

**Good afternoon Your Grace, graduands, platform party, honored guests, ladies, and gentlemen.**

It is indeed an honor to have the opportunity to address the class of 2021 this afternoon.

As mentioned, I come from New Brunswick, and although I attended a Catholic High School, St. Malachy Memorial, I did not have the benefit of publicly funded Catholic Education as a grade schooler. As a cradle Catholic, I attended Catechism class, and was involved in parish ministry but it would not be until 1993, when earning my first teaching job at Providence School in McLennan Alberta, that I came to understand the importance and gift of Catholic Education.

At that time there were outreach scripture courses being offered in High Prairie. These were offered by Father Descheneau and others who like St. Paul, travelled many roads, taking the Good News to the people. I fondly recall enjoying those initial course offerings and the beginnings of wanting to learn more about our deep and rich Catholic teachings and traditions. I learned concepts such as Right relationship, covenantal love, Parousia and Eschaton, and how to do an exegesis to better understand scripture. My eyes opened wider as these early courses sparked a desire to go and grow deeper in my faith; a road that would eventually lead to Newman Theological College.

When I reflect upon my time at Newman Theological College, there are many fond thoughts and recollections that come to mind. I first started with the Graduate Certificate in Catholic School Administration. Having moved from McLennan after five years of teaching, my wife Susan, and I, were living in Brooks Alberta, and serving in Christ the Redeemer School Division. We wanted to grow deeper in our knowledge of the faith; particularly in support of our aspirations to serve as Catholic Educational Leaders. We were committed to hitting the road and travelling to Edmonton to undertake this learning opportunity. But, as it turned out, we would not have to drive that far. As Providence would have it, shortly after being accepted to the program at NTC, I received an invitation to interview for a teaching position with Edmonton Catholic Schools. I was hired and soon after, my wife was hired by Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools.

It was through the graces of Edmonton Catholic Schools that I was gifted with an opportunity to join a cohort in the Graduate Diploma in Religious Education program, eventually laddering into the Master of Religious Education. It was through the value ascribed on the formation of Catholic Educational leaders by our visionary Superintendent, Joan Carr, and the emphasis placed on supporting this program, that has helped many aspiring leaders take root, grow, and flourish. Being in a cohort of peers from within ECSD as well as from other jurisdictions, was rewarding in so many ways. I forged friendships and made acquaintances that I very much cherish today; many of whom still serve with me in our Catholic schools. Yes, in many ways, the road to Newman allowed me to travel new roads and to take on new challenges and adventures.

You will notice that I have mentioned the word “road” a few times. Scripture provides some wonderful insights on the many roads or paths we walk in life. I think of the Road to Emmaus for example, and how followers of Jesus, in witnessing and lamenting the crucifixion of Jesus, had

their eyes opened and became awakened to their faith when they saw that the person traveling with them was in fact, the Risen Lord. In this regard, the Road to Emmaus calls us to travel together with our Lord as *Companions on the Journey*. It is fitting that NTC offers an award steeped in this particular scripture passage. The Emmaus award reflects the experience of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus: the hope that when religious education students attend Newman, they join other colleagues on the journey and through their studies and dialogue with the content, come to recognize Jesus more clearly.

In the same way, there is another Road story that I would like to share with you this afternoon; something that happened on the Road to Damascus. It comes from the Acts of the Apostles 9: 1-19, and is as poignant to the circumstances, challenges, and crisis of our world today as it was in the times in which it was written.

### **The Conversion of Saul Acts 9: 1-19**

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men, or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** <sup>5</sup> He asked, **“Who are you, Lord?”** The reply came, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.** <sup>6</sup> **But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”** <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so, they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, *Here I am, Lord.* <sup>11</sup> The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup> I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” <sup>17</sup> So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For me, this scripture speaks to the need for the conversion of heart and mind. In so many ways, today our eyes are open, but like Saul, we do not see what is truly set before us. In light of the many challenges we face today in our world, a world that has become increasingly divisive, fractured, and susceptible to the secular worldview, the story of Saul on the Road to Damascus has planted the seed of an idea or better yet, a challenge that I believe the Holy Spirit has set before me. And this challenge is about forgiveness and understanding. It is:

### **How to see Saul, through the eyes of Paul.**

Let us take a few moments to walk together along this road:

Saul was highly educated, a prodigy of sorts, well-versed in Hebrew scripture and teaching. Saul was a Pharisee; he participated in the persecution of the early disciples of Jesus. When we hear “Saul, was uttering threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” and given his hand in what would become the martyrdom of St. Stephen, it is readily apparent that Saul was an enemy to the followers of Christ. Catholic historian and author, Mike Aquilina writes: “Saul was renowned for the fear he instilled and his resolve to put Christians in prison or worse. Saul was not a docile minion, blindly carrying out orders issued by higher authorities. He was the most active agent of persecution, moving it forward and prosecuting the matter himself.” Saul was a man with a mission; a mission which in his mind was valid, rational, and worthy of his conviction.

Then, as Saul sets out on the Road to Damascus to persecute even more Christians, a trip of about 140 miles, Jesus appears to Saul: **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** Saul, like the travelers to Emmaus, does not recognize Jesus at first and asks who is speaking to him. We hear: **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”**

What followed was one of the most dramatic conversions in church history. Saul of Tarsus became the Apostle Paul, an ardent missionary to an unbelieving world and an exemplar of faithful service in the face of fierce persecution.

In his encounter with Christ, Saul’s eyes are open, but he is blinded. The loss of his vision, which would last three days, is the starting point of his conversion. In becoming blind, Paul is taken to Damascus where he meets Ananias. At first, Ananias is skeptical about what is set before him. Ananias states: “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup> and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

Nonetheless Ananias says: *Here I am Lord* and answers the call to lay hands on Saul and cure his blindness. Here, God shares the vision that Saul, soon to be called Paul, is to become an instrument chosen to bring God’s before Gentiles, Kings, and the people of Israel. Ananias obeys and sight is restored to Paul. I often contemplate how difficult that must have been for Ananias, given what he knew about Saul.

In many scholarly articles we learn that Paul did not lose sight of his past. In fact, it was in recalling the steadfast and unwavering faith of Stephen's testimony and resulting death that would give root to St. Paul's conviction to spread the Gospel to all corners of the inhabitable world. Saul's conversion is framed in the concept of sight – of seeing the world not only how it is, but rather how it is meant to become. In many ways and through the Pauline Epistles to the various communities with whom he engages, we come to see Saul, through the eyes of Paul and in this regard, we come to understand how we, too, are called to see ourselves in the light of our own failings and faults, never losing sight of God's forgiveness.

We come to understand that to see Saul through the eyes of Paul is an act of humility, of being vulnerable, of understanding our need for reconciliation and need for conversion of heart and mind; to be centred on and trusting in God.

Ultimately, it was by being seen through the eyes of Jesus that Saul came to understand his new mission, his new purpose, and while we cannot come to comprehend fully the mystery of his conversion, we do know that God calls each of us to conversion, to be in right relationship, to walk along the roads of our faith, to take courage, and to not be afraid when we encounter the many forks or crossroads that come our way.

During these challenging times of the pandemic, when there is much dissent and confusion in our society, when the road forward is not so clear, let us recall the example of St. Paul and learn to see others through the eyes of compassion and understanding. Let us be mindful of those followers of Jesus on the Road to Emmaus and strive to see Jesus in one another.

In closing, let us give thanks for the opportunity to learn and grow in our faith at Newman Theological College. Let us give thanks for those leaders like Joan Carr who provided many Catholic educators the opportunity to access post-secondary religious education. With great courage and joy, let us take our learning on the road like St. Paul, spreading the Good News with perseverance, running the good race that is set before us. Like St. Paul, let us open our eyes and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Congratulations Class of 2021! God bless you.

## References

### New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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[Saul the Persecutor, Paul the Apostle \(catholicexchange.com\)](http://catholicexchange.com)