

Pastor's Column

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Saul, Saul, Why Are You Persecuting Me?

In the Scriptures of this weekend, we hear of the conversion of St. Paul.

Saul is a zealous Jew working to protect Judaism against the people of the Way, the people who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, a messiah who suffered on the cross, who died the death of a common criminal, and who was gloriously raised from the dead.

Saul made sure that the people of the Way were being persecuted and punished, and some historians would indicate that Saul was responsible, indirectly, for the deaths of some of the early Christians.

He is on his way to Damascus and something happens to him that changes his life forever.

He has a “shattering” moment in which he hears a voice. It is the voice of Jesus who says to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Jesus does not say, “Why are you persecuting the Church?” or “Why are you persecuting my followers?” Jesus says, “Why are you persecuting me?”

In that moment when Saul's life was turned upside down, in that moment that Saul went from persecutor of the Christians to a Christian leader, and in that moment that Saul became Paul, Jesus identifies himself with his followers. He and they are one! “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

From this experience, Paul, in his later writings, develops the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ, with Christ as the head. The Church is the physical and mystical presence of Christ for any given time and place. The followers of Jesus are each members of the Body working together to be Jesus for a specific time and place. Jesus and the Church are one.

After Paul's faith encounter with the Christ, he did not go off on his own to preach the Gospel and to found his own Churches. He went back to the very people that he was persecuting and began a journey of trying to convince them that he encountered Christ and because of that encounter he had to find a place with them, the first followers of Jesus.

It was not easy for him, and it was not easy for the early Church to believe in and to trust Paul. The struggle was tumultuous and difficult, but it brought Paul into the fold of the Church.

The theology of the Mystical Body is an important framework in which we are called to live our Christianity.

As a Christian, we must be connected to the Church, which is the Body of Christ. There is no such thing as just “Me and Jesus.”

A “Me and Jesus” lifestyle is not true Christianity. It is a personalized life style based on the Teachings of Jesus. It may be good, it may be virtuous, but it is not the fullness of Christianity.

If one has heard the call of Jesus and responds to that call to develop a personal relationship with Jesus, as Lord and Savior, then that call must be lived out in community, within the Church.

It is so much easier to follow Jesus on one's own path, than to submit oneself to a group of fellow believers where there will be differences of opinions, ideas, strategies, practices, customs, likes, and dislikes.

Yet, Paul makes it very clear for us, by his example, that if we are to be in communion with Jesus, we must be in communion with the Church.

As we celebrate this Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, may it provide an opportunity for each of us to be more deeply committed to Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and to live out our relationship with Christ, as faithful members of the Body of Christ, the Church!

F. Mike