

One man's conversion attracts others to the church

By Father Paul Cuddy
Courier columnist

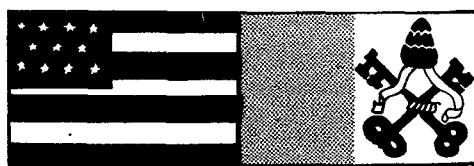
In 1955 a young airman named Bob White came to my chaplain's office on Nouasseur Air Base, near Casablanca, Morocco.

I remember that the 23-year-old airman had a fair complexion, light curly hair, blue eyes and a friendly smile. I had met him on occasion with his buddy, Don Skolundunas, who came from a strong Lithuanian Catholic background.

Interest in religion among many young men was high in 1955 — especially at our air base. Protestant Pentecostals were evangelizing with the vigor of Jehovah's Witnesses so religious debates were common. As shepherd of my flock, I was not remiss in the area of evangelization.

White sat down and our dialogue went as follows:

B.W.: "I want to join the Catholic Church."



ON THE RIGHT SIDE

Fr. C.: "Why? We've got enough bad ones of our own without adding another to the list. If you should become a Catholic you must be a good one. What gave you the idea of becoming a Catholic?"

B.W.: "The Protestant mission I made last week."

Fr. C.: "I don't get the point. Why should the Protestant mission give you the idea of becoming a Catholic?"

B.W.: "Oh, it's very much to the point. At the mission service I sat in the middle of the chapel. The preacher was a Southern Baptist. I am a Lutheran. The fellows

around me were Methodists, Presbyterians and others, especially Pentecostals who are the most energetic. I thought to myself, 'The one Christian church which goes back to Christ is the Catholic Church,' so I want to belong to that Church."

Fr. C.: "Well, that's correct history, but you've got some work ahead of you."

I gave him intensive instructions. He was well instructed in Lutheranism. Lutherans are the best instructed in their religion and probably closest to the Catholic religion. White was intelligent, virile and interested. He absorbed the load of things I gave him to study, which included the Correspondence Course offered by the Knights of Columbus.

The course consisted of six tests with 100 questions each. They were corrected by seminarians at the former St. Bernard's Seminary. Some months later I had the happy honor of receiving him into the church, and Skolundunas was his sponsor.

A month later White came to my chapel office all excited, saying:

"Father, a master sergeant in my outfit wants to become a Catholic. Will you instruct him?"

"Oh, Bob, I can't. I'm up to my neck in work and simply can't do more. I'll tell you what. You instruct him," I groaned.

"Me, instruct him?" he said with an astonished look.

"Why not? You've just had an intensive instruction. You probably know the faith better than anyone on the base excepting myself."

"Father, I'd love to!" he replied.

At the Easter Vigil in 1955, White was the sponsor for the master sergeant.

When White returned to civilian life he brought both his brother and sister-in-law into the church. He had written to me that his brother had such fears of the Catholic Church that when he saw White's rosary beads on the dresser he backed off as if they were a poisonous reptile. He became engaged to a Methodist girl, who became a strong Catholic. It tickled my ego when he wrote that they named their first child Paul.

I don't know why some Catholics have problems about the faith. White struck the right cord when he said: "I want to belong to the church which goes back to Jesus Christ, and that is the Catholic Church."

The Holy Spirit is the gift of God's new covenant

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) John 12:20-33; (R1) Jeremiah 31:31-34; (R2) Hebrews 5:7-9.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, the first reading deals with God's promise to make a new covenant with the house of Israel. The covenant will be new because it will not just merely give the law, which is something external. Rather, it will consist in giving something internal: "I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts." What did this mean?

The great gift of the old covenant was the law: the Ten Commandments. The great gift of the new covenant is the Holy Spirit. Law never touches the heart. Law tells what one ought to do, but does not enable one to do it.

In the new covenant, a new law is given: "I will give you a new covenant: As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 13:34). But at the same time, all are given the power to keep the law. That power is the Holy Spirit, which is poured into our hearts at baptism.

A whole new relationship between God and ourselves results from this outpouring. The spirit changes our hearts, disposes them to do God's will and empowers them.

A criminal finds it hard to keep the civil law. But suppose something changed his heart and mind so that he sees law in an entirely different light and realizes the joy and goodness in keeping it. Then he would have no more difficulty in observing the law than any other ordinary citizen. Similarly, the spirit changes us in regard to the things of God.

Thus in the Responsorial Psalm, we pray



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

four times: "Create a clean heart in me, O God. Put a steadfast spirit within me."

The Gospel gives us further insight into what is "new" about the new covenant. The old covenant was offered to only one nation, but the new covenant offers salvation to all nations — the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

Thus the Gospel tells us of the Greeks and the Gentiles, who are seeking an audience with Jesus. Whom you know seems to make a difference because the Greeks seeking Jesus went to the two apostles with Greek names: Philip and Andrew.

When Philip and Andrew informed Jesus, he replied, "The hour has come" — meaning the hour for the salvation of all mankind. Then Jesus went on to explain that it will come through his sufferings and death. "Once I am lifted up (on the cross and at the Ascension), I will draw all men

to myself."

The sacrament of baptism, which so many will receive at the end of Lent, provides us with the Holy Spirit. The first thing he does is to transform our very being so that we share in the very nature of God and become children of the father. "Spirit begets spirit."

Thus, the Lord's Prayer was first said by catechumens only after baptism. This transformation is called "sanctifying grace." It is "grace" because the new life is a sheer gift of God, unmerited and undeserved by us (Eph. 2:5-9). And it is "sanctifying" because it makes us holy as God himself is holy (Isaiah 6:3).

Confirmation deepens the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. What remains for us to do is to respond to the promptings of the spirit within us, as Jesus did to the will of his father. Our first response should be devotion to the Holy Spirit.

We ought daily to pray to the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with love, and to help us and guide us on the way to holiness. Prayer is the cloud that causes the spirit to rain down upon us his fruit and his gifts.

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