

**FOLLOW**

**ME**

by

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Christian Moral Life

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*Follow me.* A simple phrase of Jesus used in various ways throughout the gospels no less than twenty times<sup>1</sup>. The most distinct of these are the various calls of the disciples of which Matthew 9:9 is typical

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus called Matthew and he responds immediately by following Jesus physically. But Jesus is not calling us to follow him just physically, but also in his example of how to live the moral life.

Such stories point to an instantaneous conversion of heart typical of the Evangelicals today when they ask, "When were you saved?" referring to a single time and place when you turned your life over to Jesus Christ. Evangelicals also use the term *born again* based on John 3:3-4

Jesus answered and said to him, Amen, Amen I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being *born from above*." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother's womb and be born again, can he?"

Here, in the Catholic translation the phrase used by Jesus is *born from above*. The King James Version uses the term *born again*, making the same mistake as Nicodemus, as Nicodemus did 2000 years ago. Thus, conversion is seen as an *experience* rather than as a *journey*. If we are to use the "birth" analogy, we should carry the analogy one step further. Julian of Norwich describes Jesus as mother when she says

To the property of motherhood belong nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge, and this is God. For though it may be so that our bodily bringing to birth is only little, humble, and simple in comparison with our spiritual bringing to birth, still it is him who does it in the creatures by whom it is done.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The New American Bible uses either "come after me" or "follow me."

<sup>2</sup> All Bible Verses taken from the New American Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Dupre and James Wiseman, O.S.B., *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Paulist Press, New York, 2001. 239.

Before we emerge from our mother's womb at our birth we are formed over time into our human physical form. Therefore, to be "born-again" is not *necessarily* an instantaneous experience. It takes time to convert in the womb of Jesus from our "secular" form to our new "spiritual" form. It is this *process* of conversion that is the subject of this paper.

Many describe baptism as the moment of conversion. However, in the early Church, Justin writes of three requirements for baptism to be initiated into the Church, sorrow for one's sins (put on a new heart), acceptance the Church as the teacher of truth, and evidence that one is *already* transforming to Christ. Thus, baptism is not to be viewed as a moment of conversion but rather a step along the way.

Exactly what are we being converted from and to? Without union with God, in our humanness, we are Adam and Eve. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were expelled from the Garden. Thus, we are creatures of the *flesh*, forever being tempted by fleshy or temporal desires. Yet we are also created in the *image of God*. This is the paradox of Bohr, who borrowing in part from Ratzinger says

Each human being is a complexus of disparate qualities, drives, abilities, weaknesses, strengths, etc. When it comes to the Mystery of God, the person, and spiritual realities, we today realize that "we must not look, in the Aristotelian fashion, for an ultimate concept encompassing the whole, but must be prepared to find a multitude of aspects which depend on the position of the observer and which we can no longer survey as a whole but only accept alongside each other."<sup>4</sup>

For example, we are creatures of the flesh who have sexual desires yet he describes the soul as asexual. For him, it is a paradox that cannot be resolved. I believe the term, mystery, as discussed in class is more appropriate as there may be an answer that we cannot know until we reside in the beatific vision. Is there a way to bring our body and soul closer in union on Earth? We do so by forsaken the Old Adam in favor of the New

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<sup>4</sup> David Bohr, *Catholic Moral Tradition, Rev. Ed*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor. 1999, 89.

Adam who is both human and divine. Jesus is the New Adam in Philippians 2:6-11.

Jesus reverses everything that Adam was and did.

Now, we turn to Scripture to examine the biblical notion of conversion. The Hebrew Word in the Old Testament closest to conversion is *shub*, which means to turn, a call to repentance. It is used by the Prophets (ex. Jer 7:3, Joel 2:13) as a call to reform by the Israelite people who have abandoned Yahweh. In the New Testament, the word is *metanoia*, which means a change of “mind”. To be like Jesus is the goal of this turning and changing. By entering into conversion, we become disciples of Christ.

For a role model there is Christ and the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12, Lk 6:20-26). But what role model do we have on Earth for conversion? Again, we look to the words of Jesus

Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:3-4).

Children are not examples of obedience but children do *love unconditionally*. If we want to enter into the kingdom of God we must do likewise. Thus, conversion is call for a *new heart or self*. This idea is found in the Old Testament

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 natural heart, so that they will live according to my statutes, and observe and carry out my ordinances; thus they shall be my people and I will be their God (Ek 11:20).

As well as the New Testament

That you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth (Eph 4:22-24)

As we see in the story of the rich young man (Mt 19:16-30) it is not enough to simply follow the law. To be moral, we must be willing to give up everything to be like Christ.

Faith is not as it *was* defined by the Church for many years – to submit one’s self to the intellectual teachings of the Church. Biblically, faith is to submit one’s self to God *completely*, trusting in Him for *all* things. Intellectual submission is just one part of this. We must also give ourselves religiously, affectively, and morally. To submit ourselves religiously is to be empowered to overcome our fallen nature to become Christ-like. Affective conversion involves putting on a new heart and seeing the world with the eyes of Christ through the Holy Spirit. We convert morally when we take the first three and apply them to our everyday action.

Therefore, Bohr describes sin as not conforming oneself to Christ. He cites the new Rite of Penance of 1973 (RP 6a, 15). “Likeness to Christ rather than conformity to a set of laws is the stated goal of our conversion from sin.”<sup>5</sup>

This idea of whole-person causes difficulty for me with regards to Gula’s spiral and his levels of engagement.<sup>6</sup> He discusses the concept of levels within us. To commit mortal sin is to do wrong on the deepest level. I believe that anything that potentially separates us from God regardless of the level should be avoided when possible, even if it is not mortal sin. To do otherwise, is not to turn ourselves wholly to Christ.

Bohr describes six principle concepts of conversion as found in the RCIA process. These six steps are best described as a spiritual journey (1) involving the whole person (2) towards Christ (3) and a covenantal relationship with God (4)<sup>7</sup>. We have discussed the whole person turning to Christ. Now, we will examine the notion of journey. Thus, it appears that conversion is an on-going process (the journey). How can we best

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<sup>5</sup> Bohr, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, 215-216

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> These are four of the six. The other two being a Sacramental Sign of transformation and conversion in an ecclesial environment.

describe the process? When we speak of our physical bodies we understand that growth is a process that takes time to reach maturity. We start out as infants totally dependent on others, taking a year just to learn to walk. Thus, we must also realize it takes time to learn to walk in Christ. The physical growth process can be described in stages of infancy, toddlers, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Psychology also describes life in stages. Jean Piaget (*Psychology*, 438-440) separates our development into four stages. The first is the Sensorimotor Period where we learn to coordinate our body responses to our environment. Here, in the spiritual life we are becoming aware of God's presence in our lives. Next comes, the preoperational period where we begin to develop our use of mental images, followed by the Concrete Operational Period where one begins to think for oneself but everything has to be concrete.<sup>8</sup> There is no ability to extend the rules to abstract situations. This is like the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-30 who follows the law but does not understand how to go beyond the law. Finally comes the Formal Operational Period where we learn to abstract new principles and understand new situations in light on previous experiences. In the spiritual life it is here that we are able to see the spirit of the law and who we are called to be.

Pinckaers describes virtue as progressive and places it into three stages. We begin in the Discipline Stage where we learn by practice.<sup>9</sup> In the moral life, this practice is to follow the laws found in Scripture. We follow the law because it is the law (Concrete Operational Period). In our psychological development we first learn by Conditioned

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Piaget in Weiten, Wayne, *Psychology: Themes and Variations, Fourth Edition*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Pacific Grove, CA, 1998. 438-440.

<sup>9</sup> Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. Trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995. 359ff.

Learning. If we do A we get B. If we want B we learn to do A to get it. But if B is punishment then we learn to avoid A. This would follow a casuistic form of law. We follow the law because of the consequences. However, as we practice it over and over we integrate it into our whole being, making it part of our core identity. When we do this we have begun to move into Pinckaers second stage of Progress. It is the beginning of virtue. We are moving to what Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount, we are internalizing the meaning of the law.

Pinckaers calls his last stage, Maturity. The behavior we have been practicing is fully integrated into our person. We have taken the Law, incorporated it into ourselves and merged it with our own identity, adding our own distinctiveness to it. It is this stage that others see the gifts of the Holy Spirit manifested in us. It is here that we can begin to live freedom as Freedom of Excellence. Freedom of excellence states that we are only truly free when we strive to become Christ-like. It seems to be a paradox but it is in the Freedom of Excellence that we are freed from slavery to sin and choose God. In the discipline stage, we see everything as a choice to do whatever we want. In Freedom of Excellence we see life as the moral life, seeking to do good and live a life for Christ.

This would seem to say when we reach spiritual maturity we have completed our conversion to Christ. We can indeed reach a point where our behavior seems to reach maturity. In many ways we do reach a plateau of maturity but the plateau is still an uphill incline to Jesus. We are never totally conformed to Christ, or we would never sin. Thus, our conversion is a journey that never ends.

Finally, “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). What is our Father perfect in? God is perfect in love. We can talk about our conversion

in terms of the Two Greatest Commandments; love thy God with all your heart, and to love thy neighbor as yourself. There are four types of love found in the New Testament. *Epithumia* is the love that is physical love, lust. It would not seem to have a place in love for God except in the basic desire we have that calls us to Christ. Next is *Eros*, which is passionate love. *Philia* is brotherly love where I believe we reach the plateau of maturity in our conversion. However, that is not the highest level of love. The highest form of love is unselfish and sacrificial love, known as *agape*. The only place *agape* is used in the New Testament is to describe Jesus death on the Cross as his love for us. Few, if any, reach this level of love on Earth. Therefore, to love at this level of *agape* is to be Christ-like, to be moral.

To conclude, I return to the Old Adam to New Adam concept and the Gospel of John

Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me (John 12:24-26).

In our conversion, we must turn from our earthly life as Adam in favor of eternal life with God by striving to be moral, to be Christ-like, the new Adam. Only in doing so does our behavior cease to be simply law abiding and become moral, a matter of choice.



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