



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
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Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer. 9. *Witnesses: Saint Paul. 1*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our journey of catechesis on apostolic zeal, let us start today to look at some figures who, in different ways and times, bore exemplary witness to what passion for the Gospel means. And the first witness is naturally the Apostle Paul. I would like to devote two catecheses to him.

The story of Paul of Tarsus is emblematic in this regard. In the first chapter of the Letter to the Galatians, as in the narration of the Acts of the Apostles, we can see that his zeal for the Gospel appears after his conversion, and takes the place of his previous zeal for Judaism. He was a man who was zealous about the law of Moses for Judaism, and after his conversion, this zeal continued, but to proclaim, to preach Jesus Christ. Paul loved Jesus. Saul — Paul's first name — was already zealous, but Christ converts his zeal: from the Law to the Gospel. His zeal first wanted to destroy the Church, whereas after, it builds it up. We might ask ourselves: what happened, that passed from destruction to construction? What changed in Paul? In what way was his zeal, his enthusiasm for the glory of God, transformed?

Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that passion, from the moral point of view, is neither good nor evil: its virtuous use makes it morally good, sin makes it bad (Quaestio "*De veritate*" 24, 7). In Paul's

case, what changed him is not a simple idea or a conviction: it was the encounter with the risen Lord. Do not forget this: it is the encounter with the Lord that changes a life. It was Saul's encounter with the risen Lord that transformed his entire being. Paul's humanity, his passion for God and his glory was not annihilated, but transformed, "converted" by the Holy Spirit. The only one who can change our hearts is the Holy Spirit. And it was so for every aspect of his life. Just as occurs in the Eucharist: the bread and wine do not disappear, but become the Body and Blood of Christ. Paul's zeal remains, but it becomes the zeal of Christ. It changes direction, but the zeal is the same. The Lord is served with our humanity, with our prerogatives and our characteristics, but what changes everything is not an idea, but rather life itself, as Paul himself says: "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). The encounter with Jesus Christ changes you from within, it makes you another person. If one is in Christ, he or she is a new creation, this is the meaning of being a new creation. To become Christian is not to apply make-up that changes your face, no! If you are Christian, your heart changes, but if you are Christian [only] in appearance, this will not do ... made-up Christians will not do. True change is of the heart. And this happened to Paul.

Passion for the Gospel is not a matter of comprehension or studies, which are helpful but which do not inspire it. Rather, it means going through the same experience of "fall and resurrection" that Saul/Paul lived and which is at the origin of the transfiguration of his apostolic zeal. You can study all the theology you want, you can study the Bible and all that, and become atheist or worldly, it is not a question of studies; in history there have been many atheist theologians! Studies are useful but they do not generate the new life of grace. Indeed, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola says: "For it is not knowing much, but realizing and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies" (*Spiritual Exercises*, Annotations, 2, 4). It is about things that change you within, that let you know something else, savour something else. May each of us reflect: "Am I a religious person?" — "Fine" — "Do I pray?" — "Yes" — "Do I try to obey the commandments?" — "Yes" — "But where is Jesus in your life?" — "Ah, no, I do the things the Church commands". But where is Jesus? Have you encountered Jesus, have you spoken with Jesus? Do you pick up the Gospel or talk with Jesus, do you remember who Jesus is? And this is something that we very often lack. When Jesus enters your life, like he entered Paul's life, Jesus enters and changes everything. Many times, we have heard comments about people: "But look at him, he was a wretch and now he is a good man, she is a good woman... who changed them?". Jesus, they found Jesus. Has your Christian life changed? "No, more or less, yes...". If Jesus did not enter your life, it did not change. "You can be Christian only on the outside". No, Jesus has to enter and this changes you, and this is what happened to Paul. We have to find Jesus, and this is why Paul said that Christ's love drives us, it is what takes you forward. The same change happened to all the saints, who went forward when they found Jesus.

We can reflect further on the change that takes place in Paul, who from a persecutor became an apostle of Christ. We note that there is a sort of paradox in him: indeed, as long as he feels he is righteous before God, he feels authorized to persecute, to arrest, even to kill, as in the case of

Stephen; but when, enlightened by the Risen Lord, he discovers he was a “blasphemer and persecutor” (cf. *1 Tim* 1:13) — this is what he says of himself, “I formerly blasphemed and persecuted” — then he starts to be truly capable of loving. And this is the way. If one of us says, “Ah, thank you Lord, because I am a good person, I do good things, I do not commit major sins...”, this is not a good path, this is the path of self-sufficiency, it is a path that does not justify you, it makes you an elegant Catholic, but an elegant Catholic is not a holy Catholic, he is elegant. The true Catholic, the true Christian, is one who receives Jesus within, that changes your heart. This is the question I ask you all today: what does Jesus mean for me? Have I let him enter my heart, or do I keep him within reach but so that he does not really enter within? Have I let myself be changed by him? Or is Jesus just an idea, a theology that goes ahead... And this is zeal: when one finds Jesus and feels the fire, like Paul, they must preach Jesus, they must talk about Jesus, they must help people, they must do good things. When one finds the idea of Jesus, he or she remains an ideologue of Christianity, and this does not save, only Jesus saves us, if you have encountered him and opened the door to your heart to him. The idea of Jesus does not save you! May the Lord help us find Jesus, encounter Jesus, and may this Jesus change our life from within and help us to help others.

Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, especially the groups from England, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Indonesia, the Philippines, Canada and the United States of America. I greet in particular the delegation from the nato Defense College and the many students and teachers present. May our Lenten journey bring us to Easter with hearts purified and renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Upon you and your families I invoke joy and peace in Christ our Redeemer!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to young people, to the sick, to the elderly and to newlyweds. During this Season of Lent, I wish that each of you may rediscover and joyfully bear witness to the gift of Christian faith. Let us continue to pray and be close to battered Ukraine. I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on apostolic zeal, we now consider some of the great men and women in the history of the Church whose lives exemplify love for Christ and passion for the spread of the Gospel. We begin, naturally, with the Apostle Paul. Paul’s encounter

with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus transformed his zeal for the Law, which had led him to persecute Christians, into a consuming desire to proclaim the Gospel of God's loving mercy, revealed in the paschal mystery. Paul's conversion was truly a profound experience of death and resurrection; reborn in Christ, he became a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), now filled with zeal to carry the good news of our salvation to all the nations. Paul's example shows us that at the heart of all missionary zeal is a living encounter with the risen Lord. It also shows us that zeal for the Gospel can never justify violence or persecution in the name of the God of mercy, who invites us freely to accept his gift of new life by believing in the Gospel of Jesus his Son.