

THE NATURE OF CONVERSION

By PATRICK PURNELL

THE *Rite of christian initiation for adults* (RCIA) was published by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship in 1972.¹ It is only gradually becoming known and used in the U.K. The importance of the document lies not only in its presentation of a comprehensive liturgical initiation into the Church centred upon the local eucharistic community, but also in what it says and implies about the nature of conversion.

The document is about people, who 'freely and knowingly seek the living God', who 'enter the path of faith and conversion' (1), and whose 'initiation takes place step by step in the midst of the community of the faithful' (4). It allows that this 'spiritual journey' will vary 'according to the many forms of God's grace, the free co-operation of the individuals, the action of the Church, and circumstances of time and place' (5). It is even possible that a person may die before he receives the sacraments of initiation in which case, as a catechumen, he should be given christian burial (18).

The imagery of the journey is older than Christianity: the individual is to grasp his pilgrim staff and journey to the 'everlasting hills': he is to search for the living God. The journey is a conversion; it is a leaving behind, a forsaking of one's own home, one's own possessions (even if these are but a few nets and a boat), one's security, one's attachments and, in place of one's previous anchorage, to put out into the open sea knowing that any future moorings will be only of a temporary nature. Conversion is a radical turnabout and, although this appears to occur almost instantaneously in some individual cases, for most people the metaphor of the long, slow, halting pilgrimage is a more apt description.

Conversion is a process, the goal of which is the possession of the fulness of the kingdom of God. It is a process initiated by God: he is present in the life of every single human individual from the very first moment of a person's existence not only as the creator and preserver of life but also as saviour. Creation is God's act of sharing himself with what he creates. He desires to be with the children of men. He is present as saviour within the whole of his creation to

bring each piece of his handiwork to the fulness of its being. This salvific presence within man means that God is within each one so that each may reach the fulness of human-ness, which involves a deep personal relationship with God and with his fellow human beings. God is always in a communion of love with man: conversion is the process through which man comes to recognize and respond to this loving presence. 'You were there and I did not know it'.

It is supremely important for the preacher of the gospel to be aware of this truth: his function is not to give God to his hearers but to help them respond to God already present within them: his task is not to create a relationship but to put people in touch with a relationship which on God's part already exists. The immediate consequences of this truth challenge the preacher to clear his mind of preconceived notions of the forms of how God makes his salvific presence felt within each individual: he cannot take the form of his own experiences as the norm, though these experiences may guide him in the way he proceeds. He must learn how to discern God's presence in ways that may appear unorthodox to the more usual religious expressions with which he may be accustomed. It is also a consequence of this truth that when he discovers a way of talking about the christian revelation in a meaningful way he will find an echo in the heart of his listener: in fact hearing this echo is a sign that he had discovered the right approach.

Conversion is a process; a journey begun in response to a God who calls everyone from within the 'heart' of each. It is this 'calling' which is the dynamic of the conversion-experience and because this calling is universal we need to speak of it in a way that can be understood universally; we need to overcome the confines of a specifically religious language. It seems to me that one approach is to look at the way everybody needs to make sense of his life: his 'reason for living': what makes the person 'tick'? Many people are probably not able to give any coherent answer to this question, though with a little help they may well be able to do so. The replies will cover a wide spectrum of human motivation from an instinctual and unreflective grasp of life, through a fierce desire for self-expression and self-assertion to an altruism which sees the good of others as a supreme ideal. These motives translate themselves into many different expressions, for example, fear of death and diminishment, or wanting power, success and money, or finding comfort in friends and family, or seeking the fulfilment of some ideal or a mixture of many: but whatever the circumstances are, each person walking on the face of the earth has a

reason for being alive. This reason belongs to the 'heart' where God dwells and calls. In this context the 'heart' is that complex network of thought, feeling and determination which characterizes the human being, and issues in the person's ability to think, to hope, to want, to feel, to desire, to imagine, to dream, to love, to hate, to plan. . . . It is somewhere within this inner world that an individual finds meaning for clinging to life which we, with the sophistication of our religious language, describe as religious faith, or, at least, as potential (or primordial) faith. The point I am trying to make is this: that the faith which St Paul is talking about when he says ' . . . I live in faith: faith in the son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake' (Gal 2,20) is that which makes sense for him of his life in this world (his reason for living) while the man who makes sense of his life through a pursuit of self-aggrandizement with no reference to a transcendent has that as his reason: the latter could be converted to the former. God is at work in both because he is love. Put in this way the question of conversion is a question of shifting the meaning of one's life in response to a God who calls through Christ or, expressing this in specifically christian language, the shift from making oneself the centre of one's love to 'loving as Jesus loved'. This is the journey which every single human being is called to venture upon.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes of the light shed by the Good News: it 'has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ' (4,6) and in Galatians he writes; 'I live not now with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me' (2,20). The late Alan Dale, a methodist minister and writer who transliterated parts of Paul's letters for children, puts into Paul's mouth by way of introduction to these passages: 'Let me begin by saying what Jesus means to me', and later: 'I can only describe my experience as a friend of Jesus in this way. . . .' Alan Dale wants us to remember that Paul is preaching by way of handing on an experience: 'My own experience of Jesus'. He wants his hearers to share his experience of that which makes his life so rich and worthwhile. Jesus Christ, as Lord, was his interpreter of human existence. 'In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. . . . The Word was made flesh, he lived among us' (Jn 1,1 and 1,14). The Word is the revelation, the meaning, of the unseen God. 'If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples' (Jn 8,31): that is, if you live within my revelation, accept my understanding of life, making my meaning

your own, you will be my disciples. The Word is Meaning: Meaning became flesh.

The would-be convert knocks at the door of the Church asking 'Have you got the meaning of life?' Implied in this question is a loss of meaning and a searching: 'Life no longer makes sense for me': a feeling of dissatisfaction, unease, a loss of direction. The response to this question, if it is to find an echo in the enquirer's heart, is 'That is what makes sense of my life': the pauline 'My experience of Jesus' — the fruit of the inner world: 'my story'. The RCIA speaks of the faithful:

making known to the world the message of Christ through their words and deeds and communicating his grace. Therefore, they will be ready to open up the spirit of the christian community to the candidates, to invite them into their families, to engage them in private conversation, and to invite them to some community gatherings (41,1).

The fitting reply to one seeking a new meaning is to tell him your meaning — your experience of how you make sense of life through Jesus Christ: this is the grace offered to the would-be convert.

The Christian telling his story is recounting his own salvation story: he is speaking of how God has dealt with him in the past and is continuing to do so. He speaks not only from his own experiential viewpoint but also as a member of a distinct community with a history and a tradition. His salvation story is part of the larger story of the Church: his own salvation is bound up with that of the whole community which colours and gives an ecclesial dimension to his faith.

The would-be convert responds, in his turn, to the Christian's story by telling his own tale and how it comes about that he is now seeking another meaning for his life. As he speaks so the Christian listens: and as the Christian listens he discerns the action of God in this life being set out before him. He discerns out of a gospel mind-set and out of a particular ecclesial tradition. As he discerns so he begins to interpret and name in the language of the community what God has done and is doing for this person. He challenges him with the paradoxical values of the gospel and above all with the death-resurrection pattern of human existence. Somewhere in the midst of this interchange comes what the Rite describes as, the 'initial conversion' (6a). This is the moment when the would-be convert

acknowledges the God of the Christian as his God and prayer haltingly begins.

The Rite with good reason speaks of this preliminary step as an initial conversion. Now, depending on one's understanding of conversion, one can either speak of a whole series of conversions following on the initial one or speak of a series of steps or stages in one long conversion process and within each step or stage different degrees or ways of acceptance. James Dunning in *New wine: new wineskins* speaks of a series of conversions:

- Affective:* coming to terms with one's inner life: the ability to be in touch with one's feelings so as to use them as a means of personal development.
- Intellectual:* coming to be aware of knowledge not simply as facts but as meaning for living.
- Religious:* coming to understand life not as a series of events and problems following one upon another, but to be in touch with life as something much greater than its individual pieces; moving the individual to look beyond the immediacy of the present: accepting life as something 'given' and as mystery.
- Moral:* moving from satisfaction to value as a criterion of choices: the source of the commitment is the intrinsic value of what is to be done not simply because it gives pleasure. Moral conversion includes a value perspective of law which steps beyond legalism.
- Theistic:* involves the continual purification of one's image of God: forsaking God to find God.
- Christian:* involves the deepening of one's personal relationship to Christ — the putting on of Christ: he is not just an historical figure, he is God's love for 'me' made flesh — 'my' personal saviour.
- Ecclesial:* coming to understand the Church not as an institution 'out there' but as a Body of which 'I' am a member: the Church is not a 'they' but a 'we'.

The above 'conversions' characterize something of what goes on in the interchange between the would-be convert and the Christian (and the community). These 'conversions' are not to be thought of as

logically following one after the other nor do they necessarily take place prior to the sacraments of initiation: rather they map out the kind of journey which the would-be convert enters upon and on which he will meet his fellow Christians.

We have so far attempted to say something about the dynamic of the interchange between the would-be convert and the Christian representing the Church. Now it is important to place it in its liturgical setting.

Stage 1: *Pre-catechumenate*

The would-be convert inquires: 'Have you the meaning of life?' He is introduced to the parish community of hospitality — a time for sharing stories and discussing questions: great emphasis is placed on 'welcome':

Stage 2: *The catechumenate*

The would-be convert enters the catechumenate by celebrating the *Rite of becoming a catechumen*. This is a time of seeking for a heart-knowledge of the spiritual life and christian teaching. Progress through the catechumenate is marked by the *Rite of election* which celebrates God's choice of his people: and by the *Exorcisms* which celebrate God's act of freeing and cleansing the candidate from evil and sin. The Lent immediately preceding the reception of the sacraments of initiation is called the period of *Purification and enlightenment* and is marked by the *Scrutinies* and the *Presentations* (presentation of the Creed and the Our Father). This latter period is a more intense time of prayer and catechesis.

Stage 3: The celebration of baptism, confirmation and eucharist at Easter.

Stage 4: *The post-baptismal catechesis/mystagogia*. This period from Easter to Pentecost is described as a sacramental catechesis in that the new dimension of regularly joining in the celebration of the eucharist brings added depths to understanding the word of God, and helps prayer to deepen and the growth of the spiritual life to develop.

The pre-catechumenate should be distinguished by the welcome it gives to the would-be convert. He is to be made feel that he is genuinely wanted by the church community and that within it he can find a home. While every member of the local parish should be

welcoming, a small group is delegated to act as a community of hospitality.

Each stage of the candidate's journey towards the sacraments of initiation is marked by a liturgy which celebrates the candidate's progress in the midst of the local community. These celebrations are extremely important; they are the liturgical conscientization of the growth of the Body of Christ and they involve the christian community in the progress of the would-be convert for their mutual advantage. The Rite does not lay down any time scale for the process; each person is to be allowed to grow and develop in his own way with the help of his sponsor. The latter may be a friend of the candidate and he is to be officially delegated by the community. The Rite spells out his duties:

it is his responsibility to show the catechumen in a friendly way the place of the gospel in his own life and in society, to help him in doubts and anxieties, to give public testimony for him and to watch over the progress of his baptismal life (43).

The Rite describes a spiritual direction relationship and envisages it continuing after the candidate has been baptized.

The Rite gives due place to the catechist who during the catechumenate is charged with the formal instruction of the candidate. This instruction is woven into the would-be convert's search and responds to the questions he asks and the story he tells. It is the christian interpretation of this story in the light of the gospel.

Clearly, the candidate needs to know about the Church, its values and its doctrinal teaching; however, he should be introduced slowly into these areas, knowing that this is but the beginning of a life-long process of instruction and formation and, moreover, all this should be done in a way which complements his experience. This is a genuine catechesis and involves the interplay of three stories: the story of how God acts in the life of the Christian who meets and welcomes the candidate, in this case, the catechist; the story of the would-be convert and the story of the community (that of the Church) which includes the 'teaching' handed down from one generation to the next. Throughout the process the would-be convert is encouraged to take part in the apostolate: 'to work actively with others to spread the gospel and build up the Church by the testimony of their lives and the profession of their faith' (19,4). The sacraments of initiation underscore the vocation and mission of the Christian: he is to think of himself as 'one who is sent'.

The majority of those who seek admission to the Church today have been baptized. Among these people a great number will come as a result of marrying a Catholic: others will come who, although baptized into different ecclesial communities, have never practised and now seek a new and deeper commitment: with these may be numbered baptized Catholics who also have not practised and wish to renew themselves. This quite considerable group may be spoken of as the 'unchurched'. The RCIA, however, is about people receiving the sacraments of initiation and is, therefore, not about those who are baptized even if they have remained, by and large, unchurched. Nevertheless, the RCIA has much to teach us about the 'unchurched'. It contains, for example, a section on how to deal with adults who though baptized as infants have never received any catechetical formation (chapter 4). Nevertheless, more pertinently, the RCIA's whole emphasis on meeting people's needs is crucial in dealing with the unchurched. It may come about, for example, that an Anglican will find his way back to his own communion.

The unchurched present a challenge within our own ecclesial community. Many are longing to find a way of making sense of their lives within some kind of christian framework but are threatened by what they feel the Church would demand of them. We need to re-emphasize the serving mission of the Church. It exists primarily to help people find meaning for their lives through Christ and so reach the fulness of their human-ness in the kingdom. The RCIA could offer us a model on which to base a liturgical approach, which is both evangelical and catechetical, to the unchurched: such an approach would make hospitality its touchstone, would use people's own stories of God's saving love in order to help them discover the God for whom they are looking within their own hearts and thus meet their needs; it would emphasize that God makes no demands for which he does not also give the grace to respond; and this model would develop its own liturgical celebrations to mark the stages of their developing spiritual life. This kind of approach would echo the compassion of the shepherd who sympathizes with our weakness when we stumble under religious burdens and become uneasy under yokes that do not fit.

NOTE

¹ Figures in brackets in the text of the article refer to *Rite of christian initiation for adults* (Congregation of Divine worship, 1972). Also *Study edition* (CTS, London, 1976).

HELPFUL READING

For the philosophical basis of the *Rite of christian initiation for adults*:

Evangelization in the modern world — Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI (CTS, London);

This is gospel — a summary of *Evangelii nuntiandi* by Robert Bogan (CTS, London);

Evangelization in the modern world — a summary of *Evangelii nuntiandi* available from the Office for Evangelization, 120 West Heath Road, London, NW3 7TY;

Rite of christian initiation for adults (CTS, London).

For the historical background to the catechumenate:

A history of the catechumenate: the first six centuries by Michel Dujarier (Sadlier, New York);
The rites of christian initiation: historical and pastoral reflections by Michel Dujarier (Sadlier, New York);

Christian initiation: baptism in the medieval west — A study in the disintegration of the primitive rite of initiation by J. D. C. Fisher (SPCK, London).

Practical guides to the RCIA:

A parish guide to adult initiation by Kenneth Boyack CSP (Paulist Press, New York);

A journey in faith: An experience of the catechumenate by Raymond B. Kemp (Sadlier, New York);

Welcome: an adult education program based on RCIA by Gary Timmons (Paulist Press, New York);

Welcoming the new Catholic by Ron Lewinski (Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago);

Guide for sponsors by Ron Lewinski (Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago).

Implications of the RCIA:

Becoming a catholic Christian; a symposium on christian initiation organized and directed by Christianne Brusselmans, general editor William J. Reedy (Sadlier, New York);

New wine: new wineskins by James B. Dunning (Sadlier, New York);

Christian initiation resources — a quarterly packet of pertinent materials for implementing the new Rite of christian initiation and restoring the catechumenate to a central position in parish life. James B. Dunning and William J. Reedy, eds (Sadlier, New York).