

# COPING WITH CONVERSION

By DAVID FORRESTER

IN A RECENT publication entitled *Conversion* by Patrick Purnell S.J., there are fifty-three different words or phrases descriptive of the process known as conversion. They range from well-known and frequently used expressions such as 'change of heart' or *metanoia* and 'self-surrender' to words like 'conscientization'. All of them, as does the book by A. J. Krailsheimer also called *Conversion* and published in 1980, serve to illustrate just how widely we interpret the term 'conversion'. Even so, as Krailsheimer points out, whereas Christianity does not have a monopoly on converts, and the call to 'forsake all and follow me' can be paralleled in most other world religions and even in secular creeds such as marxism, the notion of responding to the call in terms of a strictly personal relationship with a master who is himself God and man seems to be unique to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This point cannot be sufficiently emphasized. Whether one is speaking of conversion to Christianity or to full ecclesial communion with the Catholic Church, certain features are common and fundamental to both.

Before the Second Vatican Council all of us were familiar with those anthologies of personal accounts of well-known people's conversions to the catholic faith (what today among educationalists and catechists would be called a 'faith story'), which were often bound in series with an overall title such as 'My journey to Rome' and so on. The majority of such accounts gave intellectual reasons why their writers had finally come to embrace Roman Catholicism; most at least mentioned, if they did not deal at length with, the six months of quite rigorous instruction they received before being accepted into the Church. In other words, as in more than a few areas of the Church's life and practice before the Second Vatican Council, great importance was attached to the learning and acquisition of truth expressed in formal dogmatic propositions and statements. The faith was not as yet sufficiently viewed as a living revelation from a personal God to which man was invited to respond.

Furthermore, in addition to this emphasis on the faith being expressed in intellectual terms and the consequent obscuring of man's potential relationship to become an adopted son of God, there was a tendency, at least among a certain type of convert, to talk of entering the Catholic Church for reasons which were ultimately to prove insufficient. When one reads the accounts of converts in the 1940s and 1950s it is clear that more than a few of their authors were seeking a harbour of safety and security from the winds of change sweeping through society. Others felt that they needed either external public disciplines to prevent them leading chaotic private lives or a rational explanation of the world around them and all that occurred in it. A few felt drawn by aesthetics and history. Of their number Evelyn Waugh might be regarded as typical. Of his own conversion Waugh wrote in 1949:

England was Catholic for nine hundred years, then Protestant for three hundred, then agnostic for a century. The Catholic structure still lies lightly buried beneath every phase of English life; history, topography, law, archaeology everywhere reveal Catholic origins. Foreign travel anywhere reveals the local, temporary character of the heresies and schisms and the universal, eternal character of the Church. . . . It only remained to examine the historical and philosophic grounds for supposing the Christian revelation to be genuine. I was fortunate enough to be introduced to a brilliant and holy priest who undertook to prove this to me, and so on firm intellectual conviction but with little emotion I was admitted into the Church.<sup>2</sup>

The triumphalist Church of pre-Vatican II times supplied most of the needs of the converts described above, and it is small wonder that many from those days are today highly critical of or disillusioned by what has occurred since the Council. If Jesus Christ the person, rather than the institutional Church, had been their rock, they would not now be so unhappy.

On the other hand and right at the very beginning of Augustine's classic *Confessions*, which contain the account of his conversion to Christianity, there occur the famous words 'Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee'. Not only does this expression root his conversion in the context of a highly personal encounter with a living God, but it makes it clear that authentic conversion is never a static phenomenon. Rather it is something

both with roots in the past and more developments to come in the future. As Peter Brown, Augustine's outstanding biographer remarks: 'For Augustine conversion (by the time he came to write the *Confessions*) was no longer enough. . . . The "harbour" of the convert was still troubled by storms'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Augustine had come to realize that his conversion to Christianity was to be a continuous process this side of the grave; the chief difference after the initial dramatic conversion event was that it henceforth continued within the Church.

The recovery of this classic idea of conversion as unending rather than static has been due not only to the Vatican II conception of revelation as something requiring a personal response as well as intellectual assent. It has been due too to lessons learnt from such movements as ecumenism and to a degree from the charismatic renewal.

Undoubtedly ecumenical contacts since Vatican II account for a sharing or pooling of ideas concerning personal conversion, especially conversion from conventional practice of the faith to a more ardent embracing and spreading of the faith to others. It has become difficult at times indeed, especially when dealing with Catholics in the charismatic renewal, to differentiate their ideas on conversion from those traditionally associated with Protestantism. It is probable for example that few Catholics today would find anything objectionable in the views on conversion of the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, even though they would consider his views on the Church and the sacraments to be inadequate.

Conversion with him (Booth) was the divine focus revealing all thoughts and all things in their absolute perspective. . . . He held . . . that directly a soul is converted — that is to say, directly the spirit of a man looks upon earthly life with the sure and certain knowledge that a living God exists, and that by faith in Christ he is brought into harmony with that God — temptation loses its power and the soul is impelled towards holiness.<sup>4</sup>

This personal awareness of Jesus as Lord is something which charismatic Christians of all denominations share, so it is not surprising that in their worship together they have found other things in common. The chief of these flows inevitably from an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ as 'my' personal Saviour. It is a recognition that conversion means being transformed by the basic

gospel values, pre-eminently the mystery of life — death — resurrection, folly-wisdom, lose to find, expressed uniquely in the paschal mystery through which mankind is redeemed.

It is what occurs after the initial conversion experience, however, that is all important; it is then that one has the choice of continuing to co-operate with God's grace and to develop the new relationship with Jesus Christ or allow it to atrophy through, for example, complacency, laziness and sometimes fear of what more might be demanded of one by Christ. Either one follows Augustine's example and accepts that one's heart will always be restless and searching, albeit now converted to Christ, or one becomes lethargic and sinks back into the ranks of the conventional and supposedly safe christian way of life. It is at this point that encouragement from others in the christian community is vital.

### *Summary*

At this point it might be considered useful to summarize what has been said so far.

First, one needs to remember that authentic conversion, whether to Christianity or to full communion with the Catholic Church, must include a personal commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. It is not enough simply to have given intellectual assent to a body of doctrine.

Secondly, one needs to appreciate that conversion is an on-going process, rarely totally completed before death and requiring frequent renewal. Genuine conversion matures and develops with time. For this to be properly understood it is important that the convert receive regular spiritual direction not only before but for some time after he has embraced the faith.

Finally, the convert must be given every encouragement and facility to deepen and extend his or her faith within the framework of the Church, the Body of Christ. To cerebral knowledge of the latter must now be added experience of community and brotherhood, especially through the practice of daily and indeed continuous prayer, spiritual reading and regular reception of the sacraments. Without these, participation in active parish life or engagement in the ministries will differ little from secular community service. Through grace, however, the process of conversion will persist and life will take on the characteristics of a pilgrimage described so effectively in the second verse of John Henry Newman's famous hymn 'Lead Kindly Light'.

I was not ever thus,  
nor prayed that thou  
shouldst lead me on;  
I loved to choose  
and see my path; but now  
lead thou me on.  
I loved the garish day,  
and, spite of fears,  
pride ruled my will;  
remember not past years.

Within this verse virtually all the elements of conversion are present either explicitly or through implication. The recognition of past sin, the implied understanding that the writer had now changed through no merit of his own, and that now he is 'justified' are the classic elements of conversion. These same features can be found in characters right across the ecumenical board, whether one is examining the lives of such diverse people as Paul, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola, Charles de Foucauld, John Bunyan, Luther and William Booth, to name just a handful. The purpose of the next section is to show precisely how this is so.

#### *A case study of a conversion*

For many years now I have known a man aged about fifty, the tenor of whose life is best described as one of searching. As a baby he was baptized an Anglican, but his earliest recollections of receiving religious instructions were of those he obtained at Sunday school classes in the local branch of the Salvation Army. Indeed, until he was about seven, those instances of religion which left their deepest mark on him were the sight of his mother kneeling by her bed each night to say her prayers, and the teaching he received on Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan at the Salvation Army. At a very tender age, then, the importance of both prayer and love of neighbour were impressed upon him. He had little or no experience or knowledge of the Church and of the sacraments.

Then at the age of nine, without any prior warning or consultation as to his feelings on the matter, he was sent four hundred miles away from home to a military boarding school for the next nine years. Military discipline, martial law and language and customs were the ethos in which he grew to manhood. He learnt how to drill, wear an army uniform correctly, and how to handle a

variety of weapons. Church parade on Sunday mornings and the school chaplain reading aloud on Sunday evenings excerpts from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's progress* are his chief recollection of organized religion. And yet he never forgot the memory of his mother at prayer or what the Salvationists had taught him about the paramount importance of love of neighbour. So strong were these recollections at times that he sometimes felt as though the harsh military atmosphere in which he lived was unreal; behind the everyday world of kit inspections, route marches and the study of regimental history was the real world of good triumphing over evil.

One day, not long after settling into the routine of military school life, the young boy was walking alone on the sands by the sea close to where the school was situated. Admittedly the setting was dramatic in the sense that before him stretched the open seas of the Atlantic and behind him high cliffs and seemingly endless miles of sand dunes, but suddenly he became oblivious to everything around him; for a period of time (he has no means of knowing how long), the boy knew himself to be utterly in the very presence of God himself. Furthermore, he knew deep within himself that he would always — if he so chose — be conscious of the presence of God wherever he happened to be. Forty years later this continues to be the case. From time to time, particularly in times of crisis and of seeking renewal, he pays a visit to the beach where as a boy he was converted to experiencing the presence of God.

At the time it occurred the boy found nothing strange about his conversion. He told no one about it, chiefly because it was precious to him. This incidentally tells us much about the natural way that children so often accept the supernatural, whereas later as adults they might find such things embarrassing. The boy simply incorporated the experience into his devotional life, now focusing his prayers on the Person he had encountered on the beach and whom he identified as Christ. Apart from being regarded henceforth as a boy who took religion seriously, he was, outwardly at least, little different from his fellow school boys. It was gradually assumed by staff and pupils that one day he would be a priest in the established Church.

These comfortable assumptions were then rudely shattered when the boy was seventeen, for it was then that he became aware experientially, as distinct from in theory, of the Catholic Church. He started attending Mass, studying Catholic literature and being attracted especially by the fact that Catholicism seemed to impinge

on every aspect and every moment of its adherents' lives; it was not a Sunday-only religion.

The headmaster of the military school and the young man's parents were bitterly hostile to this latest development. They interpreted it as an outbreak of what they termed 'roman fever', not for one moment suspecting it to be a further development of the youth's initial conversion on the beach. Moreover, such was the strength of their opposition, that the young man was unable to become a Catholic until after he had graduated from university and was able to maintain himself financially.

In the event he entered the Catholic Church not long after becoming a school master, viewing it as a deepening of his original encounter with Jesus Christ. By then too the Vatican Council had taken place and faith as man's response to revelation was being widely taught.

At least on one point the man's parents were proved right. Once their son had become a Catholic it was next to no time before he felt called to offer himself for the catholic priesthood. The man's parish priest nevertheless had the wisdom to advise him to wait for at least two years. During this time he could become part of the parish community or in other words experience the communal aspect of the faith. In addition and equally as important he would participate in the sacraments for the first time. A short time later he also profited from the spiritual direction of a very holy and discerning priest who guided his prayer life. It was this same priest who enabled him to see the absolute necessity of further developing the relationship with the person of Christ. In so many ways then the process of conversion, begun so many years before, continued and deepened.

Later, at the seminary, when the man reached the diaconate in his path of training for the priesthood, he experienced a second conversion which left as indelible an impression on him as the first. This time it was of the type mentioned in mystical theology and by such reliable guides as Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, which is marked by a passive purgation of the senses and a quickening of all one's insights into the realities lying behind human existence. He speaks of the occasion as one granted him through no merit of his own and as one akin to being lifted out of himself. His great sadness is that he lacked the courage to persist; he knew that even after this second conversion a third is necessary, but before that can occur it is necessary usually to undergo 'the dark night of the soul'. From that he shied and continues to shy away.

By now the man, who long ago as a solitary child experienced conversion on an atlantic beach and encountered the person of Christ, has been a diocesan priest working in parish communities for over a decade. His commitment to Christ is now unthinkable outside a community context. He considers it unlikely that God will not call him, if he is not already calling him, to a further deepening of his attachment to Christ. In this he is exactly like all Christians who have ever undergone conversion. In the meantime he simply struggles to make Newman's words from 'Lead Kindly Light' his own:

Keep thou my feet;  
I do not ask to see  
the distant scene;  
one step enough for me.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Krailsheimer, A. J.: *Conversion* (SCM, 1980), p 1.

<sup>2</sup> Waugh, Evelyn: 'Come inside', in *The road to Damascus*, edited by J. A. O'Brien (1949), vol 1, p 11.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Peter: *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 1967), p 177.

<sup>4</sup> Begbie, H.: *Life of William Booth* (London, 1920), vol 1, p 77.