

How Christ Converted St. Paul

By Fr. Walter M. Abbott, S.J.

In Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles we have the account of the remarkable conversion of Saul, a learned Jew, a member of the very devout group known as Pharisees, who "kept up his violent threats of murder" and who at least had letters from the High Priest certifying that he was authorized to arrest Christians, "both men and women," or was recommended to the Jewish authorities in Damascus as a capable man for doing the job there.

Luke's account says it was the risen Christ Himself who intervened and changed this young persecutor of the Christians into first a beaten and baffled man, then after only "a few days" a bold preacher asserting Jesus "is the Son of God," and then, apparently within another very short time, a man able to use "proofs that Jesus was the Messiah" which "were so strong that the Jews

who lived in Damascus could not answer him."

I think many people have the impression that Saul, who became St. Paul, went within a few days from being an all-out persecutor of the Christians to being the deep and brilliant teacher of the Christian faith whom we know from the Epistles of the New Testament.

In the analysis I have just given there certainly is a remarkable development, but I do not think it goes that far. Even this very specially chosen soul, Paul, had a long way to go before he would know about some of the mysteries of the faith.

I remember an article written by Cardinal Bea in 1960, on the occasion of the 19th centenary of St. Paul's arrival in Rome. The cardinal wrote that it took the young Saul a long time to understand the true significance of the first words he heard Jesus speak, "Why do you persecute Me?"

The cardinal said it was only

later, when Paul penetrated more deeply into the mysteries of the faith and had been illuminated by the Holy Spirit, could he write to the Corinthians, "You are the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 15:27).

It seems to me that Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, understood Paul's first preaching to be just what the preaching of the Apostles and their seven apostolic helpers was, namely, the presentation to Jewish people that Jesus' life, work, and doctrine was the fulfillment of a divine plan foretold by Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms.

Paul could have been given all he needed for such preaching in the few days when he talked with the Christians in Damascus, or he could have been given it in a flash by Christ Himself on the road to Damascus, or he could already have had quite a knowledge of what the Christians were saying before he headed

for Damascus, or his knowledge of this whole subject when he began to preach might have been the result of all these possibilities combined. You will have good scholarly company whatever you decide on this matter.

There are three accounts of Paul's conversion in the Acts of the Apostles, in Chapters 9, 22, and 26. Some discrepancies have been noted between the accounts, especially the fact that in Chapter 9 Paul's companions on his trip to Damascus are said to have heard Christ's voice when Paul fell from his horse, but in the account of Chapter 22 they do not hear.

I like the explanation that the Greek text uses one construction for Paul's "hearing" and another for the companions' "hearing" to indicate that Luke distinguished the companions' experience from Paul's, meaning that they heard but without understanding.

I like, too, the theory that Luke has three accounts of Paul's conversion to emphasize its importance and to bring out different aspects of it. Thus the account in Chapter 9 shows Paul as a true Apostle in the same sense as the Twelve; the account in Chapter 22 shows that Paul's vision made him a witness to Christ and the teaching of Christ; and the account in Chapter 26 shows he was called to be a prophet. You are free, of course, to see some other design in Luke's use of the three accounts.

Commentators these days make a great deal of the fact that Luke's first account of Paul's conversion, in Chapter 9, presents Paul returning from Damascus to Jerusalem. They say Luke wants to show that the preaching of the Gospel by Paul, who will be the principal agent for it among the Gentiles, begins like the others from Jerusalem and he is always closely connected with the college of the Twelve in Jerusalem. Do you agree?



The experience of prayer in the home is the most important ingredient in teaching the child religious values. (Courier Photo by Orville Andrews)

Parents' Faith and Prayer Is the Greatest Teacher

By Lawrence D. Rilla, S.T.L.

(Lawrence Rilla is a member of the staff of Fr. James McHugh, Director of the Family Life Bureau, United States Catholic Conference. He is also a Parish Director of Religious Education.)

It has been said that Christianity is ultimately a religious teaching for adults and sinners. It is not only a faith commitment difficult for adults to understand and accept, but it is also one of the world's most advanced religions.

Nevertheless, the social sciences, the experience of parents and Catholic teaching itself reveal that children are religious by nature. Long before learning skills are developed, children become fascinated by and seek to participate in the mysteries of God and of the world around them.

The teaching of religion outside of the parochial school has undergone a definite evolution. The current emphasis on "home-centered religion," adult education, and increasing parental responsibility actually began in 1539, when the first home visitor or "fisher" division of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine was established in Milan, Italy.

Today, parishes are encouraged over their success in conducting high school classes in the home and in some areas parents report this approach to own religious understanding in

be working effectively with elementary grade students as well.

Formal religious instruction for one hour a week can hardly be considered adequate today. As a result, this home-centered approach with its new flexible texts and life-centered methods can be viewed as a valuable development in catechesis and in family spirituality.

But unfortunately, this is not always the case. Many parents who realize their essential role in the religious formation of their children are unsure of themselves and even more skeptical of the rapid changes surrounding religious education.

We all must begin to realize that there need not be a repetition of ideas, prayers or even content in the home and in the classroom. Classroom instruction can only help to complement in a formal way what has already begun in the home.

But the rub comes when the parental attitude toward and understanding of "religion" is decidedly different from those presented in the class and found (or not found) in the modern texts. This is not an uncommon parochial reality today. What is even more disturbing is the lack of Christian charity which sometimes characterizes the debate.

Parents as well as priests have a grave obligation to be informed and to rethink their light of the Second Vatican Council. On the other hand, those involved in setting up

programs and selecting texts must be sensitive to more than just child psychology and theological symbolism.

A noted catechist suggests that a child may indeed be able to understand complicated points of doctrine if he has had certain personal experiences which he can place alongside what he is taught.

One very important source of "personal experience" for the child is the religious practices, personal devotions and types of prayer which his parents rely on and practice in the home. An experience of faith and prayer "in action" will greatly enhance the total process of religious education. In fact, it is what makes religious instruction—a catechesis—an introduction to a "living faith."

Nor should parents be alarmed when in older childhood and adolescence, the prayers and practices once learned are seemingly cast aside. Childhood ideas and convictions need a second, more mature scrutiny—that's simply part of growing up. In the final analysis, the adolescent may still question the religious practices which enlivened the faith of his parents. Again, no need for concern, for the foundation has been laid; the lessons of faith were not merely learned but lived; the essential process of praying and worshipping together was experienced back in those formative years with the two most influential teachers the child will ever meet—Mom and Dad.

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FR. RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. I read with much interest of the recent march on Rome by traditional Catholics from all over Europe, particularly from those countries where liberal clergy have been forcing reforms down the throats of the laity. This is supposed to be the age of "dialogue," isn't it? Well, then, why don't the radicals give us conservatives a chance to speak our minds? Or is "dialogue" a one-way street, with the radicals calling the tune?

A. The reform to which the traditionalist demonstrators in Rome seemed most opposed was the change from Latin to the vernacular in the Mass.

What seems to have been forgotten by yourself and others is that Pope Paul VI has not only strongly approved the changes in the Mass (including the introduction of the vernacular in place of the Latin language) but he has also explicitly chastized those (including two Roman cardinals) who have been waging a rear-guard action against the liturgical reforms.

We can't have it both ways. If Pope Paul VI is the "Supreme Pontiff" and the "Vicar of Christ" when he speaks out against the liberal element in the Church, he is also the "Supreme Pontiff" and "Vicar of Christ" when he promulgates changes in the Mass.

Significantly, traditionalist Catholics are much harsher in their judgments of the Pope than are the liberals. The latter group, after all, objects principally to papal attitudes and styles. It thinks of him as being perhaps too cautious, too conservative, even out of date.

The traditionalists, on the other hand, charge the Pope with heresy, and even promoting it (e.g., in the new Mass texts).

One final point: your plea for genuinely mutual dialogue should be heeded. The Second Vatican Council made a similar appeal in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (n. 92).

Q. Billy Graham has just completed two highly publicized campaigns. I always thought that Catholics were forbidden to attend his rallies. There doesn't seem to be any opposition expressed nowadays by our bishops, not even in those dioceses where Dr. Graham holds his public meetings. Am I to conclude that the Catholic Church no longer opposes his work and that it is perfectly acceptable to attend one of his services?

A. First of all, the Catholic Church never "opposed" the work of Billy Graham. The Catholic Church's official attitude toward him would have been the same as its attitude toward any Protestant minister, and the Catholic Church's attitude toward attendance at a Graham service would have been the same as its attitude toward a Catholic's attendance at any Protestant service.

If there has been any change in attitude toward Billy Graham, it would only be a reflection of the change in the Catholic Church's attitude toward non-Catholic Christianity in general.

Even the most conservative interpretation of present Catholic policy would allow an individual Catholic to attend a Billy Graham service as a spectator, i.e., taking no active part in the service.

It would be my opinion, shared by other Catholic theologians, that a Catholic could, in good conscience, attend such a service and actively participate in it (in prayer, in song, and even in the public manifestation of repentance of sin and acceptance of Jesus Christ).

Nowadays, theologians would be more likely to criticize Dr. Graham not for his evangelical ("The Bible says . . .") approach to Christianity but for his emphasis on personal conversion at the apparent expense of social and political responsibility. However, even here, Dr. Graham seems to be changing. He speaks more and more, if only in general terms, about our complicity in racism and social injustice.