

# My personal reflections on St. Paul

I grew up Jewish. (I say that facetiously.) My German, trilingual mother spoke her third language, Yiddish, so fluently that she was often absorbed into the local Jewish community for discussions and advice. Surrounded by Orthodox Jews in our small Midwestern town, she was able to clear up our confusion regarding the two religions, Judaism and Roman Catholicism. Our Judeo-Christian faith fit neatly into my young ideas of God and religion. I grew up knowing the fierce loyalty of a Jew to his religion.

For this reason, I have always felt that I had a special bond with Paul. I learned early in life that to give up that faith was tantamount to death, literally. I have known more than one Orthodox Jewish friend who embraced Christianity and was then not only ostracized by friends and neighbors, but was painfully declared dead by her family.

My reaction to Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus was mixed with wonder that stemmed from my early life with Orthodox Jews. I looked at Saul, there on the ground, blinded by the brilliance of the light and confused by the question asked by that extraordinary voice. What a tremendous change must have taken place in Saul's heart at that moment! Jesus, whom he was persecuting, had come to him there on the road to Damascus! Something was wrong here. Suddenly he found himself with an unfamiliar enemy. The object of his persecution was no longer the followers of the "Way." He learns instantly, with brilliant clarity, that he is persecuting Jesus, the way, the truth and the light! His instant conversion left no doubt as to what he must now do.

It was no easy matter for a fervent Jew to change religion. Friends would become bitter enemies. Beloved rituals of temple life would be exchanged for new, strange ceremonies. Former enemies would become friends. Doubts must be faced as he strove to convince them of his sincerity. This was my introduction to Paul.

How did his family feel about his conversion? Did they mourn him as one dead? I search his letters for some slight inkling of what he must have been feeling during those first months and years of Christianity. I find none. His conversion is complete.

The blinding light, the voice of Jesus, the conversations with Ananias - all speak of the depth and totality of his newfound faith.

There is no hint of longing for the old way, the Book of Laws, in the following words he wrote to the Romans: "If you obey the law, your circumcision is of value; but if you disobey the law, you might as well never have been circumcised." And again, "If the Gentile, who is not circumcised, obeys the commands of the law, will not God regard him as though he were circumcised?" (Romans 2:25-28).

Paul's new relationship with God brought him to a new life and a new lifestyle. So complete was his conversion that he was able to stand firm in his new faith. He was on fire to spread the good news throughout the world. At times he had to fight for his status as an Apostle, especially when dealing with problems and divisions among the various churches he founded. To the Corinthians he lays the claim: "Am I not a free man? Am I not an Apostle? You yourselves are proof of the fact that I am an Apostle" (1 Corinthians 9:1,2).

His new life brought him intense joy. "I am so sure of you; I take such pride in you! In all our troubles I am still full of courage; I am running over with joy" (2 Corinthians 7:4).

His joy and happiness persisted even in weakness. Insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties only increased his joy (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

He says boldly to the Hebrews, "The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

And closes his letter to the Hebrews with these words: "I beg you, my friends, to listen patiently to this message of encouragement. ... May God's grace be with you all" (Hebrews 13:22-24). With those words, the raging Saul of Tarsus tells us convincingly that the brilliant light seen by all his companions seared his soul, blinded him into meekness and gave us a saint.

Sister Mary Alice Chineworth is an Oblate Sister of Providence and former superior general of the order.