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Diocese of Belleville

Third Sunday of the year, sermon January 24, 2021 at St. Teresa Catholic Church, Belleville

“The Journey of Conversion”

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Jesus Christ:

I.

Tomorrow the Church celebrates the conversion of St. Paul. As you know Saul, a staunch defender of the Jewish faith against the new Christian heresy, was on the road to Damascus, where he was working to close down the Christian sect, when he is thrown from his horse and blinded. He heard an unknown voice, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you?” “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!” Saul never met Jesus in person, although he later insisted that he should be called an apostle.

Saul was instructed in the teachings of Jesus by Ananias. Saul became Paul, the apostle to the gentiles. He travelled the Mediterranean world and wrote numerous letters to Christian communities. His teachings were focused almost exclusively on the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and details for Christian living. Paul has very little to say about the personal life and teachings of Jesus. In many ways, he was the Church’s first theologian. He so influenced the development of early Christian thought that some secular commentators have called him the true founder of Christianity, noting that Jesus never traveled beyond the Jewish world and he never wrote any documents that have survived. Paul was beheaded in Rome around the same time Simon Peter was crucified. (Since Paul was a citizen of Rome, crucifixion was beneath his dignity.)

St. Paul’s dramatic instantaneous conversion (knocked from his horse, blinded, personal vision of Jesus Christ) is what many people today mean by conversion or “being saved.” Before the pandemic, when I traveled often by plane wearing my Roman collar, passengers would sometimes ask me if “I was saved.” By that they usually meant, did I know Jesus Christ as my personal savior. And could I, like Paul, tell them the day and the time of my conversion when I

was saved. If I said, I was a baptized, committed Christian and that I strive to live by the teachings of Christ, and I hope I will share in the salvation promised by Christ – this was usually challenged. “Either you are saved or you are not saved! If you have been saved it is once and for all. So even if you sin over and over again, if you have been saved, your place in heaven is secure!” Some people think conversion is exclusively a dramatic encounter with Christ, in which we confess our sins. Others, think salvation is not so much a single event as it is a gradual lifelong process. During that lifelong process there may be particular events that are spiritual high points, but they do not guarantee eternal salvation. Certain Protestant and Catholic theologians have had ongoing dialogues about this for generations.

II.

“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” In this morning’s reading from Mark, immediately after His desert temptation, Jesus of Nazareth announced his central message. Then, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John to be his first apostles with the unusual words “Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”

What are we to make of the metaphor, “fishers of men”? Clearly Jesus did not wish His image, fishers of men, to be taken literally. He is simply telling the new apostles, “If you are happy catching fish to feed your family and to take to the market, you will be even happier casting your nets out to encourage your Jewish friend and neighbors to follow the man who they believe is the expected messiah.”

According to Mark’s gospel, Simon, Andrew, James and John dropped everything and followed Jesus immediately, even though they had never met Him before and had never heard Him speak. Why would they do that? Why would they drop everything and follow Christ. This would be similar to the instant conversion of Saul, become Paul, or the “being saved” of those I have encountered on an airplane.

Mark says Jesus sees them, calls them and they followed Him. Was it his charismatic personality? In Mark’s gospel, everything takes place in a single encounter with Jesus. But according to the gospels of Luke and John, Simon, Andrew, James and John already knew Jesus (Jn 1:39; Lk 5:1-11). The call was not instantaneous, their conversion was more a progression than a single dramatic event. By compressing many encounters between Jesus and the four apostles into a single experience on the seashore, Mark is telling us when we hear the good news of Jesus Christ, we should drop everything and follow. But for most Christians, the journey to Christ is the journey of a lifetime.

III.

When many Catholics hear the word conversion, they tend to think of something that happens to protestants, when they decide to become Catholics. They are converts. But all mature contemporary Catholics are, in fact, on the road to conversion and salvation, which is a multi-dimensional reality. There is conversion to God, conversion to Jesus Christ, conversion to the Church, conversion to living a morally good life, and what might be called intellectual conversion, which integrates the knowledge born of faith with other forms of knowledge.

Conversion to God means acknowledging the God who is God, not an old man in the sky who fixes the world when we ask Him to. But the absolute, mystery, truth and beauty who sustains the universe and keeps each of us in existence. At its deepest level, conversion to God requires us to learn from our spiritual journey that God is not the God the way we would be God, if we were God.

Conversion to Christ means placing the life and teachings of Jesus at the center of our lives as Paul did, the REAL Christ revealed in scripture and received in the consecrated Bread and Wine in the Eucharist, the living gift of Divine Love. NOT a pious image in a church window, not a statue on a pedestal. The real Christ is the one who says, “If you want to be my disciple, give to the poor, take your cross and follow me.”

Conversion to the Church means the commitment to live out our faith in God and in Christ in the community of the Catholic Church, enriched with the sacraments. While acknowledging that members of the Church are redeemed sinners, accepting the fact that sometimes we may doubt or question the Church’s teachings, but still committing ourselves to learn our faith, love our faith and live our faith proudly AS Catholics.

Conversion to the morally good life means struggling with St. Paul who wrote to the Christians in Rome, “The things I know I should not do, I do. And the things I know I should do, I do not do.” The morally converted person lives by the norm, “The things I know I should not do, I do NOT do, and the things I know I should do, I do.” Moral conversion is the life-long struggle to live by the Ten Commandments and the eight Beatitudes in a secular world which suggests that there are NO moral norms by which we should live.

Intellectual conversion can be particularly challenging. Intellectual conversion means developing an adult, responsible Catholic faith. It is possible for a Catholic to have expert knowledge in their field of study (law, medicine, science) and still think about their faith as they did in the 4th grade. Intellectual conversion means recognizing the compatibility between different paths to knowledge and truth: science, history, philosophy, psychology, art, music, poetry AND religious faith. Intellectual conversion is necessary if a Catholic is to understand that there is no essential contradiction between the Church’s belief that God is the creator and sustainer of the universe and some theories of evolution. Unfortunately, this type of synthesis requires a level of religious and intellectual sophistication that many Christians find difficult to attain.

IV.

When you reflect on your spiritual journey as Religious (theistic), Christian, Ecclesiastical, moral, and intellectual conversion, you will realize that NO two people are in the same place on the spiritual journey. No two people in this Church are in the same place. A wife may have a deep belief in God AND an intimate relationship with Christ. Her husband, on the other hand, may be awed by the mystery of God but have many fundamental questions about Christ and the stories of His miracles. Parents may have a deep love for and commitment to the Catholic Church, but their teen-aged children may feel alienated from the Church, rejecting challenging teachings on sexual morality and arguing that many church goers are hypocrites, praying one thing on Sundays but doing the opposite on Mondays.

Sometimes significant human experiences can lead to the undoing of one or more forms of conversion. This is what I call “breakdowns.” An example of a breakdown would be the traumatic experience of a faithful Catholic who watches someone whom they love dearly dying of cancer. They pray to God with all their hearts, day and night, “Please, Lord, let my child live!” When the child in fact dies, some parents might find their conversion to God, to Jesus Christ, and to the Church to grow deeper and deeper, in spite of their great grief. However, other parents, overwhelmed by their sorrow and heartbroken that their “prayers were not answered” gradually conclude that there is no God, or that God “does not care” about them, and that Jesus Christ and the Church are no longer meaningful to them. This sad human experience is a breakdown. Another unfortunate example of breakdown occurs when Catholics, who lived a lifetime of dedication to the Catholic Church, are so overwhelmed by the sin and the scandal of priests and bishops sexually abusing children and the Church’s concealing of these crimes, conclude that since the Church has turned its back on them, they must turn their back on the Church. This is the breakdown of Ecclesial conversion.

If we keep the complexity of our individual journeys of conversion and salvation in mind, it is far easier to understand the perspectives of our fellow Catholics who are at a spiritually different point on the journey than we are. It can sometimes be difficult to comprehend why and how we are all in different places on the journey of conversion. St. Paul, whose world-changing conversion we celebrate tomorrow has reminded us that: “We see now through a glass darkly; but then, face to face!” We must remain confident, however, that the Holy Spirit is accompanying us all and nudging us along the road of faith, “because the Holy Spirit over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.” (Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., *God’s Grandeur*)

St. Paul, Apostles to the gentiles, Pray for us!

Praise be Jesus Christ.

Both now and forever. AMEN.