

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Today's catechesis will be dedicated to the experience St. Paul had on the road to Damascus, commonly called his conversion. Precisely on the road to Damascus, in the first 30 years of the first century, and following a period in which he persecuted the Church, the decisive moment of Paul's life took place. Much has been written about it and, of course, from many points of view. The fact is that a complete turnabout took place there, a total change of perspective. Henceforth, unexpectedly, he began to consider as "loss" and "rubbish" all that before was for him the highest ideal, almost the *raison d'être* of his existence (Philippians 3:7-8). What happened?

In this respect, we have two sources. The first type, the most well-known, are the accounts owed to Luke's pen, who on three occasions narrates the event in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 9:1-19; 22:3-21; 26:4-23). The average reader, perhaps, might be tempted to pause too long on certain details, such as the light from the sky, the fall to the ground, the voice that called, the new state of blindness, the curing when something like scales fall from his eyes and the fasting. However, all these details point to the heart of the event: The Risen Christ appeared as a splendid light and addressed Saul, transforming his thinking and his very life. The splendor of the Risen One left him blind; presenting also externally what the interior reality was, his blindness in regard to the truth, to the light, which is Christ. And then, his definitive "yes" to Christ in baptism reopens his eyes, and makes him truly see.

In the early Church, baptism was also called "illumination," because this sacrament gives light, makes one truly see. All that is indicated theologically was realized in Paul also physically: Once cured of his interior blindness, he sees well. Hence, St. Paul was not transformed by a thought but by an event, by the irresistible presence of the Risen One, whom he could never again doubt, so strong had been the evidence of the event, of that encounter. The latter changed Paul's life fundamentally. In this connection, one can and must speak of a conversion. This meeting is the center of St. Luke's account, who quite possibly used an account born, probably, in the community of Damascus. The local coloring suggests this by the presence of Ananias and the names, both of the street as well as of the owner of the house where Paul stayed (Cf. Acts 9:11).

The second type of source on the conversion is made up of St. Paul's letters themselves. He never spoke in detail about this event; I think he assumed that everyone knew the essentials of his story. All knew that from being a persecutor, he was transformed into a fervent apostle of Christ. And this did not happen at the end of his own reflection but of an intense event, of an encounter with the Risen One. Although not mentioning details, he refers to this most important event, that is, that he is also a witness of the resurrection of Jesus, the revelation of which he has received directly from Jesus himself, together with the mission of apostle.

The clearest text on this aspect is found in his account of what constitutes the center of the history of salvation: the death and resurrection of Jesus and the apparitions to witnesses (cf. 1 Corinthians 15). With words of very ancient tradition, which he also received from the Church of Jerusalem, he says that Jesus died crucified, was buried, and after his resurrection appeared first to Cephas, that is, Peter, then to the Twelve, and afterwards to 500 brothers who were still alive at that time, then to James, and then to all the apostles.

And to this account, received from tradition, he adds: "Last of all ... he appeared also to me" (1 Corinthians 15:8). Thus he clarifies that this is the foundation of his apostolate and of his new life. There are also other texts in which the same reference appears: "Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship (cf. Romans 1:5); and elsewhere: "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Corinthians 9:1), words with which he alludes to something that all know. Finally, the most complete text is found in Galatians 1:15-17: "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus." In this "self-apology" he underlines decidedly that he is also a true witness of the Risen One, that he has a mission received directly from the Risen One.

We can see that the two sources, the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St. Paul, converge in a fundamental point: The Risen One spoke with Paul, called him to the apostolate, made him a true apostle, a witness of the resurrection, with the specific charge to proclaim the Gospel to the pagans, to the Greco-Roman world. And, at the same time, Paul learned that, despite the immediateness of his relationship with the Risen One, he must enter the communion of the Church, be baptized, and live in harmony with the other apostles. Only in this communion with all will he be able to be a true apostle, as he wrote explicitly in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed" (15:11). There is only one proclamation of the Risen One, because Christ is only one.

As we see in these passages, Paul never interprets this moment as an event of conversion. Why? There are many theories, but the reason is very obvious. This change of his life, this transformation of his whole being was not the result of a psychological process, of a maturation or intellectual and moral evolution, but it came from outside: It was not the result of his thinking but of the encounter with Jesus Christ. In this sense it was not simply a conversion, a maturing of his "I," rather, it was death and resurrection for himself: a life of his died and a new one was born with the Risen Christ.

In no other way can this renewal of Paul be explained. All psychological analyses cannot clarify or resolve the problem. Only the event, the intense encounter with Christ is the key to understand what happened: death and resurrection, renewal on the part of him who revealed himself and spoke with him. It is in this more profound sense that we can and must speak of

conversion. This meeting was a real renewal that changed all his parameters. One can now say that what before was essential and fundamental for him, now has become "rubbish" for him; there is no longer "gain" but loss, because now only life in Christ is what counts.

However, we must not think that Paul locked himself blindly in an event. In reality, the opposite occurred, because the risen Christ is the light of truth, the light of God himself. This enlarged his heart, and opened it to all. At that moment, he did not lose all that was good and true in his life, in his heritage, but understood in a new way the wisdom, truth, and depth of the law and the prophets; he appropriated them in a new way. At the same time, his reason opened to the wisdom of the pagans. Having opened himself to Christ with all his heart, he became able to engage in a wider dialogue with all, he made himself everything to all. Hence he could really be the apostle to the pagans.

Let us now look at our situation. What does this mean for us? It means that also for us, Christianity is not a new philosophy or new morality. We are Christians only if we encounter Christ. Of course he does not show himself to us in that irresistible, luminous way, as he did with Paul to make him Apostle of the Gentiles.

However, we can also encounter Christ in the reading of sacred Scripture, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch Christ's heart and feel him touch ours. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we really become Christians. And in this way, our reason opens, the whole of Christ's wisdom opens and all the richness of the truth. Therefore, let us pray to the Lord to enlighten us, so that, in our world, he will grant us the encounter with his presence, and thus give us a lively faith, an open heart, and great charity for all, capable of renewing the world.

[The Holy Father then greeted the pilgrims in several languages.]

[Translation by ZENIT]

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