

# St Paul's Apostolic Zeal according to Blessed John Henry Newman



Fr. Hermann Geissler, FSO



Pope Francis wishes the Church, in every part of the world, to become more missionary. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, he addresses the faithful asking them “to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization” (n. 1). St. Paul, an apostle and a missionary, still remains a model for us today. For Blessed John Henry Newman Paul is the “glorious Apostle, this sweetest of inspired writers, this most touching and winning of teachers” towards whom he “ever felt a special devotion”.<sup>1</sup> Newman left us four sermons dedicated entirely to the Apostle of the

Gentiles. The theme of these sermons is not so much Paul's apostolic activity as the interior attitude that shaped his work of evangelization. Newman's insights have lost none of their relevance. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they continue to help us rediscover ever more deeply our own missionary vocation.

## **1. Newman's Conversion Experience**

Nobody can truly be an apostle unless he has first been seized by the grace of God and thereby undergone a profound conversion. In a homily from his Anglican years, Newman spoke of *St. Paul's Conversion viewed in reference to his Office*. For

---

<sup>1</sup> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *St. Paul's Characteristic Gift*. In: id., *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, Longmans, Green & Co., New York 1908, pp. 91-105. p. 104.

Newman, Saul's conversion constitutes the beginning St. Paul's ministry. What did he mean by this?

Saul was known as one of the leading persecutors of the Christians. In fact he had approved of the stoning of Stephen who when dying had prayed for his executioners. Later he obtained from the Jewish religious establishment the authorization to imprison the followers of this new movement, "the Way", which was particularly active in Damascus. But at the gates of that city he was "struck down by a miracle, and converted to the faith he persecuted".<sup>2</sup> Above all Paul's conversion is a demonstration of God's power, his triumph over the enemy. "To show His power, He put forth His hand into the very midst of the persecutors of His Son, and seized upon the most strenuous among them".<sup>3</sup> At the same time this conversion is the fruit of Stephen's prayer. "The prayers of righteous men avail much. The first Martyr had power with God to raise up the greatest Apostle".<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is clear, no one can become an apostle unless he first trusts in the transforming power of God and in the efficacy of petitionary prayer.

The grace of conversion, a mystery of God's providence, makes Paul the model Apostle whose appeal is undimmed by the passage of time. In his own life Paul experiences the extremes of sin and the power of God's mercy which so captivates him as to make him the spiritual father of the Gentiles: "in the history of his sin and its most gracious forgiveness, he exemplifies far more than his brother Apostles his own Gospel; that we are all guilty before God, and can be saved only by His free bounty".<sup>5</sup> Just like Paul, every apostle is called to testify to God's mercy, first of all with their lives but also with their words.

Paul's past life made him a particularly apt instrument with which God could realize his plans for the Gentile nations. Nonetheless, one must remember that the spread of the Gospel is not primarily the work of men but rather the grace of God. God, however, almost always avails himself of human cooperation in order to realize his plans. Paul is, one might say, predestined for his mission to the pagans – not only because of his learning and his spiritual gifts, but above all because of the path of faith he followed and his conversion experience. This path had taught him a number of things: not to be discouraged by the gravity of one's sins, how to find the sparks of faith hidden in the hearts of men, to understand those who experience all kinds of temptations, to carry with humility God's revelation and how to use wisely his own experiences to help the conversion of others. In this

---

<sup>2</sup> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *St. Paul's Conversion viewed in reference to his Office*, in: id., *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. II, Christian Classics INC. Westminster, Md. 1966, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99.

way Paul becomes a “comforter, help, and guide of his brethren” because he “know[s] in some good measure the *hearts of men*”.<sup>6</sup> It is consoling to realize that all of life’s experiences, both good and the bad, can, through God’s providence, be used for the spread of the Gospel.

With these considerations, Newman certainly does not imply that one must sin in order to become an apostle and a saint. Paul did not become a better Christian on account of his sins, rather they “rendered him *more fitted for a particular purpose* in God's providence, – more fitted, when converted, to reclaim others”.<sup>7</sup> Newman stated clearly that Paul’s past life was not impious or immoral. He listened to the voice of his conscience and he did not arrogantly turn his back on God. However, Paul’s conscience was not sufficiently illumined by Scripture as, for example, those of Anna and Simeon who, from the Old Testament, had recognised Jesus as the awaited Messiah. In contrast, Paul did not recognise Jesus and therefore became a persecutor of Christians. What implications does this have, according to Newman, for the believer? He must “cherish and obey the holy light of conscience within him, as Saul did; let him carefully study the Scriptures, as Saul did not; and the God who had mercy even on the persecutor of His saints, will assuredly shed His grace upon him, and bring him into the truth as it is in Jesus”.<sup>8</sup> The believer who wishes to become a true apostle must listen to his conscience and the Revealed Word. He must engage with this Word and allow himself to be transformed. He must be attentive and responsive to God’s call that is always new.

## **2. Knowledge of Human Nature**

The profound union with Christ that is the fruit of an authentic conversion leads St. Paul to say “it is no longer I, but Christ living in me. The life that I am now living, subject to the limitation of human nature, I am living in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2,20). A select few saints become so filled with the life of God that they seem to lose themselves entirely such that they appear to no longer possess the frailties of a human nature. As Newman stated in his sermon *St. Paul’s Characteristic Gift*, the Apostle of the Gentiles is numbered among the other group of saints “in whom the supernatural combines with nature, instead of superseding it, - invigorating it, elevating it, ennobling it;

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106.

and who are not the less men, because they are saints”.<sup>9</sup> In this homily, which Newman preached in Dublin’s University Chapel a few years after his conversion, he asks what is the characteristic that distinguishes the Apostle from the other saints. In his view, above all, it is typical of St. Paul that the fullness of the divine gifts does not destroy his humanity but rather they elevate and perfect it.

For this reason Paul understands man with all his strengths, weaknesses, temptations, aspirations and proclivities: “human nature, the common nature of the whole race of Adam, spoke in him, acted in him, with an energetical presence, with a sort of bodily fullness, always under the sovereign command of divine grace, but losing none of its real freedom and power because of its subordination. And the consequence is, that, having the nature of man so strong within him, he is able to enter into human nature, and to sympathize with it, with a gift peculiarly his own”.<sup>10</sup>

Even if before his conversion the Apostle conducted his life with rigor, he now finds himself among the despised pagans and he speaks as if he were one of them. He experiences solidarity with those like himself, with all of Adam’s descendants. For this reason he is conscious of his wounded nature with all its inclinations towards sin that are typical of man living in a fallen world. In this sense Paul followed in the Lord’s footsteps, carried the sins of all men and felt himself in full communion with them. “He, I say, a strict Pharisee (as he describes himself), blameless according to legal justice, conversing with all good conscience before God, serving God from his forefathers with a pure conscience,



Crucifix in the Chapel at Littlemore

he nevertheless elsewhere speaks of himself as a profligate heathen outcast before the grace of God called him”.<sup>11</sup> Paul does not point the finger at others, because he is aware of the weakness and cupidity in himself. He knows human nature intimately because he sees “in that nature of his which grace had sanctified, what it was in its tendencies and results when deprived of grace”.<sup>12</sup> A faithful

<sup>9</sup> NEWMAN, *St. Paul’s Characteristic Gift*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 95-96.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 97.

missionary is always on the way of conversion and renewal in Christ. Such a missionary is able to enter into the differing circumstances of people's lives, their emotions, to understand their struggles and to share their joys and worries.

Paul shows his great love for human nature also by quoting from pagan writers. Newman refers to three famous passages in which the Apostle cited Greek authors: at the Areopagus of Athens when he refers to the altar dedicated "To An Unknown God." (Acts 17,23); then when he quotes the poet Menander to the Corinthians "Bad company corrupts good ways" (1 Cor 15,34); finally in the letter to Titus in which he cites the philosopher Epimenides "Cretans were never anything but liars, dangerous animals, all greed and laziness" (Tit 1,12). Why does Paul quote pagan authors? Newman responds: "He was a true lover of souls. He loved poor human nature with a passionate love, and the literature of the Greeks was only its expression; and he hung over it tenderly and mournfully, wishing for its regeneration and salvation".<sup>13</sup> God's salvific plan embraces the Greeks and in fact the whole of humanity. As Paul clearly teaches, though "the heathen are in darkness, and in sin, and under the power of the Evil One, he will not allow that they are beyond the eye of Divine Mercy".<sup>14</sup> The Apostle never rejects anything authentically human. He has a big heart and is convinced God wants everyone to be saved.

In the end, Paul, recognizing that all men are descended from Adam, took "pleasure in thinking that all men were brethren".<sup>15</sup> More than this, he "tenderly contemplates the captivity, and the anguish, and the longing, and the deliverance of poor human nature".<sup>16</sup> As he wrote in the Letter to the Romans: "the whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed" (Rom 8,19). The Apostle constantly remembers that all men have the same origin and the same final end. They are created by God and called to the life of glory in God.

### **3. Love for his People**

Newman also spoke of Paul's love for the people of Israel. If the Apostle felt bound to the whole of the human race, "what did he feel for his own nation! O what a special mixture, bitter and sweet, of generous pride (if I may so speak), but of

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

piercing, overwhelming anguish, did the thought of the race of Israel inflict upon him!"<sup>17</sup>.

Even after his conversion, Paul will not gainsay God's choice. Israel, Paul's people are the Chosen People. This is particularly evident in the Letter to the Romans in which he writes: "They are Israelites; it was they who were adopted as children, the glory was theirs and the covenants; to them were given the Law and the worship of God and the promises. To them belong the fathers and out of them, so far as physical descent is concerned, came Christ who is above all, God, blessed for ever. Amen" (Rom 9,4-5). With what gratitude does Paul look to Israel: "the highest of nations and the lowest, his own dear people, whose glories were before his imagination and in his affection from his childhood".<sup>18</sup>

But these feelings of pride and gratitude are accompanied by sadness and pain (See Rom 9,2). It was these people, who waited centuries for the promised Messiah, who prepared his way and announced his coming, and yet were those who rejected him. Paul understands Israel's obstinacy because he himself had shared the same thoughts and feelings about Jesus. Moved by compassion, Paul, like Moses before him, interceded for his people. Out of love for his brothers, he wished "that I myself might be accursed and cut off from Christ" (Rom 9,3). He was ready to give all for the love of his people. "He pleaded for them, while they were persecuting his Lord and himself".<sup>19</sup> His heart bled on account of his countrymen's hardness of heart, so much that he exclaims: "O dearest ones, O glorious race, O miserably fallen! so great and so abject!"<sup>20</sup>.

At the same time – despite everything – Paul does not lose hope for his people. While admitting that the greater part of his people have rejected Christ, he is consoled to think that their obstinacy had become a blessing for the pagans, and was full of hope in the prophecy of their recovery in a time to come. Because of this prophecy he writes in his Letter to the Romans: "part of Israel had its mind hardened, but only until the gentiles have wholly come in; and this is how all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11,25f.).

Every Christian who becomes an apostle experiences the same feelings for his own family and people, full of gratitude for the good received, sincerely ready to intercede for those who don't know or have forgotten the Lord and founded on an unbreakable confidence in God's mercy towards all.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99-100.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100.

#### 4. Sympathy for the faithful

In a sermon, entitled *St. Paul's Gift of Sympathy*,<sup>21</sup> which Newman preached a little later, also at the University Chapel in Dublin, he described the Apostle's love for Christians. He continued the argument begun in the preceding homily and showed the affection with which the Apostle treated his brothers and sisters in the faith.



He spoke of Paul's *humanitas*: "a virtue which comes of His supernatural grace, and is cultivated for His sake, though its object is human nature viewed in itself, in its intellect, its affections, and its history. And it is this virtue which I consider is so characteristic of St. Paul; and he himself often inculcates it in his Epistles, as when he enjoins bowels of mercy, benignity, kindness, gentleness, and the like".<sup>22</sup> How is this attitude manifest in the Apostle's life and works?

Newman stressed that Paul is so full of love for others that "in the tenor of his daily thoughts, he almost loses sight of his gifts and privileges, his station and dignity, except he is called by duty to remember them, and he is to himself merely a frail man speaking to frail men, and he is tender towards the weak from a sense of his own weakness".<sup>23</sup> Paul knew that not only do others need God's mercy, but above all others he himself has need of it. He likes to take for himself the title of servant: "It is not ourselves that we are proclaiming, but Christ Jesus as the Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor 4,5). He admitted his own weakness: "but we hold this treasure in pots of earthenware, so that the immensity of the power is God's and not our own" (2 Cor 4,7). The Apostle acknowledges his own misery and knows that he depends upon God's mercy. It is precisely this awareness that links him all the more intimately with his spiritual children.

In his preaching and writing Paul constantly speaks of his weakness: "after we had come to Macedonia, there was no rest for this body of ours. Far from it; we were beset by hardship on all sides, there were quarrels all around us and misgivings within us." (2 Cor 7,5). Describing his apostolate in Corinth: "I came among you in weakness, in fear and great trembling and what I spoke and

<sup>21</sup> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *St. Paul's Gift of Sympathy*. In: id., *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, Longmans, Green & Co., New York 1908, pp. 106-120.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

proclaimed was not meant to convince by philosophical argument, but to demonstrate the convincing power of the Spirit" (1 Cor 2,3f.). Speaking of the revelation given him by the Lord he notes: "I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself" (2 Cor 12,7). Nor does he omit to mention his hard-won interior struggles: "in the hardships we underwent in Asia, we want you to be quite certain, brothers, that we were under extraordinary pressure, beyond our powers of endurance, so that we gave up all hope even of surviving" (2 Cor 1,8). And when he sympathizes with the old men of Miletus, he says: "You know what my way of life has been ever since



the first day I set foot among you in Asia, how I have served the Lord in all humility, with all the sorrows and trials" (Acts 20,18s.). Why did Paul speak so openly of his weakness and internal struggles? Newman explained: "A man who thus divests himself of his own greatness, and puts himself on the level of his brethren, and throws himself upon the sympathies of human nature, and speaks with such simplicity and such spontaneous outpouring of heart, is forthwith in a condition both to conceive great love of them, and to inspire great love towards himself".<sup>24</sup> Being an apostle should not be confused with worldly heroism or a perfectionist attitude. To fulfil his designs

God does not need heroes but hearts full of love: hearts seized by the fire of his love and thus purified and transformed, made capable of drawing others into intimacy and leading them lovingly to Christ.

Time and again, Newman stressed that the grace in Paul's heart does not repress his human nature; rather this nature is sanctified and ennobled. Though he loses what is sinful, Paul retains everything authentically human. He lives in communion with his beloved Lord but at the same time is sensitive to the feelings of those around him. Newman sees this as the essence of Paul's humanity. "Wonderful to say, he who had rest and peace in the love of Christ, was not satisfied without the love of man; he whose supreme reward was the approbation of God, looked out for the approval of his brethren. He who depended solely on

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112-113.



the Creator, yet made himself dependent on the creature. Though he had That which was Infinite, he would not dispense with the finite. He loved his brethren, not only 'for Jesus' sake,' to use his own expression, but for their own sake also. He lived in them; he felt with them and for them; he was anxious about them; he gave them help, and in turn he looked for comfort from them. His mind was like some instrument of music, harp or viol, the strings of which vibrate, though untouched, by the notes which other instruments give forth, and he was ever, according to his own precept, 'rejoicing with them that rejoice, and weeping with them that wept'; and thus he was the least magisterial of all teachers, and the gentlest and most amiable of all rulers".<sup>25</sup>

The bond between Paul and his companions is particularly strong. He rejoices "that Stephanus and Fortunatus and Achaicus have arrived" (1 Cor 16,17) and writes: "I had no relief from anxiety, not finding my brother Titus" (2 Cor 2,13). Or later, "But God, who encourages all those who are distressed, encouraged us through the arrival of Titus" (2 Cor 7,6). In the Church in Rome he greeted Phoebe, Prisca and Aquila and "the Church which is at their house", Epenetus, Mary, Andronicus and Junias and many other brothers and sisters (cfr. Rom 16). He mentioned that Epaphroditus has been "seriously ill and nearly died; but God took pity on him, and not only on him but also on me, to spare me one grief on top of another" (Phil 2,27). He lamented that: "all the others in Asia have deserted me" (2 Tim 1,15), and in another passage: "The first time I had to present my defence, no one came into court to support me. Every one of them deserted me - may they not be held accountable for it" (2 Tim 4,16). Some of his friends abandoned him: "Demas has deserted me for love of this life and gone to Thessalonica, Crescens has gone to Galatia and Titus to Dalmatia; ... only Luke is with me" (2 Tim 4,10s.). At the end of the second Letter to Timothy he wrote: "Greetings to Prisca and Aquila, and the family of Onesiphorus. Erastus stayed behind at Corinth, and I left Trophimus ill at Miletus. Make every effort to come before the winter. Greetings to you from Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers" (2 Tim 4,19-21). What great fraternal love, what trust, what sensitivity and how much compassion and pain is expressed in these words! Newman is profoundly touched by them: "He, in a word, who is the special preacher of Divine Grace, is also the special friend and intimate of human nature. He who reveals to us the mystery of God's Sovereign Decrees, manifests at the same time the tenderest interest in the souls of individuals".<sup>26</sup> The true Christian is magnanimous, has a universal perspective

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

and prays for everyone. At the same time, however, he turns with love to those around him because he recognizes the dignity of the individual and the unique vocation of each person. His concern is the eternal salvation every single person.

This love towards all is at the root of the Apostle's indignation when he discovered within the Christian community feelings of envy, jealousy and rivalry. He considered these attitudes shameful and unworthy, "not only as injurious to his Saviour, but as an offence against that common nature which gives us one and all a right to the title of men. As he loved that common nature, so he took pleasure in viewing all who partake of it as one, scattered though they were all over the earth. He sympathized with them all, wherever and whatever they were; and he felt it to be one special mercy, conveyed to them in the Gospel, that the unity of



human nature was henceforth recognized and restored in Jesus Christ. The spirit of party, then, was simply antagonistic to the spirit of the Apostle, and a great offence to him, even when it did not go so far as schism".<sup>27</sup> Speaking to the community in Corinth, divided because of divisive affiliations to Apollos, Peter and some to himself, he asked "has Christ been split up?" (1 Cor 1,13). Among those reborn through grace "there is no room for distinction between Greek and Jew, between the circumcised and uncircumcised, or between barbarian and Scythian, slave and free. There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything" (Col 3,11). The believer possessed of an apostolic heart should nurture the same aspirations as Jesus and pray with him that *all may be one*. He is, with Christ, a servant of unity knowing that the credibility of the Christian witness rests on this condition: "May they all be one; so that the world may believe" (Jn 17,21).

## **5. The Good Fight and trust in God**

Newman's notes for a sermon *On St. Paul the Type of the Church as Missionarising*<sup>28</sup> have survived. The fundamental themes of this homily complete this meditation

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *On St. Paul the Type of the Church as Missionarising*, in: id., *Sermon Notes*, Longmans, Green, and Co, London 1913, pp. 62-64.

on Paul's apostolic zeal. He begins this homily stating that Paul was above all a sower of the Word. He "sowed in all places", and he was a champion, not like David against Goliath but rather "against the world".<sup>29</sup> This activity, begun by Paul, will be continued in the Church throughout the world. Not just the sowing of the word either, but also the struggle of and fight for the faith.

Paul is the apostolic model *par excellence*. He struggled in faith against the Jewish Zealots. It is enough to think of the forty men who "held a secret meeting at which they made a vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul" (Acts 23,12). He had to fight against pagan fanatics as well, such as those at the revolt of the silversmiths in Ephesus (Acts 19,21vv.). He also confronted indifference, for example Festus the governor who thought him mad (Acts 26,24), or with the Greek philosophers who ridiculed him, but of whom some wished to hear him speak again of the resurrection (Acts 17,32).

Newman applied these examples to his own day: the Catholic Church in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had to fight against evangelical zealots and face the indifference of politicians. The former called Rome the Antichrist, the latter were only interested in political expediency. Most certainly this is also true of our own day: the hostility and indifference of today's culture make it difficult for many to receive the Good News and to bear witness to it.

But Newman was not a pessimist. On the contrary, he was full of faith, because in faith he saw the greatness and the unity of the Church of ages. "This awful unity of the Church is our consolation." This shows that "the Church comes from God" and "nothing comes strange and new to her".<sup>30</sup> This led him to conclude that the vocation of every generation of Christians is "to sow and to fight, and to leave the rest to God".<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It is striking that in his sermons on St. Paul Newman never described a missionary strategy, nor emphasised the Apostle's extraordinary feats. For Newman it is not so much the external activity as it is the interior movement of the heart that matters. These become a kind of spring that wells up in Paul's thoughts, speeches and actions. Newman wanted to describe the movements of the heart and the interior life of a true apostle. The pieces which make up the mosaic of the

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63-64.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

authentic apostle are: an openness to conversion that with the grace of God becomes a personal experience that makes one's own life a model for others; the knowledge of human nature that opens us to understand others, allowing us to sympathise and share their joys and worries; love for one's own people which shows itself in gratitude and to intercede for others; the hope of communion with the faithful that renders one ready to give everything for the salvation of all whatever the cost (cfr. 1 Cor 9,22); the courage to commit oneself in the good fight without which it is not possible in this life to bring others to the Gospel; but above all, an unshakeable faith in the power of God's Word. Our principle task is to sow the Word of God and to leave it to God to give the increase.



© Intl. Centre of Newman Friends.  
Via Aurelia 257  
00165 Rome

[newman.roma@newman-friends.org](mailto:newman.roma@newman-friends.org)  
[www.newmanfriendsinternational.org](http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org)