

Fr. Roger J. Landry  
“Becoming Ambassadors of Mercy Incarnate and Ministers of Mercy Above All”  
Continuing Education Convocation of Priests  
of the Diocese of Tulsa  
During the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy  
Tulsa, Oklahoma  
January 25-27, 2016

### **St. Paul as a Model of an Ambassador of God’s Mercy**

- Introduction
  - Today on this Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, I thought it would be liturgically fitting and very much worthwhile for us as priests to ponder him within the theme of the Year of Mercy. Every Ash Wednesday in the epistle, we make his appeal to the Corinthians our own: “All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:18-21). Like him, we have been called and sent out as emissaries of God, imploring others on the basis of our own conversion and reconciliation, to be reconciled to God so that they may become in God his very holiness.
  - The topic of St. Paul and Mercy is something that obviously doctoral dissertations could be written, something I don’t intend to do at this hour of night. But I would like to present several things from his life as consideration for our own.
    - First, what his conversion was all about and what it means for our own.
    - Second, how deep his conversion was, as an indication of our own sorrow.
    - Third, his ministry of mercy, in preaching and deeds.
- St. Paul’s Conversion and our own
  - Today we celebrate one of the most important events in the history of the Church and, because of the Church’s role in the salvation of the human race, one of the most important events in the history of the world: St. Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. His conversion is the most famous conversion of all time, but at the same time, it’s one that even though most Christians have an accurate of. Most think it a 180 degree turn from a life of persecuting Christians to one of preaching Christianity, of a total shift from a bad man to a good man, from a murderer to a minister, but that’s not really what it was.
  - If we’re going to grasp the conversion that the Lord Jesus is asking of us in our lives, and asking us to help bring about in the lives of those we serve, love and know, then we need first to grasp what his conversion was. And we’ll let St. Paul lead us to that understanding in the hope that we may experience that for us 61<sup>st</sup> Street and Yale Avenue will be the road to Damasus.
  - Pre-history
    - To understand St. Paul’s conversion, it would be helpful briefly to review his life prior to his Jesus Christ on the outskirts of Damascus..
    - Probably after his bar-mitzvah at the age of 12-13, Saul, which was his Jewish name, traveled to Jerusalem to study at the feet of the great Rabbi Gamaliel. He became a Pharisee excelling beyond all others. He loved the law. He was zealous for the Legislator.
    - When a new Jewish sect sprung up that was relativizing the importance of the law — from dietary restrictions, to the importance of circumcision, to not observing the Sabbath, to preaching a crucified criminal as having risen from the dead, to announcing that God wasn’t unitary, but there was a God the Son and God the Spirit — he saw in it a great danger. He thought this sect was drawing many people into blasphemy.

- With the fire of youth, he went to try to extirpate it. He got permission to rip Christians from their homes and bring them before the Sanhedrin.
  - He himself said in Jerusalem before the tribune: Acts 22: “I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as you all are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brethren, and I journeyed to Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.”
  - Before Agrippa in Caesarea, he said: Acts 26: “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme; and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”
- We come to the famous scene of the stoning of St. Stephen, who was accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God, against the temple and the law. He gave a lengthy defense before the Sanhedrin, showing how all the Old Testament prophecies converged in Jesus, a style that must have engraved itself on the mind of Saul because in his initial preaching to the Jews later, he would emulate the style and even much of the content. Stephen’s point was that their hearts were hardened to God’s message so they repeatedly killed God’s messenger.
- After Stephen said that he saw the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, they shouted, covered their ears and rushed upon him. They cast him out of the city and stoned him, laying their garments at Saul’s feet, a symbol that he was presiding over the execution. While they were doing so, St. Stephen prayed first to the Lord to receive his spirit and then, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Both prayers were heard.
- Just like Jesus whose first and last words from the Cross were, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” and “Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit,” so Stephen was praying for his persecutors, doing good to those who were persecuting him, loving his enemies, because they and Saul did not know what they were doing. Saul, in stoning Stephen, was essentially stoning Christ.
- That prayer must have remained within Saul much as Jesus’ first word from the Cross had pierced the heart of the good thief and the centurion. Normally the last thing dying men do is pray for their executioners. Stephen’s prayer was the beginning of Saul’s conversion, a point we’ll cover a great tomorrow, but we can simply now how important it is for us really to pray for the conversion even of those who seem least likely. No one is beyond the reach of God’s mercy. We should never give up on anyone. And if they convert, like St. Paul, they can end up doing great good.
- Conversion scene on the Road to Damascus and its applications.
  - As Saul was continuing his persecutions, he eventually got a commission to go to Damascus to take those who belonged to the new sect back to the Sanhedrin. As he was nearing his goal, the episode happened which changed his life totally. We know the story so well. St. Paul tells us about it three different times in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9:1-19; Acts 22:6-21; Acts 26:4-23) , but we can flesh out some of the elements:
    - The place
      - There are no coincidences in God. He could have come to meet Saul anywhere. So why outside the gates of Damascus?
      - It seems clear that the Lord waited to get him far away from Jerusalem, 135 miles, something that would have taken him a good week to traverse. He wanted him away from what he knew, from his comfort zone.

- He also wanted him to be close to where he could nourish him through his Church. The Christian community was strong there, which was the reason St. Paul was going there in the first place.
- We, too, sometimes need to get away from our habits, our customs, our haunts, our schedules, for the Lord to encounter us. In doing so, we need to be open to the Lord's using others to bring us to where he wants us.
- The light
  - "As he journeyed he approached Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. He fell to the ground."
  - Acts 22:6 "As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. 7 And I fell to the ground.
  - Acts 26:12 "Thus I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining round me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground."
  - Light is an obvious sign of God's presence. The light had come into the world to illumine Paul and make him capable of illuminating others.
- The question
  - "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"
    - Acts 26:14: I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?'
    - "I am Jesus [of Nazareth] whom you are persecuting."
  - Jesus identified with his Church. The Church is his body. Whenever one attacked a member of his body, they attacked him. "I was hungry and you gave me no food..." This is something so many need to remember when they attack the Church, whether from inside or outside the Church. It's done to the Lord.
  - Only he heard the voice. The others saw the light but couldn't interpret it.
- Instructions and blindness
  - Paul understood the action as a thing to be done. He was a man whose faith led to action.
  - Acts 9: "What shall I do, Lord?" And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.
  - Acts 26:16 "But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles — to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."
  - These are all expressions of God's mercy for Jews and Gentiles both:
    - Open their eyes
    - Turn from darkness to light
    - Turn from the power of Satan to God
    - Receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.
  - Saul was told to get up and enter the city and he would be told what he was to do. Like with the man born blind in the Gospel, Jesus wanted him to receive the gift of faith. This was the first act of Paul's faith. To do what he was told. He needed to be led by the hand. His pride was crushed in that

moment. His friends were assisting him. He was walking by faith, not by sight.

- We're told for three days Paul fasted, he neither ate nor drank.
  - It was a mini-Lent
  - He was doing penance.
  - He was cleaning himself out of the "old leaven" of the Pharisees.
  - He was developing a hunger for a new food.
  - He was praying.
- Lord's instructions to Ananias
  - The Lord appeared to him in a vision, "Ananias." "Here I am, Lord."
  - Acts 22:12 "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me
  - Gives specific instructions, Saul is praying. He had fore-announced that a man named Ananias would come to lay hands on him to regain sight.
  - Ananias was afraid because of Paul's reputation. The Lord replied, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."
  - The Lord had chosen him to preach the Gospel both by his words and by his sufferings.
- When Ananias entered the house, he called him, "Brother, Saul."
  - This shows the great power of Christianity to turn enemies not only into friends but brothers.
- Purpose of his visit was so that Saul might regain his physical sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.
  - Acts 22:12 "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And in that very hour I received my sight and saw him
  - Acts 22:14 And he said, "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name."
    - Our sins are forgiven by calling on God's name. As Pope Francis says, God's second name is mercy.
- Scales fell from his eyes
  - He hadn't realized he had had scales his entire life.
- He rose, was baptized, and began to eat and grow strong.
- Importance of baptism.
  - Through it, we too, have been a chosen vessel to carry the Lord's name to the nations and to suffer on account of his name.
  - The Lord has sent us priests to minister to us in this way.
  - Again, the Lord could have healed Paul in any number of ways, but he wanted to do so through the laying on of hands and through baptism.
- Then he stayed among the disciples for several days.
- Then he started to go to the synagogues to show the Jews, using all of his knowledge, that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. People were amazed at his conversion, the one who has persecuted the Church was now promoting it, preaching that Jesus was Messiah and Lord. The Jews then plotted to kill him.
- We see in this something of the Lord's wisdom.

- As a young man, after living a life that he had then regretted, St. Paul made a commitment to give the rest of his life to the Lord. He made up for lost time. He had encountered the Risen Lord, experienced the call by him, and didn't go in by halves. He was all in. And the Lord was able to do so much good through him.
- His past sins motivated him to preach God's mercy and to make up for lost time.
- What St. Paul's conversion was and wasn't
  - After this review, we can turn to what the real nature of St. Paul's conversion was. Most, as I mentioned above, think about the conversion of St. Paul as a change from a wicked life to a good one, from a life in which he was murdering Christians to a life in which he was making Christians. But it's more complicated than that.
  - Pope Benedict said in a 2006 catechesis that it was principally a change from a false notion of what a holy life was to a true one, from one in which we pleased God and were saved by works of the mosaic law, to one in which we were saved through grace, through our relationship with Christ, through God's mercy rather than our fidelity to the works of the law. Listen to Pope Benedict:
    - Paul states with absolute clarity that this condition of life does not depend on our possible good works but on the pure grace of God: "[We] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3: 24). With these words St Paul expressed the fundamental content of his conversion, the new direction his life took as a result of his encounter with the Risen Christ.
    - Before his conversion, Paul had not been a man distant from God and from his Law. On the contrary, he had been observant, with an observance faithful to the point of fanaticism. In the light of the encounter with Christ, however, he understood that with this he had sought to build up himself and his own justice, and that with all this justice he had lived for himself.
    - He realized that a new approach in his life was absolutely essential. And we find this new approach expressed in his words: "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2: 20).
    - Paul, therefore, no longer lives for himself, for his own justice. He lives for Christ and with Christ: in giving of himself, he is no longer seeking and building himself up. This is the new justice, the new orientation given to us by the Lord, given to us by faith.
  - These thoughts bring us to ask ourselves if we, too, have a false notion of a holy life
    - Many Catholics think that a holy life is one that avoids merely the worst of mortal sins. Convinced by false modern ideas of eschatology that think that all or most of us go to heaven no matter what we do — in other words, most of us become saints no matter what we do — they go about with a shallow prayer life and a shallow moral life. They don't really sense the need to pray, to love God with all their mind, heart, soul and strength, but just need not to do evil.
    - Many others think that it's just obeying the rules, keeping the commandments.
      - But the Christian life is about love, not rules, about our heart, not about only our external actions, about the tree more than just the fruit
    - Others have a notion of the Christian life without the Cross
      - St. Paul, however, knows that there is no way to follow Christ without picking up our Cross each day and following him
      - He discovered in the Cross his "glory" and the means to a holy union with Christ, through its power to crucify the world to him and him to the world. He would eventually say, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but he who lives in me."
      - Many need to have this same conversion, from an *aversion* to the Cross to an *adversion* and finally *conversion*, turning with Christ on the Cross.

- Many think that all God wants of them is to be a “good person,” however one defines it.
- But God calls us to more.
  - He told us in the Sermon on the Mount that our righteousness needed to surpass that of the Scribes and Pharisees, who fasted 3x a week, prayed 3x a day, went up to the temple 3 times a year, paid 10 percent of their income. He said that it needed to surpass that of the virtuous pagans who loved those who loved them and did good to those who did good to them. He called us, rather, to love even our enemies and to become perfected as our Father is perfect.
- Even among those who recognize that the Lord is calling them not merely to be “good” but to be holy as he is holy, many have a false notion of holiness. St. Paul did, one that was based on keeping the works of the law, even while he was arresting and killing innocent Christians. There are other false notions of holiness today:
  - When many think about becoming saints, they, like Paul, consider first their own works, their own fidelity to God, their own acts of love. These are all part of the pursuit of holiness, but a secondary part, a reaction, a response. The main means to holiness is *given to us*, especially in the sacraments, in which God seeks to make us holy.
  - As the theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar described in the introduction to his work on St. Therese and Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, we cannot make ourselves holy; it is God who makes us holy and the main means he uses is the graces he gives us in the sacraments and in prayer.
  - St. John said in his letter, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and handed over his Son as an expiation for our sins.”
  - We could paraphrase this by saying, “In this is holiness, not principally what we have done for God but in what he has done for us.”
  - St. Therese’s image of an elevator instead of a staircase.
- All of these ideas lead us to mercy. We become holy through God’s grace, through God’s forgiving us and giving us himself, allowing the Holy Spirit to become the rule and guide within us leading us to love, helping us to unite ourselves to Christ’s mercy on the Cross and continually turn with him, to allow God to love us in such a way that we’re changed in our core.
- All of this points to the truth that St. Paul’s conversion was, in essence, not a conversion to a set of ideas, but to a person. His conversion was a death to his old way of a life and a rebirth to the new based on his encounter with the Lord Jesus.
  - Pope Benedict wrote: Thus St Paul was not transformed by a thought but by an event, by the irresistible presence of the Risen One whom subsequently he would never be able to doubt, so powerful had been the evidence of the event, of this encounter. It radically changed Paul's life in a fundamental way; in this sense one can and must speak of a conversion.
  - As can be seen, in all these passages **Paul never once interprets this moment as an event of conversion.** Why? There are many hypotheses, but for me the reason is very clear. This turning point in his life, this transformation of his whole being was not the fruit of a psychological process, of a maturation or intellectual and moral development. (as conversion always is).
  - Rather it came from the outside: it was not the fruit of his thought but of his encounter with Jesus Christ. 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.

- **In this deeper sense we can and we must speak of conversion.** This encounter is a real renewal that changed all his parameters. Now he could say that what had been essential and fundamental for him earlier had become "refuse" for him; it was no longer "gain" but loss, because henceforth the only thing that counted for him was life in Christ.
- Our conversion, too, requires this death and resurrection, death to an old way of life and conversion to a new way. That's what the experience of God's mercy does, it brings us into Christ's paschal mystery, not in a superficial way, but in the whole of our being, leading us to live by that merciful love of God.
- Ratzinger, Dec 2000:
  - "The Greek word for converting [metanoete] means: to rethink – to question one's own and common way of living; to allow God to enter into the criteria of one's life; to not merely judge according to the current opinions. Thereby, to convert means: not to live a all the others live, not do what all do, not feel justified in dubious, ambiguous, evil actions just because others do the same; begin to see one's life through the eyes of God; thereby looking for the good, even if uncomfortable; not aiming at the judgment of the majority, of men, but on the justice of God – in other words: to look for a new style of life, a new life. All of this does not imply moralism; reducing Christianity to morality loses sight of the essence of Christ's message: the gift of a new friendship, the gift of communion with Jesus and thereby with God."
  - Then he talks about the life we're called to live: "At the beginning of His public life Jesus says: I have come to evangelize the poor (Lk 4:18); this means: I have the response to your fundamental question; I will show you the path of life, the path towards happiness – rather: I am that path." He responds to the deepest poverty, which is the "tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory," a life without joy that produces the inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice, and other destructive responses to the lack of meaning. "This is why we are in need of a new evangelization: if the art of living remains and unknown, nothing else works."
- We need to follow Christ on this path but this following has a special characteristic:
  - Ratzinger 2000: The Sequela of Christ – Christ offers Himself as the path of my life. Sequela of Christ does not mean: imitating the man Jesus. This type of attempt would necessarily fail – it would be an anachronism. The Sequela of Christ has a much higher goal: to be assimilated into Christ, that is to attain union with God. ... The only path is communion with Christ, achieved in sacramental life. The Sequela of Christ is not a question of morality, but a "mysteric" theme – an ensemble of divine action and our response.
  - This is the conversion we're talking about. A new life so that we like Paul can say, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me." The one who would say, "For me, to live is Christ."

- His conversion was a fruit of his encounter with Jesus Christ, a true death and resurrection.
  - B16 Nov 2006: In fact, he will explicitly define himself as "apostle by vocation" (cf. Rom 1: 1; I Cor 1: 1) or "apostle by the will of God" (II Cor 1: 1; Eph 1: 1; Col 1: 1), as if to emphasize that his conversion was not the result of a development of thought or reflection, but the fruit of divine intervention, an unforeseeable, divine grace.
  - Henceforth, all that had constituted for him a value paradoxically became, according to his words, a loss and refuse (cf. Phil 3: 7-10). And from that moment all his energy was placed at the exclusive service of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. His existence would become that of an Apostle who wants to "become all things to all men" (I Cor 9: 22) without reserve.
  - From here we draw a very important lesson: what counts is to place Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives, so that our identity is marked essentially by the encounter, by communion with Christ and with his Word. In his light every other value is recovered and purified from possible dross.
- To encounter Christ, we should stress again, we have to die to ourselves.
  - This Christian identity is composed of precisely two elements: this restraint from seeking oneself by oneself but instead receiving oneself from Christ and giving oneself with Christ, thereby participating personally in the life of Christ himself to the point of identifying with him and sharing both his death and his life. This is what Paul wrote in his *Letter to the Romans*: "[A]ll of us... were baptized into his death... we were buried therefore with him... we have been united with him.... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6: 3, 4, 5, 11).
  - B 16: 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. In this deeper sense we can and we must speak of conversion
- St. Paul's conversion was to take the focus off of himself and to put it on Jesus Christ, off of his works and onto Christ's mercy
  - Likewise, the conversion we are called to make is to make Christ the center of our whole life.
  - For Paul, Christ was "the pearl of great price" that made everything else in his life pale in comparison. He would say, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8; cf. Mt 13:46).
  - Paul's great anxiety was for Christians to follow him and make everything else distant second in comparison with the person of Christ. "Imitate me as I imitate Christ," he said to the Corinthians. His prayer for us on this great feast day would doubtless be what he expressed several times to the early Christians: "My little children, I am in labor pains until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19; cf. 1 Cor :4:14-15; 1 Thess 2:7-8). And Christ, as Pope Francis wrote in *Misericordiae Vultus*, based on Jesus' words to St. Faustina and other mystics, is Mercy Incarnate.
- The Converted — resurrected — St. Paul as an Ambassador of Mercy
  - St. Paul's conversion was so powerful that he wanted everyone to come to know the same mercy he had received.

- 2Cor. 5:18 And all this is from God, who has **reconciled** us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, God was **reconciling** the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be **reconciled** to God.
    - The ultimate purpose of Christ's mission is the reconciliation of the world to God and Paul knew that he was a minister of that purpose, as we are, and as are the people we serve, each according to our particular calling.
  - His whole ministry was, he saw, a gift and an expression of God's mercy
    - 2Cor. 4:1 Therefore, since we have this ministry through the mercy shown us, we are not discouraged.
  - Paul saw himself to be a tremendous example of how Christ's mercy was meant for everyone.
    - 1Tim. 1:12 I am grateful to him who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me trustworthy in appointing me to the ministry. 13 I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an arrogant man, but I have been mercifully treated because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief. 14 Indeed, the grace of our Lord has been abundant, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost. 16 But for that reason I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life.
    - 1Cor. 15:8 Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God [that is] with me.
    - When I was a teenager, I used to tease my balding father about the commercials for the Hair Club for Men. (Little did I know that later other teenagers would tease me for a similar protruding forehead!). I thought it was one of the best commercials ever made. At the beginning of it, Sy Sperling, the owner with a full head of hair, detailed the new techniques to cover up baldness and the great reactions he had received from needy men. Up to this point, there was nothing different than any other such commercial. But at the end of it, he said, "I'm telling you this will work not just because I'm the president of the company, but because I'm a former client" and held up a photograph of him fully bald, as clear proof that his technique works. The Lord wants to do a similar thing with each of us, as he did with Paul, as he did with Peter, whose first words were "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man!," as he did with St. Matthew, St. Augustine and so many others. He wants to reconcile us and send us out as the Sy Sperlings of our day.
  - Paul proclaimed the need for the forgiveness of sins for everyone.
    - In Antioch in Pisidia: Acts 13:38 You must know, my brothers, that through [Christ] forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, [and] in regard to everything from which you could not be justified under the law of Moses, 39 in him every believer is justified.
  - St. Paul stressed that we are saved not by ourselves but by God's merciful grace received in faith.
    - Titus 3: But when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, 5 not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the holy Spirit, 6 whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, 7 so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.
    - Eph. 2:1 You were dead in your transgressions and sins 2 in which you once lived following the age of this world. ... 3 All of us once lived among them in the desires of our flesh, following the wishes of the flesh and the impulses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved) 6 raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, 7

that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; 9 it is not from works, so no one may boast.

- He stressed that we are all sinners and that God out of love saved us while we were sinners. God has sought to make us rich in his mercy.
  - Rom. 3:21 Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; 23 all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. 24 They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed, 26 through the forbearance of God — to prove his righteousness in the present time, that he might be righteous and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.
  - Rom. 5:6 For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. 7 Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.
  - Col. 2:12 You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And even when you were dead [in] transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions; 14 obliterating the bond against us, with its legal claims, which was opposed to us, he also removed it from our midst, nailing it to the cross; 15 despoiling the principalities and the powers, he made a public spectacle of them, leading them away in triumph by it
- He stresses that God's mercy is greater than our sinful misery and where sin abounds his grace superabounds.
  - Rom. 5:10 Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11 Not only that, but we also boast of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. 12 Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned — 13 for up to the time of the law, sin was in the world, though sin is not accounted when there is no law. 14 But death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam, who is the type of the one who was to come. 15 But the gift is not like the transgression. For if by that one person's transgression the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one person Jesus Christ overflow for the many. 16 And the gift is not like the result of the one person's sinning. For after one sin there was the judgment that brought condemnation; but the gift, after many transgressions, brought acquittal. 17 For if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ. 18 In conclusion, just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all. 19 For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous. 20 The law entered in so that transgression might increase but, where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more, 21 so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through justification for eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
- God has allowed us to sin, not just as a consequence of having created us free so that we might love and live in his image, but so that he could show us his merciful love:
  - Rom 11:29 The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may [now] receive mercy. 32 For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all. 33 Oh, the depth of

the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!

- God's mercy is a motivation for our seeking to be holy as he is holy
  - Eph. 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, 4 as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love 5 he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, 6 for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved. 7 In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him 10 as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.
  - Col. 1:9 Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding 10 to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God, 11 strengthened with every power, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. 13 He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ... 19 For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross [through him], whether those on earth or those in heaven. 21 And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds 22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through his death, to present you holy, without blemish, and irreproachable before him, 23 provided that you persevere in the faith, firmly grounded, stable, and not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, am a minister..
- The mercy of God was given to us precisely so that we could share it, “pay it forward,” we might say.
  - 2 Cor 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all consolation, 4 who consoles us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God.
- Having forgiven us, God wishes us to be precisely “vessels” of his mercy
  - (Talking about Jacob and Esau) Rom. 9:14 What then are we to say? Is there injustice on the part of God? Of course not! 15 For he says to Moses: “I will show mercy to whom I will, I will take pity on whom I will.” 16 So it depends not upon a person's will or exertion, but upon God, who shows mercy. ... 18 Consequently, he has mercy upon whom he wills, and he hardens whom he wills. ... 23 This was to make known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared previously for glory, 24 namely, us whom he has called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.
- God's mercy requires a response, a total self-gift
  - Rom. 12:1 I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.
  - 1Cor. 15:33 Do not be led astray: “Bad company corrupts good morals.” 34 Become sober as you ought and stop sinning. For some have no knowledge of God; I say this to your shame.
- Paul was constantly summoning us to be merciful in concrete deeds like our Father has been merciful to us.
  - Eph. 4:1 I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, 3 striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: ... 31 All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all

malice. 32 [And] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

- Col. 3:1 If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. . . . 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. 14 And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.
- Rom. 15:1 We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves; . . . 3 For Christ did not please himself. . . 7 Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, 9 but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.
- We should respond with pity when people persevere in sin. Admonishing a sinner is part of mercy.
  - 2Cor. 12:20 I fear that when I come I may find you not such as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; that there may be rivalry, jealousy, fury, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. 21 I fear that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, immorality, and licentiousness they practiced.
  - Gal 5:19. The works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, 21 occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit. 26 Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another. 6:1 Brothers, even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he is deluding himself. 4 Each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason to boast with regard to himself alone, and not with regard to someone else; 5 for each will bear his own load.
- He stresses that the evil one is constantly trying to prevent this sharing of mercy, for unless we forgive others their sins, God won't forgive us ours; and unless others can experience through us a little of the reflection of God's mercy, they might not experience it through him.
  - 2Cor. 2:5 If anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure (not to exaggerate) to all of you. 6 This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person, 7 so that on the contrary you should forgive and encourage him instead, or else the person may be overwhelmed by excessive pain. 8 Therefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. 9 For this is why I wrote, to know your proven character, whether you were obedient in everything. 10 Whomever you forgive anything, so do I. For indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for you in the presence of Christ, 11 so that we might not be taken advantage of by Satan, for we are not unaware of his purposes.
- While Satan seeks to divide, God's mercy seeks to bring about reconciliation and unity in the Church
  - Phil. 2:1 If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. 3 Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, 4 each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others. 5 Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus.
- God wants us to give mercy joyfully, because his great joy is forgiving us.

- Rom. 12:6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; 7 if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; 8 if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.
  - Mercy ultimately became St. Paul's prayer
    - 1Tim. 1:2 to Timothy, my true child in faith: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.
    - 2Tim. 1:2 to Timothy, my dear child: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.
    - Gal. 6:16 Peace and mercy be to all who follow this rule and to the Israel of God.
- Conclusion
  - St. Paul's whole life can be summed up as an experience of God's mercy. God had permitted what he did in his life so that he might have mercy on him and give him greater motivation to spread the joy of that mercy to others.
  - Pope Francis mentioned this reality earlier today when he traveled to the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls in Rome where St. Paul is buried and where today, with ecumenical leaders, we concluded the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. Pope Francis took advantage of the occasion to speak about mercy in St. Paul's life, which is a good summary of what we've tried to ponder today.
    - "I am the least of the Apostles ... because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace in me was not without effect." That's how the Apostle Paul sums up the significance of his conversion. Coming after his dramatic encounter with the Risen Christ on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, it is not primarily a moral conversion but rather an transforming experience of the grace of Christ, and at the same time, a call to the new mission of announcing to everyone the Jesus that he previously persecuted by persecuting the disciples of Christ. ... The vocation to be an Apostle is founded not on Paul's human merits, which he considers to be 'the least' and 'unworthy', but rather on the infinite goodness of God who chose him and entrusted him with his ministry. St Paul also bears witness to a similar understanding of what happened on the road to Damascus in his first letter to Timothy: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." The overflowing mercy of God is the sole reason upon which Paul's ministry is based and at the same time it is that which the Apostle must announce to everyone....
    - In this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, we must always keep in mind that there cannot be an authentic search for Christian unity without trusting fully in the Father's mercy. We ask first of all for forgiveness for the sins of our divisions, which are an open wound in the Body of Christ. As Bishop of Rome and pastor of the Catholic Church, I want to ask for mercy and forgiveness for the behavior of Catholics towards Christians of other Churches, which has not reflected Gospel values. At the same time, I invite all Catholic brothers and sisters to forgive if they, today or in the past, have been offended by other Christians. We cannot cancel out what has happened, but we do not want to let the weight of past faults continue to contaminate our relationships. God's mercy will renew our relationships.... Let us unite ourselves with the prayer that Jesus Christ prayed to his Father: "May they be one, so that the world may believe". Unity is the gift of mercy from God the Father.
  - So today on this feast of St. Paul's Conversion, we ask his intercession that we may correspond to God's mercy and grace the way he did.
  - Just as God had entrusted to Paul the ministry of reconciliation, so he has entrusted that same gift to us.
  - We, like him, are ambassadors of Christ, God as it were appealing through us, making us implore each other, our parishioners, and everyone Jew and Gentile both, to be reconciled to God. This is

Christ's mission, the reconciliation, the reunification of the world, and he has entrusted that mission to us.

- May we, like Paul, fight the good fight, finish the race given to us with urgency, keep the faith and grow it by God's mercy.