

COURIER-JOURNAL

• February 20, 1985 •

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. All contents copyright © 1984 by NC News Service.

Faith Today

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

Conversions come about when people reach a point in life where they know that things just can't keep going the way they're going. Something has to give. They may not know which way they're going to turn, but one thing is certain. They can't keep going on the road they're on.

Let me illustrate.

□ □ □

My friend Pat is a wife and mother who recently went through what I see as a conversion. This conversion was not written in mystical terms. Some may not even consider it religious. It certainly wasn't dramatic. But I believe it is the kind of conversion that lies at the heart of a lived Christian faith.

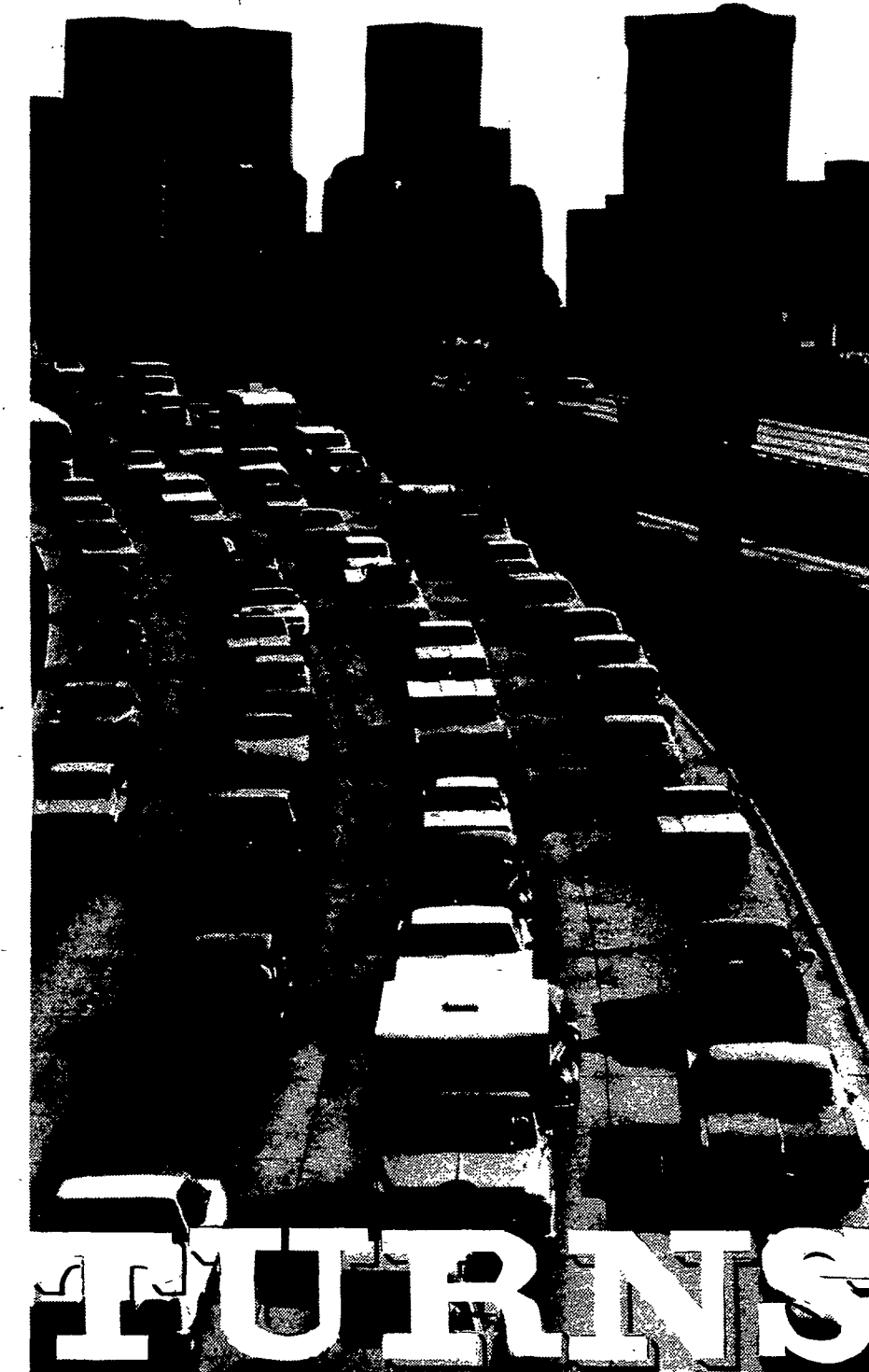
This story is so ordinary it has probably been lived out thousands of times. Pat's family, like many families, was held together by the personality of her mother. Her mother was a strong-willed and supportive woman. She was counselor and friend to her husband and children, the focal point for the celebration of holidays and family festivals, the glue that held it all together.

She also was a marvelous stage manager, able to turn family gatherings into celebrations that everyone remembers fondly. Her death a few years ago was a great loss.

Pat noticed that ever since then the solid family no longer seemed all that solid. With her mother gone, people began to go their own ways. Everyone missed the holiday gatherings and birthday celebrations, but no one wanted to take on the hard work of pulling them all together.

Pat didn't want to step in. She had her husband and children and her own life to live. And she valued their independence and privacy. Assuming her mother's public role and opening the doors of her house and her life to the whole family was something she had never bargained for.

But she saw what was happening to the family, especially her children. Her own faith was made concrete through images and memories connecting faith with religious holidays and family festivals. She wanted the same



Lent The manner of Paul's conversion, dramatic and memorable, is probably the exception rather than the rule, writes Father David O'Rourke. More often than we think, he says, the possibility of conversion lies in all the myriad turning points of life.

kind of faith for her children, but was convinced she was losing the battle.

How, she asked herself, would her children get their religious images without the big, family celebrations?

This need was brought home forcefully to her when her 6-

year-old announced that Sesame Street was more fun than Thanksgiving. Then he left the table in the middle of Thanksgiving dinner to watch television. That could never have happened at grandmother's.

After several weeks of reluctance and indecision, she and her

husband invited the family to their home for Christmas dinner. She knew what that might mean, not just for this one festival but for all future crises and celebrations as well. As her mother had done 45 years previously, she was going public.

A simple family transition? I think it's much more. I see it as authentic religious conversion.

□ □ □

Think of conversion and what comes to mind?

The one conversion we may all be familiar with is St. Paul's. His account, described in the Acts of the Apostles, is read at Mass every year. St. Paul was thrown to the ground, struck blind for a while and then went off to become the greatest missionary in the early church.

Most conversions, I suspect, are not so dramatic. Neither are conversions rare or exotic. Religious conversions are common, so common we often don't recognize them for what they are. They are as common for people who are already Catholics as they are for people joining the church for the first time.

We miss seeing them, I believe, because we assume that conversions affect only non-believers, and we expect conversions to be something extraordinary.

In these expectations we miss seeing what is really at the heart of a conversion, which is a change of life.

Conversion literally means a turning, a turning point in life. I believe we reach these turning points more frequently than we recognize. It is helpful to recognize our conversions because they can be sources of personal renewal and religious strength.

□ □ □

For some people a conversion is a single and personal turning to God.

For others, like Pat, it is a turning to the Christ we find in the community he founded — others who are close to us.

In both situations, conversion is a common part of our experience of faith.

(Father O'Rourke is associate director of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)