

Friday in the 3rd week of Easter, the 19th April 2024 (Vranov, UCESM)

Readings: Acts 9:1-20, Psalm 117, John 6:52-59

A Double Conversion

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The most fanatic persecutor [Ac 9,1] becomes the most active preacher of the Gospel [Ac 9:20ff]. To me this sounds very hopeful. For, in a world where Christians and other minorities are threatened and actively oppressed, it may seem there is no other way to stop this than to destroy the persecutors. But then, before we know it, we ourselves have become part of the vicious circle of rejecting others as the “enemy” and “pure evil” and of acting with violence. Yet today we see, in the conversion of Saul/Paul: “the enemy” is never pure evil, but rather a fellow human being, i.e. another person, open to living in the Spirit of God [Ac 9:17f.20], in the service of God, humankind and all His creation [Ac 9:15f].

Even more, we see that Paul’s conversion is not only a matter of God’s intervention. In the conversion process God makes use of *people*, who play a *crucial* role. In Paul’s case Ananias is called to be God’s human instrument of salvation. It is through his hands, the human touch so to speak, that Paul is able to see again.

When we, religious in Europe, read about this event at the end of our conference, we may realise that by this reading we are encouraged to collaborate with God in the same spirit. In some countries or in some situation we may feel threatened as a community of faith. It is tempting to recoil and close ourselves in fear, as Ananias did at first when he heard that he was sent to Paul [Ac 9:13f]. But we do not go on our own behalf as if our own wisdom, strength and courage were decisive. We are *sent*, by *God*. We are in His hand!

It strikes me that Ananias is not telling Paul what he did wrong nor what he had to do; the only thing he does is meeting with Paul, making contact and *thus* making him see – like in a synodal approach. Paul’s seeing is not just physical sight, but also seeing in terms of understanding on a deeper level: this Jesus whom he first saw as a threat, is now recognised by him as the One Who passes on to humankind the goodness of God [Ps 117:2].

So, Ananias comes to recognise Paul as a fellow human being, i.e. intrinsically open to God’s goodness, whilst at the same time Paul comes to recognise Jesus and the mission of His disciples as salutary. It is a double conversion.

By gathering us together in this assembly and by our celebration of the Eucharist [cf. Jn 6:56f] the Lord is making contact with us anew and hence we are enabled to live through a double conversion ourselves. In our challenging situations we keep on trusting in God and in the mission He is entrusting to us *as religious*. And, at the same time He keeps on training us, just like Ananias and Paul, in recognising people who are different from us as fellow human beings who are (meant to be) our sisters and brothers.

May we as religious with our strengths and weaknesses, our opportunities and threats, like Ananias, feel totally free to follow this path. Thus we, in a rapidly changing world, may, cooperating with God, contribute to the spreading of the Gospel in a life-giving way – for the sake of our well-being and for the sake of our salvation. Amen.