

## Have You Had a Damascus Experience?

As St. Paul walked on the road to Damascus, Christ appeared to him and radically changed his life. A Damascus experience not only changes lives, but initiates a life-long process of change, growth, spiritual maturity and union with Christ. In taking a deeper look at Paul's experience, perhaps we may rediscover our own, and be inspired to embrace it again and again.

*"But Saul (Paul), still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. (Acts 9:1-8)*

Once an enemy of Christ, now he has become a disciple; a murderer of Christians has become a missionary and a sinner begins his road to sainthood. This is the nature of Paul's change. It was indeed extreme. Perhaps Paul's extreme antagonistic beginnings distance him from most people and make him an exceptional character, one in whom it is difficult to see ourselves. One point which must not be missed is Paul's blindness, his inability to see that he was wrong and; in the name of justice, in the name of Yehweh. Here everyone can find a parallel, a link with Paul and a need to discover the blindness that distorts our view. Blindness is overcome through Christ who referred to Himself as "the light of the world" and calls Christians to "become a light unto the world." (Matthew 5:14 & John 8:12)

How are we to translate Paul's experience into our own? The foundation of such an experience has been laid within each Christian through the mystery of Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist (Holy Communion). We have been buried with Christ so that we might live in Christ. The mysteries of the Church (sacraments) are always an encounter with the living God and a foretaste of His Kingdom.

*"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, We too might walk in newness of life... We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him...So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:3-11)*

To consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus is to live out one's Damascus Experience. The newness of life offered in Christ is made into a living experience through *repentance*. Not simply acknowledging one's sins, but going much further, (as Paul did), and experiencing a change in what we believe, how we think, the way we see ourselves, and in the way we look upon others. *Repentance* is the road to be traveled in becoming a new creation in Christ. This road is both painful and joyful. The road to Damascus is a journey in the emptying of oneself. Paul was filled with the passion of pride and could not see anything wrong in seeking the destruction of Christians. Once he became a Christian, his life was now marked by *suffering*, persecution, trials, tribulation and calamities. What a transformation! Paul discovered that God allows distress in order to cultivate virtue and to free us from sin. It is by suffering in service to Christ that salvation is either lost or gained, faith is strengthened or weakened, and love is increased or grows cold. Christ tests our love, our obedience and our faithfulness by allowing suffering. And emptying of oneself is required for *humility* to be given birth.

At the same time, each testing is accompanied by joy. Paul was continually thankful to God for whatever was allowed to come upon him. *Thankfulness* is the product of knowing the depths of God's forgiveness. (Matthew 18:23-35) Paul knew how much God had forgiven him. An awareness of God's forgiveness is offered to members of the Church through the mystery of *Confession*. In coming to the priest one is before Christ and by Christ is reunited to the Church.

The fruit of self-denial is the presence of God's love. "*No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*" (John 4:12) In denying the works of the flesh, consequently, good works are accomplished and this fulfills God's Will within us. (Romans 7:5-6) By extension, any expression of love, especially towards one's enemy, is a sign that God abides in us. "*We who are strong ought to bear with the failing of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him.*" (Romans 15:1-2)

The gospel of Christ mandates that Orthodox communities do everything within their power to facilitate union in Christ and sharing that experience with others. Christ said, *no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel.* (Matthew 5:15) Some feel they cannot invite people to our Church because it is an ethnic, "Greek" Orthodox Church. Even worse, for some, the thought of inviting others has never even occurred. Both situations are symptomatic of a loss of perspective. Christ ought to be the criteria and the focal point for gaining right perspective.

Is the Light of Christ present or not? One measure of the presence of Christ is found in what a community is doing: "*What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?*" (James 2:14) Is our community seeking to live out the mandate of the Gospel to evangelize and care for the poor? (Matthew 25) Are

we relying on funds from the general public (often non-Christian) to fund the ministries of Christ? (Luke 12:33) Is there an active study of the Word of God? (Luke 11:28) Are people growing in faith? Is there a bearing of one another and an accepting of differences, in the name of edifying our neighbor? (Romans 15:1) These are the symptoms that accompany a community that has had a Damascus experience and is continually seeking Damascus experiences.

*Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you; and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts un-blamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thess. 3:11-13)*

In Christ's Love,  
+ Fr. Andrew