



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Wednesday, 9 October 2019 [\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Beginning with the narrative of the stoning of Stephen, a figure emerges which, along with that of Peter, is the most present and significant in the Acts of the Apostles: that of “a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58). At first, he is described as one who approves of Stephen’s death and wants to “lay waste the Church” (cf. Acts 8:3); but he will later become God’s chosen instrument to proclaim the Gospel to the peoples (cf. Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17).

With the high priest’s endorsement, Saul hunts down Christians and captures them. Those of you who come from populations who are persecuted by dictatorships, you well understand what it means to hunt people down and capture them. That is what Saul did. And he does this believing he is serving the Law of the Lord. Luke says that Saul ‘was breathing’ “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1): there is a breath in him which reeks of death, not life.

The young Saul is portrayed as uncompromising; that is, one who manifests intolerance towards those who think differently from himself. He makes his own political and religious identity absolute and he reduces the other to a potential enemy to be fought. An ideologue. In Saul, religion had been transformed into ideology: religious ideology, social ideology, political ideology. Only after being transformed by Christ will he teach that the true battle is not “against flesh and blood, but against ... the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Eph 6:12). He will teach that one must not fight against people but rather the evil that inspires their actions.

Saul’s state of anger — because Saul is angry — and hostility invites each of us to question ourselves: How do I live my life of faith? Do I seek to *encounter* others or am I *counter to* others? Do I belong to the universal Church (the good, the bad, everyone) or do I have a selective ideology? Do I adore God or do I adore dogmatic formulations? How is my religious life? Does the faith in God that I profess make me friendly or hostile towards those who are different from me?

Luke recounts that, while Saul is wholly intent on eradicating the Christian community, the Lord is on his trail in order to touch his heart and convert him to Himself. It is the Lord's way: he touches hearts. The Risen One takes the initiative and manifests himself to Saul on the way to Damascus, an event that is narrated three times in the Book of Acts (cf. Acts 9:3-19; 22:3-21; 26:4-23).

Through the pairing of "light" and "voice", typical of theophanies, the Risen One appears to Saul and asks him to account for his fratricidal wrath: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (cf. Acts 9:4). Here the Risen One manifests that he is one with those who believe in him: To strike a member of the Church is to strike Christ himself! Even those who are ideologues because they want the "purity" — in quotation marks — of the Church, strike Christ.

Jesus' voice says to Saul: "rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:6). Once on his feet, however, Saul can no longer see anything. He has become blind, and from a strong, authoritative and independent man, he becomes weak, needy and dependent upon others because he cannot see. Christ's light has dazzled him and rendered him blind: "thus what was his inner reality is also outwardly apparent, his blindness to the truth, to the light that is Christ" (Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 3 September 2008).

From this "one to one" between Saul and the Risen One, a transformation begins which reveals Saul's "personal Paschal journey", his passage from death to life: what was once glory becomes "refuse" to reject, in order to gain the true worth which is Christ and life in him (cf. Phil 3:7-8).

Paul receives Baptism. Thus for Saul, as for each of us, Baptism marks the beginning of a new life, and it is accompanied by a new gaze upon God, upon himself and upon others, who from enemies, have now become brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let us ask the Father that, as with Saul, he will allow us too to experience the impact of his love which alone can make a heart of flesh from a heart of stone (cf. Ez 11:19), able to welcome "the same sentiment of Jesus Christ within us" (cf. Phil 2:5).

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Nigeria, Uganda, Belize, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Korea, Canada, and the United States of America. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God bless you!

I offer a special greeting to *young people, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds*. During this Marian month, imitate the zeal and the missionary fervour of Our Lady; make yourselves proclaimers of Christ in every area of your life.

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