

## CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL PASTORELLE COMMUNITY,

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It's somewhat ironical, isn't it, that on this one feast day St. Paul has to himself—he has to share 29 June with St. Peter—we don't hear in the Scripture readings anything written by himself. We hear the account of his conversion from St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. And, of course, the Gospel has to be from one of the four, in this case the ending of St. Mark, which does powerfully describe Our Lord's sending the disciples on worldwide mission.

I think, though, that St. Paul would be happy with the description given here by St. Luke. Luke, of course, gives no less than three accounts of Paul's conversion in the Acts of the Apostles (9:1-22; 22:3-16; 26:12-23). We have heard today the first one, from chapter 9, which is in fact the longest. And one interesting thing about it is that it tells as much about the disciple Ananias of Damascus as it does about Paul. If Paul had to be converted to look upon Jesus of Nazareth in a totally new way, so Ananias had to be converted to look upon *Paul* in a totally new way: no longer as a persecutor but as a dear 'brother' in the Lord (9:17).

We see here something characteristic of St. Luke. In both his works—the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles—we find the following pattern: one person has a significant spiritual experience, while at the same time another person or party is having a separate experience. Then the story brings them together so that each one's experience is deepened and enriched by that of the other party; in effect, it all becomes *community* experience.

The opening case of this is of course the Visitation, when Mary, who has received the annunciation that she is to be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God, goes to share her experience with Elizabeth. The moment Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, her unborn child, John the Baptist, leaps in her womb, beginning already his role of announcing the coming of the Messiah (Luke 1:39-56). Elizabeth's response confirms for Mary that the promise made her by the Lord has been fulfilled; she breaks out in her canticle (the *Magnificat*) of thanksgiving and praise. Later, the shepherds have a vision of angels telling them of the birth of the Saviour and they go to Bethlehem to find the infant there, lying in a manger, just as they had been told (2:8-21). We see the same pattern in the Presentation in the Temple, with Simeon and Anna (2:22-38), and, at the end of the Gospel, the disciples who have had a meeting with the risen Lord at Emmaus, head back to Jerusalem to share the good news, only to be told, 'Yes, the Lord is risen and has appeared to Simon' (24:13-35).

So here, according to the same pattern, we have St. Paul having his turnaround meeting with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. The encounter leaves him blind and helpless, until Ananias, who has also experienced a message from the Lord, completes his incorporation into the community of faith, through healing (the laying on of hands), through baptism and instruction. So, through the ministry of Ananias, the community at Damascus comes to take the one who had been persecuting them so severely, into their life—and, as

Acts tells it, almost immediately into their mission: Paul begins to preach in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus is the Son of God (9:20).

What St. Luke is clearly getting at here is that you can't be converted to Christ so that henceforth it's just you and him, you and Jesus. To be converted to Christ is to be converted to life in his *community*. Did he not make this point by saying to Paul, who was persecuting his disciples, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?' (Acts 9:4-5)?

Let me just mention some ways in which this pattern might relate to you as a Pastorelle community.

First of all, precisely as a religious community, you are committed not just to live together as but to *share your faith with one another*. As St. Paul would say to the Corinthians, each one has a distinctive gift of the Spirit, given to build up, not just the individual but the community of faith.

Secondly, you are, in your vocation as Pastorelle, all *Ananias's*—you bring your faith and your human gifts, especially of sympathy, healing, and compassion, to those—like Paul immediately after his conversion—who need healing and deeper integration into the community of faith.

Thirdly, this personal mission to individuals and small communities is the local nucleus and fount of a *worldwide mission*, as described in the Gospel. You are an international missionary congregation; almost all of you are currently living or have at other times lived away from your country and culture of birth. I'm not sure whether any of you could say that you have cast out devils or picked up snakes or been unharmed through drinking deadly poison. Some may indeed have had the gift of tongues. These were the signs that accompanied the proclamation of the Gospel in the early church. They were not necessarily meant for all times and in all places. For St. Paul, the essential thing is that the Good News of God's love and the victory of Christ over sin and death be proclaimed.

Let us hear him, finally, speaking for himself, describing in his own words his conversion and his mission:

2 Cor. 4: 5 For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For it is the God who said, "*Let light shine out of darkness*," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ... 13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith as in the Scripture—"*I believed, and so I spoke*"—we

also believe, and so we speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. 15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

You see there what Paul indicates as the ultimate goal of all his activity and mission: to increase thanksgiving to God. What God wants from us human beings in the end is simply this: to be grateful.