

## Genuine conversion is about God

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Forty-five years ago the late Father John A. O'Brien, a celebrated street preacher and best-selling author of books on the Catholic faith, published a volume called "The Road to Damascus: The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Fifteen Converts to Catholicism."

The title referred to one of the most famous conversion-experiences in history; namely, that of Paul of Tarsus, "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," as he made his way along the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1, 3-9).

The four-and-a-half decades that have passed since the publication of Father O'Brien's extraordinarily popular book represent more than a quantitative advance of years. There has been a qualitative advance of time as well, bordering on a sea change.

Between 1949 and 1994 the world has witnessed previously unimagined progress in transportation and communication. Men have landed on the moon. We make instantaneous contact with others around the globe via satellite, facsimile messages, electronic mail, and the like. And Communism has collapsed.

In 1949 the Catholic Church was still 13 years from the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Anyone with even a smattering of knowledge about pre- and post-Vatican II Catholicism appreciates how very different the face



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and shape of the church now appear.

Catholics were wont to boast in 1949 of famous individuals — in sports, politics, the theater, or academia — who took the dramatic step from atheism, agnosticism, or some other faith-tradition to Catholicism. Their decision somehow validated our own place within the church.

On the other hand, we found it difficult to acknowledge that the road to Damascus had two-way traffic on it. For every one person who left a non-Catholic base to take up spiritual residence in the Catholic Church, there was at least one other who was moving in the opposite direction. And that is certainly the case today, with the balance tipped perhaps in the oppo-

site direction.

In the late 1940s, however, we didn't make much of the reverse movement. We tended to discount such behavior as morally perverse, or at least eccentric.

Priests who resigned from active ministry to marry and/or to exercise ministry in another church were far more confounding. They were spoken of furtively and in hushed tones.

Such thoughts came to mind recently with the news that a married Episcopal bishop in Fort Worth, Texas, has announced his intentions to join the Catholic Church in January, following his retirement, and then to become a Catholic priest.

Bishop Clarence Pope has been a leader of the Episcopal Church's traditionalist wing, having founded five years ago the ultra-conservative Episcopal Synod of America.

In another time, before Vatican II, Catholic school children would have been fully briefed on the significance of such a move — by a bishop no less — from one portion of the Body of Christ to another. Only it wouldn't have been put that way.

Bishop Pope's "conversion" would have been seen as a real conversion, as a turning away from a life of sin, without God, without Christ, to a life of selfless generosity, a life oriented wholly now toward God, in full embrace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But neither this case nor the few others that have made the news in re-

cent years are conversion-experiences in the full theological sense of the term.

Bishop Pope has told reporters that he had come to believe that the seat of authority in the church had been divinely placed in Rome from the time of the Apostle Peter. However, the issue that seems to have really prompted his action (and the actions of others before him) is the Episcopal Church's decision to ordain women to the priesthood.

But even taking the bishop's stated motive at face value, would an acceptance of the authority of the Bishop of Rome constitute a conversion-experience?

No, because conversion has to do with our relationship with God, and more immediately with Jesus Christ. Everything else, even if it should bear a resemblance to conversion, is at a qualitatively different level.

For an Episcopalian to become a Roman Catholic is only a matter of conversion if he or she had not already accepted Christ. Otherwise the "conversion" is really an ecclesiastical shift from one portion of the Body of Christ to another.

This is not to diminish the significance or the importance of such a shift. The point is only to preserve the unique significance and importance of a genuine conversion-experience.

Conversion is not about ecclesiastical structures and discipline. It is about God and Jesus Christ.

## Catholics must take lead managing diversity

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

Should Catholics take the lead in "managing diversity" in the workplace? The Catholic Health Association says it should.

In a new publication, "Diversity in the Workplace: A Resource Manual," the St. Louis-based CHA argues that Catholics in general — and Catholic hospitals specifically — have a special responsibility to get out front on this very volatile issue.

"More important than economic or social reasons, our Catholic heritage, demonstrated through the social teachings of the church, directs us to respect the dignity of each person and the meaning of work," said Sister Joanne Lappetito, RSM, chairperson of the agency's Task Force on Diversity in the Workplace.

"To live our heritage we must strive to create just work environments that are free of discrimination and other barriers that make Catholic health or-



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ganizations less inclusive and less inviting places of employment," she noted.

Diversity in the workplace has become one of the "hot button" issues of the 1990s. A look at a few statistics shows why. Right now, women, people of color, and immigrants (many

of them non-English speaking) comprise more than 50 percent of the U.S. labor force. By the year 2000, 85 percent of all new workers entering the labor force will be female, African-American, Asian-American, Latino, or new immigrants.

In addition, within 25 years, one out of every four workers in America will be age 55 or older. Finally, there are 43 million people with disabilities in this country who can now seek equal employment opportunities under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

"Fostering workplace diversity is about building an organizational culture that embraces personal differences and encourages heterogeneous groups of persons to work together toward a common end," said Sister Lappetito, the senior associate for corporate and social ethics at CHA. "However, achieving common goals in a collaborative spirit may be impossible if we fail to recast existing negative behaviors regarding individual differences."

But why should Catholic institutions take the lead in this task? Partly because of Catholic teaching on the common good, she insists. "The common good embraces the differences of gender, race, and culture and draws on the richness of the gifts and talents of many cultures. The common good is inclusive of everyone's contributions and is realized more fully when individuals and communities work together for the good of all," she said.

Sister Lappetito noted that managing diversity in the workplace includes a major change in thinking. "It is now a manager's responsibility to foster the acceptance, as opposed to the assimilation, of differences that are rooted in an individual's expression of human nature," she said.

"The moral persuasion associated with the Catholic moral tradition will cause many in health-care careers to look to Catholic institutions for leadership," Lappetito concluded.

That will be true in many other professions as well.

### Kids' Chronicle Answer Key

R	U	Z	Z	I	A	H	S
W	A	J	E	H	U	A	M
J	L	S	T	Q	P	I	G
J	D	A	V	I	D	Z	X
O	M	U	C	E	B	A	O
A	A	L	T	N	H	M	E
S	E	Z	B	A	H	A	A
H	E	Z	E	K	I	A	H

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