

Second Conversion

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MUCH has been written and said on what is commonly called the 'leakage' (of Catholics from the Church), and it has for the most part been rightly attributed to circumstances such as the lack of a good Catholic upbringing, lax example in the home, mixed marriages, and possible faults in the way the Faith is taught to children. Nevertheless there remain a fair number of defections among souls who have no such excuses. Some who have had the advantage of a good Catholic home and education, and who have shown more than average devotion to their religion, fall away, and it may be helpful to enquire into what appears likely to be at least one of the occasions of these failures.

A Spiritual Experience

Some may have experienced just such a crisis as a result of war, or of other major crises in their lives. Indeed many in the 50s and 60s had such a crisis as a result of the war of 39 to 45. But the spiritual experience about to be described is not confined to times of war and upheaval, for, I believe, all earnest souls, whose religion is more than a mere formality, must pass through it in some form or other. Our modern unrest may precipitate it and make it take a more obvious and even violent form. This in itself is not a bad thing though it adds to its dangers. It is a good thing in so far as it makes the crisis more marked and the act of the will, which is its proper culmination, more definite. The danger is that the soul may not be so well habituated in the practices of religion as it would be in later life, and thus can throw off religious exercises and even duties more easily.

We speak of our spiritual life and that is the first point that must be stressed and realized. Grace is Life. Our Lord never uses the word 'grace' but speaks incessantly of Life. He came to give us life. 'I come that they may have life and may have it more abundantly' (Jn 10:10). By Baptism we are born again into this new life (Jn 3:5). Now there is one very obvious thing about all life: that it must grow and develop. Moreover it must develop proportionately in its different parts and aspects, for example, in human life, in body, mind, and will. Without this proportion a person becomes in some way defective. He may have a child's mind and an adult body and thus be mentally deficient; or he may have the body of a child and a grown-up mind and be a precocious prodigy (which is almost worse than the former!); or he may as a full grown man still show the irresponsibility of a child and be a nuisance to everybody.

Definite Stages in Life

Again, we observe in natural life a few definite stages: infancy, childhood, puberty, youth, and manhood. These do not come suddenly so that we can point to the exact hour or day when a person passes from one to the other, but they have their own discernible characteristics and can be easily recognized when they have been reached. All these essential characteristics of normal life have their counterparts in the new supernatural life of the soul. For this reason Pere Garrigou-Lagrange O.P. says: 'It is not surprising to find that the development of the interior life has often been compared to the three periods or stages of physical life: childhood, youth, and manhood. St Thomas himself has

indicated this analogy: and it is an analogy which is worth pursuing, particular attention being paid to the transition from one period to another'. (The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life. Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd. 1938. pp. 25-26.)

By Baptism we receive the new supernatural life of the soul which we call Sanctifying Grace, and this is the first great conversion of the soul to God. It is, of course, the most important conversion of all but it is not the only one. By it we are turned to God and away from sin and the devil. We accept God as our Supreme Lord and Master by renouncing the devil with all his works and pomps. An infant makes this act of homage by proxy through the God-parents, and God gives the new supernatural life with His gifts of Faith, Hope, and Charity. Provided that the child is brought up properly in the Catholic Faith these infused gifts will preserve and develop the New Life of the soul while the habits of religious duties and practices are formed. There should be the normal growth from infancy to childhood when what is called the use of reason begins to dawn.

A Counterpart

This first stage of human development has its counterpart in the spiritual life of the soul, but it may not take place at the same point of time. None of the stages of physical and spiritual growth coincide chronologically but may be very distantly separated. There are many adults who appear not to have passed beyond their spiritual infancy or spiritual childhood. Very few reach the perfection of spiritual manhood. By 'spiritual infancy' and 'spiritual childhood' I am not, of course, referring to that perfection of holiness which our Lord enjoins for all souls when He says: 'Amen, I say to you, unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18:3). This is an essential characteristic of all true spirituality, but in describing the growth of the spiritual life many writers use the expression 'spiritual childhood' to mark a stage in that development. It is in this sense that I am using it in this pamphlet.

The stage of spiritual childhood is manifested by the first dawning of some realization of the all-importance of religion and an implicit desire for spiritual progress. This development is essential before any further progress can be made and the next clearly discernible stage or crisis can be reached, which is the counterpart of the physical age of puberty and is often called, by spiritual writers, the Second Conversion. 'The important thing to be noticed is that, just as there is the crisis of puberty, more or less manifest and more or less successfully surpassed, between childhood and adolescence, so in the spiritual life there is an analogous crisis for the transition from the purgative life of beginners to the illuminative life of proficients. This crisis has been described by several great spiritual writers, in particular by Tauler and especially by St John of the Cross, under the name of the passive purgation of the senses, and by Pere Lallemand S. J. and several others under the name of the second conversion.' (Pere Garrigou-Lagrangé O.P., op. cit., p.28.)

This second conversion is the subject of this pamphlet, for, in my opinion, it may well be the occasion of the falling away of souls who have passed from spiritual infancy to spiritual childhood and have shown more than average devotion to their religion. It may be a real help to souls in the throes of this crisis to have a short account of what they are experiencing and the reasons for it. Once it is fully realized that it is neither abnormal nor evil, there should be very much less danger of failure to pass through it successfully.

A Result of Original Sin

During our spiritual infancy and childhood the act of homage, made at Baptism, has never been fully comprehended in all its implications or renewed with the full and complete surrender which

God has a right to demand from His creatures. This is precisely the reason for the Second Conversion, which is the full and explicit conversion or turning of our will by unconditional surrender to His perfect will. As a result of original sin our will tends to bear away from God and has to be drawn back, as it were, against its tension. This can be done only by the grace of God, but grace needs the co-operation of our non-resistance; hence it is best described as surrender. The great graces which God offers the soul in the first stages of spiritual growth tend to strengthen and dispose the will to make this surrender complete and perfect. Above all, the sacrament of Confirmation has this effect, but it is by no means inevitable that the Second Conversion must follow Confirmation. The sacramental grace and the Gifts of the Holy Ghost dispose the will to surrender but do not force it.

Before the Second Conversion the truths of religion and the reasons for being religious may be very much taken for granted, and there is no great sense of personal responsibility for the needs of the soul. It is rather as a child takes for granted the provision of the necessities for his bodily health and development but does not feel responsible for providing for himself, and is only too pleased to accept all that is provided for him without giving much thought to why it is done or whence it comes. In much the same way the soul in its first stages really does enjoy religion and is grateful for the provision God makes, but it has not as yet developed a sufficient sense of spiritual responsibility for God to reveal what is His due in return. All that God asks is the unconditional surrender of our will.

The Parallel Stages

Growing up is not merely a matter of physical development and change. There must be a proportionate development of mind and will. We expect a child to begin to acquire the elements of a sense of responsibility and at least to give some thought to the fact that the day is approaching when he will have to provide for himself. If a child does not develop in his mind and will proportionately to his physical age he is deemed an idiot or mentally defective. 'It is at this point that the analogy becomes illuminating for the spiritual life. We shall see that the beginner who fails to become a proficient, either turns to sin or else presents an example of arrested spiritual development. Here, too, it is true that "he who makes no progress loses ground", as the Fathers of the Church have so often pointed out' (Garrigou-Lagrange, op. cit., p.27).

The parallel stage in the spiritual life is our Second Conversion, and failure to make this normal development leaves the soul spiritually defective or abnormal. Hence there can be no grounds for spiritual pride in imagining ourselves privileged, above the normal, or any such foolishness, because we have passed through or are passing through this stage. Still less should we allow ourselves to become depressed or full of fears of vice and weakness because of the darkness and temptations which afflict the soul during it. All this is perfectly normal and must be experienced if our soul is to grow, as all life must grow, proportionately from stage to stage.

With converts this Second Conversion may coincide with their embracing the true Faith, but it is by no means always so. Their conversion to the Catholic Faith may arise from good motives but not the perfect one of unconditional surrender to the will of God. In this case, provided the convert has made the normal spiritual development, already described, to spiritual childhood, the Second Conversion will occur later and follow the same lines as for so-called born Catholics. It is sometimes mistaken for the wearing off of first fervour, whereas, if it is rightly understood, it is

really a sign of proper and normal spiritual growth. Just as for any other soul, it is a crisis and may become the occasion of a relapse and loss of faith.

An Example

The effect of the Second Conversion will become clearer if we take an example. We all know how our Lord insists that the first and greatest commandment is 'You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with all your strength', and together with its corollary, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', it sums up the whole law of God. Before our Second Conversion we presume that in some sense or other we are obeying this great commandment, but we do not ask ourselves very explicitly how, or what it involves. In fact, some secret reservations hidden deep in our heart may be revealed if it is put in a way which makes more explicit all its implications; for example, 'Lord, grant that I may love You always and then do with me what You will'. Or, 'Lord, I desire only Your will; teach me to hate my own will'. This may show that we still love our own will for its own sake.

This is not the same as the realization of our failure to accept perfectly the will of God on every occasion, for all of us must acknowledge this, but it is failure even to desire the acceptance of God's will whatever it may be. Nor does it necessarily mean that we refuse to accept God's will in any particular point, but only that we have not definitely embraced it by unconditional surrender. We have not developed that sense of spiritual responsibility which makes us realize God's supreme rights over us in every phase and aspect of our lives. To some extent we are still keeping our supernatural and natural lives in water-tight compartments as though there were no necessity for the former to absorb and spiritualize the latter.

A State of Indecision

It is quite possible that a soul may continue for a long time in this state of indecision without falling into mortal sin, and thus losing the new supernatural life, but such a state cannot continue indefinitely if there is to be normal growth of the spiritual life. This becomes clearer if we consider for a moment why God made us: to know, love, and serve Him. To know a person is by no means the same as knowing about a person. We may know quite a lot about Napoleon, but we cannot know him. We know a person by having some kind of communication with him, usually speech, while we can know about him simply from hearsay, study, reading, and gaining information one way or another about his life and character. We may know quite a lot about God from our religious instruction, but we can know God only through prayer. Hence the importance of a life of prayer and the necessity of taking this seriously as a prerequisite of the Second Conversion. Before God can convert our will to Himself we must at least have begun to know Him. If prayer is neglected or is nothing more than mere formality, bred of habit, we cannot learn to know God better and may even cease to know Him at all.

To love and serve God amounts to the same thing, for Christ says 'If you love Me, keep My commandments' (Jn 14:15). The object of the Second Conversion is to elicit from us an explicit act of love of God above all things, which will exclude any secret reservations which may perhaps have been hidden from ourselves. This is essentially an act of the will determining to obey God before all things by converting our own will into perfect harmony with God's. Before our Second Conversion we may be satisfied with making acts of love without much consideration of what they imply, and may be complacent about our spiritual state so long as we feel a certain amount of devotion in our prayers. It is this feeling of devotion which is so misleading and dangerous, as we may come to

mistake it for true spirituality, relying on it almost entirely, and even making it the test of the objective truth of the Faith. Thus, when it loses its savour we may no longer feel any satisfaction in or desire for religion, and fear that we are receding and losing our faith.

Feelings of Emotion

As long as we are moved by this desire for satisfaction and feelings of devotion we are not offering to God a pure act of our will. Self is still intermingled in our choice and in choosing God we are still to some extent choosing self. If we remember that what God wants is not our emotions but our will, we will see why the first sign of the Second Conversion must be loss of feelings of devotion and pleasure in our religious life. God made me to love Him, and that means that God made me to give Him my will and not merely to feel devout and loving towards Him. Feelings of devotion, in the right sense of affective love, may come and grow intense in later stages of the spiritual life, and they may, in a somewhat less spiritual form, buoy us up during the first stages. They must, however, be sacrificed for a period lest they mislead us, while God is converting our soul to make a pure act of the will, that act of unconditional surrender to His supreme dominion over us, which is called effective love.

This period may be prolonged even for years and souls are frequently grieved and worried by their apparent loss of devotion. There is no need to worry so long as there is no deliberate consent to sin and the various duties and exercises of religion are fulfilled as well as possible in the circumstances. This coldness and feeling of aloofness from God is definitely a sign of growing up like the shyness and lack of responsiveness which so often afflicts children in their middle teens. They appear to lose their self-confidence, and that assurance of manner with others, which they had when younger, and might easily imagine that they were becoming less grown-up rather than developing into youth.

God wants the unconditional surrender of our will; not the passive surrender of the will-less but the active surrender of the willing. Hence we must do the choosing and must have a choice to make. God could overwhelm us with His own perfect loveliness and attractiveness so that we could not help but choose Him, but this would be the passive surrender of the will-less, for our own will would make no effective choice. For this reason the Second Conversion is marked by a very great lack of emotional attraction to God and to religion and a grave temptation away from God, so that the choice becomes clear-cut and definite, forcing the will to make a positive act of willing surrender to God.

From what has been said above we can easily deduce the usual signs and forms of the Second Conversion, though they vary very much in intensity, duration, and detail. The signs are a loss of devotion and feeling in prayer; little comfort or satisfaction in religion or in the duties and exercises of the spiritual life; a feeling of praying into a void with no one to listen or care about our prayers; spiritual darkness and that weariness of religion that Fr Faber well describes as the monotony of piety. The truths of faith lose their reality and become formalities which give us little or no emotional response. This may be especially true of the Holy Eucharist, making our Holy Communion lack savour and feelings of devotion. Often there is a great loneliness, very like that which afflicts adolescents, and unwillingness to ask advice or discuss our difficulties with others. We feel that we must stand alone and fight our own battle without others perhaps because we are still too ego-istical and self-centred to imagine that anyone else could have suffered anything quite like what we are going through.

An Essential Characteristic

The form of this trial may vary but it must have one essential characteristic, it must offer the will a definite choice. In some way or other we are faced with a choice between our own will and God's will, for the final outcome of the Second Conversion must be Christ's own prayer, 'Not my will, but Yours be done'. Hence common forms are: persistent and grave temptation to sin, or to reject what we know or seriously suspect to be the will of God for us. There maybe temptations against faith, temptations against purity, temptations to refuse a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, or temptations to rebel against the will of God as manifested by some grave trouble or infirmity. These will not be merely passing or periodic temptations, such as all souls experience both before and after the Second Conversions, but persistent, gnawing, and intense. God does not send them, for 'God is not a tempter of evils; and He tempts no man' (Jas 1:13), but He permits them as the occasion of our conversion, and no doubt the devil adds fuel to them. God permits them, as has already been said, to force us to make that explicit act of the will which really does amount to loving God with our whole heart and soul and above all things. Sanctifying Grace fills the soul with the infused gift of Charity which enables us to love God above all things, but this is not as yet explicit in all its implications. By the Second Conversion we face the question fairly and squarely and declare ourselves unreservedly for God.

A very common form of this crisis is temptation against faith, and a more detailed examination of this one form will throw light on all. This is a particularly difficult one to bear because of the spiritual darkness, lack of feelings of devotion, and aridity, which always accompany the Second Conversion. Moreover, in what I have called our spiritual infancy and childhood we may have accepted and taken for granted the doctrines of our religion largely from emotional reasons. Consequently, not only must our will be converted, but our intellect must also be satisfied. The grace of faith must, of course, help in this, as it has always helped us to believe without doubting whatever God has revealed. But God does not ask or force anyone to act against human reason, but rather to rise above it and acknowledge that divine Truth must of its very infinity be more than finite mind can comprehend. Before we reach the crisis of our Second Conversion we may have believed to a large extent because it never entered our mind not to believe. Then, if we come up against arguments about religion and are forced into circumstances that demand conviction or complete loss of faith, God may well use these circumstances as the occasion for our Second Conversion by allowing grave temptations against faith to assail us.

A Pagan Environment

This is particularly frequent in these days when young people are being suddenly transferred from the Catholic atmosphere of good homes and schools into an almost pagan environment. Such an experience is almost bound to precipitate the crisis of the Second Conversion, and failure to pass through it successfully may well be the cause of some of those defections from the Faith among well-instructed and formerly devout Catholics to which I have referred. This falling away, however, is not fatal and complete through delay in making our surrender, as the state of indecision may last for years. There may even be some giving ground, some falling back and lapse into sin together with neglect of religious duties, while the fight is on. Nor, of course, even in a case of complete failure must we say there is no hope of salvation. God's mercy is boundless and we may be sure He yearns for our salvation even more vehemently than we can possibly desire it ourselves. 'God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able; but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it' (1 Cor. 10:13).

How are we to meet this crisis of our spiritual life? The first and all-important point is to realize that it is a state or stage in the normal growth of the new supernatural life of the soul. To know this is more than half the battle, and for this reason it has seemed to me worth while attempting to give this little account of it. For once we are aware why God permits these trials we can see what we must aim at doing. God wants our will, which is the same as our love. Hence the counter-action required on our part must be in our will. We should not waste time trying to stir up feelings of devotion by feverishly trying out new forms of piety, but fix our will on doing as well as possible, however coldly and unsatisfyingly, what we have been accustomed to do in the way of spiritual exercises. The time for increasing the amount and advancing to higher forms of prayer comes later; for the present it is enough that we give the time we have usually given to praying as best we can, though this in our arid state may seem a very poor best. We must, of course, pray earnestly for grace to meet the crisis and our prayer should tend to become more and more simple acts of the will rather than the emotional rhetoric of some books of devotion. We cannot do better than follow our Lord's example by repeating over and over again the self-same prayer that happens to suit our mood. 'Lord, teach me to love Your will.' 'Lord, enlighten my mind.' 'Lord, help my unbelief.' 'Lord, not my will, but Yours be done.'

God to Decide

Secondly, we must not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed with the fruitless effort of trying to satisfy our mind on every little point. For example, one could argue incessantly for and against the reality of one's vocation to the priesthood or religious life without coming to any decision. We must decide in our will that, whatever the arguments against a vocation may be, if God wills me to be a priest or religious I am His to command. If once we start questioning 'Am I fit or worthy?' the answer must be 'Of course not'. But then, who is? We must leave it to God to decide.

When the temptations are against faith the principle still remains the same, that we must concentrate on the will rather than on satisfying the intellect or emotions. Faith is not a matter of feeling or emotional acceptance of religious doctrines based on some vague assumptions, such as many non-Catholics seem to think, and so it is an absolute waste of time to try to make our imagination feel the truth of such mysteries as the Real Presence. It is objectively true for rational reasons, but, as it is above reason, we need an act of the will to accept it and, of course, above all, the grace of God. If we can rise to the supreme act of the will, sweeping aside all the difficulties and doubts that beset the mind during our temptations against faith, and say 'I believe', we have made our surrender to God and won the day.

This, however, may not always be possible when a soul may have given too much ground to be able to make such an act of faith. It may be necessary to satisfy the intellect by establishing anew the rational principles for the acceptance of the Catholic Church as our infallible teacher before the will can make its act of faith. In this case we must stress the point that it is the fundamental principles that must be studied and not waste our time seeking to solve every point and detail, or to answer every argument advanced by unbelievers. The principles which I would suggest for consideration are:

God;
Christ is God;
therefore Christ's religion and Church are divine;
but what is divine must be true;

to be true Christ's Church must be infallible;
only the Catholic Church claims to be infallible;
and has the other marks we must expect in a religion founded by God.

There are numerous books dealing with these points, but any well-instructed Catholic should know the arguments and it should only be a question of recalling them and satisfying the intellect as to their validity. Good will and the grace of God will do the rest. All other doctrines of faith can then be accepted on the infallible authority of the Church without seeking to settle every difficulty and objection to them individually.

This does not mean that detailed study of our religion is not important but only that times of temptation against faith are not the moment for it. Later, we will benefit far more from deeper studies, which will lead to a real appreciation of the Faith. If every difficulty were solved, every t crossed and i dotted to the satisfaction of the intellect, there would be no need for an act of the will in accepting the Faith, and so the conversion, which is essentially an act of the will, could not result from these temptations against faith. Without this conversion of our will we cannot grow up normally in our spiritual life but will remain spiritually deficient. 'Just as the child who does not grow does not merely remain a child but becomes an idiot, so the beginner who does not enter upon the way of proficients when he ought to, does not merely remain a beginner, but becomes a stunted soul. It would seem, unhappily, that the great majority of souls do not belong to any of these three categories, of beginners, proficients, or perfect, but rather of stunted souls!' (Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p.38). We must make up our minds to make our unconditional surrender and not remain in a state of wavering indecision. Failure to do so may spell spiritual disaster and total ruin for the soul, or, at best, a poor mediocrity and tepidity in the practice of religion, which will become a burden and a bore. The joy of religion comes only to generous souls, and this is the first really great act of generosity that God asks of us.

Complete Surrender

God cannot ask for less than complete surrender, for He is all in all and must have supreme dominion over us, either by the loving acceptance of His rule, or by our rebellious submission to His just judgement. To ask God to share His throne with our miserable self-love is blasphemy. God does not put every soul to this crucial test; some He allows gradually to grow in generosity until they are actually giving themselves wholly to Him without realizing that they have made their unconditional surrender to His holy will. just as He calls certain souls, for His own good reasons, to the priesthood or religious life, while leaving others apparently much better fitted for such a vocation, so He selects some souls for the crucial test and leaves others, equally spiritual, to develop gradually and imperceptibly. We may be sure, however, that He is offering to the chosen soul a very great grace in return for their formal act of surrender, and to refuse a great grace is often to lose all grace. On the other hand God never asks us to do anything beyond our powers and will always give abundant grace to enable us to fulfil His holy will.

We must beware of expecting exaggerated effects from the spiritual experience that I have attempted to describe, for the Second Conversion is really only the first step in a serious interior life, the passing from childhood to adolescence. It must destroy all affection for mortal sin and form in us a habit or facility in making the necessary sacrifices for avoiding mortal sin. This in itself is a tremendous step forward and must result in an ever-increasing generosity in the service of God. Interiorly there is a great transformation in our attitude towards God and religion, but this may not

be very perceptible outwardly or even to ourselves. We may not realize that we have passed through this crisis until long afterwards, when we can look back and recognize this transformation in the importance which we attach to spiritual duties and practices, with a correspondingly greater faithfulness to them.

An Awareness of God

After our Second Conversion our religion ceases to be merely one aspect or part of our lives among several, and becomes our whole life, so that all our judgements and valuation are spiritualized by it. We develop an awareness of God which cannot easily be described. It is not vision, nor feeling, nor inspiration, but a deep, inescapable certainty of mind and will that God is with us even when the soul is steeped in spiritual darkness, aridity, and dullness. There is still a long road ahead with many trials and possibly falls, but God has revealed Himself to us by His Spirit. 'Now, we have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit that is of God; that we may know the things that are given us from God. Which things also we speak; not in the learned words of human wisdom, but in the doctrine of the Spirit, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the sensual man perceives not these things that are of the Spirit of God. For it is foolishness to him; and he cannot understand, because it is spiritually examined. But the spiritual man judges all things; and he himself is judged of no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that He may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:12-16).
