

Conversion is of course intended to be only the first stage of a lifelong walk with God. A major fault in fundamentalist groups is to assume that after a quick ritual of “accepting Christ as personal Savior” the major work of conversion is done. In the USA, for example, some 40% of the population claims to be born again but this far exceeds the number of committed Christians. All areas of our lives need to be turned over to Christ for deeper healing and renewal. On a daily basis all of us need to repent of our sins and redirect our lives and actions to God. Every day we must experience God’s work saving and renewing us. Every day we need to be filled anew with the Holy Spirit. Besides daily spiritual renewal we need to make time for God to touch us more deeply by taking a few days off periodically to pray and reconsider what is happening in our lives. We need to read Scripture and spiritual books, make friends with spiritual people and frequent the sacraments as encounters with Christ in a devout and sincere fashion.

Converts to non-Christian religions

Another issue we have to deal with is people who leave Christianity altogether and claim to meet God in a non-Christian religion. Here for example we find people who have become disillusioned with an apparent lack of clear moral principles and practice and join Islam, or people who seeking mystical encounter with God and join an eastern religion. Again we have to rejoice that people have found God who were very weak Christians before: better a committed believer in another faith than an uncommitted Christian. However, in many cases these people have joined another faith because they have not understood or appreciated Christianity, and it is the role of apologists to dialogue powerfully with these on the mission of Christ and his work. These people have not rejected Christ but a weak and uninspiring masquerade of what he is.

Reaching those who need conversion

As committed Catholics we need to reach many classes of people both within the Church and outside it. We need to reach out to the morally depraved but also to the indifferent and worldly. We need to touch those in the spiritual darkness of non-Christian religions, as well as to the many agnostics and atheists in the world today. Finally we need to make contact with those outside the Catholic Church who have a faulty knowledge and appreciation of what Christ has left us, especially in the sacraments the Blessed Virgin Mary and other aspects of Catholic Christianity which our critics consider “unbiblical”.

The fullness of faith is in the Catholic Church

We should not conclude this pamphlet without stating very clearly that in it is in the Catholic Church that the fullness of Christ’s redemption and God’s love will be found. To be converted and to find Christ in all his fullness means becoming a Catholic. Whatever other Christians possess they have in some way derived from the Catholic Church: which was originally the only Christian church. Many have converted to Catholicism from other churches and especially today there are those who are rejoicing that the fullness of Christian truth is to be found in Catholic Christianity. Our task is to appreciate fully comprehend and spread abroad what we have as Catholics and share it with other Christians (Mt 10:32, 28:18-20).

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Pamphlet 444

Finding God: A Catholic perspective

Introduction

We live in an era of great crusades for spiritual renewal. We are assaulted continually by calls from “born-gain Christians” to “commit our lives to Jesus” or accept “Jesus as personal Savior.” Now Catholics have always been exhorted by powerful preachers to change their lifestyles, often to avoid spending eternity in hell. What Catholics are not used to is the notion that unless they make a personal commitment to Christ, regardless of having been baptized or confirmed they are not really Christians at all!

Conversion in the Church

Of course undergoing conversion is nothing new. The history of the Church is full of those who have found God for the first time or have had a profound spiritual encounter that changed their lifestyle. Scripture tells of the story of St Paul, struck blind and cast on the ground, and who later became perhaps the greatest Christian evangelist of all time. Christ’s own ministry was an awesome spectacle of conversions and miracles (see Acts 9:1-6). So were the first days of the Church after Pentecost Sunday (Acts 2:41).

Ultimately all who want to be known as Christians do have to make a personal decision for Christ, whether they have been baptized as infants or confirmed as children. And that is what many good Catholics do: they decide to follow God with all their hearts. Some will say that this occurred at a definite time in their lives. Others will not be able to say that at a definite point in time they made Christ the centre of their lives.

Christ himself is very forthright about the need to follow him. He actually has little to say about undergoing a religious ceremony and a lot to say about putting him first in life and living the

lifestyle that he lays down. However, in the early Church the point of conversion was marked by baptism (on Christ's own command: Acts 2:28, John 3:5). As time went by, the Church became filled with millions of people who went through the ritual of baptism without ever undergoing any personal conversion. It is not that the Church encouraged this state of affairs: throughout the ages the Church has ceaselessly campaigned for renewal and conversion, perhaps never more so than today

Finding God and leaving the Church

Today fundamentalist groups are preaching conversion. They insist that people undergoing conversions use formulas of commitment that Catholics are not familiar with and they claim explicitly or imply that those who do not use their formulas of commitment are not Christians at all. For example, they insist that one must "accept Jesus as personal Savior", an expression not found in the Bible. And because the Catholic church does not use their terminology Catholics are not seen as Christians and the Catholic church is not regarded as Christian. False preaching and evangelizing of this nature has caused untold damage to the Church, causing many to leave the Catholic Church or create in them serious doubts. While it is wonderful that many non-practicing Catholics have entered into a relationship with Christ it is tragic that they have left the Catholic Church in order to do so. The entire function of the Church is to place men in an ever-deepening relationship with Christ, and it has all the resources to do this. Fundamentalists and born again churches have lost or distorted so much of what Christ offers men that what they teach is but a pale reflection of the fullness of Christ's legacy to the Church.

Finding God in the Catholic Church

The first correction one has to make is to debunk the idea that one has to join a "born-again" church to be spiritually renewed. Today many have

experienced spiritual renewal through Catholic renewal movements, such as Charismatic Renewal, which is estimated to have reached some 75 million, or a tenth of all Catholics worldwide. In addition a trail of healings and conversions have marked modern Marian apparitions, such as Lourdes, and Fatima. In fact one of the main aims of the modern Church is spiritual renewal, a desire for which is echoed in many Church documents. The Church wants everyone to have a deep personal relationship with God that spills over into all aspects of life, and not simply to be a Sunday Christian who goes to church out of habit.

Problems in conversion for the Catholic

From a pastoral point of view "conversion" however can be difficult for the Church, particularly if people have already become known as staunch Catholics. They now claim to "know Jesus" or "have accepted him as Savior". What were they before? And why do some of these undergoing a conversion move out of the Catholic Church? We have to admit that a lot of what we sometimes regard as piety is not really evidence of a very deep relationship with God. A real appreciation of Christ as Savior and Lord seems often lacking amongst Catholics and a real living relationship with him in all the activities of life. Rather than having a deep faith in Christ Catholics may have their devotion centered in Mary or the saints or in receiving the sacraments regularly without being evangelized. In other words, Catholics may focus upon secondary aspects of the redemption instead of the primary ones, or fail to understand that these secondary aspects have no meaning apart from their value of imparting the redemptive work of Christ to us. We have been sacramentalized rather than evangelized.

The need to look after converts

However, this is not the only difficulty we have to face in the subject of conversion. Many who find God do not seem to have a very deep or lasting conversion. This is particularly true in the case of

people who have committed their lives to Christ, perhaps after attending an evangelistic crusade. People seem to change for a while and then lapse into their old ways and are now much more difficult to reach. Here we may say that Christ warned about this in the parable of the Sower. People can be caught up in a very worldly way of life. Others may not get support from friends. Others may just not be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to change their lifestyle. On a pastoral level it is important for leaders in the Church to nurture those who have had a conversion experience and not make light of it. Indeed conversions should be the main thrust of pastoral ministry, because most Catholics are not truly evangelized. Many of our parishes are not warm, friendly communities.

Religious experiences and conversion

Another area of difficulty is religious experience associated with conversion. While profound religious experiences often accompany conversion, this is not necessarily always the case. Overwhelming joy in finding Christ or great sorrow for sin is not something to be ashamed of, and those in pastoral ministry should not be surprised or alarmed when people get emotional. Neither should they be suspicious when people talk of visions of Christ or supernatural voices. It is upon experiences of God that the Church is built and these have occurred in every society and throughout the history of the Church. Great saints have often had great conversion experiences and their teaching and example has led countless thousands to God in wonderful encounters with the love and forgiveness God gives us in Christ. Conversion may be neither sudden nor very dramatic and neither may one have visions or speak in tongues. It is very wrong to put pressure on people to display these signs because it opens the door to fraud, and it makes conversion a matter of emotion rather than commitment to Christ.

Spiritual growth after conversion