

Local Solemnity of the Conversion of St. Paul – January 25, 2017 – Fr. Bryan W. Jerabek
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 6:30pm Fraternus Mass – 900 words

On our present liturgical calendar there is only one feast day that is uniquely for St. Paul – the one that we celebrate today, his Conversion. Thus it becomes, by default, the patronal feast of this Cathedral of St. Paul. Today, with particular solemnity, then, we thank the Lord for giving St. Paul to our parish and our diocese as a special patron saint and we meditate upon his extraordinary life. Our patron wrote more than half of the New Testament. He traveled from the Holy Land all the way to Rome, and possibly even to Spain. He was shipwrecked multiple times and imprisoned. Ultimately he lost his head for the faith. He was an incredible man of God during his time on this earth and remains an example for us all!

It all really began with the conversion of a man named Saul. The Lord intervened directly in his life, in a powerful way. And Saul was in no way worthy of God’s intervention – in fact, he was in the process of going to persecute yet another group of Christians; in effect, he was in the process of doing something that was quite displeasing to God. But the Lord did not wait for Saul to become worthy; no, he had a plan for Saul to become Paul and to become one of the greatest saints of his Church – and he carried out his plan perfectly. This, then, is an important lesson for us to take away on this feast: God does not wait until we are perfect; he is close to us always, even in our worst moments, and is always interested in bringing about the fulfillment of his plan for us.

Saul had been accustomed to being the leader. But when he was knocked off his horse and struck blind, he had to start being led by another. He literally had no other choice – and this was a special grace, also, for it taught him a lesson that is ours to learn as well: he had to submit himself to God and be led by him. Until then he had been following his own plan; now he would start following God’s. Until then he had been going after the Church; now he would follow after Christ. This does not mean that God’s plan is always easy to perceive; but Paul learned about that also, for he was struck blind and so lived for a time in darkness. Very often the next step is not clear to us. The Lord calls us to step out in faith and trust that he will guide us aright. The first step, before any physical movement, is a step of the heart and mind, by surrendering oneself to God’s will and asking for its fulfillment in us.

We wish to be led by God as well. For those here who are in Fraternus, we wish to be led to be men of God who change the world by first being changed ourselves. We ask St. Paul to intercede for us so that we can imitate him in stepping out in faith: standing up for Christ’s Church, for our families, for goodness and virtue, for the truth, and seeking God’s honor and glory in all things. But before we can take that step in faith we first need to submit and be led: we need to turn to the Lord in our hearts and in our minds and say, “Thy will be done!”¹ – “Be it done unto me according to thy word!”² This is our ongoing process of conversion, but it pleases God to carry it out in us also. He has not waited until we were perfect, for none of us is – yet. No, he has begun it already, out of his great goodness and great love for us, so that – please God – he will perfectly fulfill his plan in us as well. Through the intercession of St. Paul we, too, say: Thy will be done!

This evening we again celebrate the Eucharist turned together toward the cross, toward the Lord – as is our Fraternus tradition and according to the ancient practice of the Church. When Pope Francis celebrated Mass publicly this same way in the Sistine Chapel just a few weeks ago

¹ Cf. the Lord’s Prayer.

² Luke 1:38.

on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord,³ he reminded us through his actions what the Church clearly permits in her law. And this manner of celebrating is particularly helpful for our spirituality because it more clearly highlights the priest's mediation between the people here gathered and God. This is the role of the priest, who stands at the head of the assembly to lead all gathered toward God – and, in Holy Communion, to bring God to them. We can always turn to the Lord spiritually in our hearts and minds; but we are not pure spirits: we turn to him physically as well. Coming back to the concept of conversion, our whole lives are to be turned toward the Lord, such that we can someday say with St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”.⁴

May the great St. Paul pray for each one of us, especially those of us here gathered this evening who participate in the Fraternus program, so that we can live by faith in the son of God⁵ and become all that he wants us to be. Amen.

³ The fourth year in a row that he has celebrated on the high altar of the Sistine Chapel rather than having a special detached altar set up.

⁴ Galatians 2:20.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, Communion Antiphon.