

Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul

January 22-23, 2022

Readings: Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Acts 22:3-16; Mark 16:15-18

As we approach a special day in the life of this Cathedral parish, with permission we have moved the observance of the Feast of the Conversion of Paul to today. We anticipate this day with joy in honor of our patron. This feast is one of significance not just for this parish, but in the life of the Church in general. Who among us is not in need of conversion?

God works in mysterious ways. How many times have we heard that in our lives? Very many I surmise, and rightly so. The mysterious workings of God are manifest in the person of one Saul of Tarsus, a scrupulous observer of the Law of Moses, a Pharisee of the first rate, who thanks largely to Caravaggio's 1601 A.D. masterpiece, we visualize being "thrown from his horse" on the road to Damascus. And it made all the difference!

One thing though was required of Saul, which is often left out of the picture. Saul was not forced to accept the reality that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. He was invited in a most peculiar way, yet he exercised his free will to accept the grace of Christ into his life. God, who is ever patient with us sinners, waiting for us to take the bait. God simply would not force His will upon us, without our consequent free choice.

This may be little consolation to families who suffer with the knowledge of young adult children who have seemingly abandoned the faith. Very few families of faith are untouched by this trend. We priests bring to prayer your struggles. We ought never give up on anyone, for God is not finished working in their lives, any more than he is in ours.

For many people, conversion is a frightening word, because no matter how carefully you package it, it will always sound to some as if there is something wrong with them. To others it refers only to a movement from unbelief to belief. Some would say that "conversion" is the wrong word

to describe Saul, who was a fervent believer. But in fact, it is an appropriate term because at its heart, conversion refers to a change of heart, and this is equally applied to believers and unbelievers.

Today's feast stands as a reminder of our continual need for conversion. So too with the Church. This was Vatican II's urgent summons to pray, work and hope that the image of Christ may shine ever more brightly on the face of the Church.<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesia sancta simul et semper purificanda*. Vatican II spoke of the Church, at the same time holy and in need of purification. Conversion is a personal appropriation that goes beyond a theological truth; rather, it effects a deep inner change of heart.

Saturday marked yet another infamous day in our nation, as we have reached forty-nine years of legalized abortion in this country. While there are good reasons for hope among our Catholic youth, it is equally true that the strongest proponents of protection for life in the womb are married couples and people of faith. Both demographics are in decline.

As Church attendance continues to decline as also the number of people seeking marriage, we have our work cut out for us. We need to engage people who do not fit in the typical demographic of the pro-life generation, sharing the reasons for our defense of those most vulnerable among us. None is more at risk than the unborn child in the womb.

The *Dobbs v. Jackson Mississippi* case offers the possibility that the issue of abortion may be returned to the individual states. Still, regardless, the battle for innocent life would continue, just on a different playing field. Ultimately, conversion of heart will be needed on a very large scale. But we hope, pray and work tirelessly. We never give up.

For some, conversion can be radical as in the case of Saul, as recounted in today's reading. It can also be gradual, organic, periodic and incomplete.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, (cf. Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, 15) *ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT* 2 April 2004

Periods of spiritual fervor are followed by moments of doubt or laziness, *acedia*. The one best poised to effect conversion of heart is the one we see each morning in the mirror. It is marked by the seemingly insignificant ways in which we challenge ourselves. Do I really need this comfort that I derive from food or drink? How long will I hold onto this grudge towards someone? Can I finally let go? Can God truly free me from this addiction to sensuality? The list goes on. Always remain hopeful.

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature.” With these words, Jesus exhorts the Apostles, giving them a glimpse into the mission for which he called them. Could they have known the magnitude? Had they known, would they have had second thoughts?

The Feast of the Conversion of Paul is a sign of hope that God is not done with us, that we must never put a timetable on God’s love and grace. Perhaps the best is yet to come.