

## C111 De conversione sancti Pauli Apostoli Sermo

### St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. – On the Conversion of St. Paul (Acts 9:15)

Acts 9 (Douay transl.): 3 And as he went on his journey, it came to pass that he drew nigh to Damascus; and suddenly a light from heaven shined round about him. 4 And falling on the ground, he heard a voice saying to him: Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? 5 Who said: Who art thou, Lord? And he: I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the goad. 6 And he trembling and astonished, said: Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? 7 And the Lord said to him: Arise, and go into the city, and there it shall be told thee what thou must do. Now the men who went in company with him, stood amazed, hearing indeed a voice, but seeing no man. 8 And Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. But they leading him by the hands, brought him to Damascus. 9 And he was there three days, without sight, and he did neither eat nor drink... 15 And the Lord said to him: Go thy way; for this man is to me a vessel of election, to carry my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.

"This man is to me a vessel of election," (Acts 9:15). These words are found in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9. Today, in church, is the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. No saint other than St. Paul the Apostle has a feast of their conversion, not just for its own sake, because it was miraculous, but also for our sake, because he was a profitable [proficua] sinner, for in his conversion is shown how a sinner ought to be converted to Christ. But first we "Hail" the Virgin Mary.

By way of a short introduction to the material it must be known that the principal foundation and principle of the salvation of a man is the eternal election of God. Before God created the heavens and earth, or anything, already in the secret consistory of the Trinity the choice of those to be saved had been made, in such a way: There are so many lords, emperors, kings, dukes, and counts, etc. in the world. From these, the Father says, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, so many will be saved out of the love of justice, because they succeeded in the correction of their subjects. Also there were so many prelates, popes, cardinals, patriarchs, archbishops and bishops, etc. in the world. From these so many shall be saved by virtue of their charity and diligence toward their flocks. Also there are so many religious, from which so many shall be saved by virtue of obedience, serving their order. Also so many clergy, by virtue of their devotion. Also so many rich people, by virtue of their mercy. So many poor people, by virtue of their patience. Also so many women, by virtue of their integrity and continence. This election is the first and fundamental principle of the salvation of men and women. Authority: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and unspotted in his sight in charity. Who has predestinated us unto the adoption of children through Jesus Christ," our Lord (Eph. 1:4-5). And this choice is called predestination. And because St. Paul was chosen by God from all eternity, that he would be one of the greater saints in paradise, about him Christ spoke in the theme text, "Vessel of election;" he, Paul, is chosen – passively – for me.

But although divine election has been made in eternity, it has its execution in time, I say to you the practical execution of the election of St. Paul, as is contained in today's epistle. Luke tells the story in today's epistle, Acts 9, how he was persecuting Christians, as a wolf hunts sheep, to the extent that many Christians fled from Jerusalem, and so he himself said, " I shall then pursue

them." It is told how infected with rage he was going to Damascus etc. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). Note, he does not say "Why do you persecute my servants?" because so great is the love of Christ for his servants, that their persecution is considered his. Just as the good which comes to his servants out of love of him, he receives in his own person, and also evil. And so he says in the universal judgment, "For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat," (Mt 25:35). Then they shall say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; thirsty, and gave you a drink?" (v.37). To whom he will say, "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me," (v.40). Here is made clear how a man ought to be careful lest he displease the servants of God, because he [Christ] receives it in his own person, just as a king takes it personally when a knight is offended, or one of his officials. And because of this there is great fear lest an official of the king be offended. Therefore Christ says, "Saul," for so he was called before his conversion, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" Behold, the love of Christ for us. And Paul, frightened and stunned said, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). Jesus replied, "I am Jesus whom you persecute. It is hard for you to kick against the goad," (v. 5). Note that Paul, before his conversion had four false beliefs or opinions and errors,

First, that he did not believe him to be God, but simply man.

Second, that he was not the Savior of the world, but an imposter.

Third, that he had not risen from the dead.

Fourth that he was not the judge of the good and wicked.

But Christ, in response, dispelled all these errors when he said, "I am Jesus of Nazareth," etc., (Acts 22:8).

And first, when he said, "I am," which is the name of the Divinity, because God has existence of himself. Our existence is given to us by God. Already it ought not to be called existence. Just as no one ought to be called rich because of monies which he received on loan. Our total existence has been loaned to us by God. Therefore, properly speaking, no one has being but God alone. Therefore we read in Exodus 3 that when God wished to send Moses to free the people of Israel from Egypt, Moses said to him, "If they should say to me: What is the name [of God]? what shall I say to them? [The LORD] said to Moses: I AM WHO AM. He said: Thus shall you say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS, has sent me to you," (vv. 13-14). See why he replied to Paul, "I am." And Augustine says in his Book on Seeing God, that Christ then showed Paul the divine essence.

Against the second error he says, "Jesus," which is the same as "Savior," showing him clearly that no one can enter paradise, nor be saved unless believing and obeying him.

Against the third error he says, "of Nazareth," that is, "blooming," because his body in his glorious resurrection blossomed with four flowers: 1) invulnerability, 2) lightness, 3) subtlety, 4) clarity. That is why he said, "of Nazareth."

Against the fourth error he said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goad," (Acts 9:5). The goad is a harsh sentence, which he shall give as the universal judge of the good and the wicked, when he will say to the wicked, "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire," (Mt 25:41). Then Paul, "trembling and astonished, said: Lord, what will you have me to do," that I might be saved? (Acts 9:6). Now I see clearly my errors. "And the Lord said to him: Arise, and go into the city, and there it shall be told you what you must do... And Saul arose from the ground; and

when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing," (Acts 9:6,8). So great was the brightness which surrounded him, that he lost his sight, as if a man had looked at the sun for a long time, he would lose his sight. "But they, leading him by the hands," men who accompanied him, who stood amazed, "brought him to Damascus. And he was there three days, without sight, and he neither ate nor drank," (Acts 9:8-9). The scriptural doctors say that during these three days he learned and saw in the school of paradise whatever later he preached. In the mean time Christ appeared to a certain disciple of his living in Damascus, who was called Ananias, and said to him, "Ananias. And he said: Behold I am here, Lord. And the Lord said to him: Arise, and go into the street that is called Strait, and seek in the house of Judas, one named Saul of Tarsus," (Acts 9:10-11). And Ananias was afraid saying, "Lord, I have heard from many," (v. 13) of this man, how he persecuted your name, etc. And so Lord do not send me to that wolf," etc. Then "the Lord said to him: Go thy way; for this man is to me a vessel of election, to carry my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel," (v. 15). Because just as fruit is presented to lords in a gold or silver bowl, so this man shall bear my name, etc. The story of the epistle is completed by the concluding theme, "This man is to me a vessel of election." Behold, the eternal election.

As for the second I say that in the conversion of St. Paul is shown the manner of the conversion of a sinner to God. And so the Church makes a feast only of this conversion of Paul. And there are seven ways by which a sinner is converted to God, like Paul, which are as follows:

1. Divine illumination
2. Personal humiliation
3. Fraternal correction
4. Judicial exposure
5. Doctrinal instruction
6. Example of virtue
7. Penitential affliction.

#### DIVINE ILLUMINATION

The first mode is divine illumination, when the sinner is converted to God, like Paul, he is subtly enlightened by God, because the sinner while he remains in sins is blind. A blind man does not see the danger in which he is. Just as one who walks along the street, and first falls into the mud, then stumbles on rocks, then into vipers, he is judged blind, because he truly is blind. So for the sinner passing through the road of this world or of life, who first falls into the morass of putrid lust, then between the prickly thorns of avarice, and then between the rocks of anger and malice. And so holy scripture judges such to be blind: "And they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord," (Zeph 1:17). And so the divine light is necessary, illuminating the mind of the sinner. The sinner is illuminated by light when he says: "O wretched me [miser]! How many years have I been in the mire of lust, or in the thorns of avarice?" And so for the others. "O wretched me! What will become of me or of my soul?" When the divine light illuminates his conscience, he recognizes sins, because the natural light of the intellect does not suffice, nor even the light of acquired science, but the divine light is necessary.

This is shown in the conversion of St. Paul where it says, "And as he went on his journey, ...suddenly a light from heaven shone round about him," (Acts 9:3). Note, "light from heaven;"

not from the natural intellect or human genius. This manner of conversion is very sweet. When God suddenly enlightens a sinner in his home, his room, on his bed, or going on the street, that he might recognize his sins, saying: "O wretch, what will become of me." This light David sought saying in prayer, "Enlighten my eyes that I never sleep in death," (Ps 12:4).

### PERSONAL HUMILIATION

The second way is personal illumination or humbling. When pompous inflated persons who care only for worldly things are brought down or humiliated, and if this happens because, God says, "These need another remedy," and he makes them lose their temporal goods, and the love of lords in whom they trusted, and then they are converted to God, because others were not caring about them. And so David, "Fill their faces with shame; and they shall seek your name, O Lord," (Ps 82:17). Blessed is the adversity or trouble of poverty, of sickness or persecution of lords, which converts the sinner to God.

This way is shown in Paul who went about filled with fury, [dirumque] power flushed his whole heart, and falling on the earth, from being a persecutor he was made a "vessel of election," saying, "Lord, what will you have me do?" (Acts 9:6). Behold how out of adversity, he was converted.

### FRATERNAL CORRECTION

The third [way] is fraternal correction. Just as some are not converted by the first or second way, because God does not get them on the first day, but when someone, a friend, brother, companion, father or neighbor gently corrects his friend or son, saying, "This is for your own good. People are already talking about you. So for the love of God straighten up!". In this way many are converted to Christ. And so Christ says, "If your brother shall offend against you, go, and rebuke him between you and him alone. If he shall hear you, you shall gain your brother," (Mt 18:15).

This way is shown in Paul, when Christ correcting him said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4).

### JUDICIAL EXPOSURE

The fourth is judicial exposure, as when God by himself invisibly or through the mouth of some holy and devout person points out to him the rigor of justice in such a way. "Let us see if you wish to persevere in this wicked life, what shall you say in the judgment? What shall you respond to Christ when he says, "What have you done for me?" Showing his wounds [Christ] says: "See what I have done for you. Do you recognize these wounds? Let us see what you have done for me." What will you say who now stand and live in sins, and you have done nothing good? How shall you avoid the punishments of hell? Such judicial exposures make many convert, confess and do penance, so that they have something to show at the judgment. And so David: "The Lord shall be known when he executes judgments: the

sinner has been caught in the works of his own hands. The wicked shall be turned into hell," namely through thinking [cogitationem], (Ps 9:17-18).

This way is seen in Paul to whom Christ exposes himself in judicial form, just as he ought to stand on the day of judgment, when he says to him, "It is hard for you to kick against the goad," (Acts 9:5). And Paul immediately replied, "Lord, what will you have me to do?" (v. 6).

## DOCTRINAL INSTRUCTION

Fifth is doctrinal instruction, as in preaching, to which many sinners come, entangled in great sins, and they return converted to God, because in preaching, when the preacher preaches sound doctrine, sinners come to recognize their evil life, and they say, "O wretched me! According to this [preaching] I am in an evil state!" And in this way more are converted than by the other aforesaid ways. And so the Apostle says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel. For it is the power of God unto salvation to every one who believes," (Rom 1:16). Note, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," like those who care more about the poets, than the gospels. The teaching of the poets saves no one. And so the preachers of the evangelical doctrine have a special crown in paradise.

This way of conversion was shown in Paul to whom Christ said, "Arise, and go into the city, and there it shall be told you what you must do," (Acts 9:7). If Paul had wanted to say, "Lord, you show me what I have to do. Why do you send me rather than another?" Christ would have said, "Go, because in you I instruct the Christian. How you have gone, so they can go. They have a lesson." Note the city to which Christ sent Paul, saying, "Arise, and go into the city." It is called Damascus which is interpreted to mean "bloody," and it signifies the Church, where the blood of Christ is consecrated [conficitur] and drunk. When therefore he says, "Go into the city," into the Church for hearing Mass and a sermon, there you are told what you ought to do. This is the principal manner for converting sinners.

## EXAMPLE OF VIRTUE

The sixth way [of conversion] is the example of virtue. When one sees that someone lives a good and holy life, even if it is not told by preaching, but just by the example of such a one many are converted. There is a story about the conversion of a certain prince of thieves on a road lying in wait to steal. A certain holy abbot wishing to convert him to Christ came to him and immediately was captured, and stripped naked. The abbot however questioned him about how it was living in such a wilderness. The abbot said, "O, you live in great labor and danger. If you wish, come with me to the monastery, and I shall provide for you abundantly [opulenter]. Fearing capture he did not dare to go, but the abbot assured him, and he followed him. He gave him the best of cells, and a most devoted monk as a servant, that he might serve him, giving him whatever he wished to eat: chickens, partridges, and capons, and ministering to him. And after he had dined, his brother the servant ate bread and water in his presence. And when he laid down on his bed, the brother prayed on his knees with tears etc. After a number of days the robber captain said to the brother, "And what kind of life did you have in the world, because you do so much penance?" And the brother said: "Many [sins], lord." "Tell me, if you please." He said, "I laughed excessively, and I cheated," and so for

other venial sins. And the captain said, "O wretched me! What shall be of me who have robbed and killed so many men, because you, for such little sins do such great penances? Henceforth I wish to live like you. Give me a bed no more, nor hens." And so he had been converted by the example of a good life. Possibly, if someone had preached to him for a hundred years, he would never have converted him. Yet, he was converted by the example of a good life. We read that in the time of St. Peter the Apostle, when he was preaching in Rome, some good woman already converted to Christ had perverse husbands to convert. Showing them this way he said, "Let wives be subject to their husbands: that if any believe not the word, they may be won without the word, by the conversation of the wives," (1Pet 3:1).

This mode was shown in Paul, when leading him by the hand they led him into the city. Hands signify works, because they are done by hands. And so he said "leading him by the hands," in which is implied that by the example of deeds sinners are drawn to God.

### VOLUNTARY PENANCE

The seventh manner is voluntary penance [*afflictio penitentialis*], by saying "Lord, although I am wicked and a sinner, I hope nevertheless that because of this penance you shall rescue me from sin and shall convert me to a good life. And so although a man perceives himself to be in sin, he should not abandon penitence, because it disposes to conversion, and ultimately to salvation. "Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (Mt 4:17).

This way is shown in the conversion of St. Paul the Apostle, who for three days did not eat, or drink. What a penitential affliction! It was a sign that by penitence God leads the sinner to conversion and salvation.

This is why the Church celebrates a feast of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle, because not only was it miraculous, but it was also profitable for sinners.