

The Conversion of Saint Paul

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Today is the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul: it is also the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Renowned spiritual writer, Gerry W Hughes, offers some thoughts on how the quest for unity requires just such a deep conversion in the hearts of all Christians.

The Conversion of St Paul is celebrated on 25th January, on the last day of what is now called 'The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity', a tradition begun one hundred years ago in 1908 by Lewis Thomas Wattson, an American Episcopalian priest, and Spencer Jones, an Anglican priest from Moreton - in - the - Marsh, Gloucestershire. It was then called 'The Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity'. Wattson became a Roman Catholic in 1909, believing that Christian unity could only be achieved by a return of all Christian denominations to Rome. The subsequent popularity and development of this movement towards Christian unity owes much to the work of a French Catholic priest, Paul Couturier, who had a deeper and wider understanding of the unity for which we are working and praying. He once wrote, 'We must pray, not that others be converted to us, but that we all may be converted to Christ'.

A lesser known character in the movement towards Christian unity was Max Josef Metzger, a German Catholic diocesan priest. He was a military chaplain in the First World War, emerged from it a confirmed pacifist, and later worked for international peace. It was working for peace that led him to become founder of a Christian Unity movement called *Una Sancta*, 'One Holy...'. Metzger realised that the Christian Churches, as long as they remained divided, could not be effective promoters of peace in the world.

The purpose of the *Una Sancta* movement was not that all Christians should become Roman Catholic, but that all Christian denominations should reform by becoming more Scripture-based, Christ-centred, true to their own tradition. In this way they would become more open to the action of the Holy Spirit, who alone can bring about the unity of the Church.



Metzger also founded houses of refuge for the homeless throughout Germany. In 1944 he was executed by the Nazis, having been betrayed by the courier, who was carrying his plans for the future of the German State to the Swedish Lutheran bishop of Uppsala.

What has all this to do with the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul? These two 20th century examples illustrate the continuing effect of Saint Paul's conversion on the foundation, development and spread of Christianity. The examples also indicate essential features of Christianity which are desperately needed in our own time, commonly described as a 'Post-Christian Age'.

Paul was a committed Pharisee, so utterly dedicated to the service of the God of Israel that he became an active persecutor of the new Christians, then called 'Followers of the Way.' When Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death, those who had given false witness against Stephen, 'put their clothes down at the feet of a young man called Saul.... Saul entirely approved of the killing.' (Acts 7:58 – 8:1)

Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles begins:

Saul was still breathing threats to slaughter the Lord's disciples. He had gone to the high priest and asked for letters addressed to the synagogue at Damascus, that would authorise him to arrest and take to Jerusalem any followers of 'the Way', the name first given to the followers of Jesus, men or women.

Suddenly, while he was travelling to Damascus and just before he reached the city, there came a light from heaven all around him. He fell to the ground, and then he heard a voice saying, "Saul,

Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, Lord?” he asked, and the voice answered, “I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me” (Acts 9:1-4).

In chapter 22 of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul gives his own account of his Damascus experience. Paul had been blinded by the brightness of the light which shone around him. A disciple called Ananias had a vision in which he was told to go to meet Saul. Ananias was reluctant, because he knew Saul as a persecutor of Christians, but “The Lord replied, “You must go all the same, because this man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before pagans and pagan kings and before the people of Israel.” So Saul, now known as Paul, became the apostle to the gentiles.

In the year 49 AD, fourteen years after his conversion, Paul went to Jerusalem and took part in the first Council of the Church, the Council of Jerusalem, which declared that pagan converts to Christianity were no longer bound by Jewish Law. It was Paul’s experience with the pagans and his reflections on that experience that led him write and develop his teaching, a teaching which enabled Christianity to develop, spread and affect billions of people. His Damascus experience is central to all his subsequent teaching: Jesus is the ‘image of the unseen God’, the source and living cause of all human salvation. The call of Christ is universal, gratuitous, inclusive of every human being. ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ However we treat any other person, whoever the other may be, that is the way we are relating to God. Christ’s kingdom is cosmic: it is affecting all creation.

Three quotations from Paul’s letters make this clear. This is what he has to say to the Galatians, one example of the inclusive nature of Christianity:

‘In Christ...there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:27-28).

And here is Paul writing on the cosmic nature of Christ:

He is the image of the unseen God and the first born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth; everything visible and everything invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers - all things were created through him and for him..... because God wanted all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross.’ (Colossians 1:15 -20)

And this cosmic Christ is also most intimate to every individual, as Paul tells the Ephesians:

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your inner self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth until, knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. (Ephesians 3:16-19).

When these characteristics of God, made manifest to us in Christ Jesus - the universality and inclusivity of Christ’s kingdom, yet intimacy, love and compassion for each individual - are preached and practised by Christians, then there is ‘love, joy , peace , patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness’ (Galatians 5:22-24). Where, in God’s name, there are power struggles, endless regulations and condemnations, and the management ethos takes over, then the way of Christ is dismissed as inefficient, ineffective, and the way of fear, timidity and violence takes its place.

Thank God for St Paul, and may his passionate love of Christ deepen our own faith and appreciation of God’s presence and power working in us and amongst us in ways which surpass our thinking and imagining.

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