

- One of the main gates into the city of Jerusalem is named for St. Stephen, the first martyr of the Church. Just below this particular gate is a small monastery named after St. Stephen that was built on the spot where he was stoned to death.
- If you remember the story from Acts, there was a young man named Saul at Stephen's death who consented to the killing.
- This Saul, of course, is the man who would soon become St. Paul, and his conversion to the Catholic faith would become the most famous conversion of all time. It's this conversion of Saul to Paul that our Church celebrates today.
- Normally when this feast falls on a Sunday – as it does this year – the feast is suppressed and the Church simply celebrates the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- However, as we are in the middle of the Year of St. Paul, which is a holy year that was proclaimed by the Holy Father last June to commemorate the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Paul's birth, parishes around the world have been given permission to celebrate this feast today.
- As we call to mind this story of how St. Paul was knocked to the ground on the road to Damascus by a blinding light, I think it's important that we see in St. Paul the hope that all of us – no matter how bad or sinful we may be – can be changed for the better!
- The opening line of the first reading tells us that the young Saul was a man who, in his zeal for the Jewish religion, developed a murderous hate of the Christians, and he personally sought to have them imprisoned.
- Saul's heart was completely hardened against the Christians, and when our hearts are hard and hate-filled anger fills our breasts, it is very difficult for the love of Christ to penetrate us.
- Yet, with God nothing is impossible. What this story shows us is that God's grace is powerful enough to penetrate and heal even the most hardened of hearts, and convert them on the spot if He so wishes.
- God's grace is powerful enough to heal whatever is most broken and sinful within us. We need only be open to that grace. We need only be humble enough to change.
- However, the story of St. Paul's conversion shows us much more than simply the power of God's grace to convert us. It also reminds us that our personal growth in holiness and our willingness to be converted should not be simply for our own well-being, but for others as well.
- Think for a moment what our church would be like if we didn't have St. Paul. Not only is he responsible for writing a large portion of the New Testament, but he also spread the Gospel far and wide through his own preaching and teaching.
- The Lord sought to bring about the conversion of Saul not only for his own salvation, but so that others might also be saved.
- And while we may not be used to the same degree as St. Paul, our Lord does wish that each of us help bring about the salvation of others through our own personal holiness and through the witness of our lives.
- Whether we like it or not, to some degree we are our brothers' keepers. Through our baptism we have become members of the Body of Christ, and through this incorporation into Christ's body, we have a certain responsibility for our fellow man.
- But our involvement in the Body of Christ doesn't end with trying to help others repent so that they, too, can live good and holy lives. We must also strive to influence our society at large so that it, too, reflects the hopeful truth of the Gospel.

- As Christians, it is our duty to bring about *positive change* in our society that has been damaged by the culture of death and that so often stands against the truths we hold so dear.
- This past week our nation's capital hosted two major events that were centered on the concept of "change."
- First, this past Tuesday was the inauguration of our new president, a president who ran on a platform of "change" and who has promised to help change much that is wrong with our country.
- So let us earnestly pray that his administration is able to positively affect the economy, improve international relations, and help secure health care for all Americans, among other things.
- The other major event was the Pro-Life March on Thursday, which drew 500,000 people from around the country - including myself and some of our fellow parishioners – who hope to see changes in the laws that govern the evil practice of abortion.
- I have been attending the Pro-Life March since 1994 because abortion is the single most important issue facing our country today.
- While we all worry about our economy and the negative impact it is having on so many Americans, and while issues like affordable health care and the war in Iraq are certainly serious and pressing issues, all of these issues pale in comparison to the terrible affects of abortion.
- And this is because 4000 Americans die needlessly each and every day in our country from abortion. **4000!** In Mecklenburg County alone over 30 babies are killed every day by abortion, and countless women are hurt: physically, emotionally and spiritually.
- On Thursday morning I was with Bishop Jugis and several thousand Catholics from around the state at a Mass before the Pro-Life March, and Bishop Jugis made the statement in his homily that the most dangerous place in America today is in a mother's womb.
- Considering the startling statistics on abortion, he's absolutely right. But it doesn't have to be this way. This is something that we can change. And as Catholics it's important that we keep hope alive that someday abortion will be outlawed.
- Sometimes as we consider the terrible problems in our society or even our own human sinfulness, it's hard to believe that things can change.
- But we must never lose heart. Hope is our vocation as Christians, and as St. Paul shows us today, we can change. And if we change, our society can also change.
- Let us pray that through the gracious intercession of St. Paul, each of us may continue down the path to true conversion. May all that is broken within each of us be healed through our Lord's merciful grace.
- And as we grow in holiness and grace, let us together work for a more just and charitable society. Let us work together to help our society better embrace the truths of the Gospel. May God bless you always.