

Repent and Believe!

Metanoia: The Fundamental Datum of Christian Existence

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Metanoia is the *sine qua none* of the Christian life. You cannot be a Christian without it.



What is involved in *metanoia* is what might be called a spiritual paradigm shift, a spiritual revolution. We encounter the Lord Jesus, and He personally invites us to change as persons: *metanoiei!* He calls us each and everyone by name. "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine." (Is. 43:1) Live that way! CORPUS CHRISTI, TX (Catholic Online) - The first word which we shall focus on in our series [Tres Linguae Sacrae](#) (Three Sacred Languages) is Greek in origin. The Greek word is *metanoia*, a noun. In the New Testament, however, it is almost always found in verb form; in its most basic form it is found in an imperative, active sense, *i.e.*, as a command, a warning, a tocsin, or a hue and cry.

The word is found, for example, on the lips of Jesus as He proclaims the coming of the Kingdom and begins his public ministry. It is the first, essential step to believing in the Gospel.

"Repent (*metanoete*) and believe (*pisteuete*) in the Gospel." (Mark 1:15; *cf.* Matt. 4:17)

In his 1966 Apostolic Constitution [Paenitemini](#), Pope Paul VI observed: "These words constitute, in a way, a compendium of the whole Christian life." They are the sum

and substance of being Christian. This is the Gospel in a nutshell.

The same message is found on the lips of St. Peter, who, in one of the first sermons of the Church after the gift of the Holy Spirit, proclaims the same message as His Lord:

"Repent (*metanoesate*), therefore, and be converted (*epistrepsate*), that your sins may be wiped away." (Acts 3:19)

If repenting and believing in the Gospel is the "compendium of the whole Christian life" as Pope Paul VI put it, then it follows that the concept of *metanoia* is fundamental to the Christian believer. Recognizing the importance of this concept is why, in his book *Credo for Today: What Christians Believe*, Pope Benedict XVI called *metanoia* the "fundamental datum of Christian existence."

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What, then, does the word mean? The verb *metanoeo* is a compound word formed by the joinder of the prefix *meta*, a preposition meaning "with" or "after," or even "beyond," and *noieo*, "I think." The verb *metanoeo* therefore means "I change my mind." Literally, then, *metanoia* is the state of thinking differently, a state where I have changed my mind, one occurring after some sort of encounter with reality.

It is apparent from the Scriptures, however, that the change involves more than the adoption of an attitude, a philosophy, or a manner of life because it involves an encounter with God in the Person of Jesus Christ. "We are Christian only if we encounter Christ," Pope Benedict XVI said in one of his [audiences](#). "Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we really become Christians." "The Gospel," John Paul II said succinctly in an [address](#) in Guatemala, "is somebody: it is Jesus Christ, the Lord."

Metanoia, at least in its Christian sense, is the change that occurs upon one's encounter with the person of Jesus and our affirmative response to his call. The change in us occurs *because* of our encounter with the Lord and his calling out to us radically to change and our saying, "yes."

Since it is clear from the context of the word's use in Scripture that more than mere "change of mind" is at issue, the English word most often used to translate the Greek is the verb *repent*, an intensive form of regret or sorrow for evil done accompanied with a resolution to change one's life and to do good.

However, the words "repent" or "be converted" or "do penance," while they might be the best we have in English, do not quite capture the fullness of meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*.

As Pope Benedict XVI observed in his book *Credo for Today: What Christians Believe*, the concept of *metanoia* as it is understood in Scripture is difficult to translate with one word.

"When one tries to translate the word *metanoia*, one immediately runs into difficulties: change of mind, reconsidering, remorse, repentance, turning back, conversion are available, but none of these words exhausts the contents of the original meaning, even though turning back and conversion indicate most clearly the radical character of what we are talking about: a process that affects one's whole life and affects life wholly, that is, definitively, in the totality of its temporal extent, and that means far more than just one single or even a repeated act of thinking, feeling, or willing."

In *Paenitemini*, Pope Paul VI defined the concept of *metanoia* as a "change of heart," which he explained was "that intimate and total change and renewal of the entire man--of all his opinions, judgments, and decisions--which takes place in him in the light of the sanctity and charity of God, the sanctity and charity which were manifested to us" in

Jesus, and "communicated fully" to us by Jesus.

What is involved in *metanoia* is what might be called a spiritual paradigm shift, a spiritual revolution. We encounter the Lord Jesus, and He personally invites us to change as persons: *metanoei!* He calls us each and everyone by name. "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine." (Is. 43:1) He tells us, "Live that way!"

As Pope Benedict XVI put it in his book *Credo for Today*: "[*M*]etanoia . . . is actually the fundamental Christian act, understood, of course, in terms of one very definite aspect: the aspect of change, the act of turning, of becoming new and different. In order to become a Christian, a human being must change, not merely in one place or another, but unconditionally, down to the very bottom of his being."

The person of Jesus is very clearly at the heart of *metanoia*. We encounter the Lord Jesus who calls us by name. We have two options: continue on our way, or *metanoia*. *Tertium non datur*. There is no third way. This is an either/or decision. Either *metanoia*, or not.

If we decide for *metanoia*, we opt for a radical, interruptive change of our entire being, our *becoming* changes so that, turning to the Lord, we change who we are to become, and we gain an entirely new perception of reality. The person who encounters and decides to follow Jesus resolves to give the Lord Jesus his all. There is nothing--nothing--we hold back. *Metanoia* means a resolve to turn to Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind and strength throughout our entire lives.

It is obvious, then, that *metanoia* is not a one-time change of heart, a one-time action, but a continual, constant, perpetual, habitual resolve to change one's heart to follow only one master, and one master alone: Jesus. That decision therefore includes a rejection of anything that opposes itself to this decision, whether it is something in

ourselves or something outside of us.

"Since 'no one can serve two masters' (Mt. 6:24)," Blessed John Paul II stated in his Apostolic Exhortation [Ecclesia in America](#), "the change in mentality (*metanoia*)," required by the Gospel, "means striving to assimilate the values of the Gospel, which contradict the dominant tendencies of the world."

For this reason, there is a continual and perpetual imperative attached to *metanoia*, and that imperative is "to renew constantly 'the encounter with the living Jesus Christ,'" as it is Jesus who leads us always to *metanoia*, to "continuing conversion." [Ecclesia in America](#), No. 28. St. Paul calls it a race, a battle.

John Paul II continues: "Conversion (*metanoia*), to which every person is called, leads to an acceptance and appropriation of the new vision which the Gospel proposes. This requires leaving behind our worldly way of thinking and acting, which so often heavily conditions our behavior. As Sacred Scripture reminds us, the old man must die and the new man must be born." [Ecclesia in America](#), No. 32.

Metanoia therefore is all about "change" and all about "progress." But here Benedict XVI issues a warning, a spiritual *caveat*. These words mean something different to a Christian than they mean to a secularist, to a non-believer. Pope Benedict XVI asks: "How is the Christian willingness to change, that is, *metanoia*, related to the modern will to change?"

Harkening to the Dietrich von Hildebrand's *Trojan Horse in the City of God*, Benedict XVI rejects the "cult of movement [*Kult der Bewegung*]" that is part of modern society as an authentic form of *metanoia*.

The "inner unity of radical change and radical fidelity that *metanoia* implies" in Christians may, in large part, require us reject modern progress, because the Christian sees it for what it is: a sham progress. The Christian *metanoia* hears but one voice--the voice of

his or her Beloved--and that is not the voice of "everybody," of prevailing standards, of the majority, of a particular political party, of academia, of celebrities, of ever-shifting convention, or even our laws. No. The Christian *metanoia* does not result in us turning into reeds shaken by the wind. (Cf. Matt. 11:7)

"The willingness to change for the sake of following Christ has nothing to do with the lack of direction evident in the reed that is swayed by every wind; it has nothing to do with an existential indecisiveness, a facile susceptibility to influence that allows itself to be pushed around in any direction," Pope Benedict XVI explains.

The Christian *metanoia*, while it demands a total change, makes us also firm in faith. In fact, Benedict XVI states that "Christian *metanoia* is objectively identical to *pistis* (faith, fidelity), a change that does not exclude fidelity but rather, makes it possible." The Christian change--*metanoia*--has a backbone of steel. It has all the resolve of a faithful spouse.

The fidelity to the Lord that is part of *metanoia* gives the Christian the "courage to make the break," a break from all false convention, all peer pressure, all false standards and ideals, so as to gain true freedom, a freedom the world does not, cannot offer. Pope Benedict XVI concludes: "This courage to make the break is called, in biblical language, *metanoia*."

While *metanoia* bespeaks of great willingness to change, it also has a hard center core. "It is at the same time a process of becoming firm in Christ," Pope Benedict XVI says quoting von Hildebrand, "a hardening in relation to all tendencies toward being change from below--a flexibility in relation to all formative influences 'from above.'"

Metanoia "makes Christians," Pope Benedict XVI says, but if it is allowed to bear the fruit it is intended to bear, it also "creates saints" of those Christians. The product of *metanoia* when rigorously lived is succinctly expressed by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians: "I

no longer live I, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20)

"I no longer live I, but Christ lives in me." If we can honestly say that as to every part of our lives, then we have accomplished *metanoia*.

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