

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Conversion of Saint
Paul
January 25, 2015
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Most every saint's day in the church year memorializes the martyrdom (or otherwise death date) of the person being commemorated. There are a few exceptions made for birthdays, notable that of Our Lady and John the Baptist. But today is neither Saint Paul's birthday nor date of martyrdom. It is his *conversion* to Christian faith we recall and celebrate on January 25th each year.

That conversion took place while Saul (as he was formerly named) was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. And the incident is recorded not once or twice but *three* times in *The Acts of the Apostles*. The Bible clearly wants us to take notice of Saint Paul's Conversion!

When you read from any of these three accounts your impression is that Saul experienced something sudden, overwhelming, and as unexpected as an earthquake with no warning. None of this describes the way the Bible shows God's usual dealings with souls. Both in the Old and New Testaments we see Almighty God calling a soul patiently and over a period of time. That period often involved testing and trials. The target for conversion is often slow in coming to the light of faith. Almighty God was not abrupt with Abraham, Moses, Gideon, the boy Samuel, or the prophet Elijah. And Our Blessed Lord once described the divine process by which a soul comes to faith as like "a seed growing secretly." That leads us to a conclusion. The Conversion of Saint Paul was more likely a culminating point in a period of preparation. During all that time under God's Providence, Saul of Tarsus was a chosen vessel in the hand of God.

You remember Saul was present when Saint Stephen was martyred. Saul was consenting to this death. Stephen used his last breath to pray for those who were killing him. Saul witnessed that moment and heard those words. Much later, from Paul's epistles, we get to know this apostle to be man of keen spiritual sensitivity, with a vivid imagination, and as an acute observer of human nature. What Paul saw then in the death of Stephen must have left a deep and lasting impression. Many people who don't like what they see and hear go into denial. The initial reaction of Saul of Tarsus was to fight hard against the faith of Stephen. We can easily

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imagine Saul disturbed and haunted by the memory of Stephen's witness and martyrdom. It agitated Saul in his soul. We have a saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Was it working that way in Saul of Tarsus? For a while Saul crushed his uneasy conscience by throwing himself into the persecution of the Church. And he was successful! That is by his own admission. We are told Saul was heading to Damascus on precisely such an errand: to round up the Christians there and haul them into court in chains.

But there was trouble. Every time Saul captured Christians he brought them to trial and gave his evidence. Then Saul had to listen to the accused Christian declare his readiness to suffer and if need be to die for his faith in Jesus Christ. *It was just like Saint Stephen every time!* The sight and sound of such courage and devotion, and Saul's failure to stamp it out, was all the while preparing him for that moment on the Damascus Road when Our Lord said, "*Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?*" It was very much the blood of the martyrs being the seed of the Church."

Conversions happen every day. We commemorate Saint Paul's conversion not because it was so dramatic (which it was!) but because it was so important. No change of heart ever had more far reaching consequences than Saint Paul's conversion. If we ever wonder why such a dramatic moment never happens to us, we forget that most of the time a soul's progress in the faith is as Our Lord has described: "*The seed growing secretly.*" You cannot see a plant grow, even if you watch it all day. And we cannot measure our own spiritual progress with any accuracy. Only God can do that.

What we can do and *must* do is remain in the places where the grace of God has been promised to feed souls. Saul was doing that in a remarkable way by persecuting Christians. Thankfully such a way is not recommended for most of us! When we avail ourselves of Christ's Presence in Word and Sacrament in the more usual way, our souls are nourished for His service. We take the advice of the Collect we pray when we commemorate that incident on the Damascus Road. May we "show forth our thankfulness for Paul's wonderful conversion *by following the*

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holy doctrine which he taught.” Then we leave the rest, as Paul did, in God’s
gracious hands.