

ST. PAUL CENTER FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

BREAKING THE BREAD

January 2014

*Reading the Bible
from the Heart
of the Church*

ST. PAUL CENTER FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

A non-profit educational
and research institute for
promoting life-transforming
study of Sacred Scripture
in the Catholic tradition.

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Converted and Converting

By Dr. Scott Hahn

Our patron, St. Paul, isn't any ordinary saint. He's a singularity. He's unique. And the Church calendar reflects the extraordinary role he played in God's revelation. It was he who brought the Gospel to the world beyond Israel — the Gentiles. He's credited as author of more than half the books of the New Testament, and it was under Paul's tutelage that Luke composed his Gospel and Acts.

The Apostle to the Gentiles gets not one but two feasts on the Church's Western calendar. In June he shares a feast with St. Peter, with whom he died as a martyr as they consecrated Rome with their blood.

On January 25, however, we at the St. Paul Center mark our patronal feast: the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. It's a glorious day, quite unlike other feasts. For Paul's conversion marks a milestone not only in his own life, but in the life of God's people. Once a persecutor of Christ, he became the Lord's preacher. Once an impediment to the Gospel, he became its great champion. Once a guardian of Israel as an ethnic preserve of holiness, Paul came to serve as a father in the worldwide (literally, catholic) Church that included both Jews and Gentiles.

The story of St. Paul's conversion is told repeatedly in the New Testament, three times in the Acts of the Apostles and then, briefly, in Paul's own correspondence with the Galatians and Corinthians. In all of history, no other conversion gets that kind of special coverage, with God himself as primary author of the narrative!

It's possible, though, to over-emphasize the uniqueness of Paul's conversion. When we consider the lives of the saints — and especially saints as extraordinary as Paul — we can be tempted to miss the lessons of their lives. We can miss the lessons that apply especially to us.

More than a decade ago, with my wife Kimberly and a few colleagues, I founded this apostolate, and we decided to name it after St. Paul. Most of us were converts to the Catholic faith, having come into full communion with the Church as adults. St. Paul, the "adult convert," was a special guide for us.

But even that application is too narrow for this saint and this feast. For he's not just a patron to those who change religious affiliation. In fact, it's debatable whether he would have considered his affiliation to be different after he met the Lord.

No. St. Paul is everyone's patron because we're all called to conversion — and we're always called to conversion, even if we've been Catholics since the cradle and attending Mass daily for decades.

Jesus said: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). The word he used for "turn" is at the root of all our Christian terms and notions about conversion.

Conversion is a turning toward God. It is a turning away from

...continued on page 3



BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE SUNDAY MASS READINGS

A KING TO BEHOLD

January 5th, Feast of Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6 Psalm 72:1-2,7-8, 10-13

Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

An “epiphany” is an appearance. In today’s readings, with their rising stars, splendid lights and mysteries revealed, the face of the child born on Christmas day appears.

Herod, in today’s Gospel, asks the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah is to be born. The answer Matthew puts on their lips says much more, combining two strands of Old Testament promise - one revealing the Messiah to be from the line of David (see 2 Samuel 2:5), the other predicting “a ruler of Israel” who will “shepherd his flock” and whose “greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth” (see Micah 5:1-3).

Those promises of Israel’s king ruling the nations resound also in today’s Psalm. The psalm celebrates David’s son, Solomon. His kingdom, we sing, will stretch “to the ends of the earth,” and the world’s kings will pay Him homage. That’s the scene too in today’s First Reading, as nations stream from the East, bearing “gold and frankincense” for Israel’s king.

The Magi’s pilgrimage in today’s Gospel marks the fulfillment of God’s promises. The Magi, probably Persian astrologers, are following the star that Balaam predicted would rise along with the ruler’s staff over the house of Jacob (see Numbers 24:17).

Laden with gold and spices, their journey evokes those made to Solomon by the Queen of Sheba and the “kings of the earth” (see 1 Kings 10:2,25; 2 Chronicles 9:24). Interestingly, the only other places where frankincense and myrrh are mentioned together are in songs about Solomon (see Song of Songs 3:6, 4:6,14).

One greater than Solomon is here (see Luke 11:31). He has come to reveal that all peoples are “co-heirs” of the royal family of Israel, as today’s Epistle teaches.

His manifestation forces us to choose: Will we follow the signs that lead to Him as the wise Magi did? Or will we be like those priests and the scribes who let God’s words of promise become dead letters on an ancient page?

ANOINTED ONES

January 12th, Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Psalm 29:1-4, 9-10

Acts 10:34-38 Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus presents himself for John’s baptism in today’s Gospel, not because He is a sinner, but to fulfill the word of God proclaimed by His prophets. He must be baptized to reveal that He is the Christ (“anointed one”) - the Spirit-endowed Servant promised by Isaiah in today’s First Reading.

His baptism marks the start of a new world, a new creation. As Isaiah prophesied, the Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove - as the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep in the beginning (see Genesis 1:2).

As it was in the beginning, at the Jordan also the majestic voice of the Lord thunders above the waters. The Father opens the heavens and declares Jesus to be His “beloved son.”

God had long prepared the Israelites for His coming, as Peter preaches in today’s Second Reading. Jesus was anticipated in the “beloved son” given to Abraham (see Genesis 22:2,12,26), and in the calling of Israel as His “first-born son” (see Exodus 4:22-23). Jesus is the divine son begotten by God, the everlasting heir promised to King David (see Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14).

He is “a covenant of the people [Israel]” and “a light to the nations,” Isaiah says. By the new covenant made in His blood (see 1 Corinthians 11:25), God has gathered the lost sheep of Israel together with whoever fears Him in every nation.

Christ has become the source from which God pours out his Spirit on Israelites and Gentiles alike (see Acts 10:45). In Baptism, all are anointed with that same Spirit, made beloved sons and daughters of God. Indeed, we are Christians - literally “anointed ones.”

We are the “sons of God” in today’s Psalm - called to give glory to His name in His temple. Let us pray that we remain faithful to our calling as His children, that our Father might call us what he calls His Son - “my beloved. . . in whom I am well pleased.”

PERFECT OFFERING

January 19th, 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 49:3,5-6 Psalm 40:2,4,7-10

1 Corinthians 1:1-3 John 1:29-34

Jesus speaks through the prophet Isaiah in today’s First Reading.

He tells us of the mission given to Him by the Father from the womb: “You are My servant,’ He said to Me.”

Servant and Son, our Lord was sent to lead a new exodus - to raise up the exiled tribes of Israel, to gather and restore them to God. More than that, He was to be a light to the nations, that God’s salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (see Acts 13:46-47).

Before the first exodus, a lamb was offered in sacrifice and its blood painted on the Israelites’ door posts. The blood of the lamb identified their homes and the Lord “passed over” these in executing judgment on the Egyptians (see Exodus 12:1-23,27).

In the new exodus, Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” as John beholds Him in the Gospel today (see 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Our Lord sings of this in today’s Psalm. He has come, He says, to offer His body to do the will of God (see Hebrews 10:3-13).

The sacrifices, oblations, holocausts, and sin-offerings given after the first exodus had no power to take away sins (see Hebrews 10:4). They were meant not to save but to teach (see Galatians 3:24). In offering these sacrifices, the people were to learn self-sacrifice - that they were made for worship, to offer themselves freely to God and to delight in His will.

Only Jesus could make that perfect offering of himself. And through His sacrifice, He has given us ears open to obedience, made it possible for us to hear the Father’s call to holiness, as Paul says in today’s Epistle.

He has made us children of God, baptized in the blood of the Lamb (see Revelation 7:14). And we are to join our sacrifice to His, to offer our bodies - our lives - as living sacrifices in the spiritual worship of the Mass (see Romans 12:1).

HISTORY REDEEMED

January 26th, 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 8:23-9:3 Psalm 27:1,4,13-14

1 Corinthians 1:10-13,17 Matthew 4:12-23

Today's Liturgy gives us a lesson in ancient Israelite geography and history.

Isaiah's prophecy in today's First Reading is quoted by Matthew in today's Gospel. Both intend to recall the apparent fall of the everlasting kingdom promised to David (see 2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 89; Psalm 132:11-12).

Eight centuries before Christ, that part of the kingdom where the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali lived was attacked by the Assyrians and the tribes were hauled off into captivity (see 2 Kings 15:29; 1 Chronicles 5:26).

It marked the beginning of the kingdom's end. It finally crumbled in the sixth century B.C., when Jerusalem was seized by Babylon and the remaining tribes were driven into exile (see 2 Kings 24:14).

Isaiah prophesied that Zebulun and Naphtali, the lands first to be degraded, would be the first to see the light of God's salvation. Jesus today fulfills that prophecy - announcing the restoration of David's kingdom at precisely the spot where the kingdom began to fall.

His gospel of the Kingdom includes not only the twelve tribes of Israel but all the nations - symbolized by the "Galilee of the Nations." Calling His first disciples, two fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, He appoints them to be "fishers of men" - gathering people from the ends of the earth.

They are to preach the gospel, Paul says in today's Epistle, to unite all peoples in the same mind and in the same purpose - in a worldwide kingdom of God.

By their preaching, Isaiah's promise has been delivered. A world in darkness has seen the light. The yoke of slavery and sin, borne by humanity since time began, has been smashed.

And we are able now, as we sing in today's Psalm, to dwell in the house of the Lord, to worship Him in the land of the living.

...continuing from page 1

sin and from attachment to worldly things and worldly cares. This is the work of a lifetime. It's not the matter of a moment. It's not just "once and done."

Unless we turn — unless we become “converts” — we're not Christian. Unless we make a habit of repentance, we're not disciples of Jesus Christ. We must convert again and again. We celebrate our conversions whenever we go to Confession. We celebrate our conversions, in fact, whenever we resist distraction and turn to our Father God in prayer.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, on the joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis makes this matter abundantly clear. He is worried less about the enemies “out there” in the world than the enemies within — the vices and the unconverted habits that tempt us away from Christ and threaten our perseverance in the faith. He calls baptized Christians to “experience a conversion which will restore the joy of faith to their hearts and inspire a commitment to the Gospel.” He defines conversion as “openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ.” He emphasizes that even the pope must undergo such a conversion.

If we work on this, he says, all else will fall into place, in society and in the Church.

St. Paul should be our model for conversion. His conversion was ongoing, lifelong, never easy, but always joyful. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he said in his Letter to the Philippians (4:4). “Again I will say, Rejoice.” Paul is joyful not because of how good things are getting, but how good God is. That's the fruit of true conversion.

And that's a great reason to celebrate on January 25. I hope you'll join me in a special observance of the day. Be bold in asking God for graces. Be importunate, too, as you beg on my behalf and on behalf of the St. Paul Center.

I thank you for your prayers and for all you do for us at the Center. I assure you of our daily intercession for you and yours.



Novena to St. Paul the Apostle

Entrust your intention to St. Paul and offer the following prayer.

O St. Paul, the Apostle, preacher of truth and Doctor of the Gentiles, intercede for us to God, who chose you. You are a vessel of election, O St. Paul the Apostle, preacher of truth to the whole world.

O God, you have instructed many nations through the preaching of the blessed apostle Paul. Let the power of his intercession with you help us who venerate his memory this day.

Conclude with an
Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be.

The First Annual Letter and Spirit Colloquium

When you run an apostolate like the St. Paul Center, it's easy to get caught up in numbers: numbers of Bible studies written, leaders trained, books published. It's not that those numbers aren't important. They are. Or, at least they can be. But, they're not everything. Sometimes, the most important things an organization does can't be quantified.

Consider the Letter and Spirit Colloquium.

On Friday, November 22, twenty of the most promising young biblical scholars in the country joined St. Paul Center President Scott Hahn for a day of fellowship, prayer, and scholarly discussion in Baltimore, Maryland. There, attendees met in the undercroft chapel of the Baltimore Cathedral, the first Catholic cathedral in the United States.

The site was chosen because of its proximity to the Baltimore Convention Center, where, over the next days, thousands of Biblical scholars from around the world would gather for the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, one of the most important gatherings of its kind. Prior to the larger meeting getting underway, the St. Paul Center wanted to provide an opportunity for the growing number of faithful Catholic biblical scholars to meet with one another, share their work, and, in the process, encourage each other in their endeavors.



The colloquium began with the presentation of three papers. Dr. Brant Pitre spoke on the centrality of the Last Supper to understanding the Person of Jesus Christ. Dr. John Bergsma examined why the Qumran community chose to identify with Israel rather than Judea. And Dr. Michael Barber looked at the relationship of Matthew 16 to Peter and the Church. A lengthy and lively discussion followed each presentation. Mass and dinner concluded the day.

The importance of these gatherings to what the St. Paul Center does can't be understated. Knowing that "Iron sharpens iron," (Prov 27:17) the St. Paul Center wants to do more than produce books and talks;

we want to nurture a movement capable of producing more than we could ever produce on our own and which will endure for generations to come. The work we do with young scholars is one of the most important ways we're accomplishing that goal. The 2013 Letter and Spirit Colloquium will be only the first of many such gatherings.

Praying in the New Year



Both in thanksgiving for a successful year and in hope for an even better year in 2014, the St. Paul Center team will begin a novena to St. Paul on Friday, January 17, We will be asking our patron to obtain for us the support we need to continue our work. The novena will conclude on Saturday, January 25, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul.

That morning, January 25, the St. Paul Center team will travel into Pittsburgh, where a special Mass will be offered for our work and for the intentions of all our donors at Pittsburgh's St. Paul Cathedral.

Because the St. Paul Center is your apostolate too, we invite you to join us in this novena. We also invite you to send in any special intentions you would like included in the Mass. Just write your intentions on the enclosed reply card and return it to us by January 17. We'll then take them into Pittsburgh with us and place them at the foot of the altar in the cathedral.

Novena on page 3