

Conversion

Acts 22:3-16
Psalm 117:1bc, 2
1 Cor 7:29-31
Mk 16:15-18

Today we're celebrating the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul instead of the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. We don't often celebrate the feast days of saints on a Sunday, because the Feast of the Lord takes precedence almost always. But Pope Benedict last June declared a year dedicated to St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, and so celebration of the day of his conversion this Sunday is allowed.

Paul, this brilliant, learned, and most eloquent of men was struck down by a blinding light as he neared Damascus where he was travelling to continue his persecution of Jews who were followers of Jesus Christ. Our first reading today is Paul's own account of his conversion which he related during his trial before a Roman magistrate in Jerusalem. He had been a violent persecutor of Christians, present at the stoning of the first Christian martyr, the deacon Stephen, and as he says in his own words, "I persecuted this Way [that is the followers of Christ] to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison." But when the glory of the Lord struck him down and he heard the voice of Jesus he had a theophany – a direct experience of God – which is granted to very few.

Even so, Paul's conversion – that is, his complete turning around from persecutor to proclaimer of the Gospel – was not an instantaneous thing. No. He had to be led by the hand into Damascus, to the street called Straight, where he fasted for three days. There a disciple of the Lord named Ananias would find him, lay hands on him – restoring his sight – and tell him his mission was to be the Lord's witness before all peoples. Then, he was baptized to wash away his sins and immediately began preaching the Gospel. A complete turnaround in his personal life.

Conversion – from the Latin *conversio* – to turn around completely. In the Christian economy it means turning your life away from sin and toward God's grace – a U-turn on the road to perdition toward the road to paradise.

Although some of you, myself included, have had a conversion experience leading them to become Christian or Catholic, I'll bet none of us here has ever experienced God or Jesus in such a direct way – am I right? Anyone here ever experience Jesus as directly as St Paul on the road to Damascus? I didn't think so.

Most Catholics baptized as infants can't remember a time when they didn't consider themselves Christian. Raised in the faith, they've grown to maturity not by the great leap of an individual conversion experience but by small steps fostered by a nurturing congregation. They've grown up in the Church, received the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, first Holy Communion, and Confirmation – and matured into Christian disciples, experiencing through the virtues of faith, hope, and charity a true conversion of heart that lets them follow in the footsteps of the Lord. They've answered Christ's call for all of us to be holy, as our Father in heaven is holy. At least some of them have.

But for others – caught up in the rationalist, secular, highly individualistic culture of America – that conversion never comes. Even with the grace they receive through the sacraments of initiation their hearts turn away from the Lord, not toward Him. They stop coming to mass every Sunday, they become Easter/Christmas Catholics. Some stop coming altogether. They stop praying. They stop believing.

So both conversion and, if you will, un-conversion are processes that occur over time.

It's hard to be a disciple of Christ. It's especially hard in our culture. Christian discipleship is “far too demanding for the individual.” I can say with certainty that “only within a caring [faith] community will the believer find those resources and relationships that forge an enduring faith.”¹ We have that community here in the Church. We especially have it here in this grace-filled St. Margaret Mary parish. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, for we are adopted children of God. We are the body of which he is the head. And when we go out from our churches into the world each Sunday, we become in the words of St. Teresa of Avila, the hands, the feet, the eyes with which Jesus looks with compassion on this world.

Our world is in great need of compassion. Torn by warfare, by tyranny, by terrorism, by the inhumanity of great poverty, by threats to our environment – God's creation is not a pretty place to look at today. As true and earnest disciples of our Lord, we must each take up the task of bringing Gospel values into the world in our work, in our thought, in our every day deeds, so that the world itself may experience conversion.

Once he had experienced his great conversion, St Paul never faltered. Listen to what St John Chrysostom wrote of him:

Paul, more than anyone else, has shown us what man really is, and in what our nobility consists, and of what virtue this particular animal is capable. Each day he aimed ever higher; each day he rose up with greater ardor and faced with new eagerness the dangers that threatened him. He summed up his attitude in the words: *I forget what is behind me and push on to what lies ahead. . . .*²

With the example of St Paul before us, we must also be willing to face injustice and abuse, even real danger in defense of our faith and the values it teaches us – all in the hope of converting the world. In this country we need a conversion of heart which will lead to a conversion of values – only then will it seem normal and right to all our citizens that life is truly the most precious and important thing we have. Life in all its stages. Only if all – or even if most – of the people of this country experience a conversion of heart will we see abortion end, will we see the threat of euthanasia disappear, will we see research on stem cells confined to adult rather than embryonic stem cells, will we see the end of the death penalty. Only with a conversion of heart – the hearts of all our people.

For the 44th time in our history we have just seen a peaceful transition of power from one President to another. With the inauguration of a new President and the seating of a new Congress, many in our land see this as a time of great hope – hope for change, hope for an end to war, hope that we will be able to pull ourselves out of an ever-deepening recession. But even in this time of hope, our Bishops fear that we may be facing the gravest threat ever to our belief that human life is sacred at every stage of its development, a threat greater even than Roe v Wade.

The so-called “Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA)”, introduced in the Congress in 2007 – where it has languished in committee – now has a real chance of being revived and passed by Congress. President Obama, who cosponsored the bill in 2007, has promised that if FOCA passes Congress he will sign it into law.³ The USCCB has done an analysis of this bill and they believe that FOCA would:

1. Eliminate regulations that protect women from unsafe abortion clinics.
2. Force tax payers to fund abortion
3. Require all states to allow “partial birth” and other late-term abortions
4. Require states to offer abortions by non-physicians

5. Violate the freedom of conscience of nurses, doctors, and hospitals – yes, that means Catholic hospitals and medical personnel could be sued for refusing to provide abortions under the ‘non-discrimination’ clause of this bill
6. Strip the rights of parents to be involved in their minor daughters’ abortion decisions⁴
- 7.

This pernicious bill would wipe out all of the modest gains made by pro-life forces since the Roe v Wade decision of the Supreme Court 36 years ago, because section 6 of FOCA retroactively applies its provisions to every “Federal, State, and local statute, ordinance, regulation, administrative order, decision, policy, practice, or other action enacted, adopted, or implemented before, on, or after the date of enactment of this Act.”⁵ Think of it – every hard-fought gain to limit abortion, particularly the hideous practice of partial birth abortions; to secure the right to inform women about the dangers of abortion; the right and responsibility to participate in our minor daughters’ decisions about abortion; and to refuse to fund abortions with our tax dollars – all this would be swept away by FOCA.

This past Thursday, on the 36th anniversary of Roe v Wade, over 200,000 Americans marched on the national mall in the annual March for Life. Eighty pro-life members of Congress have sent President Obama a letter urging him to back off on his support for FOCA. This weekend, Catholic parishes all over the country are sponsoring a massive postcard campaign to urge members of Congress not to take up or pass this bill. Postcards pre-addressed to your congressman and senator asking them to oppose FOCA and to reply to you in writing about what they will do to prevent passage of FOCA are available at tables in the courtyard and in the front of the church after mass. Please take the trouble to sign these postcards and join your voices to the voices of Americans all over this country who, like St Paul, have experienced a true conversion of heart and are ready to raise their voices in the face of entrenched opposition to proclaim the Gospel of Life, to declare that all life is precious, and to proclaim again and again that we cannot live in true freedom and equality if the most innocent among us, unborn children, can be murdered at will.

¹ Wall, Robert W. “The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol X, p. 155.

² Chrysostom, St. John. Hom. 2 de laudibus sancti Pauli in The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol III, p. 1322. Catholic Book Publishing Co., New York, 1975.

³ Obama Statement on 35th Anniversary of Roe v. Wade Decision, Chicago, IL | January 22, 2008 found on the web on Jan 22, 2009 at http://www.barackobama.com/2008/01/22/obama_statement_on_35th_annive.php

⁴ Moses, Michael F. Associate General Counsel, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Legal Analysis of the Freedom of Choice Act. Memorandum dated August 15, 2008 found on the web at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/FOCA/index.shtml> Legal Analysis link.

⁵ Text of S.1173, Freedom of Choice Act, United States Senate, found on the internet on 1/22/2009 at <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/110-s1173/text>