

Guest Speaker

The Guest Speaker Serran Thomas Wong spoke on the topic “The Conversion of St. Paul” (St. Paul’s Conversion Experiences in the Light of Bernard Lonergan’s Theology of Conversion).

(A) Who is Paul?

St. Paul is the “Apostle of the Gentiles” –

- Prominent figure in the early Christian Church
- Has universal Vision (Jerusalem → Rome → World)
- Total dedication to the Lord and early Church
- His outstanding efforts stimulated great openness to humanity
- The first great Christian Theologian – taught with his Epistles to various Christian communities
- Commonly believed to be born in the year 8 A.D. Pope Benedict XVI declared 2008 as a Pauline Year to encourage deeper knowledge of Pauline Theology.

(B) Historical Background

- Born in Gischala, then moved to Tarsus in Cilicia. Often referred to as Paul of Tarsus.
- Born Jewish (Hebrew), descendent of Abraham (II Corinthians 11:22); from the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1)
- Raised as a Pharisee and persecuted the early Christians, considering them as deviating from Jewish teaching.

(C) Cultural Background

- Born into a Jewish family (speaks Hebrew)
- Raised with a background of Greek culture (knows Greek language)
- Lived under Roman rule (knows Latin)
- Work as a Tent Maker by profession

(D) Lonergan’s Knowledge Structure

- Four steps in Lonergan’s knowledge structure:-
Experience → Insight → Judgement → Choice

(E) St. Paul’s Conversion

(i) Intellectual Conversion

Paul was a devoted Pharisee who honestly believed that Christianity (the way) deviated from the traditional Jewish faith. Paul was a witness when St. Stephen was martyred. He obtained authority to root out “the way” in Damascus.

However, Paul also believed that if Christianity was not from God, then it would die out eventually. On the other hand, if it was from God, then no power on earth could destroy it. On his way to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Paul and Paul received his “Intellectual Conversion”.

(ii) Religious Conversion

When Paul was struck blind on his way to Damascus, Jesus instructed Ananias to seek out Paul for Paul was “a chosen vessel to bear my name before the gentiles” (Acts 9:15). Ananias cured Paul of his blindness” Ananias entered into the house, putting his hands on him said: “Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee sent me, that thou mightiest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales and he received sight forthwith, and rose, and was baptized” (Acts 9:17-18).

(iii) Moral Conversion

When his blindness was cured and he was baptized, Paul reached the truth with enlightened vision.

According to Lonergan’s Knowledge Structure, Paul went through the following stages in his conversion:-

Experience (blindness) — ~~Knowledge~~ (Jesus spoke to him and Ananias instructed him) → Decision (reaching the truth, he was baptized) → Enlightened Vision

(F) Paul : The first Christian Theologian

After his conversion, Paul spent some time in Arabia (Mount Sinai) where he consolidated his belief (meeting God in contemplation). After this, he became a missionary with Luke, preaching “the way” from town to town, leaving behind people he instructed to continue his work.

When Paul was arrested and imprisoned, he wrote 14 Epistles, instructing the early Christians. These epistles made Paul the first Christian Theologian. He was beheaded and received his martyrdom between 64-67 A.D.

In all his Epistles, Paul was a true Apostle of Christ and always taught three things:-

- (i) Message of Jesus
- (ii) Concern and love for the followers of Christ

(iii) Unity in the early church

In II Timothy 4:7-8, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day : and not to me alone, but unto all them also that love his appearing". The message was clear with the three steps to success:-

- (i) Conversion
- (ii) Keep the faith
- (iii) End of the run

Thus, Paul was chosen by Jesus as His missionary to the Gentiles and the whole world. His life can be summarized as:-

"Paul → Persecution of Christians → Conversion
Martyr

After this informative and enlightening talk, there was sharing by Serrans Michael Lau, Vincent Jim and Peter Lee.