

- A couple of months ago we celebrated the conversion of the infamous Saul to St. Paul while he was on the road to Damascus. That moment of grace that took place nearly 2000 years ago is perhaps the most famous conversion of all time.
- If St. Paul's is the most famous conversion of all time, perhaps the second most famous conversion in our Church's history is that of St. Augustine.
- St. Augustine was born in 354 in the north African city of Tagaste, which is located in modern day Algeria. While his father was a pagan, Augustine's mother was the ever-patient and long-suffering St. Monica.
- As Augustine was a very bright student, his parents made sure he was well educated. Sadly, Augustine wasn't drawn to the religion of his mother as a youth. Instead, he ascribed to various philosophies and Gnostic religion (Manichaeism) for guidance in how to live his life.
- Ultimately, Augustine's moral life suffered – particularly in the area of chastity – and in his late teens he fathered a son out of wedlock.
- St. Augustine eventually left Africa, moved to Rome, and then to Milan, where he came under the influence of the brilliant St. Ambrose. It is under the tutelage of St. Ambrose that Augustine was converted to our Catholic faith at the age of 31.
- In his autobiographical *Confessions*, St. Augustine records that he was walking and praying in a garden one day when he heard the voice of a small child saying: “tolle et lege” – “take and read,” and so Augustine opened the Scriptures and began reading.
- By providence he happened to turn to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 13, and he read: “let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.”
- And it was at that moment that Augustine, knowing his sinful past, made up his mind to be converted, and soon after he and his son were baptized into our Catholic faith. God's grace had finally won out, and Augustine went on to become perhaps the most influential theologian in Church history.
- Augustine had lived a life of youthful depravity, but our Lord never gave up on him. And **God never gives up on us, no matter how sinful our lives may be.** It doesn't matter what we've done wrong in our lives; God's grace and mercy are *always* available.
- This is a point that is made clear by our first reading. 2 Chronicles tells us that even though the Israelites practiced all sorts of abominations, the Lord had compassion on His people.
- While God allowed the Israelites to be overthrown and deported to Babylon by their enemies, He eventually delivered them from their captivity and returned them to their rightful land.
- This is because of all of God's attributes, what stands out is His mercy. And it is of utmost importance that we remember that He is merciful, most especially in the face of our great sinfulness.
- Even when the Lord allows us to suffer for our sins, as he did with the Israelites, He still desires to take us back to Himself. God desires to save us, and He wants us for Himself.
- Today the Church celebrates the 4th Sunday of Lent, which is also known as Laetare Sunday. The word *laetare* means “rejoice.” And we rejoice, in part, because we are now halfway through Lent – and thus we use the color rose to symbolize our lightening of penance today.
- But we also rejoice because God is rich in mercy! We rejoice because God desires to save us from our sins! This is exactly what we hear in the readings today.

- Today's Gospel reading includes the famous verse John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that all who believe in Him might not perish but might have eternal life."
- This verse is so important because it's a summation of the entire Bible. Truly, this verse encapsulates in a nutshell the basic Truth that is conveyed by Sacred Scripture: that God loves us so much that He'll go to any lengths to save us from our sins.
- And St. Paul teaches us today about the nature of our salvation. Namely, he tells us that salvation is a free gift from God, for we are saved by grace, and grace alone.
- St. Paul goes on to tell us that our works cannot save us. All the same, we cannot ignore doing good works. In fact, St. Paul tells us that as God's handiwork, we have been created for good works. Good works are the sign of our faith.
- In fact, our cooperation and participation in the work of salvation through prayer and good works is really a matter of allowing God's grace to take root and work within us. Prayer and good works are the fruits of our faith in God's saving grace.
- But there is more to our salvation than simply cooperating with God's grace through good works. Like St. Paul and St. Augustine, we actually must turn away from our sins and be converted!
- Last week we were presented with the 10 Commandments, which remind us that certain actions are incompatible with Christian living. Sadly, because of the original sin that we inherited from our first parents, we all struggle with concupiscence to some degree.
- Concupiscence is our desire to indulge our lower appetites. It is the yearning for sin that we all struggle with from time to time, and it is why we must constantly seek to turn away from sin. Moreover, in looking to God's mercy, we must be wary of the sin of presumption.
- The *Old Catholic Encyclopedia* defines the sin of presumption as: "the condition of a soul which, because of a badly regulated reliance on God's mercy and power, hopes for salvation without doing anything to deserve it, or for pardon of sins without repenting of them."
- Presumption is a trick the devil uses to lull us into a false sense of security when it comes to the state of our souls. It is the attitude that entices us to go ahead and sin when faced with a temptation because we know of God's mercy.
- However, if we are so quick to fall into sin, how truly sorry are we for our sins?
- The point, my friends, is that God is indeed merciful – even more merciful than we can imagine.
- Yet He cannot be fooled. If we are not truly sorry for our sins, we cannot hope to be forgiven of them. God never gives up on us, but we must be contrite if we wish to be forgiven. We have to turn toward God with integrity of heart if we want to be saved by Him!
- So as we make our way through the second half of the Lenten season, let us earnestly seek to be converted, as was St. Augustine. Let us turn toward God and live in the light, leaving behind whatever deeds of darkness we may have committed in the past.
- Let us trust that our Lord, in His great love for us, will bring us to eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ.