

Facing the Apostle

Paul's Image in Art



Armanda Santos, FSP

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Prayers by Germana Santos, FSP

With a Foreword
by Michael Morris, OP



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*In memory of my loving father,
Armando Lourenço dos Santos
1922–2001*



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Foreword

Nothing is so gratifying to a teacher's heart than to see a student respond enthusiastically to the information imparted in class. When Sister Armanda took my courses in Christian Iconography some years ago at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, she perched herself in the front row in order to better view the battery of images that were projected—images of biblical figures, of saints, of signs and symbols that have long been the visual language of Christian consciousness and the splendor of Church art. Her interest in iconography was intensely focused, as if she were taking inventory of some long-hidden treasure. Being much younger than I, she had probably not been inundated with these images as I was in Catholic grammar school. In the past forty years the language of Christian visual culture has not been consistently taught. While instruction in sacred art was mandated by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, it has been rarely offered in schools, in seminaries, or even in Pontifical universities. The consequences have been devastating. Over time this visual language has been forgotten. People see, but they do not fully understand. The art can still attract and fascinate them, but the spiritual tether that linked

the image with the soul has been severed. More often than not, the faithful find it difficult to interpret what they see in their own churches. Where art remains, it beckons to be rediscovered.

In this handsome and well-planned volume, Sister Armanda invites the reader to rediscover and meditate upon the iconography of St. Paul, to follow his life pictorially and reflect upon the scriptural passages, the legends, and the prayers that celebrate this great Apostle from his mystical conversion to his dramatic martyrdom. She has chosen images that range from the classically familiar to the new and innovative. In this delightful mix we can see how Paul's life has been interpreted by artists of every age. But Sister Armanda's book is more than just an historical survey of Pauline imagery. She uses the visual to familiarize the reader with the Apostle's writings. Starting with a quotation from Sacred Scripture, Sister Armanda weaves biography, formal analysis, aesthetics, theology, history, and legend together in her chapters. Then each study is completed with a prayer that raises this wealth of information up to the spiritual plane. This is essential. For what good is Christian art if it does not draw us closer to God? Such art should lead us to prayerful reflection just as photographs of loved ones spark fond memories and associations. Knowledge comes to us through the senses and this physical delight ought to translate into food for the soul.

Sister Armanda has compiled her material and presented it in a way that is accessible to readers of every age and background. In doing so, she has followed the dictates of Saints Peter and Paul. For 1 Peter 5:5 says, "clothe yourselves with humility." Likewise, in Paul's Letter to the Philippians (2:3) it says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." This is good advice for preachers, teachers, and writers. Sister's text is not in the least bit pedantic. While thoughtful and informative, she never talks

down to her audience. Her prose is as warm and engaging as her personality.

Congratulations to Sister Armanda on work well done, and to her Congregation, the Daughters of St. Paul, for another inspiring religious publication that expresses so beautifully the harmony found between word and image.

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Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology



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Introduction

Arts by their very nature are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands; they achieve their purpose of redounding to God's praise and glory in proportion as they are directed the more exclusively to the single aim of turning men's minds devoutly toward God.

CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY, NO. 122

I belong to a religious community of sisters, the Daughters of St. Paul, who claim St. Paul as our patron and to whom we give the privileged title of Father. As a Pauline sister, I consider myself an heir to the treasure of images of the Apostle Paul that artists of every generation have given to the Church. These images, found in museums, churches, religious sites around the world, books, and the Internet, allow us to see in Paul someone larger than life, a giant of faith, a man who left his imprint on Christianity and who has been immortalized in paintings, sculptures, and representations of all types.

Through my own reading, study, and prayer, I have discovered that behind the colossal figure of Paul was a man of indomitable strength and determination; someone capable of accessing and articulating truth, yet who was also skilled at adapting his message to various circumstances; someone gifted at forming lasting personal friendships while maintaining a keen ability to network for the sake of the Gospel. This man, who lived in deep intimacy with his God, also experienced moments of testing and loneliness. At times he was all too human. He displayed impatience with the pettiness of others, was prone to conflict, and thrived on argumentation. Yet Paul was also blessed with great sensitivity, especially in his dealings with his disciples and communities.

As I have come to know and love St. Paul over the years, so I greatly desire to extend the same opportunity to others. I hope to offer some insight into the person of Paul by reflecting on his iconographic portrayals. Religious art, through its use of signs and symbolic representation, can be an effective conduit into a world of theological meaning and scriptural revelation.

In this book an image of Paul anchors each chapter and becomes the primary medium for narrating his story. Thus, iconographic images of Paul are the vehicle through which we will explore the life and message of the great communicator, theologian, apostle, and saint. While my intention for this work is not the formal critical analysis that art historians use, I have nonetheless chosen to engage Paul's iconography using a simplified method to approach and critique the art. For some paintings I explore the artist's biographical data and background. For others, I look at the shapes and colors the artist employs and what the use of such may suggest; for still others, I approach the work by looking at it from the perspective of content (i.e., unpacking meaning contained in the work) or the particular response the artwork may evoke in the viewer.

Before proceeding further, it may be helpful to look at some of the terms appearing in this presentation and how they are used:

- The word *icon* usually refers to an image or artistic representation. In addition, within the Eastern Christian tradition an icon is a picture or representation of the sacred, manifesting the divine presence and thus becoming a means to contemplation and theological reflection.
- *Iconography* refers to the pictorial material, including its symbolic and emblematic elements, relating to an image.
- A *portrait* is an image that bears a historical likeness of a person.
- *Attributes* are elements or external characteristics that embody or suggest a particular person or an activity for which the person is known.

Here I want to go beyond the attributes traditionally associated with Paul, the sword and the book, and allow Paul's iconography to reveal something of his personality and inner life: his passion for the Gospel; his indefatigable spirit; his identification with Christ; his humanness, friendships, and love for the Church; his universal outlook, etc.

In presenting an iconographic portrait of the Apostle Paul, the methodology I have followed draws from such primary sources as Paul's undisputed letters. These are the seven letters that biblical scholars recognize as written by the Apostle Paul himself: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Where particular biographical data was lacking, it has been supplemented by the disputed or "deutero-Pauline" letters—i.e., those generally attributed to Paul's disciples, such as Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus—as well as by the Acts of the Apostles and other ancient writings.

In the Gospel of John we read that certain Greeks approached the disciple Philip with the request: “[W]e want to see Jesus” (Jn 12:21). This desire of Jesus’ contemporaries has become the longing for every Christian generation. The quest to “catch a glimpse” of Jesus, Mary, the angels, and the saints with our own eyes has resulted in their images being illustrated, painted, carved, chiseled, woven, embroidered, inked, printed, photographed, and filmed. The attempts, the successes, and the masterpieces of artists of every generation to image the Divine have moved and enthralled us, capturing our imagination.

Christianity has harnessed the potential of visual art to proclaim, transmit, reveal, and communicate the message of Jesus in ways that deeply touch the human heart. These visual images, in whatever form they take, give us possibilities for new associations and ideas to interpret the message of Jesus within contemporary contexts that are ever-more universal and relevant to the times and to the demands of discipleship. Visual images, especially when we speak of religious art, are open doors into an endless world of meaning. In this visual world, an artist employs symbols to create images that articulate meaning, proclaim a message, and unlock revelation.

In the U.S. bishops’ document *Built of Living Stones*, Pope Paul VI is quoted as saying that the Church entrusts to art a mediating role

analogous to Jacob’s ladder descending and ascending between the human and the holy: Art is meant to bring the divine to the human world, to the level of the senses; then, from the insight gained through the senses and the stirring of the emotions, raise the human world to God, to his inexpressible kingdom of mystery, beauty and life.¹

For this reason, when religious art flows from the community’s organic, living experience of faith, the beauty of the work is not contained in the design, form, or market value of the image, but in the

signs, meaning, and the religious perspective the work offers to the community as gift. With this insight as a basis for our understanding and appreciation of religious art, we can better undertake the adventure of discovering the great Apostle Paul and his relevance for the Church's journey of faith.

Chapter I



A Heart Transformed



Caravaggio (Michelangelo da Merisi) (1573–1610). *The Conversion of St. Paul* (ca. 1600). Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Scala /Art Resource, NY.

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you, Lord?” I said.

*And the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.
Get up and stand on your feet! This is why I have appeared to you
—to make you my servant and a witness for what you’ve seen
[of me] and what I’ll show you.”*

ACTS 26:14–17



This famous image of the conversion of Paul was painted in 1600 by Michelangelo Merisi, who was born in Caravaggio, Italy, around 1570. Over time, people commonly referred to the artist as Caravaggio. The painting alludes to a sequence of events not entirely captured by the artist but narrated three times in the Acts of the Apostles (although, interestingly enough, Paul’s fall from a horse never actually figures into the accounts). Saul (his Jewish name), a devout young Pharisee, is on his way to the city of Damascus to discipline followers of “the Way,” whom he believes are guilty of subverting Jewish Law. While traveling, he experiences something dramatic and unexpected—indeed life changing. Caravaggio’s painting suggests a period from before the rider’s fall to shortly after it has taken place, all the

while directing our focus to the precise moment of encounter between Saul and “the One” he has been persecuting.

The painting is divided horizontally between the horse in the upper half and Saul in the lower foreground. The composition seems crowded, with the large, imposing horse dominating the scene. The horse's hindquarters and left foreleg, along with its back hump, establish two vertical lines, with the horse's handler forming a third line. Saul lies on the ground with his left leg bent like two sides of a triangle, a shape mirrored from a different angle by the horse's raised leg. The horse's



physical strength, conveyed in its muscular legs, is replicated in Saul's muscled arms. The legs of the horse and the assistant, along with Saul's legs and arms, converge in the middle of the painting, creating a visual confusion that

compels us to shift our gaze away from it and onto the serene figure lying on the ground. Some apparent crisis has caused this rider to let go of the reigns of his horse, casting the leather straps aside as he relinquishes control of the horse to the attendant.

Caravaggio produces a variety of shapes that direct our reflection toward some revealing aspects of the image. Saul's arms form a half-circle as they strain upward to grasp, to welcome, and to embrace Someone invisible to us but very present to him. A large oval shape highlights the central action in the painting, extending from Saul's right arm, then proceeding up over the horse's head and midsection, and finally reaching back down to Saul's left arm. The other large shape

emerging and dominating the painting is a rectangle formed by the horse's body and framed against a black background. Out of the darkness on the right-hand side of the painting a light descends in parallel rays, illuminating both the horse and the figure lying beneath it. Radiant light, a great metaphor for revelation, floods Saul in strong, warm hues, but its source remains mysterious as it emanates from darkness. Saul's eyes are closed to convey the blindness ascribed to him in the Scripture account, while the horse's penetrating gaze tries to assess its fallen rider. Even with his eyes shut, Saul appears alert and magnetically drawn by something outside himself. His face is warmed by the intense heat of the light, which he later describes thus: "I saw a light from the sky more brilliant than the sun.... And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 26:13–15). Saul is receptive, offering no visible resistance.

Although, of course, not a Roman soldier, Saul is often mistakenly depicted dressed in military attire. The sword, which lies on his left side, is possibly included simply as part of the Roman uniform; iconographically, however, as we will see, it represents much more than that. Saul's military helmet lies next to his head. His white sleeves are rolled up and his red cape rests carelessly on the ground.

As a photograph captures a moment in time, Caravaggio's work offers a snapshot of a memorable event in Paul's life; it visually articulates the transformation that moved Saul away from power and pride to humility and dependence. This painting represents a dimension not visible to us but that Saul entered and embraced, welcoming "the One" whom he had persecuted but who now becomes his Lord and Savior.

It is interesting to note that Caravaggio actually painted two conversion pictures. In September 1600, the young artist received a commission from Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, treasurer general to Pope Clement

VIII, for two paintings: *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* and *The Conversion of St. Paul*. Both were to be placed over the altar in the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. The artist's first rendition of Paul's conversion was beautiful in its execution and graphic interpretation, but by the time the painting was completed, the architect had changed the dimensions of the altar, and Caravaggio decided to redo the painting. In comparison, the second version is far superior. Something seems to have happened to Caravaggio between the first and second paintings, perhaps a transformation or personal conversion of his own. The first version of the painting is a literal representation of the biblical narrative, with an extremely crowded composition. In the second, the drama takes place on a psychological level and entices us to continue pondering the image. Paul's outstretched arms tell of a complete surrender to his Lord, while the omnipresent God is personified in the horse with its epic size.

Caravaggio's masterpiece hangs at a height that allows the viewer to gaze up at the painting from the perspective of the fallen rider. This is the painter's way of drawing us into the story, permitting us to see the action of God in our own lives from a position of humility. However, for the image of Paul's conversion to best communicate meaning to us and become an example for our own personal transformation, we must interpret it in the light of its biblical context:

I was on the road at about midday ... when I saw a light more brilliant than the sun shining around me and those who were traveling with me. We all fell to the ground and I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It's hard for you to kick against the goad!"

"Who are you, Lord?" I said.

And the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up and stand on your feet! This is why I have appeared to you—to make you my servant and a witness for what you've seen [of me] and what I'll show you." (Acts 26:13–17)

Paul's conversion is a significant occurrence in this remarkable life poured out "for the sake of the Gospel." Besides the narratives recorded in Acts, Paul refers in his own writings to this life-changing event. So transformative is the encounter with the risen Jesus that Paul compares it to the act of God in creation: "For the God Who said, 'Out of the dark a light will shine,' has caused His light to shine in our hearts to reveal the knowledge of God's glory in Christ's face" (2 Cor 4:6). God, who created light, also chooses to manifest himself to Paul in light.

Christ "ambushes" Paul on the road to Damascus, and in that moment Paul falls in love. It is a love that expands his heart to include everyone. So great is this experience of conversion that he later says, "I consider everything to be loss for the sake of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8).

Scripture, as mentioned earlier, does not directly refer to Paul as falling off a horse. Most artists, however, have used this image metaphorically to explain the radical change in Paul's life. Why might this be so? The horse is an animal representing strength and power. Then, too, the image of Paul being "unseated" has come to symbolize surrender of one's own control in favor of trusting dependence on God. Paul's goal may have been to bring down the Christians, but as often happens in good stories, there is a surprise twist that has Paul's world turned upside down.

So life changing is Paul's encounter with Jesus that he can nevermore turn his gaze away from Christ. He later attests that he saw the risen Lord in the same way the other apostles saw him (see 1 Cor 15:8); this reality stands at the center of Paul's life and theology and confers authority on his apostleship. The Damascus event gave Paul vision for his future mission among the Gentiles; the light bestowed gave clarity to his teaching. Neither the vision nor the light ever dimmed.

We who daily set out in pursuit of Christ would do well to remind ourselves that Jesus longs for our encounter with him even more than we do. This encounter with Christ must flourish into a relationship that will transform us, just as it did Paul.

Prayer

Light and darkness,
sight and blindness,
power and weakness,
control and surrender.

The Damascus event in Paul's life is played out
often in my own life,
though in a less dramatic way.

Lord Jesus, I meet you in so many ways,
sometimes in silence and prayer,
or by stumbling to the ground of my existence.

As I journey through the days of my life,
stop me, call out my name,
send me your dazzling light,
take hold of me, as you took hold of Paul.
Even when I kick against the goad,
even when I lack courage,
even when the fatigue of life overtakes me,
even when I fall again,
even when I lose my way,
even in all these things,
I trust that you are with me,
and that your grace is sufficient for me.

Like Paul, let me know how to be companioned by others,
led by those around me who can point out the way,
because the journey is very lonely without them.