

# THE DISCOVERY OF THE ASTONISHING IN THE COMMON

## The process of conversion

By NANCY BURKIN

CHRISTIAN RITUAL uses the ordinary to express the extraordinary—the common to point to the astonishing. In the rite of the Eucharist the act of eating and drinking simple bread and wine is the sign of dining with the risen Saviour, of the oneness of the Church with its Lord and with one another. At Baptism/Confirmation<sup>1</sup> we experience the coolness and refreshing flow of water, a most common element, as well as the regal anointing with the sacred chrism, made from an oil that would ordinarily be used for soothing or cooking. In all Christian ritual we focus on a plebeian action with simple elements and experience the elegance of the presence and interaction of God. We focus on the ordinary and experience the extraordinary.

As part of our tradition of ritual, the Christian initiation of adults does the same: it focuses on the ordinary in order to celebrate the extraordinary; it challenges all of us who participate in it to experience the astonishing in that which is thought to be common. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, however, does this formally in a more extensive way than do the sacramental rituals of Eucharist or Baptism.<sup>2</sup> It begins not with the entrance hymn or an opening prayer but with the spiritual journey of adults who ‘after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed . . . seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion . . .’<sup>3</sup> The RCIA is the celebration of a journey—the affirmation of a gradual process that begins with the first hearing of the Good News of Jesus Christ in one’s life and continues as that message becomes more intense and accepted as a way of life.

This inclusive quality of the RCIA, embracing the life lived before the celebration of the sacraments of initiation and the life that follows, points clearly to the ‘ordinary’ of the rite: the lived

experience of human persons. The food and drink of the RCIA are the human story, the life experiences of an ordinary person. In these God is seen as acting, confronting, challenging and eventually affecting the direction and purpose of one's life journey. The ordinary of day-to-day living includes events such as acquiring a new job or losing an old one; meeting the 'right' person; dealing with a wayward teenager; facing the death of a loved one; receiving a letter from a long absent friend; learning that you are seriously ill; or simply sharing neighbourhood news with a good friend on the other side of the backyard fence. Using the ordinary life stories of ordinary people, the RCIA celebrates the extraordinary. It affirms that the astonishing is found in common day-to-day experiences for it is there that God acts, challenges, comforts, is. In traditional religious terms, the ability to acknowledge the presence of God in ordinary life is faith; allowing such an acknowledgement to affect one's consequent way of living is conversion.

Catechetical methods have rightly insisted that reflecting on the ordinary use of bread, wine, water and oil as well as on the human practices of eating and drinking, watering a plant, lubricating tired muscles, and even the taking of a refreshing shower on a hot day intensifies our understanding of the sacraments. It should be of no surprise then that we begin our investigation of conversion in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults with a reflection on ordinary human experiences, seeing how events in that experience are or can be conversion events. In that reflection we will see that conversion is not a once and for all event; rather, we will see it as process.

### *Process*

Process, as defined by Webster, is a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result. When speaking of human experience Webster's definition lacks colour and vitality. Process, from a right brained standpoint, is 'the intricate mosaic of a Persian rug, the multi-coloured flecks of a Donegal tweed, . . . the opening of a rose, the growing of a kitten, the nine months of pregnancy'.<sup>4</sup> Process by nature is continual: journeying, not arriving; questioning, not answering; searching, not finding. Process is coming to understanding, slowly awakening, seeing more clearly but not face to face. Conversion, as process, is a series of events in the life of a person (or a group of persons) of faith.<sup>5</sup> It is the becoming of the faithfilled person—the evolving

of the dedicated religious woman or man. Conversion is the process of growth, of evolution; it is continual creation. We are always in the conversion process. It is a life-long, integral part of the faith journey of every person. As Karl Rahner states:

(Conversion) is the sober realization that every conversion is only a beginning and that the rest of daily fidelity, the conversion which can only be carried out in a whole lifetime, has still to come.<sup>6</sup>

Through the various human events that occur as part of the life experiences of people of faith, we, like the Hebrews of old, both turn from evil to good and/or intensify our relationship with God. It is these events that we need to examine in order to understand better conversion as process.

#### *Events in the conversion process*

Every event in human experience, I believe, is composed of three distinct yet inseparable, dependent parts: the preparation, the critical point and the resultant life. Mark Searle, who compares a conversion event to a story, calls these three components 'setting out', 'adventure of crisis' and the 'return'.<sup>7</sup> Because of the relation and interdependence of the three components of the conversion event, it is best if we begin an examination of them by consideration of the 'critical point' first.

The critical point, the second aspect of the conversion event, demands movement. As Searle describes it, crisis refers to a turning point, a time of change, as well as a moment of anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Critical points arise out of the unique lives of each individual and are defined as such only by those who experience them as such. What may be a critical point for one may not be for another. A critical point is an experience that causes a change of direction, a new way of seeing; it is that which causes movement from one horizon to another, as Lonergan would describe it.<sup>9</sup> Though called 'points', these critical points may be of a long duration or may simply last a few minutes. To refer to them as points is to emphasize that they mark a change of direction or a change of posture. Examples of critical points range from the death of a parent or marriage to the arrival of a letter or a chance remark. Directly proportional to the strength of impact a critical point makes in one's life is the quality of response that the critical point demands. A major critical point can evoke a major change of vision, a major experience of

upheaval. A minor critical point may call forth less panic, a smaller change in perspective.

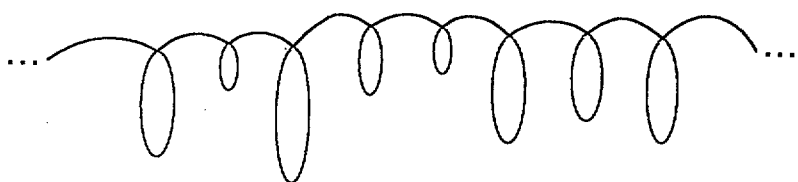
The critical point involves dying. Once a critical point has passed, things are not the way they were before; life may take on new meanings; knowledge of God may be refined; the gospel may become more pertinent to one's life. One's sense of oneself may differ; life's purpose may be clearer. To pass successfully through the critical point into the final element of the conversion event, the resultant life, means that one has to let go of past perceptions; one has to die to previously held convictions; one has to abandon the security of knowing in order to move into knowing more deeply.

This change of perception, of the way of knowing oneself and God, provides the foundation for that which follows the critical point, the resultant life. During this aspect of the conversion event, a person lives out of the experience of the critical point. One may change his/her life drastically or may change it only slightly but change has the potential to happen. It is in this period that resurrection to new life occurs. Knowledge of oneself as well as of God has taken on a new dimension. This step in the faith journey of life, this moment in the evolution of one's being into the fullness of life in Jesus Christ, is a continuation of the creation process.

The conversion process, however, does not end there. The resultant life of a past conversion event is the preparation time of future conversion events. During the time that one lives out of a vision of life and God's presence in it as a result of a past critical point, one is also paving the way for the next critical point in life. During this time s/he affirms a renewed faith, tests out convictions or simply rests in the more intense knowledge of God that s/he possesses. The way one has lived through a critical point and moved into a meaningful consequent life determines how one will approach the next critical point in one's life. Because no one lives in isolation, particularly one who strives to live the Christian life, sharing new insights or questions that are in need of resolving as a result of the experience of a critical point with others is fundamental to the process. Such sharing lends itself to discernment and impacts on the way that one moves one's resultant life into the preparation aspect of a conversion event.

An integral part of the conversion event is reflection. Reflection ordinarily occurs in the resultant life period of the event. Once a

critical point has been experienced, one must reflect on the experience, on one's feelings during and about the experience, on God's presence in that experience, and on the changes that have or may occur. Reflection is a backward glance that allows forward vision more clarity. It is the reflection experience of a person of faith that causes critical points to be part of a conversion process. Ordinarily when the critical point is major in one's life, as, for example, in a divorce, reflection on it calls forth deeper meanings in life, such as the worth of oneself or the value of committed, personal relationships. Only after reflection does one make changes within one's self. When a critical point is minor, one may undergo change almost without knowing it and may become conscious of these changes in one's self only upon reflection on the experience of the critical point and one's response to it. In either case, reflection must occur if conversion is to take place. It is in looking back and mulling over an experience that one can become aware of questions that need answering or of answers that have already been discovered. It is in looking back that one can meaningfully move ahead. What we term conversion events in a person's life become such for that person when s/he reflects on the experience and through that process finds a deepened self-awareness, an increased sense of God, and/or a more intense faith. Reflection is the power that moves a resultant life into a preparation period for future critical points. Using a more traditional language, it is reflection that permits us to see conversion as graced experience.



The three aspects of the conversion event are interdependently related. The conversion process might be pictured as a succession of loops of varying size stretching across a page. The complete picture symbolizes the conversion process with each loop representing a potential conversion event. The drawing should be open-ended and flowing so that movement is indicated. Each loop is of a different size, that is, of a different magnitude and shape,

signifying the different value that each event has in one's life. Each event propels one into the next through the power of reflection. Finally, by drawing all the loops downward, the diagram pictures the conversion events as they are—a process of dying and rising. For a Christian, the conversion process is participation in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. It is that into which we were reborn by Baptism; it is our inheritance as Christians.

Conversion events in their most general form move a person to deeper faith, to deeper knowledge and experience of God and of themselves as they respond to God.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, these may involve a definite turn from evil to good but generally speaking, conversion events are major or minor collisions with God in human life experiences. They may involve a turn from sin to goodness but in that turn, too, is a movement from one level of knowing and loving God to another. As human persons continually evolve as persons, becoming themselves in a creative, ongoing process, so too human persons' faith journeys demand confrontation with God and subsequent turning around, even inside out, until one sees God clearly, face to face.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Ecclesial conversion*

As the life of any organism evolves, so too the people of God, adapting or forsaking that which supports or hinders, evolve slowly and at times painfully, into a more perfect gospel-living community. Step by step the Church defines itself, perfecting this nuance, creating another and letting go of still another. Conversion is the process, I believe, by which the definition of Church is refined until the reign of God is fulfilled. It is through the conversion process that the Church develops itself, that it comes to a deeper sense of itself and that it becomes Church. Through conversion, *ecclesia semper reformanda* reforms.

The individual conversion experiences of members of the Church are both essential to and creative of the conversion experience of the whole Church. A good example of this is the experience of women. Women have undergone conversion events which have enabled them to rediscover their value and role in the Church. Reflection upon the experience of critical points has caused women to challenge the Church in regard to the baptismal dignity of all persons. This challenge is a major critical point in the conversion process of the Church itself. It has arisen from and been created by the individual conversion events in the lives of women.

At the same time, conversion is an ecclesial process. The Church, wherever it is found struggling to be and become, has gone through, is going through, and will continue to go through the three steps outlined above in a conversion event. Critical points have arisen for the universal Church: the Council of Jerusalem, the Reformation, the Second Vatican Council, as well as for the local Church: the destruction of a church building by fire, the appointment of a new pastor, the Sunday homily. Corporate reflection upon these and other events in the life of the Church causes the Church to see itself as it is and to catch a glimpse of who it is becoming; reflection allows the Church to see God in its midst and to recognize God's action in its life. As with an individual, the experience of the conversion event, given the energy of reflection, moves the Church into a period of preparation for the conversion events to follow. As the Church journeys through such conversion events, it enters actively into a process of *reformanda*.

As individual conversion feeds and challenges the Church, so too, ecclesial conversion nourishes and creates conversion events for its individual members. Should a local Church corporately deal with a critical point, such as becoming a sanctuary for 'illegal aliens', the issues raised on all sides will prove to be critical points for many individuals, to say nothing of the critical point the decision will be for those individuals, whether that decision is positive or negative.

Conversion is the process by which the Church becomes Church; what the Church is is the ongoing result of each conversion event moving step by step to the realized reign of God.

### *Conversion and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*

Now that we have reflected on individual and ecclesial conversion, we can examine this process in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. For the individual candidates, the RCIA is a conversion event involving several critical points. Yet, this major conversion event is part of the total faith journey of that individual. It has been prepared for by past conversion events and leads to many others. Though their faith journeys may not follow conventional, religious paths, they none the less are journeys with conversion events. These past conversion events have helped them to continue to seek until they find that for which they long and have prepared them for the conversion event that the RCIA may be in their lives.<sup>12</sup>

During the pre-catechumenate, the inquirers are given opportunities to share their life stories. This process is not simply a way to help the Church and the candidates to come to know each other better but presents to the inquirers an opportunity to reflect on their lives. Through that reflection they re-discover critical points and attempt to see how God is found in them. The process of storytelling permits the inquirers to see how the previous part of their journey has brought them to this particular point and to begin to get a clearer view of where it is leading them. The pre-catechumenate is a time for determining the context of the conversion event that RCIA is in one's life; it is the time to see the present in relation to the past. It allows the individual to be in touch with the conversion process in his/her life. S/he finds this process in his/her human history.

Storytelling is not the prerogative of the inquirers only at this phase in the process of Christian initiation. The local Church that is supporting and responding to the needs and questions of the inquirers also has a story to share. The history of the parish, its church building and its people is shared, including some of the critical points in the life of that particular Church. Encompassing stories of individuals and of the parish is the God story and particularly, the story of God as manifested in Jesus Christ. Reflecting on critical points in the story of God as narrated in the Hebrew scriptures and in the story of Jesus as told in the gospels is essential to this period in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

This time of storytelling becomes a critical point for the inquirers. Through reflection they are challenged to find meaning for their stories in the story of Jesus. The inquirers must determine if the story they have heard of the local Church has convinced them that this Church would be a support and a challenge to them as they continue their journey. Should an inquirer determine that that for which s/he is searching is not found in this particular Church, s/he moves on to continue the journey elsewhere. The inquirer who determines that this particular Church is the place for him/her to continue the faith journey will celebrate that decision in the Rite of Becoming a Catechumen. In both cases, a conversion event has taken place.

In the second phase of the initiation process, the catechumens experience several critical points. These critical points present themselves in various forms: the presentation of doctrine, a closer



relationship with the members of the local Church and the expectation that service of others and sharing the gospel are an essential part of Christian life. The catechumens, by way of reflection on the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and on the life lived within this particular faith community, determine whether they are ready at this time to move into full membership in the Church. As in the precatechumenate, the role of the Church as challenger, listener and sharer of reflection on critical points is essential. Sponsors and godparents are particularly involved in this process that helps the catechumens discern how God is acting in their lives and to what that God is calling them. Step by step the catechumen comes to a deeper sense of God and what it is that Roman Catholics believe about God. At the same time s/he is faced with the life that is to be lived because of such a belief. All of these are critical points in the life of the catechumen. The resultant life of each determines how the next critical point will be faced.

If the catechumen supported by the Church determines that s/he is ready for full membership in the Roman Catholic Church, that conversion event is celebrated in the Rite of Election. Again, should a catechumen with the help of the Church determine that s/he is not yet ready to take the step to full membership, this is a conversion event as well.

During the enlightenment, usually the season of Lent, the candidates for the sacraments of initiation engage in an intense spiritual preparation. Through the breaking open of the scripture reading of the Sundays of Lent (cycle A), they reflect on the making of choices, on letting go, on water, light and life. They may gather for prayer with the community and are encouraged to spend more time in personal prayer. The celebration of the scrutinies gives them an opportunity to reflect on their weakness as well as their strengths in the presence and with the support of the local Church. One might say that this entire period is devoted to the reflection portion of a conversion event. Through this time of intense preparation for the sacramental celebrations of the Easter Vigil, the candidates come to a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ and of the demands of the Christian life through reflection on the life, death and sufferings of the Saviour. They arrive at a more intense awareness of themselves, deal with their weaknesses and attempt to purify themselves of those things that stand in the way of living a dedicated Christian life. As throughout the previous periods, the Church stands as support, as listener and as challenger. The

conversion event that is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is celebrated at the Easter Vigil in the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

Because conversion is a process, it does not end with the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. Through that celebration the conversion event of coming to Christian faith and to consequent membership in the Church is affirmed. With it the conversion process of the catechumens is formally joined with the conversion process of the Church as particularized in a local parish. That the conversion process in the life of the neophytes continues is highlighted by the final period in the formal process of the RCIA.

During the mystagoga, the neophytes reflect on the critical point(s) that the process of Christian initiation and the sacramental celebrations have been for them. From their experiences seen in the light of the scripture readings of the season of Easter, they deepen their understanding of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. They see in an even clearer way that Christian living demands being for others and they determine how they might contribute to the mission of Jesus to bring wholeness of life, justice and unity to all.

It is significant that the mystagoga does not end in a formal ritual celebration. Its completion does not mark the end of conversion. Rather, its purpose is to facilitate the merging of the life journey of the neophytes with that of the local Church. That journey continues and with it the process of conversion.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults may also be a conversion event for the members of the initiating community. The candidates in the process of the RCIA are sacraments of the continual conversion process in the lives of the baptized, and thus their presence in the community offers an opportunity for a conversion event to the individual members. The RCIA offers the ecclesial community an opportunity to experience a conversion event as well. Authentically celebrated, the rite demands that a Church examine itself and ask serious questions about its way of being and its purpose—questions not answered by pat responses that are the ‘expected’ replies but questions that are answerable only by serious reflection on itself as Church, on the gospel and on relationship with God. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults forces both individuals and the community as a whole to face challenges to their very being.

### Conclusion

Conversion is the heart of the Christian life. It is in Lonergan's terms 'fundamental to religious living'.<sup>13</sup> To be Christian is to undergo repeated conversion events in one's life. It is to be continually ready and open to the impact of God, whether gentle or forceful, and to reflect on that meeting in order that it may become part of the evolutionary process by which each one of us grows to 'full stature in Christ'. For one seeking membership in the Church, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a major event in this process of growth; for each of us and for the Church, it can be the same.

In the Gospel of St Mark we find in miniature the story of conversion as it takes place in a life of faith. In chapter 8 we read of Jesus's encounter with a blind man. He cures the man by spitting on his eyes and laying hands on him. The blind man's cure seems to be faulty: he sees people but they look like trees! Jesus again lays hands on his eyes and the Gospel says, the blind man 'saw everything clearly'. As we journey through our lives of faith, Jesus lays his hands on us many times through the experiences of our lives. Each time we see a bit better until one day we, too, shall see clearly. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is sacrament of this fact in our Christian lives and challenges us to see in the common the astonishing presence of God.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The unity of Baptism and Confirmation as is indicated in the RCIA is assumed here.

<sup>2</sup> Certainly the sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism are essentially linked to life lived before and after the actual ritual celebration. The variance to which I refer is manifested by the explicit inclusion by the official text of the RCIA. That text includes life experiences before and after the sacramental celebrations which, though an important part of the rite, are not the rite in its entirety.

<sup>3</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Washington, DC, 1988), Article 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Insight: a resource for adult religious education*, no 2 (Fall 1988), p 45.

<sup>5</sup> Conversion can take place on many levels of life: psychological, emotional, social, etc. Though there is a definite overlapping, I am concerned here specifically with religious conversion and determine conversion to be religious when the experience results in a deeper knowledge and/or awareness of God and a concomitant growth in the knowledge of oneself both of which enhance one's relations with others. Bernard Lonergan proposes five levels of conversion. Cf *Method in theology* (New York, 1968), pp 237-243.

<sup>6</sup> Rahner, Karl: *Encyclopedia of theology: the concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York, 1982), p 293.

<sup>7</sup> Cf *Worship*, vol 54, no 1 (January 1980), pp 35-55. I found much support for my thoughts in this article. Though there are points of similarity, there are also points of difference

which I feel are crucial to an understanding of conversion. These occur particularly in the area of the relation of one conversion event to another, the interdependence of the three parts of the conversion event and, especially, the role of reflection in conversion.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p 36.

<sup>9</sup> Lonergan, Bernard: *Method in theology* (New York, 1972), p 237.

<sup>10</sup> Some people may avoid conversion events or, through reflection, arrive at conclusions or perceptions that are not the best nor in line with reality. Though there is not space to deal with these concerns here, they should be noted.

<sup>11</sup> In this way of understanding conversion, we can speak of the conversion of Jesus. He moved through life experiences that contained several critical points in which he moved into a deeper knowledge of himself and of the God he called Father.

<sup>12</sup> Though the RCIA is designed for the unbaptized, those who have been members of other Christian denominations may seek entrance to the Roman Catholic Church through a similar process. The modified rite has the potential to be a conversion event in the lives of these Christians as they pursue relating to God in a way perceived by them to be more meaningful.

<sup>13</sup> Ryan, William and Tyrrell, Bernard, eds: *A second collection* (Philadelphia, 1974), p 65.