

“The truth and beauty of Catholicism are best imparted not by a textbook but by a living witness. Lenny DeLorenzo offers in this beautiful book a reorientation of the way we think about and implement catechesis and faith formation. This book is a game-changer both in its unique, coherent presentation of the faith and in its provocative and compelling approach to forming others in the faith. This is a book that should be in the hands of every parent, pastor, catechist, and teacher.”

—Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

“The Catholic faith, and the person of Jesus Christ who reveals it, is ever new and has the power to fascinate the mind as it sets a heart on fire with excitement about the promise of a life greater than we can imagine. DeLorenzo brings to life the striking beauty of the story of Jesus Christ and offers a method that empowers catechists to share this life-changing truth with young people. This book, firmly based in the principles of the new Directory of Catechesis, has the power to transform an ordinary confirmation program into a life-changing experience, because it helps the catechist become a witness to the transforming power of the Gospel.”

—Most Reverend Andrew H. Cozzens, STD, DD
Auxiliary Bishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis

“Leonard DeLorenzo’s new book *Turn to the Lord* is an encounter with the Body of Christ! I have often found myself to be without words when trying to explain the fullness of the Catholic faith. Describing beliefs or practices by themselves feels like scattering puzzle pieces. This book will be appreciated by catechists, youth ministers, parents, and anyone who loves the faith and longs to share it. By describing the themes of faith, DeLorenzo paints the big picture of what it means to be Catholic, and to be loved by our generous God.”

—Tom East, Director of the Center for Ministry Development and
Project Coordinator for the Certificate in Youth Ministry
Studies Program

“Dr. Leonard DeLorenzo’s book articulates a comprehensive approach to faith formation. From exhaustive catechetical content to real life conversational quips, this book is a delight. DeLorenzo possesses a quality of simple explanation of deep ideas found in C. S. Lewis and N. T. Wright. The book reads like an inspiring essay but sticks with you like an excellent keynote speech. It will become a tool on the shelf of anyone in faith formation and a gift for all who pursue a deeper understanding of Catholicism.”

—Doug Tooke
Vice President of Mission, ODB Films

“*Turn to The Lord* by Dr. DeLorenzo is a refreshing look at the catechism and our youth. Not only does the text provide important elements of the Catholic faith, but also provides a framework in which to share our rich faith with children and teens. Dr. DeLorenzo takes a modern approach to reach and teach today’s generation of students.”

—Leslie Lipovski, PhD, Assistant Superintendent
Catholic Diocese of Arlington, Virginia

“I am grateful for the excellent work of Leonard DeLorenzo in his new book *Turn to the Lord*. It will be a great resource in our efforts to re-envision an evangelizing catechesis in our day.”

—Katie Dawson, Director of Parish Evangelization and Faith Formation,
Diocese of Orange

Turn to the Lord

An Invitation to Lifelong Conversion

Leonard J. DeLorenzo



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Nihil Obstat: Msgr. Michael Heintz, PhD, *Censor Librorum*

Imprimatur: † Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades, Bishop of Fort Wayne - South Bend, April 13, 2021.

Cover design and mosaic by John Vineyard.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970; the *New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms* © 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Scripture quotations are from Revised Standard Version Bible, Catholic Edition, copyright © 1965, 1966, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations are from Jewish Publication Society TANAKH translation, copyright © 1985, 1999 by the Jewish Publication Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the English translation of *Rite of Penance* © 1974, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation (ICEL); excerpts from the English translation of *The Roman Missal* © 2010, ICEL; excerpts from the English translation of *The Order of Baptism of Children* © 2017, ICEL. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from documents of the Second Vatican Council are from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, OP, © 1996. Used with permission of Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.

© 2021 by Leonard J. DeLorenzo

Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except brief quotations in reviews, without written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DeLorenzo, Leonard J., author.

Title: Turn to the Lord : an invitation to lifelong conversion / Leonard J. DeLorenzo.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, [2021] | Includes index. | Summary:

“A holistic resource for parents of students involved in confirmation preparation, spouses and family members of those participating in RCIA, and sponsors and godparents of those preparing for sacramental initiation” — Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021017753 (print) | LCCN 2021017754 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814667378 (paperback) | ISBN 9780814667385 (epub) | ISBN 9780814667385 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Catholic Church—Doctrines. | Catholic Church—Catechisms. |

Conversion—Catholic Church. | Initiation rites—Religious aspects—Catholic Church.

Classification: LCC BX1751.3 .D45 2021 (print) | LCC BX1751.3 (ebook) | DDC 230/.2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021017753>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021017754>

To the families of St. Joseph Catholic Church
in South Bend, Indiana,
and especially to the young people
in our first “Catholic Formation Group”

Contents

Preface ix

- 1 The Way 3
- 2 Saul of Tarsus and the Witness of St. Stephen 8
- 3 The Conversion of St. Paul 12
- 4 St. Paul: The Source of Goodness 16
- 5 Paul, Apostle of Christ 21
- 6 The Life of Paul and the Love of Jesus 25
- 7 Who Is Jesus? The Son of the Father Drawn Near to Us 28
- 8 Who Is Jesus? I AM 36
- 9 Who Is Jesus? The Power and Wisdom of God 43
- 10 Who Is Jesus? The Gift of Beatitude 49
- 11 Advent: Prepare the Way of the Lord 53
- 12 Advent: Waiting for the Lord 59
- 13 Where We've Been, Where We're Going 63
- 14 Who We Are Created to Be 66
- 15 Male and Female God Created Them 73
- 16 Sin and Its Effects 80
- 17 The Gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Strength of Virtue 87
- 18 Chastity of the Ears: Inclining Our Hearts 96

19	Chastity of the Tongue: Harnessing the Power of Words	104
20	Chastity of the Eyes: Risking the Joy of Encounter	110
21	The First and Perfect Disciple	115
22	The Mystery and Motherhood of the Church	122
23	Becoming Christ's Body: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist	125
24	Healed as Members: Penance and Anointing of the Sick	132
25	At the Service of Communion: Marriage and Holy Orders	138
	Epilogue The Keynote of Communion	143
	Index	145

Preface

The Whole Thing

Catholicism is about the whole but we often pass it on as a bunch of pieces. What is missing in much of religious instruction, faith formation, and sacramental preparation is the coherence factor. While it is easy to get bogged down in the tedium of “topics,” the coherence factor has to do with the beauty of the whole. Losing the coherence factor is like studying all the different rules of baseball without learning to appreciate the game itself. Or again, it is like focusing so much on each individual amendment to the Constitution that we fail to see the genius of the document as a whole.

I am interested in the genius of Catholicism as a whole, without sacrificing attention to particular things within that whole.

In this book, I attempt to present the whole while offering instruction about important parts of the Catholic faith. This does not mean that I attempt to present everything about Catholicism in this book. Instead, I want to help others encounter the impact the person of Christ makes on those he claims as his own. I want us to see how being claimed by Christ orders us to communion with God and each other. I want us to discern why the discovery of God leads to the discovery of ourselves, as we are created and called to be.

Formed in Community

Where did this idea come from? It came from practice, in a community. The community was my home parish and, within that community, a community of families who wanted to prepare their young people for the sacrament of confirmation in a new way. We did not care for using

textbooks for religious formation, so we did not use them. Textbooks present topics and are often deficient in presenting beauty or captivating interest. We wanted to form our young in a living faith that is beautiful.

I developed the content for what we called our “Catholic Formation Group,” drawing principally from Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. As a theology professor who has both taught in the classroom and crafted pastoral programming for nearly two decades, I was consistently attentive to forming and not just informing our people. I thought about how to inculcate habits and not just impart knowledge. I sought to lead people into prayer and not into boredom. I was concerned with the whole.

My approach is to move both narratively and biblically. I begin with the narrative of St. Paul, in multiple parts, whose conversion and transformation into what I describe as “a source of goodness” leads us to the person of Christ. The contemplation of who Christ is serves as the centerpiece of the whole, and leads to the practice of learning how to wait for the Lord. If we were to think of the content of this book as a full-year curriculum, the journey from Paul to Christ and into Advent would be the first semester.

The second semester, then, concerns the study of creation in order to discover who and what human beings are created to be. From there, I give an account of sin and the effects of sin. We explore how recovery from sin takes place through the Spirit, and how we grow in virtue to become capable of being who Christ frees us to be. In the process, we touch on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and why they matter, the meaning of the body and of the sexes, the significance of chastity as a virtue, the conditions of discipleship, and the mystery of the sacraments as building up the Body of Christ.

That might sound like a bunch of different stuff, but it is all presented together upon one keynote. The keynote in all of this is communion, because communion is at the heart of Catholicism, because Christ is at the heart of the faith. Christ brings us into communion with God and unity with one another—that’s the Catholic whole. By the end of this exploration, then, people will certainly know more things while also becoming practiced in a Catholic view of life, which is not something you can simply be told about; you have to be persuaded by it and ultimately immersed in it.

The Ways of Entering In

The book you are presently reading grows out of a two-part book I wrote to empower those who are leading others in sacramental formation. The second part of that other book—*Turn to the Lord: Forming Disciples for Lifelong Conversion*—presents ministers, teachers, and leader-parents with direct guidance for creating and facilitating “Catholic Formation Groups.” These groups establish the conditions and provide the instruction to fully initiate people into the Catholic Church.

While the second part of that book is really only relevant to those who are leading formation groups, the first part of the book is of use to a much wider audience. That audience includes parents of students involved in confirmation preparation, spouses and family members of those participating in RCIA, and sponsors and godparents of those preparing for sacramental initiation. The audience may also include fully initiated Catholics who are hoping to develop their understanding of the Catholic faith while also enriching their prayer life, whether on their own or in the company of other disciples. Moreover, those who are interested in learning more about the Catholic faith would benefit from this holistic introduction, as would students in Catholic high schools or collegiate ministry centers. And since my publisher and I recognized that a wider audience would benefit from part 1 of “that other book,” we decided to make that part 1 into its own book. You are now holding the fruit of that decision.

When I lead confirmation preparation groups for my parish or assist with RCIA, the parents of the students enrolled in the program along with the family members of those in RCIA will receive *this* book. It is important that they immerse themselves in the exploration of the faith alongside their loved ones who are preparing for sacramental initiation. I am firmly convinced that we need to build up communities of formation rather than relying on the old “drop-off and pick-up” approach to religious education. If we are asking young people or adults who are preparing to enter the Church to treat the content and the ways of our faith as decisively important in their lives, then I think the rest of us should join them by giving a little bit of our own time and attention to dwelling on the mysteries of our faith and the drama of lifelong conversion.

I am also interested in serving my fellow parishioners who are not directly involved in faith formation ministries but who would like to

immerse themselves in the Catholic faith more deeply for their own enrichment and growth. In fact, my wife and I are those people: we always need new opportunities for thinking and praying, discussing and practicing our faith in a way that stretches and nourishes us. This book is for people like us who seek a substantive but accessible presentation of the Catholic faith, and who are willing to grow in our knowledge of Scripture and Church doctrines, all while welcoming God into our lives.

And I never cease worrying about all the many young people who have been initiated into the Catholic Church but are in danger of leaving or “disaffiliating.” Some stop practicing the faith because they have serious disagreements with or grievances against the Church, and we should take those disagreements and grievances seriously. By and large, though, the vast majority of young Catholics who leave the faith behind do so simply because it is not important to them. It just is not relevant or foundational to who they are. They may even have a benign opinion about the Catholic Church, but they do not feel any reason to make the Church a priority in their lives.

It just so happens that what is deprioritized ends up being forgotten, and that is what happens to most young Catholics who leave the Church. I see this in my undergraduate students at a Catholic university. While there is a strong minority for whom the Catholic faith is important, the majority of those who were raised Catholic either do not know how to make their faith a priority or do not care to make it so. They will be the first to tell you that they are “technically” Catholic but not really practicing. They do not know if or how they will belong to the Church later in life.

Now, I do not believe that this single book is the answer to the entire trend toward disaffiliation. What I am certain of is this: unless we learn how to present the Catholic faith as interesting and challenging to young people, and then join them in the struggle toward developing thicker and more textured belief, then the rates of Catholic disaffiliation will only increase. This book, then, is an attempt to present young people—or older people with struggles and doubts about their faith—with a holistic, coherent, and hopefully beautiful presentation of the human and divine drama of Catholicism. In fact, I decided to put the narrative of St. Paul toward the beginning because he is *just so*

human. We can all find ourselves in the conversion and transformation of St. Paul, and then trust him to lead us to Jesus.

I end this general introduction with a word of hope. We know more people are leaving the Catholic Church every year than coming into it. We know that religion in general is in decline. We know that the fastest growing religious group in the United States and elsewhere in the world is the group known as the “Nones,” or the religiously unaffiliated. This is all serious stuff. Yet, I am hopeful.

I am hopeful because I believe in God the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. I believe in the Catholic Church. I believe that we do need new strategies and approaches to passing on and forming people in the faith. I believe that we need to commit ourselves more seriously to what matters most. I believe we have to sacrifice more. But I believe we can and will, by the grace of God.

And I believe this book will help.

*“For the foolishness of God is wiser than men,
and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”*

—1 Corinthians 1:25

*“Through him you sought us when we were not seeking you,
but you sought us that we might begin to seek you.”*

—St. Augustine, Confessions XI.4

“From the moment a soul has the grace to know God, she must seek.”

—St. Teresa of Calcutta

*“Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive
to the end for which we are created.”*

—St. Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises 23

chapter one

The Way

God's Plan

“God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”¹ That is the first line of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and it is a stunning claim. It means that the point of everything—from beginning to end—is for God’s life to become our life.

To share in God’s life means becoming what we were not. “In his Son and through him, [God] invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life” (CCC 1). Those claimed in and through Christ receive a share in the inheritance that properly belongs to Christ alone: his blessed life in communion with the Father. By the Holy Spirit, we receive this communion as a gift, with the mission to share this gift of communion with others. Christ is the gift of God’s life for us; in him, God’s life becomes our life.

There is drama in God’s life becoming our life. It is a drama that reaches to the depths of each person and stretches across the connections between us. It has to do with everything we are and, even more, everything we are called to become. God’s life is given to us as a gift, but our task is to grow into the gift we receive. And we are responsible for one another toward that end.

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter, CCC), 2nd ed. (United States Catholic Conference—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1.

Life Begins at Baptism

The life we receive in Christ is no half measure: it is complete, full, and everlasting. Through the ministry of the Church, Christ confers his life upon us through the sacraments, beginning with the sacrament of baptism. In this sacrament, Christ works through his Church to initiate us not merely into a set of teachings or precepts, but into his *life*. The Rite of Baptism performs the initiation the sacrament effects, so that by paying attention to the rite, we learn precisely what the beginning of this new life entails—namely, renunciation, profession, and immersion.

In order to be freed for life in Christ, a person must first be separated from the old life—the life of sin, bound by death. This separation is performed in a minor exorcism, in and through renunciation of this old way.² The act of renunciation is typically made in response to three questions, with either the person being baptized or the godparents on his or her behalf offering the responses:

[Celebrant:] Do you renounce Satan?

[Parents and godparents:] I do.

And all his works?

I do.

And all his empty show?

I do.

God's life cannot be mingled with the way that leads to death. There is no double life; again, no half measure. You cannot be truthful and a liar at the same time; you cannot be both dead and alive. The old way must be driven out before the new way begins.

Second, and following the renunciation, comes the profession of faith. As if having breathed out old, stale air from one's lungs, the new, fresh air can now be taken in. Just so, the three "no" responses of the renunciation are now matched by three "yes" responses:

[Celebrant:] Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?

[Parents and godparents:] I do.

2. See CCC 1237.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered death and was buried, rose again from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Father?

I do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?

I do.

Third and finally, the person is now baptized into *this* faith, which has just been professed. The baptism effects, at one and the same time, a separation (from sin) and an initiation (into Christ's life). This third moment is the one that contains the other two and makes them true: the person is immersed into the baptismal waters and into the name of the triune God—the person is immersed in a *life*:

[Celebrant:] I baptize you in the name of the Father [immersion no. 1], and of the Son [immersion no. 2], and of the Holy Spirit [immersion no. 3].

In the sacrament of baptism, *God* accomplishes what he set out to do: he brings us into *his* life, in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Our renunciation of sin and our profession of faith are two sides of our consent to what God is doing in the sacrament. In every baptism, God gives us a share in his life and we receive this gift.

The Way of Life

Since this gift is not some mere *thing* but indeed a *life*, Christians are thus initiated into a way of being to which we must grow accustomed. It is a way of life that must be practiced. In fact, in the early Church, before they were called “Christians,”³ the followers of the risen Christ were known according to their way of life. As such, “Christianity” was simply called “the Way.”

We can see the distinctive marks of this “Way” of life in the Acts of the Apostles, where St. Luke gives an account of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem:

3. See Acts 11:26 for a note about the beginning of the name “Christians.”

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47, NABRE)

As we can see, the life of the early Christian community was built on four pillars. First, they studied the teaching of the apostles—that is, they dedicated themselves to the Gospel of Jesus Christ handed down to them. Second, they shared all things in common, including serving the needs of the neediest—that is, they gave alms and practiced charity. Third, they broke bread together in their homes—this, no doubt, is the beginning of eucharistic fellowship. And fourth, they committed themselves to the rule of prayer.⁴ Upon these four pillars, the first Christians grew into the life they had received.

Notice how this scriptural passage concludes: “And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” In other words, as they lived “the Way,” these early Christians contributed not just to their own well-being but also to the well-being of others. By conforming their lives to the good gift they had received, they became a *source of goodness for others*.

In this we can see something of the connection between baptism and confirmation. The latter is the sacramental mission to give what you have received. The fully initiated and mature Christian is more than one who has been converted through the love of God; in Christ and by the Holy Spirit, Christians become a source of the good gift they have received. This is the great dignity of the Christian: to share

4. It is worth noting that these four pillars, as I have called them, are visible as the four pillars of the *Catechism* itself: 1. The Profession of Faith (the teaching of the apostles), 2. The Celebration of the Christian Mystery (the breaking of bread), 3. Life in Christ (the communal life), and 4. Christian Prayer (the prayers).

in God's life so fully as to become an agent of communicating that life to others.

Formation for Life

The Christian life is a lifelong practice in saying "Yes" to the life of God, given to us in Christ. That "Yes" begins in baptism and leads all the way to the communion of saints, in whom the Body of Christ is made complete. Being further confirmed and strengthened in this "Yes" requires formation. Those four dimensions of "the Way" enumerated in Acts 2 are the basic dimensions of Christian formation: study of the faith, practices of charity, eucharistic fellowship, and regular prayer. Whether as preparation for the sacrament of confirmation or through RCIA, or as a way of pursuing a deeper commitment to the mature Christian life, the regular practice of this "Way" makes us receptive to God's gift and responsive to the mission of the Church in sharing the gift of life in Christ.

None of this merely belongs to the world of ideas. These are the mysteries that move in this world: the world in which the Word of God became flesh and dwelt; the world in which Christ died and rose from the dead; the world from which Christ ascended to the Father still clinging to the humanity he shares with us; the world into which the Holy Spirit descended, into which the Church was born, and within which the sacraments heal, strengthen, and nourish those becoming united to Christ. These mysteries have not just changed lives; rather, these mysteries have overturned and transformed lives. Those who were dead in sin have been redeemed through Christ's sacrifice and set free as instruments of God's life for others. Even many who actively opposed God's life and gave everything to obstruct "the Way" have been converted from their death-dealing ways so as to be remade as a "source of goodness" for others. And it is with the narrative of one such man that our narrative exploration of the beauty and drama of Christianity shall begin.

chapter two

Saul of Tarsus and the Witness of St. Stephen

*“And every day the Lord added to their number
those who were being saved.”*

There was a man from Tarsus who was not among that number. While those who practiced “the Way” gathered people together, this man broke them apart. While they struggled to live in peace, he wrought violence. While they lived a new life in God, he clung to an old life in spite of God. By grace, though, this man from Tarsus was changed from what he was and became what he had never been. Saul of Tarsus became Paul, apostle of Christ. He was converted and then he converted the whole world. But his conversion was no mere turning from one way to another; it was, instead, a thorough transformation into a “source of goodness.” Everything about him was transformed. He, himself, became an instrument of the salvation Christ offers. That is his story, his new story—the story of *Saint Paul*. And this story, the story of the last apostle, begins with the first martyr.

“Now Stephen, filled with grace and power, was working great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8).¹ He was one of seven disciples appointed by the Twelve to assist in their ministry; Stephen’s own ministry was persuasive. As so often happens, though, because Stephen acted and spoke with authority, adversaries emerged. When these rivals sought to debate with him and bring him down, they were repelled because “they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit

1. All biblical citations from NABRE in this chapter.

with which he spoke” (Acts 6:10). So they did what so many jealous and frustrated people do in situations like this: they twisted what he said to mean something that it did not mean. Stephen had indeed been witnessing to Jesus Christ but not as blasphemy, rather as salvation. Like Jesus before him, Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin. The members of the “Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15).

There have been far too many tender greetings cards and precious statues by now for us to easily imagine what the face of an angel might really look like. But why do you think the first thing angels usually say is “Do not be afraid”? In the infancy narratives alone, we read about angelic appearances to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, and each time the angels say “Do not afraid!” Why would they be afraid? Maybe it has something to do with what the prophet Daniel describes, when he writes: “As I looked up, I saw a man [the angel Gabriel (see Dan 8:15, 9:21)] dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face shone like lightning, his eyes were like fiery torches, his arms and feet looked like burnished bronze, and the sound of his voice was like the roar of a multitude” (Dan 10:5-6). His face was like lightning! His eyes were like fiery torches! No wonder this angel said to Daniel, “Do not fear” (Dan 10:12). The angel’s appearance to Daniel is not at all unlike the one who sat upon the stone rolled back from Jesus’s tomb, whose “appearance was like lightning” (Matt 28:3; cf. Matt 17:2). These do not sound like softly winged, rosy-cheeked, chubby Pampers models whom you want to scoop up and cuddle. Just so, when the members of the Sanhedrin saw Stephen’s face “like the face of an angel,” the logic of Scripture tells us that they were not comforted. They were looking upon a face that was radiant, fiery, and filled with power. Stephen made quite an impression—his was a face to remember.

All the stunning power of his appearance is translated into words in the next section of the narrative, where Stephen offers his testimony before the Sanhedrin. He presents a full summary of salvation history, beginning with Abraham, continuing through Moses, and all through Israel’s history. He testifies to the pattern of persecution of Israel’s prophets, who foretold of the coming of the Lord. He testifies before them that the Lord’s salvation has now come, but asserts that they have long been unprepared to receive the Savior. Unlike Jesus, who remained

silent before his accusers, Stephen is not short on words because he must testify to Jesus as the fulfillment of the “God of glory [who] appeared to our father Abraham” (Acts 7:2). His words carry the same power as his appearance; the Sanhedrin was stunned and infuriated.

As they prepare to execute him, Stephen “looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,” and as the conclusion to his testimony, he testifies to this vision (Acts 7:55-56). So we should wonder again: What did people see when they looked upon Stephen’s face? They saw the glory of the Son of Man that shone upon him. That is what an angelic face is: a reflection of God’s glory, the glory made manifest in Christ.

Overseeing this whole affair is Saul of Tarsus; he consented to Stephen’s execution (Acts 7:58; 8:1). Saul heard Stephen’s final testimony, he witnessed Stephen give over his spirit as Jesus himself had done, and he saw Stephen’s angelic face ablaze with the glory of God. The narrative shifts to Saul immediately upon Stephen’s death—at the beginning of chapter 8—before it is interrupted by the story of Philip and then returns to Saul’s conversion in chapter 9. Without doubt, Stephen’s face is impressed upon Saul’s memory. The first encounter of the man of Tarsus with Christ is in the reflection of Stephen’s face.

We are all so quick to see the narrative of Saul’s conversion as the beginning of the story of Paul the apostle. But St. Luke, who was Paul’s intimate companion, first introduces the last of the apostles with the death of the first martyr. In doing so, the power of Stephen is juxtaposed to the power of Saul: Stephen’s power comes from Christ while Saul’s power has another source. In the brief introduction to Saul at the beginning of chapter 8, we hear what kind of man he was and what kind of power he wielded: “Saul, meanwhile, was trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment” (Acts 8:3).

This is not only how Luke identifies Saul, but also how St. Paul later remembers himself, as he was in his “old life.” In at least two places later in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke records Paul’s testimony about what he once was:

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city. At the feet of Gamaliel I was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God, just as all of you are today. I persecuted this

Way to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison. Even the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify on my behalf. For from them I even received letters to the brothers and set out for Damascus to bring back to Jerusalem in chains for punishment those there as well. (Acts 22:3-5)

I myself once thought that I had to do many things against the name of Jesus the Nazorean, and I did so in Jerusalem. I imprisoned many of the holy ones with the authorization I received from the chief priests, and when they were to be put to death I cast my vote against them. Many times, in synagogue after synagogue, I punished them in an attempt to force them to blaspheme; I was so enraged against them that I pursued them even to foreign cities. (Acts 26:9-11)

By what power did Saul live? He lived by the power of anger, the power of violence, and even the power of fear. He sought to force those who lived in “the Way” to blaspheme for fear of abandoning his own way of life, the righteousness of which he was so unbreakably convinced.

It is precisely that old way of life that Saul will renounce.

chapter three

The Conversion of St. Paul

Think about what happens when someone is enraged. Their breathing deepens, their pulse quickens, and their body heat rises. They are also really focused on what enrages them; their thoughts sharpen; and their words, if they have any, are pointed. To be enraged is no mere intellectual exercise, nor is it a partial experience. It is as much bodily as it is psychological and emotional; it is all-consuming. When Paul remembers that he was once “so enraged” against the holy ones of Jesus, he is remembering himself as completely dedicated and singularly directed. His whole life—the very essence of who he is—was taken up in this rage.

We are reminded of the character of Saul of Tarsus when the story of his conversion commences in Acts 9. In just two verses, the entire person of Saul is on display in his mission to persecute:

Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. (Acts 9:1-2, NABRE)

On his own initiative, Saul desires to search out the followers of the Way. His eyes, his ears, and his lips are committed to this quest—he is all in.

With his *eyes*, Saul is looking for Christians in a particular way: with anger, hatred, and suspicion. Even more than what he will see, the way in which he sees is being revealed. We might think of times, for example, when someone has wronged us and we go looking for them. We

can go in at least a couple different ways: we could go with a desire to understand and maybe even forgive, or we can go with anger looking to strike out and condemn. The way we will see that person when they appear to us is very much determined in advance. So, too, with Saul.

With his *ears*, Saul is listening for evidence of what he considers the disciples' blasphemous allegiance to Jesus. Remember that the early Christians committed themselves to daily prayer and to the teachings of the apostles, as we learned in Acts 2. Saul will hold their prayers and their teachings as evidence against them, determining in advance that when he hears such things, then those who speak them are deserving of punishment. It is not what he hears that separates Saul from the Christians; it is how he hears that pits him against them.

With his *mouth*, then, Saul discharges the rage that is burning within him. As a dragon breathes fire, Saul breathes "murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord" to burn down their way of life. His words and his actions are in strict alignment—this is a focused and committed person whose passion comes from a deep, deep place within him. He is a man possessed.

In the next seven verses, all this is called into question, which is to say that everything about Saul is thrown into crisis. What does he see? What does he hear? What does he say?

He *sees* a light flash around him so brightly that—like a person walking out of a dark room into the sunlight in the middle of day—he is left unable to see anything at all. He *hears* an unknown voice, which confounds him. It is the voice of one who identifies himself with the very ones Saul is persecuting. What Saul does not hear any longer are the voices of those who join him in his mission to persecute; these companions in his misdeeds are "speechless" before the voice from on high (v. 7). So what can the man of murderous threats now *say*? He is reduced to questioning, as one who is not in control but must grope for meaning. Though no horse is mentioned in the passage, Saul is indeed knocked from his high horse, where he was puffed up on his own authority.

Is this not what Saul feared? The light that blinds him is the same light he saw reflected on Stephen's angelic face. The voice he hears confirms the testimony that Stephen gave. The question Saul speaks is of one who has suddenly lost his way. The leveling of mighty Saul is as stunning as it is sudden: he can see nothing, he neither eats nor

drinks for three days, and he—this man of initiative—must now be taken by the hand and *led by others* because his own rage can no longer lead him.

The once mighty Saul will indeed meet one of the very disciples he was seeking, though the meeting will no longer be on Saul's terms. The Lord comes to this disciple, Ananias, and commissions him to lay his hands on Saul, to heal him. Ananias was no less confused than Saul before the Lord's voice, for he knows that this man Saul seeks the ruin of those who follow the Way, and yet with the Lord's assurance, Ananias trusts.

What is the first thing that Saul *hears* when Ananias stands before him? Ananias calls Saul by name and claims him as "my brother" (Acts 9:17). Can you imagine how this address must have struck Saul? He set out for Damascus in order to tear down men like Ananias, and now Ananias who stands in a position of power over the blind and weak Saul responds to those murderous threats with an offer of kinship.

Through Ananias's ministry, Saul immediately regains his sight, but let us not forget the three days he spent blinded and in total darkness. What happened during those three days? Saul was separated from the way he *saw* things previously. In those three days of blindness, his habitual and committed way of seeing was interrupted. He touched his own vulnerability and was left at the mercy of how others would see and therefore treat him. In that blindness, his sight was being refashioned: he would no longer see things the way he had before.

At the hands of the disciple Ananias, Saul undergoes a conversion to humility. Saul was blinded because he had been blind to any way but his own. Saul was dumbfounded because his way of hearing was polluted with the desire to condemn. Saul did not eat or drink because he had to purge himself of his old life if he was to live the life to which the Lord was calling him. This new life was one he had to accept as a gift.

"He got up and was baptized, and when he had eaten, he recovered his strength . . . and he began at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues" (Acts 9:18-19, 20, NABRE). With the old way renounced and a new way professed, a new man is born: Saul of Tarsus now lives in Christ.

If ever there were a conversion that we think of as immediate, it is that of Saul of Tarsus who becomes Paul the disciple and apostle of Christ. Yet, in our haste to see this conversion as oh so sudden, we

miss not only the three days of blindness and weakness, but also the ministry of Ananias and especially the thorough transformation that is begun in Paul. There are stages here in Paul's conversion, and these stages are the beginning of a lasting change.

Paul is being transformed in the way he *sees*, which has to do with the renewal of his mind because it is about the way in which he views things and the lens by which he looks at the world and at others. In brief, he begins to see in the very light that first wounded him: the light of Christ.

Paul is being transformed in how he *hears*, which certainly has to do with his ears but even more profoundly with his heart. It is about how he is willing to listen to others and to take in their words without an agenda of his own. From his heart, the movement from rage to charity has begun.

And Paul is being transformed in what he *speaks*, which will now become ordered to the end of building up the communities of those who follow the Way. Where he once spread threats, he will now spread Good News. He will no longer proclaim his own power but Jesus as the Son of God (Acts 9:20). He will back up his words with his life.