



## **Paul: Sinner and Saint**

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The first time we hear of Paul is in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter seven, the account of St. Stephen's martyrdom. At that time his name was Saul. We read: "They threw him (Stephen) out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). "Now Saul was consenting to his execution... Saul meanwhile, was trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment" (Acts 8:1,3).

So this is Saul, the man who will become St. Paul. What was his reason for hating Christians and wanting to destroy the church? The following are the words of St Paul: "My brothers and fathers, listen to what I am about to say to you in my defense... I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city. At the feet of Gamaliel I was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God, just as all of you are today. I persecuted this Way to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison" (Acts 22:1,3-4).

Saul, before his conversion was a religious, educated Jew who was zealous for God. He believed that in persecuting the church he was doing the will of God. It was the same kind of zeal that influenced the religious leaders to demand the crucifixion of Christ. St. Stephen forgave Saul and those who stoned him in the same way Jesus forgave those who crucified him. As he was dying he said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Zeal is a necessary component of our relationship with God, but it must be based on revealed truth and be at the service of the mercy of God. We also must be cautious with our zeal. If our zeal is at the service of our own projects or plans without being first of all at the service of the Church it can become destructive.

Saul didn't realize that his zeal was sinful, but that did not change the consequence of his sin. As a religious, educated Jew he should have known that his plans of murder were not consistent with what God had revealed in the Law and the Prophets. It was not until he had an encounter with Christ on the way to Damascus that he realized his sin. We all know the story of his conversion and that he came to be called Paul, a fearless apostle of the Lord. Even though Paul had a new found zeal that lead him to be the greatest preacher ever of the Good News, he never forgot the consequences of his zeal before conversion. The following is his testimony given to the Corinthians: "Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he (the Lord) appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I however, but the grace of God {that is} with me. Therefore, whether it be I or they, so we preach and so you believed" (1 Cor 15:8-11).

This last statement of Paul connects his calling to our calling to the diaconate. What he and the other apostles preached we have inherited in a long succession of “the laying on of hands.” What we have received is not for us, but for the Church and our challenge is to make the words of St. Paul our own, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective.” What St. Paul and the apostles believed has been preserved by our Church in the Scriptures, traditions and teachings and it was to this we made an oath when we were ordained. When we knelt before the Archbishop, holding on to the Book of the Gospels, he said, “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose heralds you have become. Believe what you read, preach what you believe and practice what you preach.” And we said Amen! It is an awesome thing to be ordained as Heralds of the Good News! Paul understood the weight of this responsibility when he said, “If I preach the Gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it” (1 Cor 9:16).

Two thousand years after Paul said those words, the world needs the Gospel more than ever. Even though it would prefer to hear a gospel of convenience, it longs for the Gospel that has been handed on to us. This is a time when the majority of Catholics do not agree with much of what the Church teaches, and yet, never before has there been such crisis in families. Almost half of marriages end in divorce and less than one third of all children will live with both biological parents until age eighteen. There are huge consequences for a society in which the majority of its children are not raised by their biological parents. We see those consequences all around us. This is primarily a crisis of faith. We have a generation of parents who cannot pass on the faith to their children because they are attempting to live without faith. It is sad to minister at a First Holy Communion Mass because often the families of the children do not have a clue about what is happening. It seems the average Catholic is only interested in knowing what the minimum they must do is, and the minimum soon becomes too difficult to do because it is perceived as an obligation, a burden instead a life giving opportunity to encounter Christ and receive grace.

As heralds of the Gospel, like Paul our message must be, “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect” (Rom 12:2). We can not allow our human nature to dominate us and prevent us from reaching spiritual maturity. The fact that we are not yet perfect cannot be an obstacle for preaching perfection. It is in our desire for perfection that Our Lord purifies us.

Paul was uncompromising when he preached the Gospel, yet he was well aware of his own weakness; the following are his words. “For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but the doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want... Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?” (Rom 7:18-19,24). We all must deal with sin and Paul was no exception. Perhaps awareness of his own sin and weaknesses was the source of the humility he needed to totally trust in God; to understand that it was only the grace of God present in him that allowed him to accomplish great things.

In order to be a faithful servant of the Lord we also must be aware of our sins and weaknesses. It is for this reason that Christ has given us the Church and the sacraments; to help us be reconciled to God and each other. In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to encounter Christ in the sacrament of reconciliation. The best help for a good confession is a good examination of conscience. We have all seen different guidelines to help us examine our conscience, but for the sake of time, I would like for us to take a look at the seven capital sins. There may be something here that deserves our reflection.

**Pride** is the first and most dominant sin. Pride is the human desire to be perceived as better than others, to place ourselves before others. We can become preoccupied with comparing ourselves to others; by looking for their weaknesses to discredit them. We cannot be proud and be a faithful servant at the same time. Jesus said that if we are to follow him, we must deny ourselves. The virtue opposed to pride is humility.

**Greed** is the refusal to be generous. Greed causes preoccupation with things of this world and with self. It is an obstacle to discovering God's plan and leads to bitterness. Jesus says, "As you give, so shall you receive." The opposite of greed of course is generosity. It is in our generosity that we will discover the providential care of the Lord and learn to place all our trust in him.

**Envy** is closely related to pride and resents the good perceived in others. It is an obstacle to our own maturity and prevents us from discovering and developing on our own gifts. The opposite of envy is charity. "Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish" (1 Cor 13:4).

**Anger** is first of all an emotion which is not sinful. Anger with injustice can move us to correct what is wrong. However, the way we deal with anger can often be sinful. Anger can become chronic and lead to sustained impatience, stubbornness, bitterness, resentment and hatred; all of which are obstacles to experiencing the love of God. The opposite of anger is patience and kindness. Paul tells the Ephesians, "If you are angry, let it be without sin. The sun must not go down on your wrath; do not give the devil a chance to work on you" (Eph 4:26-27).

**Lust** is the self destructive drive for pleasure out of proportion to its worth. Lust for sex, power, money or anything else becomes obsessive and dominates the individual and destroys relationships. Pornography has become epidemic in our society and has had a terrible impact on marriages and families. The opposite of lust is self control. "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."

**Gluttony** is indulgence to excess. This does not only deal with food and drink, but also with entertainment, work and even the company of others. Excessive time on the computer and in front of the TV can also be sinful. The virtue needed is temperance. St. Paul tells us, "The Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking, but of justice, peace and the joy that is given by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

**Sloth**, when we think of this sin we may think of laziness, of not doing the work we are responsible for. However; probably the greatest offence here is spiritual laziness, of not having zeal to put the things of God first in our lives. How much time each day do we spend in prayer, spiritual reading, formation of our faith and then using the gifts we have been given to build up the Body of Christ? “Name something you have that you have not received” (1 Cor 4:7).

Of course the greatest examination of conscience is the Two Greatest Commandments. Do we love the Lord Our God with all our mind, heart, soul and strength? Is there anything in our lives that is more important than God and His will? Does then our relationship with God compel us to be at the service of others? God has a great plan for humanity, but He must be the most important part of the plan. In His Church He has given us everything we need to discover and live that plan, however it depends on our free will. Do we want to be saints? Of course we all want to go to heaven, but do we want to be saints now? The unfolding of the Kingdom of God depends on the sanctity of the baptized.

To become the best possible deacon, husband, father, boss, employee, etc. we must center our lives in Christ. God is the source of all love and all that is good and the only way we will reach our potential in loving others and doing good is by drawing closer and closer to God. Our goal should be that like Paul, we are able to say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ living in me” (Gal 2:20).

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