

Reflections

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St. Paul's Conversion and Acceptance

The book of Acts mentions Saul only once before his conversion. It is in order to say that he was a witness and an accomplice in the execution of Stephen, the first Christian to die for his faith in the Resurrection. A faithful imitator of his Master, Stephen had prayed for his executioners so that God would forgive their crime: "Lord, don't hold them accountable for this sin."

They were the last words of the deacon martyr. God heard them and this is what explains the conversion of the persecutor.

Saul was approaching Damascus with the intention of bringing captive to Jerusalem the followers of Christ that he would find in the city. Suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him and he heard a voice saying to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, whom you persecute. Now get up and go into the city where you will be told what you must do."

From that unforgettable moment on, there could be no more doubts in Paul's heart: the Lord Jesus had truly resurrected because he himself had just encountered Him. Now he understood from where Stephen had received the inner strength which led him even to give his life for Christ.

Besides, Paul explained it – further on – to the Christians in Corinth, with other words. He wrote to them that all together we form one body whose head is Christ and we are the members. We share the same life of Christ and this is due to Baptism. And in this way, the community of the Church, the Family of God, grows around Christ resurrected.

And in this way – on the road to Damascus – the arrogant man who was Saul became an humble disciple of Christ: "What do You want me to do," he asks the Lord. The fanatic persecutor has been transformed into a generous apostle. He was convinced of having encountered the resurrected Lord in person and of having received from Him the forgiveness for his sins.

Nevertheless, he was still lacking something very important. He needed to enter fully into the community of the disciples of Christ, to be accepted as a true brother by all the others. But due to his background, it was not something easy. There are things which cannot be forgotten. Surely more than one Christian family in Jerusalem had lost a loved one in that persecution in which Saul had taken part.

It is understood, therefore, that many Christians of Jerusalem did not believe in his conversion. Paul would have remained outside the group, and perhaps he would have become discouraged and the Church would not have counted on this great Saint and Apostle without the Christian action of another man: Barnabas.

The Lord had forgiven them all their sins. Now it was up to them to forget and to forgive Paul. The Lord had gathered them into a great Family. Now they should have confidence in Paul, believe in his conversion and accept him with sincere love into their group.

And they did it, thanks to the intervention of that blessed man: Barnabas, the reconciler, the son of peace. The faithful of Jerusalem who embraced Paul, once again embraced the resurrected Lord.

That is how we should be. And if we omit it, we lose our time and very probably our eternity also. This is how the fruitfulness which the Lord wants to harvest in us should be.

The truth is that the fruitfulness we should give cannot always be seen. Little love is seen between men, and even less between Christians who go to Mass every Sunday. God would judge us by these words of St. John: "Let us not love by either words or mouth, but by works (deeds) and according to the truth."

There are the true fruits we shall give if we remain united to Jesus. These are the fruits which the resurrected Lord expects from us.

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