Like St. Paul we are all called to proclaim the Good News by being good news.

I remember reading years ago an article in the now defunct magazine, Psychology Today, about an experiment on the effect of good news and bad news on people’s actions. The experiment, as I recall, was to drop $10 bills around with some kind of identification to see if the person who found the money would return it. On several days, a good percentage of them were returned. However, on the day Robert Kennedy, the brother of J.F.K., was assassinated as he was campaigning for the presidency, not a single one was returned. The article concluded, if not with the greatest scientific accuracy, that good news affects us in a positive way and bad news in a negative way, especially when that news concerns manmade evils.

You used to hear it said, “Don’t get involved with that guy; he’s bad news,” meaning that he would be a bad influence on you and get you into trouble or cause you serious harm. In a sense, this is what Ananias said in response to God’s inspiration to welcome Paul in the alternate reading for today: “Lord, I have heard from many sources about this man, what evil things he has done to your holy ones in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to imprison all who call upon your name.” In other words, Ananias was telling the God, “Lord, this man is bad news.” But the Lord says, in effect, he may at one time been bad news for you, but now he is good news. St. Francis de Sales puts it this way: “St. Paul, the great Apostle, who from Saul, vessel of persecution, suddenly became Paul, vessel of election” (Conference on “Relying on God’s Providence,” Conf XXI, p. 400).

We see in today’s first reading how this conversion, or as some would call it Paul’s vocation, came about. From a fiery, zealous persecutor of the Way (Christians were then known as followers of the Way), he became after Christ the greatest proclaimer of the Gospel, the Good News. It often happens that those who most hate the Church become its greatest promoters, because it seems easier to reach the ones who are on fire than the apathetic, the indifferent and the blasé.

Notice that Paul, in giving his religious pedigree, tells how he was an excellent Pharisee and a student of the highly regarded Gamaliel. Because of this, he thought he was in the right relationship with God, that he knew with absolute certainly what God wanted, and what God wanted was to have him hunt down, persecute and imprison these fractious practitioners of the Way who were corrupting the revered religion of his ancestors. He convinced himself that what God wanted was what he wanted. He was shown by God how wrong he was.
The most telling words of Paul’s change of heart, the ones that reveal a new mind set, a new way of looking at God, himself and the world are: “What shall I do, sir?” “Lord, what would you have me do?” It was no longer, “Lord, I know what you want me to do,” but, “Lord, what would you have me do? As we all know, what God wants in a number of areas like health care is not always clear and evident. However, we can say with confidence that God’s will is evident in the case of respecting the conscience of health care providers, which is the topic of this evening’s Heritage Week event at the University Center. And I encourage you to attend, since it is an exceedingly important and relevant issue.

St. Paul’s response was very illuminating for both St. Francis de Sales, our patron, and Fr. Brisson, the founder of the Oblates. St. Francis de Sales saw in this response a total reliance on God’s providence, which leads him to remark: “St. Paul practiced this self-abandonment most excellently at the very moment of his conversion, for when the Lord had smitten him with blindness, he cried out instantly: ‘Lord, what would you have me do?’ and from that time forth he continued in absolute dependence upon the will and commands of God. Our entire [holiness] lies in this practice” (Conf. XXI, p. 400).

Fr. Brisson also zeroes in on these words, when he says: “Now let us talk about the graces that God gives you for the good of others. When St. Paul was on the road to Damascus, what made him an apostle? These words: ‘What must I do, Lord?’ There you have all of St. Paul, all of his apostolate, of his conversion, his writings. Did he remain a longtime on the ground before getting up? Not at all. God sees that he is faithful. God will give you also the graces as soon as you are faithful” (Retraites 1886 aux Oblats, Deuxième Instructions, “La conscience”). So, these were the words, in Fr. Brisson’s view, that made him an apostle, made him not only the bringer and proclaimer of Good News, but also made him good news.

It is in the celebration of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist that we can come to better understand what God wants and expects of us. For this we need a continual conversion, a continual searching of our hearts to see if they are in right relationship to God. For this we should take to heart the words of John Paul II: “The two sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance are very closely connected. Because the Eucharist makes present the redeeming sacrifice of the Cross, perpetuating it sacramentally, it naturally gives rise to a continuous need for conversion, for a personal response to the appeal made by Saint Paul to the Christians of Corinth: ‘We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ (2 Cor 5:20). If a Christian's conscience is burdened by serious sin, then the path of penance through the sacrament of Reconciliation becomes necessary for full participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice” (no 37).

These two sacraments enable us, like St. Paul, to say: “Lord, what shall I do?” These words create in us a loving responsiveness to the Good News that makes us a proclaimer of the Good News, as today’s Gospel calls us to do, by being good news to others.