

EXPERIENCE AND CONVERSION

By JACQUES PASQUIER

THE TITLE of this article could be misleading – or, at least be interpreted in several ways. At one time we spoke of a conversion-experience. Biographies of saints, or even more recently the charismatic movement, seem to view conversion as if it was something instantaneous, happening once for all, and reflected in the total transformation of the personality. However, my own experience, and the experience of those to whom I minister, have taught me that instantaneous conversion is not the norm. Conversion is rather a long process, a spiritual journey made up of failures and falls and, also, made of new beginnings, new discoveries, the experience at every moment of the fidelity of a God who calls us back to him, who changes our hearts of stone ‘into hearts of flesh’.¹

Instead of talking about ‘conversion-experience’, it seems more appropriate to say that there is in every human experience a call to conversion which involves a double movement of self-acceptance and a reaching beyond what we are now. These seemingly contradictory movements are in fact the centre of our faith conversion. I would like in the limits of this article to address myself to the nature and the process of this conversion, which could be looked at logically. But in fact conversion has neither harmony nor order. ‘Unless you die . . . unless you are reborn . . .’. Life and death have in fact no proportion in them; and it is the same with conversion.

The nature of conversion

Denis Vasse defines prayer as the passage from need to desire.² I suggest that it is the same with conversion. Need has to do with a taking hold of the object, and when the object is possessed, there is still a desire that can never be fully satisfied. In fact, the ‘object’ becomes a ‘subject’; it is the other, which cannot be reduced to an object.

¹ Ezech 36, 26.

² Vasse, Denis: *Le temps du désir* (Paris, 1973) pp 19–20.

At the basis of any religious experience, as in any relationship, there is the strong desire to possess, to reduce the other to an object which the person can assimilate to his own identity. Psychoanalysts tend to talk about the refusal to accept the trauma of the birth-separation, the refusal to accept the other as other. At the centre of conversion is the destruction of our own image of God, in order to allow God to be God for us: a God who not only is other than what we are, but is also other than what we want him to be. It is in the acceptance lived at the daily level of our experience that 'My ways are not your ways',³ that a person begins the long process of conversion.

Psychoanalysis shows that all our representations and images can be used as 'security blankets', which refuse to allow us to be in touch with reality, blocking it in a static vision. And our image of God is no exception to this. In fact the most difficult image to get rid of is our image of God; this is our last refuge. Our whole life needs to be submitted to this constant critical attitude which is not only the destruction of our own images but an openness to the reality, to the truth.

Faith is the readiness to enter into this long process of the destruction – one by one – of our false images of God, in order to allow God to be God. The history of Israel, like the history of the Church, can be understood as a continual process of destroying one idol after the other, in order that his people might grow in the knowledge and the experience of who God is. At the centre of conversion is the experience that no tabernacle can ever be built, no image of God can ever be possessed; but that God is always working at the limit, at the edges, stretching us beyond the today and leading us to learn how to trust and how to love, opening us to a constantly new reality, a new truth.

The passage from one image to another (unfortunately we always need an image – be it of ourselves or of God) and the constant call to leave behind the present image is the process of death and rebirth of which Jesus speaks to Nicodemus. In death, life is not taken away; it is radically transformed. In our experiences of powerlessness, of being stripped of our masks, we come to realize that new life is given, a new call, a new reality: 'No one can see the reign of God unless he is begotten from above'.⁴

This conversion can be concisely exemplified in an area which is

³ Isai 55, 9.

⁴ Jn 3, 4.

central to our life: the area of self-acceptance. Spiritual events take place in our psychic life, not outside of it; and the movement of conversion begins and ends in the acceptance of who we are. A few weeks ago *Time Magazine* had an article on some of the narcissistic trends of modern psychotherapy in the United States.⁵ It dealt with this need for self-knowledge which very often leads to self-centredness. But self-knowledge is not for self-centredness, it is for self-love; and this is not the same.

Genuine love and self-giving are impossible for someone who has not learned – sometimes through painful experience – that he can love himself without being threatened by the self he is discovering. Self-acceptance – this being at ease with the totality of oneself – is neither solely nor primarily a question of self-knowledge, a psychological process of clarification and self-understanding. At the basis of this self-acceptance is faith.

We would easily draw a picture which would give us the perfect image of what the person should do in order to become perfectly mature. It would be enough simply to make a list of all the 'I should's' or 'you should's' that we have heard since our childhood. But in fact when we begin to travel the long path of self-knowledge two things happen. First we become aware that there are many aspects of the self which cannot be understood or possessed. Wanting to answer all the questions about ourselves, being over-concerned about the meaning of our lives, can lead us to many compromises: into looking for self-worth in what we can achieve, into justifying our existence in the categories of material success, efficient techniques, and somehow identifying the building of the Kingdom with the building of our own image.

The second thing we discover is that we are not as good as we thought we were. We slowly come into contact with some of our needs, and our neurotic tendencies; we discover or unveil our need for security which makes us use God and others for our own satisfaction. We discover that we are too exclusive or possessive of others. We get in touch with all our fears: fear of loneliness, fear of loving or being loved, fear of our own sexuality. Yes, we are not the perfect person we thought we were or that we would like to be or that others think or expect us to be. Little by little our tiny store of self-confidence evaporates. No big games are possible; and even little games begin to appear too difficult for us. We begin to be honest

⁵ *Time Magazine* (October 23, 1976), p 57.

with ourselves; and nothing is more painful than this honesty.

Maybe conversion takes place at this point: being able to say 'yes' to who we are, to our limitations, to our possessiveness, to our selfishness, to our fears. A 'yes' which does not mean 'I will remain what I am'; but rather a 'yes' which means 'I recognize what I am now, I accept it, I am not other than what I am'.

In a certain sense, if holiness is a gift of God, we are asked to be opened to this gift. Can we see ourselves as being the gift of God to us? Or are we saying – in very subtle ways – that God has done a bad job with us? Can we see ourselves as being lovable and therefore loved by God and by others, not in spite of what we are, but because of what we are?

The movement of conversion which is a movement of faith – begins with one's acceptance of one's being. Mary Magdalen, the Prodigal Son 'who came to his senses',⁶ were first able to accept their limitations without any self-pity or any sense of despair.

The movement of self-acceptance is a movement of faith. Without faith man does not know how to sustain the weight of his existence. If the gift of being is a given, a gift becomes a gift only when it is freely received. It is in faith that we are called to respond in freedom to the gift of being. It is in faith that we say 'yes' to who we are: a self which we do not fully understand, a self limited and yet open to possibilities hardly dreamt of. We become free, free to make choices, not knowing where they will lead us. We are ready to abandon a static self-image in order to allow the self to become.

Because faith is openness, openness to a gift which is constantly being realized, we cannot rest at the level of the answers which we have or want to possess. Faith is to live not only with what we are today, but also with what we are called to be tomorrow. Self-acceptance is not static: it is not only acceptance of who we are, but also of what we are called to be, and, like any horizon of reality, it is always beyond the grasp of any apprehending capacity.

The process of conversion

It is always difficult to schematize a phenomenon which is not and cannot be described in logical terms. And yet in every conversion there is a pattern which cannot be avoided. I would describe it as the passage from one certitude (or set of values) to an openness to another reality. The key word is 'passage'. It evokes the breaking

⁶ Lk 15, 17.

through a wall of resistances in a free act. Two aspects in this process of conversion need further reflection: the aspect of resistance and the aspect of freedom.

Resistance

The process of conversion begins with a crisis point which can reach different depths of affectivity. But it is basically a sense of dissatisfaction, the feeling that whatever value-system we have at a given point is in contradiction with other tendencies in our own being: tendencies which are not clear, and yet which are deeply experienced at the level of our own being. Carl Rogers would talk of a certain sense of incongruency. It could be in the area of moral behaviour, religious behaviour or any other area of one's own life. This feeling of incongruency can come out of an experience: the experience of the death of a loved one, or of a long process of self-searching. But conversion, if it is to be true, will affect the totality of one's behaviour: one's relationship with God, with others and with oneself.

But conversion is possible only if, at the same time that we experience dissatisfaction or incongruency, we can also see alternatives or at least the possibilities for new ways: the crisis point without these alternatives leads to depression and, in the last analysis, to suicide.

The first resistance one experiences is in accepting the 'crisis point' or the dissatisfaction. The temptation is to deny it either through repression or sublimation. The refusal to deal with one's own depression, one's own sense of incongruency, through work, alcohol or any other form of escape-mechanism, is the refusal to accept the call to 'go beyond' the experience. It can immediately take many different forms – and for the sake of clarity I would like to underline different ways of expressing this refusal.

i) *Resistance to the reality of the present by living either in the past or in the future*

I am not referring to a chronological factor, but to a scheme of interpretation we use as we look at reality. How do we interpret the 'here and now' experience? We can look at it either in terms of the past – as we saw it and understood it in the past which allows us to know which responses should be given – or in terms of the future, as we would like to see it. Both past or futurist schemes of inter-

pretation are a means of escape, of self-protection, a refusal to listen to the newness of the here and now.

ii) *A refusal to accept the mystery of one's own existence*

I believe that one of our greatest temptations is wanting to understand all our tendencies, all our behaviour in the constant effort of trying to control and predict them. If the phenomenon of conversion is the passage from a known situation or value-system to an unknown value-system, such a passage is possible only as far as we are ready to accept the dimension of mystery in ourselves. Rudolf Otto speaks of the twofold aspect of the Sacred – and therefore of the mystery – in terms of *tremendum et fascinans*. The *tremendum* is so much part of this experience of the mystery that the fear makes us run away from the mystery we are to ourselves.

Maybe the best way to understand the process of conversion is by looking at the process of death and dying. Conversion is nothing else than that: death to a certain image of oneself, of God, death to a known reality: experiencing – much more than knowing – that somehow in the acceptance of this death a new life is emerging.

In her book *Death and dying*,⁷ Kübler Ross talks about different stages which take place in the process of dying. Maybe we could apply these different stages to the process of conversion.

The first stage is the stage of *denial*. We have already spoken of the different forms this denial could take. Following denial is the stage of *anger*. It is one of the most difficult stages to recognize and accept. Somehow we have not learned how to express our anger. Having a confused feeling that dying is part of the process of any spiritual journey we tend to rebel against it: 'Why me? Why is God doing that to me?' And yet we find ourselves extremely uncomfortable in trying to verbalize or articulate this anger. It creates a lot of guilt; anger – or the expression of it – is always seen as something bad. Maybe it could be helpful to look at the psalmist struggling and wrestling with God, articulating in very powerful language the feeling of having been abandoned, and resenting it.

This leads to the third stage: the *bargaining* stage: our bargaining with God can take many different forms, but somehow it is like entering into a dialogue with a God reduced to our own image. We sit together at the same table to see how many compromises we can find: 'If you give me this . . . I will give you that'. And yet in spite

⁷ Kübler Ross, Helena: *On Death and dying* (New York, 1969), pp 39-137.

of all this bargaining one becomes more and more aware of one's own helplessness: that God is not a God you bargain with, that God is God and beyond that nothing can be said. One comes into touch with one's own powerlessness and sinfulness. We come into touch with our finitude and limitedness or brokenness. I think it is when we come to this point that, in the experience of *helplessness*, we begin to realize that running from place to place, knocking on all the doors, is leading us nowhere. Maybe we can enter into the act of *acceptance*, ready for the act of surrender: the point where words are no longer necessary. In the experience of silence, the Word begins to speak to us. In the experience of darkness, the light begins to shine: very uncertain, very weak, yet becoming more and more real. What is left is not loneliness, but an emptiness, a vulnerability which is the beginning of conversion. We can let go because new life, which is no more greatness, but more littleness, is coming through, in the experience of dying. One has grown to understand the real Beatitude . . . 'Happy the poor', happy the one who has nothing, who can lay naked on the earth and taste it. Accepting our own powerlessness, we experience the power of God's love and life.

Maybe we can understand better now how the process of conversion is nothing else than the constant living out of the Paschal Mystery, lived at the level of the daily experience: the death to a part of oneself, that the real self – the 'God self' part in us – may grow. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians expresses this constant call: 'that your hidden selves may grow strong, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts'.⁸

Freedom

Somehow at the centre of the process of conversion is the experience of freedom. The act of surrender has to be a free act: God does not force himself upon us. The lying down, face in the dust, being able to utter 'your will be done' is not the result of a lost battle against an invisible and invincible God. Sometimes, listening to people describing their experience of conversion, one has the impression that the experience does not give too much room for personal choice, and is more an acting out of a compulsion than the result of a free choice.

And yet freedom is at the centre of this surrender. Maybe the aspect of freedom is clearer at certain stages than others. The break-

⁸ Eph 3, 17.

down of resistance is the first free act. We can deny and protect ourselves behind roles and façades, we can conform to all the expectations that others put on us and that we ourselves too willingly put on ourselves. To break down this resistance is the choice that one makes to stop 'running away', in order to look at the reality of one's experience, accepting that this experience is the *locus* in which God reveals himself, talks to us as individuals. We can accept or refuse this challenge. But more central to the process of conversion is the readiness to accept the consequences of our conversion and surrender. We all experience having uttered the words 'your will be done', but spend a great deal of energy denying these words in our daily behaviour.

A conversion is not only surrender: it is a choice for life. Acceptance of death does not make sense if it is not the choice for a new life: one made of challenges, of unknown and of possible and real failures, of rejections and communions. Can we own the consequences of our choices? Can I own the suffering which is part of life? A lot of suffering in our life has been and is unproductive for the simple reason that it is received passively – imposed on us. The choice for life – for new life – is the choice for suffering, trying to be authentic in our choices.

In a culture where everything is 'instant' we obviously look for the instant result; we find it difficult to accept that the spiritual journey in which each one of us is involved cannot be instantaneous. The temptation is to give up. Thomas Merton wrote in one of his letters about this temptation:

We are not converted only once in our lives, but many times; and this endless series of large and small conversions, inner revolutions, leads to our transformation in Christ. But while we may have the generosity to undergo one or two such upheavals, we cannot face the necessity of further and greater rendings of our inner self, without which we cannot finally become free.⁹

It is only 'in the fulness of time that God has spoken to us in his Son'.¹⁰ God reveals himself not only in the fulness of time but also in the slowness of time, in our sinfulness and forgiveness, in our struggles and our defeats, in our deserts and in our land of milk and

⁹ Merton, Thomas: letter published in *Information Catholiques Internationales* (April, 1973, back cover).

¹⁰ Heb 1, 2.

honey. He reveals himself as a God of Covenant, a God who cannot be known or possessed, but a God who can be trusted because he is Father: he allows each one of us to experience him as a Father of love.

Conversion is the abandonment of our own securities. To allow God to be God for us is accepting that we cannot be 'the man with all the answers', but that we are ready to become 'the pilgrim with questions'.¹¹

¹¹ Sheehy, Gail: *Passages* (New York, 1976).