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VATICAN - AVE MARIA by Mgr Luciano Alimandi - Paul's conversion and ours

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - When reading of Saint Paul's conversion following his encounter with the risen Lord who appeared to him on the road to Damascus (cfr. Acts 9, 1-9), we often tend, in a sense, to think more about “light from Heaven” which marked the event, certainly extraordinary, and less about the man's terrible experience: “Saul rose from the ground but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing ” (Acts 9, 8). Undeniably for Saul the meeting with Jesus was “devastating”: he found himself not only on the ground but in a totally new situation, full of concern and anguish, feelings of guilt,… Paul, finding himself before the Lord, experienced acute personal failure.
He had lost his sight completely! He, until then so sure in his convictions to the point that he championed persecution against the Christians; precisely he who had witnessed impassive the stoning of Stephen (cfr. Acts 7, 58), and had hurled thousands of other “stones” at Christians prejudice, condemnation, sentence with no appeal … now finds himself thrown to the ground, without even the slightest warning. That dazzling light and those words of absolute truth, had left powerful Saul, helpless and sightless! To use an expression dear to young people we might say: Saul was “a wreck”.
Yes, the failure he experienced was bitter, but it was precisely from that failure that the Apostle Paul arose. And he who had persecuted his own God, was to suffer persecution for the sake of that Name, the Name of Jesus which, from the moment of that meeting in Damascus, had began to burn itself on his heart with letters of fire!
The Holy Father Benedict XVI, who has called a Year of St Paul for the whole Church, invites us to reflect on Paul's conversion with these words: “ In this sense it was not simply a conversion, a development of his "ego", but rather a death and a resurrection for Paul himself. One existence died and another, new one was born with the Risen Christ. There is no other way in which to explain this renewal of Paul. None of the psychological analyses can clarify or solve the problem. This event alone, this powerful encounter with Christ, is the key to understanding what had happened: death and resurrection, renewal on the part of the One who had shown himself and had spoken to him. ” (Benedict XVI, general audience 3 September 2008).
How often behind a “failure” there hides a call from Divine Providence to radical conversion, but we unawares because we are not on our way to Jesus! We are on the “road to Damascus”, hurled “to the ground” by broken securities, deafened by crises without a name … but, unlike Paul, we lack the humility to listen to that Voice which he, thanks to a special privilege, heard in an extraordinary way. We too could hear it, in the silence of our conscience, if only we were to keep “silence” in the face of our “failures”, small or great. That “voice” can be heard in the secret of the confessional, if we have the courage to make a good confession.
How many personal “crisis”, small or great, could, with God's grace and humble human cooperation, turn into events of conversion! Remember: every trial, with prayer and inner listening to the truth which Jesus never fails to offer, can bec a new start with God, a new birth, which puts the soul into deeper communion with the One who is “in agony until the end of time” (Pascal), because he took all our failings upon himself. “ he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was on him; and with his stripes we are healed ” (Is 53, 5).
We often imagine the process of conversion as something “unhurried”, moved by exclusively “positive” factors; certainly it can be so, but how often powerful conversion shakes the very foundations of life, as with Paul! Here is a man thrown to the ground, his identity almost lost, he is confused, bewildered, and all because the direction of his life hitherto has been completely mistaken! He stands before only two paths: to despair or to entrust himself to God. Paul chooses the right path, he puts his trust in Jesus! The Lord Jesus alone is the way which leads unfailingly to the encounter with that loving mercy of which Paul was to become a tireless herald. “ Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ-can hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing, or threats

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or violence?.. No; we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8, 35ss).
Nothing and no one can stop the love of Christ from reaching and transforming a person, even if that person is drowning in the abyss of his sins. Christ alone has the power to restore his innocence, as He did with the crucified thief at His side. That thief's meeting with Jesus was a meeting with goodness. Who knows how many crimes he had committed to be condemned to the ignominious wood of the cross, but Jesus forgave every one of them, and the thief "stole" into Heaven (cfr. Lk 23, 43)!
It is in the light of a call to personal conversion that we should reflect again and again on the trials in life, periods, black or grey, mistakes, broken stories… there, in the dust which lifted as we fell, in the suffering which drove everyone away, in what we often refer to as the "tragedies" of life, there was and always will be Someone, Someone anxious to reach us with a ray of His light, to pull us up with the power of His love, to bring us back to life with the warmth of His forgiveness, but we must recognise Him, we must call on Him with all our heart: "Jesus I trust in you"! (Agenzia Fides 29/10/2008)

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