

Friday of the Third Week Easter Season
Homily of Bishop Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
April 23, 2021

**Paul's Conversion Experience on the Road to Damascus and our
Personal Conversion in the Easter Season**

*I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up and go into the city, where you will
be told what to do. (Acts of the Apostles 9:5-6)*

With the many Resurrection appearances in the Gospels that we pray and celebrate during the Easter Season, we sometimes forget that Paul of Tarsus himself had his own experience of a Resurrection appearance on the Road to Damascus.

We just heard about Paul's encounter with the Risen Lord in the first reading from the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and we celebrate the Feast of St. Paul's Conversion on our Catholic liturgical calendar on January 25th.

What is the relationship between the Feast of St. Paul's Conversion celebrated on January 25th and the Feast of the Martyrdom of St. Stephen that we celebrate on December 26th?

Paul was complicit in the murder of Saint Stephen, the first martyr. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that those who were stoning Stephen to death "laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul." (Acts 7:58).

St. Stephen's glowing, peaceful face and his forgiveness of his persecutors as he died must have made an indelible impression on Saul, and prepared him for the experience of the Risen Lord that he had on the road to Damascus, when all of Saul's energetic personality previously focused on the persecution of Christianity suddenly became focused on the spread of Christianity.

In a blinding flash of light, the Risen Lord penetrated the inmost being of Saul – henceforth to be known as Paul – and shattered his resistance, causing a complete

change of mind and heart, a *metanoia*¹, that led him to be a “servant” and “apostle” of Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1)

We can never underestimate the power of a Catholic life lived with integrity and radiant vitality. How many potential “Saint Pauls” might we influence by radiating the power of Christ from deep within as Saint Stephen did?

St. Paul’s reversal was so striking and complete as to be almost unbelievable to his contemporaries. When the Lord spoke in a vision to Ananias to seek out Paul and lay hands on him to restore his sight, Ananias replied "Lord, I have heard from many sources about this man, what evil things he has done to your holy ones in Jerusalem." (Acts 9:13) It’s as though Ananias was politely asking the Lord if he really knew who this man was!

The great English churchman, theologian and writer, St. John Henry Cardinal Newman, meditated on how Paul’s conversion prepared him for his missionary role. He writes: “...his awful rashness and blindness, his self-confident, headstrong, cruel rage against the worshippers of the true Messiah, then his strange conversion, then the length of time that elapsed before his solemn ordination, during which he was left to meditate in private on all that had happened, and to anticipate the future – all this constituted a peculiar preparation for the office of preaching to a lost world, dead in sin. It gave him an extended insight, on the one hand, into the ways and designs of Providence, and, on the other hand, into the workings of sin in the human heart, and the various modes of thinking in which the mind is actually trained.”²

So much of the story of the early Church can be traced back to the contemplative and enthusiastic heart of Saint Paul ignited by his intimacy with the Risen Lord.

Saint Paul understood how sin works in human nature and how the Holy Spirit can completely transform habits of corruption. Saint Paul also understood how to influence non-Christian and anti-Christian mindsets with charity so as to be able to be an instrument of another mind’s enlightenment.

¹Cf. Roch A. Kereszty *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology* (Staten Island, NY: Communio Books), 40.

² John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons, Sermon 9, Saint Paul’s Conversion Viewed in Reference to his Office, The Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 290-291.

The best way that we can celebrate Saint Paul's missionary mysticism in the life of the Church in this Easter season is to go to the Risen Lord and ask Him about what deep and intimate conversion of life He is calling us to.³

³Cf. Bishop Michael Saltarelli's Pastoral Letter "Celebrating the Year of St. Paul," issued on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, January 25, 2008 to the People of God of the Diocese of Wilmington. Bishop Barres assisted Bishop Saltarelli in the research and writing of this Pastoral Letter. This homily draws directly and extensively from a section of that Pastoral Letter with some additions and modifications.