

**The Conversion of St. Paul
January 25, 2009**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

**So when was the last time you saw someone fall off their “high horse?”
When was the last time you fell off your “high horse?” That was one of my
mother’s favorite phrases. Someone was always falling of his high horse—and
usually much to her delight.**

**The phrase is attributed to many real high horses throughout history.
But some think it may have something to do with what we celebrate today. In
the 16th century, the great Italian artist, Caravaggio, painted two magnificent
canvases depicting St. Paul’s Conversion. In the most famous, almost the
entire frame is taken-up by this gigantic horse. At the bottom, near the
horse’s upraised hoofs, lies Saul of Tarsus, stretched out on his back with his
arms pleading with a brilliant and other-worldly light. He has, literally, fallen
off his very high horse.**

**There are three separate accounts of Paul’s experience in the Acts of the
Apostles (Acts 9, 22, and 26—the last two in autobiographical form, in Paul’s
own voice) And there are many references to it throughout his letters.**

**But when we look carefully at what really happened to Paul (or Saul, his
Hebrew name), we may find some surprises.**

There is a wonderful series of brief, very Ignatian, meditations on St. Paul collected for this Pauline Year. In them, the Jesuit Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S.J., asks Paul himself to answer a few questions about what really happened on that road.

Who was this Paul? And what was the “high horse” he was riding? He tells us himself in his letter to the Philippians. Paul writes this letter, only a few years after his Damascus road experience, but before any of the gospels were written down. In it he tells the members of that community who he is and why he has more confidence “in the flesh,” as he puts it, than most of his peers; he is heavily credentialed as a devout and righteous Jew. You will remember the passage; we read it occasionally in church. In the third chapter of that letter, Paul describes his history, his accomplishments, his nature by saying: I was circumcised on the eighth day, come from the illustrious people of Israel, am of the esteemed tribe of Benjamin; I am a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the new church, and as to righteousness under the law, completely blameless (Phil. 3). Quite a list! If nothing else, Paul seems rather smugly full of himself.

What he is really saying is that he, Paul, is a *righteous* Jew, the same word used in the gospels of Joseph, Mary’s husband, and of Zechariah and

Anna. Paul says he possesses a great tradition, has always been a full member of the Chosen People of God, and he is fiercely proud of his lineage and his heritage. Can you see that horse getting bigger?

Next question: so, Paul, what happened? What changed? In a blinding moment of revelation from God, Paul's whole inner orientation is turned upside down. He realizes, when the God of Israel speaks *in and through the person of the risen Christ*, that despite all his gifts and zeal for the God of Israel, Paul's attitude toward God is profoundly wrong. In his effort to be holy, he has missed the point!

On that road to Damascus, Paul has revealed to him that he has made a profound mistake by embracing ideology and the faithful observance of the Law as central to his faith. As Cardinal Martini puts it: "Paul's story is the difficult story of a person who is profoundly religious, but whose religious approach threatens to lead him to a radical distortion of the image of God."

Paul learns that ideology—any ideology—negates the generous and gracious God who has become human in Jesus. And Paul's life is profoundly and forever changed. And so is the entire church that comes after him.

But Paul also learns, again in Cardinal Martini's words, "His change was not due to his own strength, meditation, spiritual exercises, long prayers,

or fasting. Everything was given to him [in a blinding instant] so that he could be for all peoples a *sign* of the merciful God, whose initiative always precedes our seeking.”

The author of Paul’s conversion is not Paul; it is always God. Paul’s “high horse” was actually his own profound, but misguided, faith that blinded him to God’s total graciousness and completely unpredictable love. There may be a lesson here for us as well. We might want to watch out for our own “high horses.” And let God be God.