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THE MONASTIC WAY OF CONVERSION

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The monastic call is ultimately a call to unity. And that unity can only be reached through a long journey implying successive deep transformations, that is, through a long conversion process.

Such a conversion is rooted in baptism, by which we are introduced into that most radical of all the conversions lived by a human being, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No conversion has any meaning without a relationship to that paschal mystery.

The paschal mystery stands at the very heart of human history. The two arms of the cross cover the whole span of time, from the dawn of creation with God breathing his breath of life into humankind, to the eschatological return of everything to God at the Parousia, with Jesus of Nazareth at the center, surrendering his spirit to the Father and receiving it back to become the first of our kind to partake fully in the glory of the Father.

Our monastic conversion, as a form of participation in the paschal mystery of Christ is an element of that global transformation of mankind and of the whole cosmos under the action of the Spirit of Christ. Although it is first of all a conversion of the heart, it takes its meaning from God's experience of human conversion in Christ, and the long journey of mankind that preceded it; and it will not be achieved without our active participation in the building up of the Kingdom of God, which implies a radical transformation or conversion of the whole fabric of society.

My purpose here is simply to show how all these aspects form a unified reality that receives its meaning from the paschal mystery into which we are inserted by baptism.

GOD'S EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION IN JESUS CHRIST

The first paradigm of conversion or transformation is certainly God's

transformation to humanity as described in Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Though he was in the form of God, he ... emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men ... Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name" (Phil 2:6-9).

If we understand conversion simply as a passage from sin to virtue, it does not make any sense, of course, to speak of Jesus' conversion or of God's experience of conversion in Jesus. But it is, as it were, only by accident that conversion is for us a passage from sin to virtue-only because humankind has sinned. The reality of conversion is in itself something much deeper and much larger. It starts with our birth and is a dimension of any passage from one stage of growth to another till we reach the perfection to which we are called. And Jesus certainly went through such a process.

After the peaceful, uneventful, slow process of Jesus' growth in age, grace and wisdom came the radical change at the time of his baptism. As he went down into the water to be baptized by John, the Spirit came over him and he heard the voice of the Father saying " You are my most beloved Son." At that time he experienced in his human psyche his identity as son of God. And that gave him a new insight into his mission.¹ That sense of identity and that new insight were assumed through a long period of solitude in the desert, where he had to face terrible temptations.

He immediately began not only to preach but to actualize the Kingdom of God, by healing the sick, forgiving the sinners, and announcing the Good News to the poor. This was not done without encountering opposition and those confrontations through which new insights into his identity and his mission developed. The entire process came to completion in the radical transformation realized through Jesus' surrendering of his spirit to the Father and being raised by him.

The transforming experience lived by Jesus is the summit of humankind's groping towards its ultimate end; it gives its meaning to the whole of human history before and after.

When we are baptized, we are inserted into the long human experience of conversion that reached its culminating point in Jesus of Nazareth. By being immersed in Christ's paschal mystery we are called to a personal transformation that must bring us to our full integration in God. Baptism does not so much establish us in a state, a so-called state of grace, as it sets us on a journey. And that journey leads us much beyond ourselves and beyond the limits of our own individual experience.

Looking back at the journey that preceded helps us to understand where our own journey leads us. But we cannot find in it any road map or blueprint. The road is entirely ahead of us; and it is totally uncharted. This is the journey we committed ourselves to pursue unceasingly when, on the day of our monastic profession, we promised the "conversatio morum. "

CONVERSION OF THE HEART AS JOURNEY TO THE SELF

The conversion demanded of his disciples by Jesus is not simply a superficial modification of their moral behavior. It implies much more than replacing a personal "ego" by another one, more respectable or more in conformity to the dictates or the expectations of society. It requires a global and radical transformation touching all the dimensions of the human being, "spirit, soul, and body," to use the categories of St. Paul's anthropology (cf. 1 Thes 5:23).²

Of course, such conversion must be, first of all, a conversion of the heart, the source of everything that is either good or bad in human existence. Ezechiel described in beautiful and poetic terms the conversion that would be characteristic of the new Kingdom: "I will give them, a new heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the stony heart from their bodies, and replace it with a heart of flesh" (Ez 11:19). The journey to conversion is first of all an interior journey into the recesses of the heart, towards the discovery of our true self, that is, the person we are called to be by God, the unique image or word of God which we are, the name he has given us.

In that deepest part of ourselves, we may have to touch places that were unknown to us, unfamiliar and haunting lands where we are strangers. We may have to become nomads within our own world. The first reality we will encounter there will be our ego with all its limitations. When we venture to journey to our own interior world we must be ready to be confronted with fear and confusion, with temptation.

There is such an experience of the desert at the beginning of every great spiritual journey. After his baptism Jesus began a new period of his life by a journey into solitude. It was the experience of the prophet Elijah, going through the awareness of his own poverty, his fears and his weakness, in the desert before his encounter with the glory of God on Mount Horeb. It was also the experience of Paul who spent a few mysterious years in the desert of Arabia after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. And thousands of women and men, from the early days of monastic life in Syria and Egypt up to our times, have gone to the desert for the very purpose of living such an experience.

That transforming journey may start with a very deep or even shattering experience, like that of Jesus at the time of his baptism, or that of Paul on the road to Damascus, or that of Elijah on the way to Mount Horeb. Most of us however will embark almost imperceptibly on that journey, not after any radical mystical experience, but simply, gradually, as we go on in life: passing from success to defeat, experiencing failure in our academic career, in our friendships, in our moral life, and tasting the increasing frustration of unrealized dreams as we begin to count the number of our years by the mark they leave in our bodies. These may all seem at first superficial things but they touch us deeply, and if we accept them honestly they put us in touch with our deeper limitations, with our sinfulness, and with all the idols we have been worshipping secretly. And this is the first step on the path to conversion of heart.

When the Desert Fathers described their struggles with yawning beasts and slimy snakes and grimacing devils (or with seductive women), they were simply describing the various aspects of their own hearts that the experience of the desert had made them discover. These are what Jung call our shadow self, the unacceptable part of our personality with which we are now brought face to face.

Such an experience of our sinfulness is not a discovery to be made only at the beginning of our novitiate! It can be the sudden or lagging discovery, after many years of prayer and faithful service of God, that strong and persistent doubts arise in our hearts about God and our vocation; that intense passions flare, that meaning and truths grow stale, that questions abound and no answers appear. New kinds of darkness and sterility may then touch us deeply. These are not the charming little darkness and dryness of the, first years that reassured us because they somewhat convinced us that we were progressing towards the higher stages of spiritual life described by John of the Cross. We were a little proud of that darkness and dryness. The new ones are terrible. The love of God that once sustained us and motivated us seems now elusive and illusory.

When Jesus tried to describe the reality of conversion, he used images that were not images of smooth and gradual transformation, but images that reflected the two most traumatic events of human life: birth and death. He knew, more than anyone else, that the fullness of life cannot be reached without passing through the river of death.

To Nicodemus (Jn 3:5-6) he said: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God: what is born of flesh is flesh; what is born of Spirit is spirit." But later on he described the condition for such a life: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and

dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (Jn 12:24-25).

If in the darkness of our night, wanting to understand what is happening, we go to the Master for advice or solace, his response will probably be as enigmatic to us as to the poor Nicodemus.

Very often entrance into the monastic life is considered as "the conversion" (or "the second one," following the first one of baptism). The rest of our life is supposed to be a smooth, if not always easy, growth, development and faithful perseverance. Our vow of "conversatio morum" is understood as the commitment not to stop on our straight, smooth journey to perfection. Likewise, we tend nowadays to privilege "instant conversions," sudden transforming mystical experiences. The danger is that such conversions can be simply changes of behavior, the trading of an "ego" for another "ego."

In any case, even the most extraordinary experience of God is usually only the first step on a long journey toward conversion, and it does not exempt a person from entering into the desert of his or her own heart and wandering there, often for years, like the people of Israel in the desert. It is in that spirit that the first monks went into the desert, in order to get in touch with their own heart and to meet on that battleground the forces of evil and to defeat them after the example of Christ and with his grace, and so to hasten the coming of the end of time.

All the riches, the painful riches, of such human experiences of conversion can be lost when undue emphasis is placed on extraordinary mystical experiences, on unrealistic charismatic enthusiasm, or when ascetical practices substitute for the fullness of life to which we are called. Asceticism is necessary and indispensable, but it can also be a convenient excuse for escaping from the pain of growth. It can be a convenient way to exempt ourselves from the painful process of learning to care, to listen, to live, to love—in other words, to come "gradually" to the fullness of perfection.

In this context a word about monastic formation is perhaps necessary. If our monastic formation is concerned only with transforming us into good, edifying monks or sisters, or with preparing us to be good pastoral ministers and does not encourage us to advance on that solitary journey through the desert of our sinfulness to the personal and frightening encounter with the living God, it has failed. And all our activity will not be anything else than ego-building and certainly not Kingdom-building.

Paradoxically, to try to look outside of ourselves and to attempt to

live up to external ideals and expectations can prevent the authentic conversion we are talking about. And I am afraid that very often our monastic formation does just that. Instead of leading people to a painful conversion, we invite them to put on a nice new ego over their old one. When persons attempt to find the ground of their identity solely in doing things and living up to society's roles or community's expectations, they unwittingly promote a false self. Ideals very good in themselves, such as being a good novice, a good abbot, a good prioress, a good teacher, or a good pastor, can become obstacles to a deeper conversion. We are often too fearful to let go of our own creations and to allow God to touch us and to give birth to our true self.

If we courageously continue our journey through the desert of our hearts, we will eventually reach somehow the ground of our being, where it grows out of Being, where our own self is one with the One who is the plenitude of the Self, so that we can say with Paul: I do not live; He lives in me. Conversion leads us to a renewed image of ourselves, of God and of our neighbours. Or rather, it allows us to go beyond the images and to transcend in that blessed simplicity, which is the ultimate end of monastic life, all that keeps us away from ourselves, from God and from our brothers.

CONVERSION OF SOCIETY INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Though conversion is first of all something extremely intimate and personal—the conversion of the heart—it cannot be so private as to be solitary. It must become a collective conversion through which the transformation of the Church and society is realized.

Conversion can indeed happen to many persons at the same time and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation, and to help one another in working out the implications, and in fulfilling the promise of their new life. It is in that manner that cenobitic life and other forms of community life in the Church were born. Such conversion can pass from generation to generation and spread from one culture to another.³

But at a deeper level, conversion is intimately related with the Kingdom of God. When John the Baptist invited the Jews to conversion he said: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near"; and when Jesus began his own preaching he proclaimed: "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand."

Jesus' own experience of conversion at his baptism was the discovery not only of his identity but also of his mission of preaching and actualizing the Kingdom of God, and the beginning of its realization.

If our conversion is authentic, if, by becoming the person we are called to be, we become more our true self and therefore more identified with the One who is the plenitude of the Self, we will also receive the revelation of our personal unique mission in the edification of the Kingdom of God.

That was the experience of the Apostles. It took them time to understand Jesus' message. At the moment of his death they were still very far from such an understanding. They were cowards: they ran away and Peter denied his Master. Yet, in the forgiveness experienced through Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, they saw themselves in a new way and embraced Jesus Christ as Lord. They were bound to him in a new manner, and thus they discovered their own mission in the building up of the Kingdom.

Our mission, although rooted in our baptism, has to be discovered, like that of the Apostles, in the deep experience of commonality and solidarity with all people afflicted by the poverty of sinfulness and in need of healing. Yet they are all those toward whom we easily experience prejudice and intolerance.

The Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus implies a radical transformation of the whole fabric of society, and individual conversion of the heart receives its meaning from being a small constitutive part of that great, profound transformation. That transformation of the Kingdom, just like the individual conversion, requires, at some point, a radical break. The Kingdom does not really evolve; it breaks in. It is not only spiritual, but implies a total revolution of the structures of the old world. Hence it is presented as good news for the poor, light for the blind, healing for the lame, hearing for the deaf, freedom for those in prison, liberation for the oppressed, pardon for sinners and life for the dead (cf. Lk 4:18-21; Mt 11:3-5). Such a Kingdom is not the other world, but this world transformed and made new.

This is the message of the Beatitudes. We tend to interpret them as if Jesus were promising happiness only for a life after death, in a far distant "Elsewhereland." "Happy are the poor-we sometimes understand-because, after their miserable life on earth they will be given the Kingdom of heaven; happy are those who suffer, because they will be consoled with the joys of heaven; happy are those who are hungry, because after they have died of starvation they will be fed in heaven with a wonderful spiritual food, and so on. . . ." This is not Jesus' teaching. When he declares the poor happy, it is because he has come to deliver them from their poverty; when he declares the sorrowful happy, it is because he is bringing consolation to them; when he declares the hungry happy, it is because he has come to deliver them

from hunger.

What Jesus began, his disciples are called to bring to completion. The Kingdom of God must first be realized here on earth, in space and time. If it is realized here on earth, it will last forever, because it is divine and since it is the realization of the divine dimension of human being created in the image of God. Its completion will mark the end of time. And therefore, the Beatitudes are not a spiritual tranquilizer meant to help us endure the hardships of this life in the expectation of a better "Elsewhere." They are a call, a mission entrusted to, all of us: the mission to transform, to convert the world.

This, of course, implies an eschatological expectation. The Kingdom of God is here but not yet fully realized. There is an urgency to achieve it. It implies also a constant struggle. The demonic powers that we find in ourselves as soon as we enter our solitary journey are present and active in society. Saint Paul, using the terminology of the Gnostics of his time, calls them the powers and principalities of this world. The meaning of our asceticism, of our "conversatio," is to hasten the final victory of the kingdom of light over the kingdom of darkness. The end of time is not the moment when the world will cease to exist, but the moment when it will be fully transformed into the Kingdom of God. A life of conversion is a life lived with the constant awareness of that urgency: "Let your belts be fastened around your waists and your lamps be burning ready. Be like men awaiting their master's return from a wedding, so that when he arrives and knocks, you will open for him without delay" (Lk 12:35-36).

Jesus, in the Gospel, makes it very clear that conversion is a choice between two lords. Either we serve the principalities and powers of this world (personified by Jesus under the name of Mammon) or we serve the personal God, also with a personal name, Abba. There is no in-between possibility. There must be a personal choice.

We live our monastic conversion in a concrete world where one of the great manifestations of the power of evil is the tremendous disparity between rich and poor (rich and poor countries as well as rich and poor individuals within each country).

The principal consequences of this disparity are hunger and war.

For us living a monastic life, as for any other baptized Christian having the responsibility of bringing about the Kingdom of God, the first step towards conversion in that regard will be to realize how much we are co-responsible for that collective sinful situation. We are all compromised with it by the very fact that we all profit from

it. Let us take a very simple example: We are all well-fed, well-clothed and well-housed. In order to come to this meeting we took a plane, a bus or a car. All these are things that hundreds of millions of people cannot afford. The system that makes these things available to us is the same system that deprives the rest of mankind in order to privilege us. I know that the solutions are neither easy nor simple. But at least the fact that we do not have solutions at hand should not make us blind to the real problem.

Paul's conversion was a radical awareness of the identification of God with the oppressed: "Why do you persecute ME?" Jesus said to him. By that simple question, everything in him was shattered: his own identity, his image of God, his understanding of men. Any real understanding of Matthew 25⁴ and any clear awareness of God's identification with the little ones of this world, should effect in us the same conversion.

A second step in conversion is the analysis of the situation.

Monsignor Oscar Romero, in a homily delivered shortly before his assassination said: "A true Christian conversion must reveal the social mechanism that makes of the worker and the peasant marginalized persons."⁵ And, of course, every awareness brings with it the responsibility to act. The awareness of social evil is certainly greater nowadays than at any time before. But it is not enough to be aware; it is not enough to sign petitions. We must be creative. And to be creative in our effort at conversion is to, find ways of dissociating ourselves-individually and collectively -from an economic and social system in which the poor do not occupy the privileged place that has been assigned to them by the gratuitous and preferential love of God for them.

The Desert Fathers saw the evil in the society of their time. They did not condemn society; they acknowledged the presence of the same evil in themselves and they fought it at that level. They expressed that struggle in their writing, using a mythological form of language. The myths they developed were very powerful in leading several successive generations to the experience of conversion. For a few centuries now, although we find it charming at times to read those extravagant mythical stories of the Desert Fathers, we have replaced their mythology by our theology and our spiritualities. But these systems do not seem to be helping us very much. Maybe we will have to re-invent a mythical language and a mythical expression of our monastic experience.

CONCLUSION: FINAL INTEGRATION

At a time when the primitive Christian groups were tempted to find their psychological security and their cohesion through a profound hostility against the Jews whom they considered responsible for Jesus' death, one of the most extraordinary aspects of Paul's conversion was that he resisted that sheer re-orientation of aggressivity found at times in converts.⁶ Not only did he harmonize his own Jewish identity with his fidelity to Christ, but he dedicated three full chapters of his Epistle to the Ro. mans (9 to 11) to demonstrate, sometimes very laboriously, how the Jews could be saved in spite of their rejection of Christ.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have often given in to, the temptation of tightening their ranks by waging crusades. Great monks have at times been drawn by popes and patriarchs into such movements. But nothing is in itself more alien to monastic conversion.

By their ascent of the twelve degrees of humility, the disciples of Saint Benedict tend towards that purity of heart, or blessed simplicity that, in more modern terminology, we could call the "final integration." Those who have reached that final integration are not only converted into their own selves and therefore into the plenitude of the Self, that is into Christ, but they are also one with every human being and the whole world. While belonging to, a local community and living in a concrete culture, they transcend all cultures, ideologies, and systems. They can, by their own very lives help society to be converted into the ultimate unity, and to hasten the eschatological reunification in Christ. At a time when, in some political and ecclesiastical circles, the call seems again to be heard to engage in holy wars, that aspect of monastic tradition and monastic conversion is certainly worth remembering.

Let us sum up the process we have described. By our monastic profession we commit ourselves to live to the full our participation in the paschal mystery of Christ into which we have been introduced by baptism. This we do through a long journey or conversion that leads us to our personal identity in Christ, through a series of deaths to the multiple layers of our ego. This is first of all a conversion of the heart in which we receive the Spirit of Jesus who leads us into the desert of our sinfulness and to the experience of mercy and forgiveness. That experience develops in us a sense of compassion and solidarity that awakens us to our personal mission in the conversion of the present world into God's Kingdom.

The ultimate goal of this journey is not only our own personal final integration, but the final integration of the whole cosmos at last transformed into the eternal Kingdom of God.

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Armand Veilleux, O.C.S.O.

NOTES

- 1.** In the Gospel of Mark, that represents a more primitive tradition, the words of the Father are addressed to Jesus ("You are my most beloved Son") and not, as in Matthew, to the disciples ("This is my most beloved Son"). To say that Jesus "experienced" his identity as Son of God at that moment does not mean that it was his first revelation of it. Most modern theologians will acknowledge a development in Jesus' awareness or his mission. See, for example, Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York 1971) pp. 49-56.
- 2.** In this section I borrowed more than one insight from Paul V. Robb, "Conversion as a Human Experience," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 14 (1982) 1-50.
- 3.** This aspect was developed by Bernard Lonergan at the International Theological Congress in Toronto, in 1967. See *Theology of Renewal*, Vol. I (New York 1968) 44-45.
- 4.** Particularly Matthew 25:40 and 45: "I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me ... as often as you neglected to do it to one of these least ones, you neglected to do it to me."
- 5.** Quoted in *Le Monde* (Paris, March 21, 1981).
- 6.** See André Godin, *Psychologie des expériences religieuses* (Paris 1981), especially pp. 205-09.