

The Process of Conversion

Most commentators on the new Rite of Penance whom I have heard or read in recent months have spoken of a "process of conversion" or a "process of reconciliation." By this they mean that the Father in His steadfast mercy, sends His Spirit to move us to a conversion, a change of heart, a new way of life. When this has taken place, then we are able to celebrate this reconciliation with the Church in a sacramental way.



A comparison might serve to illustrate this idea of process more clearly.

I have begun again to exercise my joyous responsibility of ordaining young men to the priesthood; it is a part of my ministry that I deeply cherish and enjoy. The ordination ceremony celebrates and seals the commitment of a person to deep union with Christ for the sacramental ministry in and for the Church. For a long time, perhaps long before a person has begun a definite course to prepare for priesthood, the faith and spirit of service begin to grow toward blossoming. The celebration of Holy Orders blesses what is there already, and raises it to be a public sign of Christ's loving care for His Church. After the ceremony takes place, the faith and service of the priest continue to deepen and grow, bringing the People of God closer together with each other in God's Son.

The sacrament of Penance is the same: it celebrates and seals the renewed commitment of the penitent. For a period of time — in some cases, over many years — God's Spirit encourages and invites us to come back, gradually

our love and longing for God begin to grow, and we start turning away from sin. The sacramental celebration seals and blesses the renewed life that is there already, and it raises it to a public sign of Christ's love and forgiveness. Then the forgiven persons are restored to full union with the Church at the eucharistic table; from then on, our lives are to bear great fruit in love, prayer, worship, penance and works of service of every kind.

The effect, then, of seeing Penance as a process is to bring the celebration of the sacrament alive and place it in the fuller flow of our Christian lives. Penance is the wholehearted attempt to turn ourselves around and return home to the Father.

The Introduction to the new Rite of Penance (paragraphs 4 and 6) addresses itself to the parts and progress of this process of conversion and reconciliation. There are four parts to the Sacrament: contrition, confession, the act of penance and absolution.

The first of these — contrition — the new rite calls "the most important act of the penitent." It is the heartfelt turning of ourselves around, sensing deeply the brokenness and weakness of our lives. More than just a heavy sadness, "this is a profound change of the whole person." It is not a product of our own efforts, but rather the fruit of God's merciful love, a work of the Holy Spirit.

And truly, contrition must be the work of the Spirit encouraging us, because we are called upon to do the serious work of considering, judging and rearranging our lives according to the holiness and love of God, and the vision and precepts of the Gospel. I suspect that you have discovered what I have discovered: that the work of conversion is no easy task! Contrition or

conversion of heart is progressive, gradually making us more and more like Christ. Sometimes we resist this working of the Holy Spirit; we are hard-hearted, insulated against the warmth of the Father's friendship.

Yet in many subtle and everyday ways we are coaxed out of our shell, invited to return home, tripped up in our own foolishness by the work of the Holy Spirit.

For example, a particular difficulty or crisis might arise unexpectedly in our lives. A sudden sickness or death, an extra financial burden, a move to another city — these and many other possible events could serve to divide us, shake our security, threaten our faith. Yet through these difficult moments the redemptive power of Christ's own sufferings is calling us to receive new harmony and peace from the Lord. In allowing ourselves to be moved by that call, we find that our reconciliation has already begun.

The spirit of contrition could be triggered in many other ways as well. The kind and loving act or work of service of a neighbor and friend continues to be a sign of God's love active in our world; in this type of sharing, God is present and hearts are brought closer together. Our own prayer and the study of Scripture make the outlook of the Gospel more fully our own. A reading of the Scriptures at Sunday Mass, a particular phrase from the homily, a challenging word or an encouraging word — all these examples and many more may work in the service of the Spirit to call us to a repentance and conversion.

Being thus called, we are moved in the depths of our hearts and souls to seek out the forgiveness of the Father and reconciliation within the Church. Next week we shall write of these other parts of the sacrament of Penance.

Pope Hails, Warns, Challenges Newsmen

On 28 February the Holy Father received the members of the Foreign Press Association in Italy and addressed them as follows:

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Foreign Press Association in Italy!

We are particularly happy to welcome in your persons, the qualified and well-deserving representatives of the foreign press in Rome. Your Society, in fact, because of the long experience it has accumulated, the international character of its membership and even more the brotherly spirit that pervades it, is an eloquent example of peaceful collaboration and emulation in your high function of informing the public.

For us, furthermore, this meeting is a propitious opportunity to thank you for the contribution you made, in various ways, to the course of the Holy Year. And since you are the direct expression of public opinion, we are happy now to repeat in your presence what we said, in connection with the Jubilee, to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps, accredited to the Holy See: the Holy Year has shown that the Church is alive! The millions of faithful who flocked to Rome were the representatives not only of what could be called popular Christianity, but also of young people and believers wishing to deepen and mature their faith.

As for you, the fact of exercising your profession here in Rome enables you to observe from close up the life of the Church, at her heart. This would appear to make it easy for you to get to know this institution. However, on closer consideration, it calls for a far more

attentive observation of the extraordinary complexity of the Church herself.

It is important that we recognize this complexity of the Church: a religious fact par excellence, which claims to reach in a mysterious reality a living and supernatural relationship with Divinity, a historical fact, unquestionably an extraordinary one because of its interior consistency, its duration for two thousand years and its tormented, but always tenacious existence; a human fact, to which a free and spontaneous, but extremely solid organization gives a specific social character, that of the People of God, a visible, organized society, different and autonomous, but living together with, and in fact, fundamentally animating, temporal society.

You have to observe before you can inform. We know that it is often difficult for you to understand us. We ourselves feel clothed in mystery, and often we cannot renounce being better known by you, not so much in our exterior phenomena, which may sometimes be inferior to what they personify and represent, but in the authenticity of our spiritual and messianic investiture. There then come to our lips the ancient words of one of the first apologists of Christianity, Tertullian, who defended it, lawyer as he was, with the famous words: "ne ignorata damnetur", let it not be condemned because it is unknown (cf. Apol I; PL I, 308).

Now, if the internal life of the Church — which is a communion of faith, and not a mere sharing of opinions — requires, to be fully understood, an examination that is already illuminated by faith, this does not escape, however, the observation and critical judgment of the journalist, who has the task of informing the public about it, as he does, moreover, for other societies or for the various intellectual movements. It is natural, therefore, that we should ask you, Ladies and Gentlemen, to have, with regard to the Church and her members,

with regard to what is really essential and specific in her structures and her teaching, a careful attention, a special sensibility, never less than that understanding attitude and that respect which is reserved for other societies or organisms having the right of citizenship and of expression in the world.

The relations of the Church with the States and, in a more general sense, her interventions in the temporal field, are also the object of different interpretations. According to some people, the Church should limit herself to proclaiming the Gospel, without interfering in the temporal sector; according to others, on the contrary, the Church should put the whole weight of her moral authority in the battle of justice and in the struggle against all unjust oppression. It is a question, obviously, of two extreme positions, while the problem should be posed — we think — in a different way: the liberation of man is, actually, an aspect which is inseparable from his complete salvation, operated by Jesus Christ. For this liberation the Church commits herself with all her might, but without ever renouncing the direct proclamation of the Gospel, which is the supreme purpose of her mission.

Be careful to defend always and everywhere the just rights and the true freedom of persons, without making partial discrimination, as happens, unfortunately, owing to the political regimes that are in question, or to the personal choices which make us sensitive only with regard to the victims whose ideas or convictions we share.

Be the defenders of human life, wherever it is threatened, particularly of those who are helpless; or when recourse to war does not seem justified by an absolute necessity of justice.

Do not remain silent when the dignity and the honour of the human person are threatened by violence, economic exploitation, and the decay of morals, of which our permissive society too often gives a sorry display.