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From the Editor's Desk [Theological Studies, September 2013]

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Theologians cannot but talk about conversion. The foundational relationship between Creator and creation, God and humanity, demands it. This year's meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America proved how rich the theme is, applicable to virtually all areas of theological reflection. The theme is especially timely in this 50th anniversary year of Vatican II, a reform council that called the church then and now to conversion. Many commentators have observed that the council was itself a three-year conversion experience for the Council Fathers, calling the whole people of God to conversion.

Discussions at the CTSA reminded us that Christian conversion refers to the whole of the Christian life, marking both the moment of initiation and the ongoing reality of *becoming* Christian, for being Christian is never a static state; we are always converting either toward or away from God, both individually and in dependence on our fellow pilgrims with and through whom we move toward God.

Christian conversion refers essentially and always to Jesus Christ, the central mystery of the revelation offered to us, individually and collectively. It is a revelation that both changes us in the moment (say, of baptism) and also initiates us into a transforming personal relationship with God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, for Christians, conversion is both an initial event and an ongoing process empowered by the Spirit, who incorporates us into Christ and his body, the church, leading us more truly to God as well as all the other realities of our lives to which we relate in constantly evolving ways. It is a process that can only finally be called mystical, "putting on Christ" and living now in him and he in us.

Conversion is also always and necessarily conjoined with what we are converted *from*—from what is not Christ/Christian to what is. Thus conversion always arises in a positive sense out of the nonreality of sin, the absence of grace, the denial of grace. As such, the movement of conversion is from an ungraced or less graced state to a more intimate identification with the Christ-self. Typically, grace meets and conquers the resistance that is sin. Negatively, the grace-experience entails a dread of losing what we have been comfortable with: some changes we welcome, others we resist. The trick is to "manage" the change. For Christians, this is always done in reference to Jesus Christ; it is always change managed within the ethos of his good news and finally his Paschal Mystery.

Necessarily linked with conversion and sin is concupiscence and "original sin," that state of infantile narcissism in which we are born, and out of which we are meant to be transfigured from self-centeredness to other-centeredness. This transfiguration is not automatic. It is a vocation that requires *obedience* in the etymological sense of *listening to* the other as sacrament of the Wholly Other; to the other who beckons us from centripetal narcissism to centrifugal other-directedness—the very same directedness to which the church is called

and in which we actuate other-directedness: we find our true selves by losing our self-centered selves in the other.

Ironically, infantile narcissism is innately other-directed. The purpose of the infant's primal scream is survival—to have its needs met. The infant instinctively knows that only an other can meet its needs. While its scream is for its own needs, it is other-directed, because only the other can help the infant survive and grow. The primal scream, therefore, implies a primal leaning toward the other—and ultimately toward the Wholly Other for ultimate survival. When the need is met, the other is rewarded with a smile: losing ourselves in the other/Wholly Other results in the joy of a self-unfolding into and through relationship to the other/Wholly Other.

What I have described is a rudimentary theological anthropology, a line-drawing of the human person's vocation to selfhood in God. But living out this vocation is almost never linear. It is typically convoluted, a journey tracked and sidetracked by sirens of all sorts—beckoning or warning, true or false, generally ambiguous. This is so because as social beings we swim in a sea of flawed interrelationality. We typically hew to the signals of our immediate socializers, who have typically hewed to the signals of culture. The most adept socializers discern between true and false signals and inculcate this power of discernment in their offspring. The less adept become creatures of culture, who, insufficiently critical and self-reflective, pass on this tendency to their offspring, who in turn. . . .

This phenomenon makes conversion a more dramatic occurrence than it would be in an Eden world. Dramatic, because conversion requires not only choosing growth *for* oneself but also *against* false cultural norms, those that support the self-centering aspects of our socioeconomic systems. This choosing elicits counterpressures, making conversion to other-centered living a challenge: recidivism an ever-present allure.

The church is the home of conversion. By nature it is the body of converts that promotes and supports conversion. It is the "support group" for those who choose to grow out of self-centeredness toward other-centeredness, mission-centeredness, in obedience to the Lord who mandates us to "go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature."

Above I spoke of Vatican II's call for the conversion of the entire people of God. But clearly the conversion heralded by the council is far from complete. Indeed, it can never be complete, since we are *ecclesia semper reformanda* (Luther). But the process has also been impeded and prolonged, because almost from the beginning many succumbed to recidivism, turning the church back in on herself—*incurvata in se* (again Luther). Now, however, and blessedly, a new pope is calling us to turn from that tendency and once again to embrace whole-heartedly the missionary call toward the other.

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