

Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul -
January 25, 2009

Introduction

Today's recounting of St. Paul's dramatic conversion on the way to Damascus is all very familiar to us, isn't it? (However, parenthetically, it is curious that we often hear of Paul being knocked from his horse, when in fact there is no mention of any beast of burden in the story from the Acts of the Apostles.)

This memorial of Paul's turn from a bitter enemy of Christ's followers to becoming one of them comes precisely at the close of the Pauline Year. Perhaps we have not heard as much as we might have about this but on January 29 we shall close an entire year during which many Catholic circles have celebrated this Apostle and his enormous gifts to the Church.

I

A question comes to mind as we hear again about Jesus' intervention in Paul's life and his turning toward the Lord: do we think that this event was unique to Paul; or that such a turnabout no longer happens. To both these questions I would answer unequivocally - not at all!

I'm sure you will agree that anyone who has lived an examined life and who has observed others carefully knows that God calls each of us to conversion, not only once but constantly throughout our lives.

II

By way of example, let me tell you the story of a friend of mine. I first came to know this man during his years as a high-powered lobbyist in Washington. He was one of those "K Street" wheelers and dealers we hear about. Along the line a friend of this man's invited him to visit El Salvador and that experience started my friend on a steady journey that has taken him from his comfortable home in Northern Virginia to a much more modest house in a poorer section of Washington; from the halls of power to directing a night shelter/soup kitchen for the street people of our Capital.

And I'm sure we all know similar conversion stories.

III

Let me also suggest another dimension of conversion on this Feast of St. Paul - the conversion asked of entire communities and the Church itself.

Those of us who are older remember vividly the conversion in Catholicism represented by the Second Vatican Council. It's interesting to note that on this 25th of January 2009 we mark the 50th anniversary of Blessed Pope John XXIII announcing the Council.

IV

Another call to ecclesial conversion has taken place among us over the past century plus in the emergence of Catholic Social Teaching. Since the end of the 19th Century popes, bishops and theologians have gifted the Church with in-depth reflections on virtually every problem facing modern societies in the light of God's word. While this treasure has not received nearly the attention it deserves in our preaching and teaching, it remains as the Holy Spirit's call to a conversion on the part of the People of God.

Conclusion

Let me draw this reflection to a close by citing one outstanding statement from Catholic Social Teaching - one which in a way sums up much of what is contained in that teaching. In 1970 representatives of every bishop's conference in the world gathered for their triennial meeting - these are called synods. In the document that resulted from that meeting we find the following amazing words: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as constitutive [essential] to the preaching of the Gospel."