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**In Caravaggio's painting, Saul is knocked flat on his back  
before our eyes and almost into our space. His suffering  
as the "apostle to the Gentiles" has begun.**

*Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL (1600-1601).  
Oil on canvas, 90½" x 70". Cerasi Chapel, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art  
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# Apostle to the Gentiles

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Caravaggio painted *The Conversion of St. Paul* as a pair with *Crucifixion of St. Peter* to establish a theme of suffering. The suffering of Peter, the apostle to the Jews, as he is crucified upside down on a cross is immediately apparent. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul endured suffering and ridicule as he took the gospel to those outside the Jewish faith.

Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, treasurer general under Pope Clement VIII, commissioned Caravaggio to paint the two pictures in his recently acquired private chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. On September 24, 1600, Caravaggio signed a contract to paint them on two cypress panels measuring 10 x 8 *palmi*.<sup>†</sup>

Keeping close to the details in the biblical accounts of the apostle's conversion (Acts 9:1-6, 22:5-11, 26:13), Caravaggio does not embellish the narrative with an apparition of God or angels. The psychological dimension of the painting is very modern: Saul, the Jewish persecutor of Christians, is knocked flat on his back before our eyes and almost into our space. He is converted through the penetrating light of God, "a light from heaven, brighter than the sun" (Acts 26:13). He does not react in fear, but opens his arms to receive as much of the light as possible. His eyes are closed to indicate the blindness that he endures for three days. His commission to be the apostle of the Gentiles is symbolized by Caravaggio's depiction of him in Roman garb.

At this point in the biblical story, Luke describes a second important vision. Saul continues to Damascus where a disciple named Ananias is told by the Lord in a vision to seek out Saul of Tarsus. Ananias is understandably worried that Saul will continue his evil deeds of persecution,

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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

*Acts 9:15*

After he is healed by Ananias, Saul is filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized.

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 118-137. The palmo, a unit of measure based on the breadth of a human hand with the fingers splayed, was a little more than eight inches.