

THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL

By Jim Seghers

Pope Benedict XVI announced a special jubilee year dedicated to St. Paul, saying the Church needs modern Christians who will imitate the apostle's missionary energy and spirit of sacrifice. The Pauline year will run from June 28, 2008, to June 29, 2009. It marks the approximately 2,000th anniversary of the saint's birth. Although the jubilee year will have special meaning to Catholics, this focus on St. Paul's life and teaching will have great appeal to all Christians. Protestants in particular have a great devotion to St. Paul's letters, and many Protestant scholars have contributed significantly to the understanding of Pauline theology. In honor of the jubilee year, my intention is to devote the next twelve reflections on St. Paul, beginning with this examination of his conversion.

The narration of St. Paul's conversion is found in Acts 9:1-19; 22: 4, 7-16; 26:9-18. However, that remarkable event is inseparably linked to Stephen's martyrdom. When Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, St. Luke depicts an amazing scene: "All who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). They listened in wrapped attention to Stephen's hard-hitting denunciation, which drew on Old Testament passages familiar to these elders. He concluded with these spine tingling words:

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it" (Acts 7:51-53).

We are familiar with the tragedy that followed:

"But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:57-59).

The unexpected insertion of Saul into the narrative is significant. It identified Paul as the person who sanctioned Stephen's murder. It also introduced Paul's attempt to crush the infant Church. The next chapter opens with the ominous words: "And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1). However, I'm getting ahead of the story.

Something else occurred that inseparably links Stephen and Paul. As Stephen was stoned he prayed: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). There is little doubt that the sacrifice and prayer of this first martyr was the instrument Jesus used to bring Saul the extraordinary grace of his conversion. It's an enduring illustration of the power of prayer, and a perpetual reminder of Jesus' command: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). This is how an authentic Christian gets even with those who harm him.

Saul was not content with Stephen's death. He initiated the first persecutions of Christians. It was a conflagration that would spread across the Empire and eventually claim his own life. In his rage against Christians Saul threw both men and women in prison, attempted to force them to blaspheme Jesus, and voted to put them to death (Acts 22:4; 26:11). The expansion of this reign of terror motivated his fateful journey to Damascus.

The shock of encountering Jesus in the glory cloud of God's presence, the shekinah, utterly shattered Paul's worldview. Physically blinded this brilliant Pharisee began to clearly see spiritually for the first time. In that awful moment he acknowledged Jesus as "Lord" (Acts 9:5) using the Greek word that is used in the Bible more than 6,100 times for the sacred name of God. Fully submissive, Saul obeyed Jesus' instruction, "Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told about everything appointed for you to do" (Acts 22:10). Here we gain additional insight. God requires obedience, but he only gives the information needed for the present moment.

When Jesus instructed Ananias to visit Paul, he informed him that Paul was a "chosen instrument" (Acts 9:15). Then he added: "I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16). Paul will learn the great lesson that suffering, the cross, is an essential part of every Christian life. Jesus asserted: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:27).

Years later St. Paul would write to the Romans:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4).

The rich meaning of this passage cannot be explored fully here. Suffice it to say that the death and resurrection Christians experience in baptism becomes a life long challenge to embrace the cross. Few Christians receive the grace of martyrdom, but every Christian is challenged to die to pride and selfishness. Paul did not receive the newness of life into Christ when he submitted to Jesus on the road to Damascus. His sins were forgiven and he became a Christian when he was baptized. Thus, Ananias instructed Paul: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name" (Acts 22:16).

Let's consider one last reflection before we leave the subject of St. Paul's conversion. By any standard, the murder of Stephen and the persecution of Christians initiated by Paul were evil. He could not undo it. Paul lived the remainder of his life with the memory of these awful deeds. It prompted him to write: "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (1 Cor 15:9). Similarly, before our bad example, scandal, and injustices we are also helpless to repair the damage, but that is not the end of the story.

Jesus can draw a greater good from the evil we have done. It is in this sense that the liturgy of Holy Week speaks of Adam's sin as the "happy fault," because it occasioned so

great a Redeemer. Only Jesus can draw straight lines with crooked and broken instruments. He paid the whole price on the cross, and by drawing us into the cross he unites us with his redemptive suffering. What we observe in the subsequent history of Saul of Tarsus is St. Paul the great missionary. His life is a lasting witness that Jesus' reparation is universal. He can repair immediately and totally. He did it to Saul and he will do it to us. In that cooperation, which he always desires but never needs, Jesus repairs the damage we have done, and in us extends his mercy and love to others. In this way we embrace Paul's missionary energy and his spirit of sacrifice.