

Sermon for the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul | 2026

By Fr. Hayden A. Butler

Conversion is a mysterious process in the Christian life. We do not know exactly when it begins or ends. By the time we are consciously aware of it—let alone able to articulate it—we already know from experience that something has been at work in our lives. Often, in the Christian life, we only recognize in retrospect how a particular season of our walk with Jesus has been shaping us, even when we were scarcely aware of it at the time. Conversion is God’s initiative, and thus a powerful sign that God is good and that He loves what He has made. But conversion also requires our participation. We are not inert objects upon which grace acts. Conversion is personal: it originates in a personal God, who makes us persons in His own image and then draws us into the conversion of others. It is how we experience all of Creation being redeemed, turned back in love toward God, who is its life. As we celebrate today the Conversion of St. Paul—the only feast in the Prayer Book that commemorates a conversion—we are invited, through his conversion, to consider what it means for us to be continually converted as well.

Prior to his conversion, one could hardly imagine a more illustrious pedigree for a young rabbi in the first-century world. In his own account, St. Paul describes his early life: “I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.” In his letter to the Galatians, he adds: “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” And to the Philippians he writes: “If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” Taken together, these testimonies reveal a common theme: Paul’s early life was marked by an unyielding zeal for righteousness, which sounds, at first glance, like a very good thing. We typically think of conversion as a turning from what is bad to what is good. So we might reasonably ask: why would anyone need to be converted from this kind of life?

Paul’s manner of life had not been wicked, but it was incomplete. His sin arose when his zeal exceeded what God had actually revealed. As a Pharisee, Paul was shaped by a zealous but increasingly narrowed theological imagination. He was convinced that the righteousness of God—the righteousness that secured the covenant blessings—both began and ended with the Torah given to Moses. And indeed, the Torah was a gift of revelation to Israel after their deliverance from Egypt, teaching them how to live free from bondage and free for life as God’s covenant people. It was given to preserve them in faithful expectation until the seed of Abraham should be revealed, through whom God would bless the nations and redeem many. But after centuries of compromise and judgment, the Pharisee movement arose as a severe response to Israel’s recurring faithlessness. Zealous for the Law, they employed power and influence to

construct a system in which no one, if properly managed, would even approach a violation of it. Layers of rigorously enforced customs insulated the people from disobedience. The tragic result was that when Christ came to fulfill the promises made to Abraham, He was unrecognizable to those for whom the Torah had been stretched nearly to the point of tearing in the anxious effort to control life. The irony is devastating: in their zeal to defend the honor of God and His commandments, they crucified Him when He came among them.

The turning point of St. Paul's life was his personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. When Christ appeared to him in divine glory, Paul addressed Him rightly as "Lord." And the Lord answered: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." At the heart of every conversion is this personal encounter with Christ. Whether at the beginning or somewhere along the way, we inevitably reach a point where our notions, ideas, fantasies, and fears about who God is collide with who God truly is, as He reveals Himself. As Fr. Thomas Hopko once said, "We cannot know God—but we have to know Him to know that." None of our striving—whether the enthusiasm we mistake for devotion, the curiosity we mistake for thinking, or the anxious activism we mistake for service—can bring us to this knowledge of God. And without it, all such efforts will fail us in the end. The knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ is always relational. It calls us out of ourselves into exposure and vulnerability, into the capacity for love and for being loved; blind, that we may truly see; silent, that we may truly speak. Only through humble communion with God in Christ, bearing even a little shame along the way, can our lives become whole and fruitful.

Yet we cannot hold fast to the grace of conversion in isolation. Conversion is always personal, but never merely individual. Today's lessons remind us that we are always converted among others, within the life of the community. This is reflected sacramentally in the fact that we do not bring ourselves to baptism. We are *brought*—by parents, godparents, and sponsors—and almost always in the midst of the congregation on Sunday. In today's reading, Ananias of Damascus is called by Christ to receive into the Church the very man who sought to destroy it. And this, in some form, is always the case. We have all been the one who, left to ourselves, would have persecuted Christ. We have all needed someone to see us as the one for whom Christ died, and to extend the hand of fellowship to welcome us in, even before it was clear that we could be redeemed. St. Paul's conversion shows us that even under the best circumstances—noble heritage, excellent education, patriotic loyalty, and religious zeal—we can still become enemies of Christ. Yet here is both the miracle of Paul's conversion and the ground of our hope: the enemy can always be made a friend of God. Without the vision of Christ, even the noblest things become monstrous. With the vision of Christ, however, even the fiercest enemy can be redeemed. And the redeemed enemy can become, as St. Paul has been for so many of us, the beginning of our own conversions.

Conversion remains a fact of Christian life until we are perfected in Christ. No matter how long we have walked with Him, we have not yet become all that God intends us to be. And so we must still be turned again and again, returned to Christ who comes to us this day. We need to hear Him in the Scriptures when He says, "I am Jesus." We need to confess the ways we have kicked against the goads. We need to behold Him as He is set before our eyes. And we need to receive Him, knowing that it is "through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God." For as St. Paul writes to the Philippians: "What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord...that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."