

Saul's conversion story recounts the tale of a zealous believer who persecuted those who were leaving the Jewish faith he cherished for the enemy, the Christian Way. In his own words, he tells us: "I persecuted this Way to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison" (Acts 22:4). In order to help him see the truth, the beauty and the goodness of the Christian Way, Jesus blinded him for a time and asked: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Our Gospel reading today is the great commission from the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus commissioned the apostles to go to the ends of the earth and proclaim the good news. Throughout history, many zealous men and women have proclaimed the good news and won hearts and minds for the Christian Way. Unfortunately, in the 19th and 20th centuries some did this with the same destructive passion of Saul before his conversion. Missionaries went to Africa and preached their brand of Christianity by explaining what was wrong about other Christian denominations. The people who listened to competing missionaries were convinced that something must be wrong. God seeks to unify; the devil seeks to divide. As the Holy Spirit helped to enlighten the zealous Christians who were initially blind, they began to see and recognize their divisive ways. Once the scales fell from their eyes, they began to pray for Christian Unity.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity spans 8 days from January 18th to the 25th, from the original feast of the Chair of Saint Peter (Jan. 18) to the Conversion of Saint Paul (Jan. 25).ⁱ What began on a remote hillside fifty miles outside of New York City in 1908, has grown over the century into a worldwide observance. Each year the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Christian Unity works hand in hand with the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches to develop a theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The theme this year, 2021, comes from the Gospel of John. "Abide in my love... you will bear much fruit" (Jn 15:1-17). The theme joins phrases from chapter 15 verses 9 and 5. When Christians earnestly look at their differences in belief, we see how difficult it is to work for Christian Unity. Overtime we seem to grow farther and farther apart in doctrine and belief. To come closer, we need God to move our hearts and minds. We don't know how to unite on our own, but we do believe that with God, all things are possible. Jesus instructs, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (Jn 15:7-8). In humility, we turn to God praying for growth in understanding that one day we may be united in the way that Jesus desires.

Speaking on Christian Unity, Saint John Paul II taught: "Jesus himself, at the hour of his Passion, prayed 'that they may all be one' (Jn 17:21). This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his Church and in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ's mission. ... Christ's words 'that they may be one' are thus his prayer to the Father that the Father's plan may be fully accomplished" (Ut Unum Sint #9)ⁱⁱ. Jesus' prayer for unity is a great challenge to every Christian.

With God's help, Paul regained his sight and went onto be a most powerful witness to the Christian Way. Jesus transformed all of his sinful zeal to help him rise again as the most powerful of witnesses. With God's help we can see past our animosity, distrust, and ignorance to each become more powerful witnesses abiding in God's love and bearing much fruit.

ⁱ geii.org/week_of_prayer_for_christian_unity/theme_announcement_2021.html

ⁱⁱ vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html