

# Conversion

---

## Dictionnaire de la Vie Spirituelle

Under the direction of Stefano De Fiore and  
Tullo Goffi

French adaptation by François Vial  
Éditions du Cerf, 1983

The following is a Google Translation  [from the French](#)

**SUMMARY** - I. Anthropological conversion. II. Conversion of the Gentiles. III. Christian conversion. IV. Conversion in pastoral action. V. Conversion to the mystical life.

The word "conversion" is versatile, because it is used in very different meanings. In general, it means a change of life. A pattern of behavior is abandoned to undertake something new. We abandon the selfish pursuit of self to be at the Lord's service. Conversion is ultimately any decision or renewal which, in any way possible, brings us closer or unites us more to the divine life.

Conversion implies that we abandon our prior way of life to devote ourselves to a new experience. So repentance is an essential moment of conversion (cf. Ac 8, 22; 2 Co 12, 21; Ap 2, 21). However, we will not discuss in this article of penance itself, since we dealt with elsewhere (Penitent).

The word "conversion" isn't any more widely used today. It is in any case neither one of the key words of the dominant culture or a buzzword. Today, we mean to be autonomous; we want to dispose freely of oneself in a responsible manner, we want to be creative and have independent initiatives. When we then talk of conversion, we have the impression of enclosing ourselves in a mandatory behavior, of giving our assent of faith to a master, of expressing loyalty to religious requirements blindly

accepting the law of the master or else by living in a pietistic spirit.

It is necessary to remind ourselves, that conversion does not concern a particular moment of existence. Even if we are capable of a fundamental penitential decision, which contrasts absolutely with a usual behavior, such a decision does not generally appear limited in time. An authentic conversion structures itself during unceasing fluctuations, and it deepens in successive stages.

## I - ANTHROPOLOGICAL conversion

He who observes the evolution of the human person and examines his maturation process, notices that man is called to a slow but fundamental conversion. The person must learn to pass from a captative love, entirely enclosed on itself, to an oblativ love, devoted to serving others. The "me" first considers life as allowing it to own persons and things to its own advantage. One must then convert to self-sacrifice, to serve the community.

But becoming an adult, at the emotional level, means we will open up to a creative evolution. We must welcome a new gift of life from God. All the riches of human life come from God, as from their source (1 Jn 4:16). The created being can thus progress in love in the measure that he receives the opportunity to further unite into divine life. He who evolves in the direction of self-giving love, shows that he is the object of the creative love of the Lord.

At the very level of the capacities to love, there are two ways to grow: one is the human level of affectivity, and the other is of the order of supernatural charity. God does not make grow the human capacities to love by using direct intermediaries, but by using the

networks of relationships between humans. The adults who know how to love altruistically (it is the case of the vocation of parents); those are the natural cooperators of God, when it comes to promoting others emotionally. This anthropological emotional conversion refers ultimately to God himself. But it is also an ascetic practice which is primarily the responsibility of human initiative. We convert to a higher love because we make ourselves, as a person, more available to community relationships.

At the charity level, the maturity of persons occurs in a different manner. Because charity is a capacity for love which attaches itself to that of the divine persons themselves. It is not a question here of a common anthropological conversion, but of supernatural life itself. The conversion to love of charity is therefore directly linked to the action of the Spirit. "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). To convert self to charity one must meet personally with the Spirit of Christ. No doubt, does the influence of the community of believers intervene also, but it is because in it we perceive the image of the Trinity. Emile van Broeckhoven, worker-priest, prayed as follows: "Lord, make me to know the true intimacy of others, this unexplored land which is God in us."

We have the duty to implement brotherly love, by the fact that any conversion to love is a gift of God which is offered through the intermediary of the brethren. This will be the answer to the gift received from God. In every act of love towards others is realized an encounter with the Lord. Indeed, we show ourselves implicitly grateful for the gift of God, and we express our conversion to the Love which is grace. And our

relationship to God, through the intermediary of the brethren, becomes ever more intimate as the Spirit gives us the gift of a greater capacity for love of charity.

## **II - Conversion of THE GENTILES**

Every man is expected to turn to God, to turn to him in faith and love, to inaugurate an intimate dialogue with him. But we cannot meet God if he himself does not turn towards us. To know and love God is a gift of the Spirit. Jeremiah said: "Restore us to yourself, LORD that we may return" (Lm 5:21).

The gift of faith brings us into communion with God. But many levels of conversion are possible, that the Scripture accurately describes. First, the folly of man establishes a breach between God and us. "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God" ""(Psalm 1 4, 1, 53, 1). The first conversion thus occurs when one accepts the existence of divinity, even if it is under idolatrous form, which is to say as a god conceived in the measure of human misery. But the conversion becomes more authentic when passing from idolatry to a monotheistic conception of God. This is a worship of God, recognized as the creator and regulator of the entire universe. Creation guides the reason of man to the Creator himself: "All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing [to] thy name."(Psalm 66: 4).

And here then, Revelation has offered to the patriarchs, the possibility of a more intimate encounter with God. Revelation has invited them to live the covenant with God. In Abraham, all people are called to this conversion (Gen 12, 3, 22, 18), although God does not intend to achieve this universal vocation until the coming of his Messiah amongst us (Is

11:10-12; Jr 3:17; So 2:11). But even before the coming of the Messiah, all people had the possibility to recognize Yahweh as Lord Almighty in his works (Ps 47, 2 sq., 1. 38, 4 ff.).

In the New Testament, Jesus announces, only to the Israelites, this new covenant with God his Father (Mt 10:6, 11:5 Mk 7:27). And he asks his disciples to be missionaries to all people (Mt 28:19). The Spirit of the Risen Christ leads the Church to the Gentiles; the church filially welcomes the "Gentiles", according to the teachings of the Gospel (Mt 2:1, 43:22, 7-10; Jn 10:15). The Christian community begins furthermore its catholic experience by living exemplary events (for example: the baptism of Cornelius, Acts 10 and of the gentiles in Antioch, Acts 11:20 ff) or in taking solemn position (the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem, Acts 1:5). Specifically, Paul receives the mission to "open the eyes of the Gentiles, to turn them from darkness to light "(Acts 26:1-8).

Thereafter, it is under new apostolic forms that the Church has continued its mission to convert the pagans to the new covenant. Currently, the Church lives her Catholic mission in bearing witness towards any religious belief (AG 13); and invites people who convert to introduce the Gospel in the heart of their own culture (AG 21). The Church realizes that the believers of other religions have "ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." (NA 2). The Church therefore seeks to provide its truths and values, taking into account other religions. It does not therefore give up in developing the values that exist in other religions, since it doesn't ignore that it is

only within Her, in the Spirit of Christ, that "men find the fullness of religious life and the reconciliation of all things in God "(NA2). [Regarding the conversion of members of non-Catholic denominations: Spiritual Ecumenism, Protestantism]

### **III - CHRISTIAN conversion**

The chosen people had to convert away from the errant path it had taken, to comply with the requirements of the law. The Israelites prayed: "Our Father, let us go back to your law and before Thy face, convert us." The Old Testament speaks mostly of the conversion (*shub*) in terms of return to the righteous path. The New Testament, for its part, proposes conversion (*metanoia*) as it being a total change of thought and action. This is a full revival of the "self." In the Old Testament (as for John the Baptist) conversion was required from improper conduct (idolatrous, sins in the social sphere). The New Testament speaks of conversion as it is a prerequisite for entry into an alliance of intimacy with God. For John the Baptist, one had to be converted by the baptism of repentance, to escape the wrath of God (Mk 1:4). For Jesus, one must convert to enter the new Kingdom. We cannot hope for salvation but in surrendering to God; that is letting ourselves totally transformed and embraced by him. "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3).

The Gospel is realistic. It knows that we cannot speak of conversion of man to God if we don't contemplate estrangement from sin (Luke 24:47; Ac 3:19). But the evangelical conversion isn't content to overcome the state of sin. It makes one; pass from sin to a brand new state of life. According to St. Paul, this new life is characterized as

"being in Christ", a "death resurrection of man with Christ", and a "life of a new creature" that has "put on the new man". Saint John also speaks of "rebirth", a passage from darkness to light, from death to life, from hate to love, and from lie to truth. It is not a question only to convert from sin, but a conversion that makes us pass from the natural condition, to the condition of resurrected according to the Spirit. What drives to conversion is not firstly the threat of punishment, but the call to a life of divine and Trinitarian love. And Jesus not only calls to conversion publicans and prostitutes, that is to say, those on the margins of the community of salvation, but also the Pharisees and the rich who observe the law. Every man, whether he be just or unjust, is thus set by Jesus faced with the necessity to convert: "He who wants to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses it will save it" (Luke 17:33; Mk 8:35; Mt 10:39).

Man can not realize by himself such a total conversion; the gift of grace is necessary. According to biblical teaching, conversion cannot be accomplished otherwise than in participation to the paschal mystery of Christ. Church life is also founded on these perspectives: "They are given access to the stream of divine grace which flows from the paschal mystery of the passion, death, the resurrection of Christ, the font from which all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power." (SC 61). Moreover, conversion can only be realized within Faith. It appears in fact as a response to the call of God and to the grace of redemption.

When a man who has received the grace of conversion to Christ's Spirit begins to abandon the faith, can he expect to receive again the gift of conversion? "And then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance" (Heb

6:6). The Epistle affirms here the impossibility of a second conversion. But the purpose of such a statement is to recall the definitive meaning of conversion, which is a gratuitous gift of God (Heb 12:17). A new conversion cannot be the fruit of our effort; it is a grace. Nobody can earn himself a return to faith, when we already have denied it. We return to the faith for the sole reason of God's desires "not willing that any should perish, but that all should return to penance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Conversion specifies all the Christian life. It allows us to recognize ourselves as sinners; it makes us available to God's renovating gift; it accepts the grace that sets us on the path back to the Father's house, and it enables us to believe that we can love God again, in a faithful and intimate way; it puts us in joyful communion with Christ so as to accomplish with Him, his Father's will; and it makes us participate in the paschal mystery that introduces us to the new life of the sons of God; it makes us continually be reborn to a resurrected life in Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is a continuous conversion. It not only urges us to cleanse ourselves from sin, but it also makes us move forward in the path of asceticism, it makes us commune to the Holy Spirit so that our fundamental option directs us to a life wholly imbued with charity. A Christian knows that he is a pilgrim, that is to say, a man who lives in the provisory, subject to the fundamental law of an ever deeper conversion, which is completely integrated within the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection.

#### **IV - Conversion IN PASTORAL ACTION**

The first goal of pastoral Church action is evangelization. This is to ensure that the people of God engage in the practice of permanent conversion. The Holy Spirit, the Word and the sacraments are present in the Church which will perform this conversion. Certainly, one might think that the pastoral responsibility is to promote a socially acceptable moral behavior. Let us examine, for example, how the sacraments are administered, even though they are an introduction to the Christian conversion. In most cases, Baptism is conferred to small children, and as for the Eucharist and penance, they are administered at the age of infancy. Sacramental practice of penance often remains at the childish attitudes that were those at the first introduction to this sacrament. Sacramental life tends to crystallize solely in canonical and rubricist forms, within external religious customs. What is missing here is the experience of a continuous conversion to a progressive mystical initiation.

However, pastoral responsibility is called to assist into making the "quantum leap" of the Christian life, to put faithful on the path of the evangelical option. Being a Christian is not only about converting from past sins, but also to engage in a radically new life. Moreover, in a pluralistic and secular society, it is of the utmost importance to know how to understand and implement the originality of lived faith and charity.

From this point of view, Catholic pastoral ministry has always been aware of the importance of an implementation of the Mystagogy, so that one does not let go to pure sacramentalism or legalistic conformity. The Church is proud of its pastoral ministry, because this is where it shows its commitment to evangelical conversion. Suffice it to mention what is realised at the Catechumenate level and in other pastoral activities such as the

popular missions, spiritual exercises, retreats, Workshop on the Gospel, the Lents, etc. all that expresses the will of the Church into converting the faithful to the Lord, by listening to the Word of God and the welcoming of the gifts of the Spirit. Today, the Church wants to be alert to situations that create a new type of personal responsibility. We seek to effectively stimulate a spiritual conversion at the moment, for example, of adolescence, betrothals, entry into professional life, old age [Third Age], etc.

## **V - Conversion TO THE MYSTICAL LIFE**

Clement of Alexandria wrote what follows: "I think there is a first conversion from paganism to faith, and a second conversion of faith to gnosis" (Stromata VI I, 1 0, PG IX, 48 1a). Gnosis is the theoretical and practical accomplishment of faith. Spirituals took to their account the statement of Clement of Alexandria in insisting on the fact that the Christian is called to experience a second conversion. What does it consist of? There is no unanimous answer among experts in spirituality, because the answer depends on precisely how one conceives the evolution of the spiritual life. For some, the second conversion is the state of enlightenment which reaches the ascetic, after a first stage of purification. For others, it is that a man dedicates his life to God in the religious or clerical life. In general, the second conversion is characterized by a gift of all of self to perfection; it is an irrevocable commitment to spiritual progress, at the cost of all the sacrifices; it is a search in order to achieve the sole good pleasure of the Lord. The soul is not satisfied, of a usually good and honest conduct, or of a moderately virtuous practice. She wants to get on the spiritual path of an experience of the best. She continually seeks to advance in

the total surrender to God. To facilitate this transition to the second conversion, religious or consecrated persons often use the practice of "third year of probation" as proposed by the Jesuits (see *Statuta generalia*, annex to Const. Apost. *Sedes Sapientiae*, May 31, 1956, art 5 1 -. 53), or the practice of the Ignatian "month" of the Spiritual Exercises.

The second conversion therefore makes one pass from a relatively good life to a life wholly tended to perfection. But we can further specify the spiritual characteristics of this second conversion. Within the first conversion, the Christian began to live of the grace of Christ, he engaged into a morally honest life. With the second conversion, he doesn't focus any more attention to the efforts required to live in harmony with the moral law. The soul is entirely immersed in the experience of the paschal mystery of Christ. The Word of God and the participation in the event of salvation are no longer perceived as realities of faith which we adhere from afar, but as an interior fact within which we participate integrally. We taste inwardly the mystery of the Lord; the Christian life is welcomed as an intimate charism, we understand the meaning of the love of charity in its radical novelty. It is not here a matter of knowledge and of rational investigation, but an actual experience. It is not either a purely intellectual assent to the Lord, because we receive Him as one who lives in his paschal mystery. The gospel truths then appear under a new light, and spiritual acts sheathe a deep and new meaning.

In June 1897, St. Therese of Lisieux wrote to Mother Marie de Gonzague: "This year, my dear mother, God gave me the grace to understand what charity is." She said she experienced a new conversion to charity; she perceives

concretely how her love for her sisters is the very work of Jesus in her. "Yes, I feel it. When I am charitable it is Jesus acting within me. The more I am united to him, the more I love all my sisters." And St. Francis of Assisi so begins his will: "The Lord gave me, to me Brother Francis, the grace to begin doing penance: [...] what previously seemed to me bitter and tough changed into sweetness for the soul and the body." The second conversion is an initiation to the mystical life. In this sense, Saint Paul could say: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2: 20). [On the proposed conversion as a "conversion to Christian unity". See: *Spiritual Ecumenism III*, 1]

T. Goffi.

## REFERENCES

- Div. auteurs, « la conversion », in : LumVie 47, 1 960.
- P. Aubin, le Problème de la conversion, Paris, 1 963.
- Y.-M. Congar, « la conversion, étude théologique et psychologique », in : Parole et Mission 1 1, 1 966, pp. 496-523. .
- J. Gibley, « le Sens de la conversion dans l'Ancien Testament », in : MaisD 90, 1 967, pp. 79-92.
- B. Häring, la Loi du Christ, Tournai, 1 957, t. I, pp. 5 1 9- 620.
- Id., Frei in Christus («Libre pour le Christ»), Fribourg, 1 979, t 1, pp. 402-438.
- M Légault, Mutation de l'Église et conversion personnelle, Paris, 1 975.
- J. Mouroux, Sens chrétien de l'homme, Paris, 1 943.
- H. Pinard De La Boullaye, art « conversion », in : DSp, t. II, col. 2224-2265.
- J. Ratzinger, Foi chrétienne, hier et aujourd'hui, Paris, 1 969.
- E. Roche, « Pénitence et conversion dans l'Évangile et la vie chrétienne », in : NRT 79, 1 967, pp. 1 1 3- 1 34.
- R. Schnackengurg, le Message moral du Nouveau Testament, Le Puy, 1963