The Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

The Theme for this Sermon on The Conversion of St. Paul is "GOD POWER!" It is "GOD POWER" that is at the heart and center of all of Scripture -- "GOD POWER, " not Man Power --- "GOD POWER" that sent Moses back to Egypt to tell Pharaoh, "LET MY PEOPLE GO" --- "GOD POWER" that led them through the Red Sea, through the Wilderness, over the Jordan into the Promised Land --- "GOD POWER" that made the Walls of Jericho come tumbling down --- and it was "GOD POWER" that brought about the Conversion of St. Paul. And today, especially, we celebrate that same "GOD POWER" in the release and homecoming of our American Hostages after 444 days of captivity in Iran. (I hope you will all join me in the Special Service of Thanksgiving to be held at 2:00 p.m. this afternoon at St. Colette.)

But back to "GOD POWER" in the Conversion of St. Paul. In his own "man power" way, Paul was dedicated to the principle that he was doing God a favor when he persecuted those who followed the Lord Jesus. He led the persecution against them. He was willin to carry his cause all the way up to Damascus -- 140 miles north of Jerusalem. He demanded from the high priest letters to authorize him to carry on his cruel campaign against by the men and women who believed on the Lord Jesus.

But then comes the "GOD POWER" -- and Paul has an encounter with God -- and he is

by the Word and the Message which he has so solidly denounced. He hears and sees something no one else can. "SAUL, SAUL, WHY DO YOU PERSECUTE ME?" .... "WHO ARE YOU, LORD?" ..... "I AM JESUS, WHOM YOU ARE PERSECUTING." ..... The one who thought he saw clearly now is blind. And yet he sees that the One Whom he persecuted is now his Lord. That's "GOD POWER!"

God did it! God chose Paul! Paul did not choose God! God came to Paul! God interrupted his plans and intentions! God gave the Word to Paul! God initiated the action to bring Paul under the influence of His love and Grace. THE GOSPEL IS NOT THAT WE DECIDE FOR CHRIST! THE GOSPEL IS THAT GOD HAS ALREADY DECIDED FOR US! What God did for Paul, Paul would never have dreamed of doing for himself. That's "GOD POWER!"

And from that moment on St. Paul sees his experience of God's Grace as a sign that God wants all men to be called into His fellowship. This same Christ who came to Paul on the Damascus Road reaches out to others through His Word -- through the Sacraments as His Means of touching and changing their lives. ..... For Paul this Word was also a command that took hold of his life. He had to ask "what he should do." For the moment the answer was brief and not all too clear. He received orders that commanded him to go to a house in Damascus and wait. Those were orders that commanded obedience with no explanation. That's "GOD POWER!"

That's really what GOD'S WORD is all about. It calls for faith! It calls for the kind of faith which often gives little explanation of where God is leading us. Often we can do nothing but wait. ..... In faith we respond that that Word which led Abraham out of the land of Ur -- or led Jesus to the Cross -- or led Paul to a house in Damascus. ..... And by that same Word we are also called into action! That's "GOD POWER!"

For Paul the instructions were to go to a house in Damascus. God was not to live with Paul in a solitary relationship. God lives with His people in a FAMILY -- THE CHURCH! And so it was that God placed Paul into the Christian Community trough Ananias. ..... And we can well imagine how difficult that was for Ananias. Here he is called upon to minister to one who was known to be the archenemy of Christians. ..... And when Ananias does see Paul, he greets him as "brother." He ministers to Paul -- baptizes him -- and introduces him to the Christian community. That's "GOD POWER!"

The Christian Faith is not a Private Affair! Christians are built into a community. Christian Conversion does not call for isolation. Always, always, always, it has need for the congregation! It is in the congregation that we minister to one another -- give encouragement for the faith and the practice of prayer -- partake of the Blessed Sacrament of our Lord's own Body and Blood. That's "GOD POWER!"

When Paul got into the Christian Community, notice what happened! His blindness left him. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was baptized into the Christian faith. He ate with his newfound friends. He was immersed in a totally new life. ..... And from that mement on, this man who was a dynamo with enormous capacities for persecuting the Church --- this man now becomes God's vehicle for extending the Church --- this man who later writes to the Corinthians: "I DETERMINED NOT TO KNOW ANYTHING AMONG YOU EXCEPT JESUS CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED." That was to be the heart and center of his message and his own life. That's "GOD POWER!"

And it remains the same today. The lasting power of our conversion and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is our conviction that the crucified and Risen Christ is THE LIFE AND MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH! In Him alone there is "forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation!" And that's "GOD POWER!" Amen.