

HOMILY

The Conversion of St. Paul *January 25, 2009*

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This weekend we take a short time-out from Ordinary Time to commemorate the conversion of Paul. Who was Paul? He was originally named Saul after the first King of Israel, which may not have been completely appropriate for King Saul was very tall and Saul of Tarsus was a rather short man. Indeed, his new nickname “Paul” means just that: “little man.” He was a little man, but big in influence. As St. John Chrysostom, who lived and preached in Bethlehem in the Fourth Century said of Paul, “He was five feet tall, but with a reach beyond the stars.”

At first Saul was a religious fanatic. He was determined to wipe out any person who followed the way of Jesus of Nazareth. That was before the day when he was blinded, knocked to the ground and transformed into a totally new person. For the rest of his life (over thirty years) he was to be a missionary for the gospel.

When Paul could not talk to people directly, he communicated through the medium of letters. Even while he was in prison for over five years, first in Caesarea and then Rome, he continued to write. Tradition has it that he was beheaded around A.D. 64 in Nero’s anti-Christian persecution. His martyrdom gave even greater urgency to his writings and today makes up one-fourth of the New Testament. As a pastor of souls, Paul wrote letter after letter to address situations in the early church community. I encourage you to read a letter a week in the remaining part of this Jubilee Year.

Is there anything Paul would say to us? Let’s suppose he would write us a letter. How would it read? What would he say?

Paul, called by the will of God to be an Apostle of Jesus.

To the church in America, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus called to be saints together in the new society of Christ’s Church, which will reveal the glory of God for all to see.

Grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

How long I have wished to see you and meet you face to face, but the authorities here have other plans for me. As God is my witness, without ceasing, I mention you always in my prayers, asking for your faithful development as the Body of Christ in America.

While I have not been to your country, I have received many reports about it. I marvel at your technical advancements and your material achievements. You have built the highest standards of living on earth; and in this respect, your society is the envy of the world. Your inventions and discoveries in the fields of science and medicine have brought incalculable blessings to uncounted people around the world.

But I am also told that in your society poor families are evicted from their homes when rich investors buy the building. I am told that your society tolerates ever-higher levels of unemployment and homelessness as the price some must pay for the affluence of others. I am told that in your land some people can receive great wealth from the labors of others, while other people can labor all day long and still be poor from the low wages they receive. In all of these and in many other ways, I am told your society values property rights above human rights.

It has also been suggested to me that it is difficult for your society to agree on common solutions to common problems—much less make sacrifices for the common good—because everyone is conditioned to thinking only of their own interests as opposed to the interests of others.

Most disturbing of all, I am told that the unbelievers in your land adhere to a secular gospel of supply and demand, of self-interest, and survival of the fittest because of the vast material rewards this worldly god produces. Remember, what you call *secularism* I have called *idolatry*, and that the systematic worship of any idol will inevitably bring a nation to ruin.

Is our Christian faith really meant to be restricted to the narrow sphere of private morals? Is the Christian law of love really meant just for individual lives, while society as a whole is governed by laws of greed and selfishness?

Dear children of Our Lord, you must know that even the wealthiest society is not held together by money or things. Societies which succeed and endure are bonded together by spiritual values like compassion, community, and even love. Your technical priests, the economists, will scoff at this and talk instead of inefficiency and productivity. But I remind you Christians that the wisdom of this world is folly without God. I offer you, not a gospel which sells, but a gospel which saves. I am only reminding you of your higher calling, which Jesus himself has given you by choosing you for his church. You live in a world and are part of the world. But you are not a mere reflection of the world. Instead, you are a new creation, a new society of people bound together and imbued with the mind of and the heart of Jesus.

Once you were no people. But now you are God's people—a chosen race. A holy nation, you are imitators of God and, as such, you must lead lives worthy of your calling. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

