

# COLUMNS COMMENTARY

## We can convert ourselves from the outside in

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ  
Courier columnist

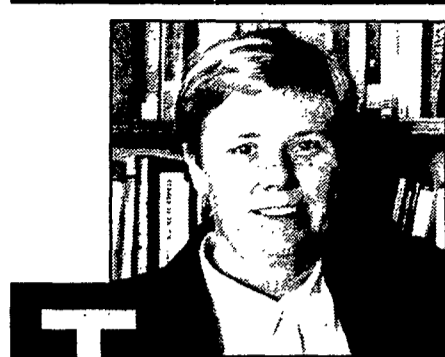
One way to express the goal of the Christian life is in terms of personal conversion, or transformation. We are all in the process of "putting on Christ," learning to be His disciples in new and better ways.

Identifying this as the goal of our lives, of course, still leaves open the question of how the transformation takes place. To answer this question, we often talk about God's grace, God's action in our lives, and our response to God. We continually are being transformed into "the new person" God calls into being through God's grace and our response.

I used to think that this continual conversion process happened exclusively "from the inside out." That is, I thought that God would first transform my interior being, my heart, my mind, my unconscious feeling and thought processes. Grace would act on my innermost self and, afterward, my actions would follow.

In this framework, I thought that God had to put a great love of prayer in my heart, which I would need to "feel" or be conscious of. Then I would begin to pray often and with the heart of someone who loves to pray. My outward, observable actions would follow an interior conversion of heart.

Another example might be love of the poor. For a long time, I thought



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that as soon as God put a great love for the poor in my heart, my actions would follow. I would begin to take up the cause of the poor and begin to act on their behalf. I might work in a soup kitchen, or help people in need link up with agencies and groups that might help them. I thought God had to act within me before my external actions would change.

This picture of "conversions from the inside out" is a true account of some of the transformations that have come about in my life. But it does not capture the reality of all of these conversions. In fact, many of the transformations in my life have occurred in just the reverse order. They have occurred "from the outside in."

Many times the interior conversions of my heart seem to be the result of outward actions I have undertaken. My change of heart seems to rely on some action I have taken, or some new experience that has occurred in my life. For me, waiting for God to "zap" my soul so that I would come to love prayer and make a habit of it did not seem to happen. In fact, it wasn't until I started praying that my "interior disposition" toward prayer changed at all! It was the activity of praying that seemed to help change my heart.

Similarly, any love for the poor I know within me seems to have followed upon very concrete actions I undertook with and on behalf of poor people. Waiting for an interior grace of love for the poor in order to serve in a soup kitchen is one way to proceed. But I have found that getting up and serving in the soup kitchen is what encourages a love for the poor within me.

I think that many times our experiences and actions are a source of conversion and transformation for us. This means, of course, that what I do is very important, since it can actually affect who I become!

Two wonderful 20th-century theologians hint at this sort of "conversion from the outside in." In a passage from his book "The Cost of Discipleship," Dietrich Bonhoeffer advises Christians that if their faith seems weak, they should get up and

perform a concrete act of care for another person. If I heard someone's faith was weak, I'd probably tell the person to go to church, or say more prayers, or spend more time in reflection on Scripture. Instead, Bonhoeffer tells such a person to go DO something for another as an aid to his or her own faith development.

Johann Metz says much the same thing. If you find some "unbelief" within yourself, seek out someone who's poor or down on her luck, and spend some time with that person. It's good for your faith, Metz tells us.

If this is true, and your own experience may verify that it is, then the concrete actions we perform actually make a whole lot of difference in terms of who we become and how our faith takes shape. It's also somewhat simple to think about: if we want to become good prayers, we should pray. If we want to become good at charity or love of God and neighbor, we should perform concrete acts of help for others. If we want to share in God's love of the poor and marginalized, we should spend some time with those people. If we want to become honest people, we should tell the truth.

What's good for our souls, it seems, is what we do with our bodies! Sometimes it behooves us to remember that what happens in our souls actually depends on where we put ourselves and what we do.



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