partially, the miraculous result of St. Stephen's prayers. When the first Christian martyr was being stoned to death outside the Jerusalem Gate that now bears his name, the stone-throwing assassins were all laying their cloaks at the feet of Saul, showing that he was presiding over the execution. St. Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," as he was asking Jesus to receive his spirit, echoing Jesus' own words from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." These prayers - Stephen's and Jesus' - were heard. God didn't hold this sin against Saul. And Jesus Christ met him on the road to Damascus to give him through that forgiveness the gift of conversion.

That brings us to what his conversion was. Many Christians believe St. Paul's conversion is like most conversions we know of, from a faithless to a faith-full life. But that wasn't Saul's conversion at all. His was from a false idea of a holy life to a true understanding of a holy life.

Saul was a zealous follower of God. He had come down from Turkey to Jerusalem to study at the feet of the greatest rabbi of the age, Gamaliel. As a young man, he had such zeal to keep the community of Israel together that he made it his mission to try to stomp out the heretical sect that was dividing Judaism and blasphemously claiming that a carpenter from Nazareth not only was the Messiah, but the Son of God and would destroy the holy Temple. That's why he was hunting Christians down.

In the persecution of the Church, he was the furthest thing, for example, from Herod, who hunted down the baby Jesus in order to preserve his own privileges. Paul's conversion was, rather, from a false idea that we are saved by our external adherence to all the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law, to the true one that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We are saved by Christ's work, not our own. The culmination of the saving life of faith he wrote about in his letter to the Galatians when he said, "I have been crucified with Christ and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:20). The true notion of holiness is to die to ourselves so that the Risen Christ truly can live within us, reign within us, sanctify and save us and make us his instruments to co-redeem the world.

Holiness is union with God. Since we are saved by grace, and grace is not a thing but a participation as a creature in the life of the Creator, Christian conversion must be continual, because it's based on a continued encounter with the Lord, as he seeks in us to form us more and more in his image. It's a death and resurrection. In St. Paul's life we see that conversion was not a one-time thing but a continuous reality as he continued to grow in the Gospel that he was fearlessly and faithfully proclaiming.

St. Paul's conversion brings us to consider our own. Many of those who come to Church, thanks be to God, don't have to convert from a wicked life of sin. But many of us, like our Christian brothers and sisters do need to convert from a defective notion of the Christian life. Some Christians are minimalists, coming to Church "when they can," praying when they've accomplished everything

else that was really “important” to do and still have the energy, and keeping the commandments “as best they can” without being “fanatical” about never breaking them.

Similarly, many of us are legalists, thinking that if we “pray, pay and obey,” that’s all the Lord asks. If we attend more Sundays than not, avoid mortal sins, follow the regulations of the Parishes Act 2013, steadfastly guarding our notion of “church”, then we’re setting ourselves up for the eternal hall of faith.

Others of us are gnostics, thinking that as long as we “know” the truth, then we don’t really have to live it, similar to St. Paul in his Pharisaical days, thinking that all that really matters is our own action. Others think they can live the faith all on their own, without the other members of the Christian community, without a real familial love of neighbour. Others think that all God wants of us is personal piety, without our imitating St. Paul in trying to spread the Gospel to all we know.

We can multiply the examples, but the point is that many of us, while not necessarily living bad lives, are not fully living by faith in the Son of God, we’re not crucifying ourselves to the world and the world to ourselves, we’re not seeking to become perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect, we’re not even making an effort to receive God’s grace truly to embody the beatitudes.

Many of us need to be converted from a defective idea of the spiritual life, of God’s will and hopes for us, to a true understanding. It’s a day in which we’re called to enter more deeply into Christ’s death and live a new life. It’s a day in which we learn how to live far more deeply by faith in the Son of God who loves us and gives his life for us.

Today is a day in which we pray for the conversion of so many who persecute Christ without even knowing it, those who are caught up in sins for which he was crucified, those who are persecuting his body and making martyrs across the globe. It’s a day for us to pray for our own conversion from any shallow or deficient understanding of the holy life to which God is calling us. It’s a day in which we pray for the grace, like St. Paul, to be so converted that we will say, “Woe to me” if I do not share this gift!

The great strength of St Paul came from his encounter with Jesus Christ not merely on the road to Damascus but every time he, with the early Church, “took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” The same Lord who met him on the road to Damascus comes here to meet us this morning in this blessed Eucharist.

Fr Robert Newton