

# CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

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After lunch one day during the recent Open Forum of the Provincial Council, Tim Gray asked me if I would be available to come here to give you a talk. I didn't have my calendar with me so I told him I would have to check to see which dates were available. Then, almost as an afterthought, I asked him what topic he wanted me to speak about. (I figured it would be something about Fr. Dehon.) As I was turning to go out to my car, he told me the theme this year was "conversion," and each of the previous speakers had spoken about significant conversion experiences they had had in their lives.

When I got to my room I quickly saw that settling on a mutually agreeable date would be no problem, but the topic of conversion was beginning to unsettle me. I did a quick inventory of my life and it immediately became apparent that I didn't have anything to talk about. I had never had what I understood to be a "conversion experience."

I had been born into a Catholic family. Both my parents were practicing Catholics, my older brother was in a seminary, and my sister was enrolled to attend a Catholic high school. The town we lived in, Jersey City, New Jersey, was said to be 88% Catholic, the highest percentage of any city in America. We simply didn't have any non-Catholic neighbors or friends. We thought it was a mixed marriage when an Irish-Catholic guy married an Italian-Catholic girl. And when people were asked what part of town they lived in, they identified their neighborhood by their parish: "I live in St. Joe's," "I live in St. Aedan's," or "I live in St. John's on the Boulevard." There was only one parish named St. John's, but still it was always referred to as "St. John's on the Boulevard." I think the parishioners imagined that "on the Boulevard" added a touch of class; it sounded so "uptown."

For my primary education I went to our local parochial school; in fact, throughout my entire life—with the exception of two graduate level courses—I have attended only Catholic schools. I became an altar boy in fifth grade and served Mass regularly not only on Sundays and Holy Days but also on early weekday mornings. My family always attended Mass together and, except for illness, we never missed a Holy Day of Obligation.

In my own life I think I've missed Sunday Mass only twice: once because of a travel glitch and the other time because the priest didn't show up. At home we didn't have any common prayers as a family, but my mother said the rosary almost daily and when I got rosary beads as a First Communion gift she taught me, not only the mechanics of working my way around the beads but also how to reflect on the meaning of the mystery of each decade. She also taught me to say bed-time prayers which, as I recall, were rather elaborate especially in the "God-bless-you-

for” section in which I was to thank God for all the people and the ways I had been blessed. Mornings being more hectic, the prayer then was shorter and more to the point.

So, I have been what is called a “cradle Catholic,” born and raised a Church-going believer all my days. There never was a point in my life when I didn’t go to church. There never was a time when I doubted the existence of God or had a crisis of faith. I’ve never even had a vocation crisis. So, from a cinematic point of view my spiritual and religious life has been very uneventful. No angst or anguished cries from out of the depths, no fear and loathing from existential terror, no wrestling with an angel or a devil for possession my soul. No one will ever make a movie out of this script. Of course, this doesn’t mean that my moral behavior always matched my faith convictions, far from it. Short of murder, I’ve left none of the ten commandments unbroken and, moreover, I have sampled broadly and frequently from the full range of possibilities presented by the Seven Deadly Sins.

But this was never a cause for a crisis of faith. I knew right from wrong, and I knew it was wrong not to do what I knew what was right. So, I made Saint Paul’s words my own: “I cannot even understand my own actions. I do not do what I want to do but what I hate...What happens is that I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend...This means that even though I want to do what is right, a law that leads to wrongdoing is always ready at hand. My inner self agrees with the law of God, but I see in my body’s members another law at war with the law of my mind; this makes me the prisoner of the law of sin in my members” (Romans 7:15-23). Now this can make for a messy, conflicted moral and spiritual existence, but it is hardly the stuff of a dramatic “conversion experience.”

So, finding myself without the raw material for a conversion story to tell you, I fell back on old habits and went straight to the library. I quickly located an annotated bibliography of current research on religious conversion which listed about 250 books and articles on the subject.<sup>1</sup> The materials were grouped according to the methodology that was used. There were studies in anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, psychoanalysis, and theology, as well as two sub-categories, one devoted to Saint Paul and the other to Saint Augustine.

Typically, each section concluded that there was great diversity of opinion within each field of study and little consensus about the meaning of conversion. For example, regarding the prototypical Christian conversion story, the author concluded: “The literature on the conversion of Paul is a study in frustration...the studies tell one far more about the individual authors and their own agendas than about Paul’s conversion”.<sup>2</sup>

So instead of enlightening my problem, my attempt at research compounded my dilemma. Now I was confronted with the fact that there was no clear consensus about what constituted a

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis R. Rambo, “Bibliography: Current Research on Religious Conversion.” *Religious Studies Review*, 8/2, (April, 1982): 146-159.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 157

conversion and there was no general agreement whether conversion was a normal and healthy experience or whether it was a sign of immaturity and self-destructive tendencies. As I was looking over the names and titles on the conversion bibliography I began to notice that several of the authors who were cited most often were people whose writings I had read and respected and from whom I had learned a great deal. Gradually it began to dawn on me that even though I had never had a classic conversion experience of my own, I was attracted to and greatly influenced by some of the major figures whose names are virtually synonymous with religious conversion.

In the first place was my namesake Saint Paul. Even as a young boy I was interested in learning about the man whose name I shared. My parents had given me a children's bible which contained full color illustrations of the principal events and scenes in scripture. I thrilled at the story of Saul of Tarsus who became Paul, the greatest of all the apostles, at least in my mind, because he worked harder and accomplished more than all the other apostles put together. The illustration of him at the stoning of Saint Stephen with the cloaks of the killers lying at his feet was just the right touch of murder and mayhem to appeal to my youthful imagination.

But the dominant image that was etched indelibly on my mind was the picture of Saul, "breathing threats of violence," as he rode a white stallion, his scarlet cloak unfurled behind him in the wind, brandishing a gleaming sword in his hand, leading a furious posse down the Damascus road on his way to wreak havoc on the unsuspecting Christian community. Even the Lone Ranger with his famous battle cry, "Hi-oh, Silver, away!" couldn't compete with the excitement of the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

Then came the dazzling brilliance and sudden reversal of fortune in what I still consider to be the single most dramatic scene in the entire New Testament. A blinding bolt of lightning, the stallion abruptly halts and rears up on his hind legs as he lets out a piercing, high-pitched whinny and hurls Saul violently to the ground. Suddenly the raiding party is shrouded in darkness, the sole source of light coming from a luminous cloud that parts the night sky and a voice from heaven addresses Saul by name.

It is not an angry nor a threatening voice, its tone is soft and pleading, like a grieved parent who is disappointed at discovering his child's persistent misbehavior. "Saul, Saul." The repetition was important, it confirmed an attitude of parental frustration and disappointment that I was familiar with, having frequently heard my mother's plaintive sigh, "Oh, P.J., P.J., how could you?" I heard that refrain echoing in the words: "Saul, Saul, why dost thou persecutest me?" (The arcane language added to the solemnity of the scene.)

Even as a child, the theological significance of the question was not lost on me. The nuns at school had pointed out the importance of the personal pronoun "Me." When Saul was hurting the Christians in Damascus he was really inflicting suffering on Jesus himself. The implications of this for our behavior on the school playground were immediately obvious for all to see. Nor

was it lost on me that a humbled Saul had been knocked from his high horse (one of my mother's favorite expressions) and now blinded, was being led by the hand into the city like a little child.

Back when I was a child it was not uncommon to celebrate one's name-day, the feast of one's patron saint. It wasn't on a par with your birthday of course, but neither would it be passed over without some acknowledgement. I knew that the official feast day of Saint Paul was June 29, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, a "double major" First Class Feast, which was the highest ranking on the liturgical calendar, even Christmas and Easter weren't higher.

But I never wanted to celebrate my name's day on June 29. Maybe it was because I didn't like the idea of sharing the day with Saint Peter, especially since he got top billing over Paul. Instead, I always celebrated my patron saint on January 25, the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. And every year I would thrill once again to the reading of the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles as I identified with my namesake when he was knocked from his high horse and in the eerie glow of the mysterious flash of light I would listen with him to the melancholy sigh in the stranger's voice.

Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, my receptivity to conversion stories may have been preconditioned by the fact that my mother was a convert to Catholicism. She described her own religious upbringing as that of a "low church Anglican," which as the name implies, followed a simple, unadorned order of worship which had more in common with the austerity of Puritanism than it did with the "smells and bells" of their "high church" counterparts. Simply put, "low churchers" were more like Protestants, whereas "high churchers" thought of themselves as Anglo-Catholics.

From what I could tell my mother's family was made up of bible-believing, church-going, and typically conventional WASPs. On my father's side of the family their Irish-Catholic identity was bred in the bone like an indelible mark on each one's soul, though my father seems never to have been afflicted with a dewy-eyed nostalgia for the Old Sod which is common among many second- and third-generation Irish-Americans.

Given the tenor of the times and their disparate backgrounds, it should come as no shock that their decision to marry was greeted with extreme displeasure by both families. For its part, the Catholic Church expressed its hostility to their marriage in a way that was calculated to be both demeaning and cruel. Since my father was marrying a non-Catholic, the wedding could not take place in the church; instead, the brief, bare-bones ceremony was shunted off to the sacristy where only my parents and their two witnesses were admitted to the presence of the priest. The Irish clergyman, wearing a simple cassock, surplice, and stole, began the proceedings by peering over the top of his glasses and looking directly at my father he asked, "Now, Paul, are you sure you want to go through with this thing?"

To escape the interference and intolerance of their families, the newly-weds left their hometown, Scranton, Pennsylvania, and moved to New York City, living first in Manhattan and then in Queens. After five years of marriage and two children, my mother decided to become a Catholic. I know as a child I had asked her about this many times; in fact, I quizzed her and had actually grilled her quite persistently about her decision, trying to find the underlying reason or secret impulse that motivated her choice, but either I didn't ask the right questions, or she was unable or unwilling to reveal the inner workings of the process that brought her into the Catholic church.

All I was able to find out were the bare facts: Monsignor Boylan, pastor of Saint Joan of Arc parish, gave her instructions and received her into the church—according to the practice of those times, by administering the sacrament of baptism conditionally, just in case the Protestants hadn't gotten it right the first time: *Si tu es capax, ego te baptizo...*

I was always proud of the fact that my mother was a convert. Although she had been a Catholic for about ten years by the time I was born, in my own mind she was always “my mother, the convert.” Whenever the opportunity presented itself to talk about this I never hesitated to let it be known to each and all that she had been a Protestant but converted to Catholicism. I know that the source of my pride went beyond the fact that her status set me apart from my peers whose parents came from Irish, or Italian, or Polish families that had been Catholic for generations.

Intuitively, I sensed that being a convert had a cachet that authenticated one's faith and hinted at a personal experience of God behind or within the conversion experience. This was not apparent in “cradle Catholics” whose faith seemed second-hand; their faith was not something hard won; it was not a personal achievement. Later I would be reminded of this by a line in a Bob Dylan song: “You say you lost your faith/ But that's not where it's at/ You had no faith to lose/ And you know it.”<sup>3</sup> Cradle Catholics often made the mistake of thinking that faith was something you are born into, like your family, or your neighborhood, or your nationality. As if your Catholic faith were just another one of the things that you were given in life, like your mother's milk. My mother's faith was different: she was a convert, and the fact that the inner dynamics of her conversion remained shrouded in mystery only added to the allure of its mystique.

Over the years, without being consciously aware of it, I found myself continually attracted to converts. Many of the books I read and the biographies I admired were not simply figures who were famous or influential, but they were also people whose fame and importance were inextricably bound to their conversion. For example, long before I ever read a word of his writings, I felt a powerful attraction to Saint Augustine of Hippo. The contours of his life-story were generally well known to everybody and they seemed particularly designed to attract the

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<sup>3</sup>“Positively Fourth Street,” Greatest Hits Album, Volume One, second side, fourth track.

interest of young males: At the age of sixteen Augustine described his life as a seething cauldron of lust, from there he went on to keep a mistress for ten years and fathered a child with her, and then after years of intense struggle he famously prayed, "O Lord, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet."<sup>4</sup>

I have probably read the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine seven or eight times and each reading has been an adventure in self-discovery and enlightenment, as I follow his tortuous struggle with the restlessness that would not let him rest. It all comes to a climax in Book Eight when he finds himself in a garden, twisting and turning within and without, literally pulling out his hair with tears and groans, when suddenly he hears the voice of a child repeating in a sing-song pattern the words, "Tolle et lege, tolle et lege (Take and read, take and read)."

Immediately he picked up a New Testament and read the first passage his eyes fell upon, Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 13:13-14: "Let us live honorably as in the daylight; not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh." Immediately the scales fell from his eyes and the chains that had bound his will dissolved. At once he knew what he should do and he had the freedom to do it. He would be baptized and become a priest and would found a religious community. He would go on to become a bishop and one of the principal theologians of the Christian church.

In its own way, Augustine's conversion was as stunning and dramatic as anything that happened to Paul on the Damascus road. Each of them had undergone a sudden, life-changing transformation, they had experienced a power that was beyond their control, and they emerged from the encounter unshakably convinced of the new direction that their lives should take.

But there were also apparent differences. Unlike Paul whose previous years had been marked by firmly held convictions, Augustine was a seeker and his search for meaning and purpose in life had been going on for over a dozen years. From Cicero he had learned that physical goods and pleasures could not satisfy the yearnings of the human spirit, from his years with the Manicheans he had learned to distrust the sophistry of eloquence that was devoid of solid argument and reasoning, and his discovery of Plato had led him to the threshold of the spiritual world. Despite the sudden, dramatic denouement in the garden, Augustine's conversion had been underway for many years and had been unfolding progressively through clearly defined stages of development. It had not been as sudden and dramatic as it first appeared.

This led me to reexamine Paul's conversion and what I discovered was the reverse image of Augustine's gradual journey to enlightenment. For Paul the light and call came first, then followed years of slowly integrating the insights and implications of his dramatic encounter with Christ until he was ready to be sent out as an apostle to all the nations. After Paul's experience

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<sup>4</sup>Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, 17.

on the Damascus road he was taken to the city where he was baptized and immediately afterwards he began to preach the gospel. But the Jews wanted to kill him, so he was led secretly to Jerusalem where the Christian community accepted him but were afraid of him. An outcast from his old community and not fully welcomed into his new community, Paul says that he spent three years in the desert of Arabia, then he returned home to Tarsus where he engaged in no public ministry until Barnabas arrived around 45 AD and took him to the church in Antioch from which he was sent out on his first missionary journey.

From the time of his conversion on the Damascus road until his first apostolic mission approximately a dozen years elapsed, years that were spent, for the most part, in silence.<sup>5</sup> We have no record of what Paul did or of what he was thinking during those years, but from the clarity of vision and the depth of conviction in the man who emerged from those years of silence it is obvious that he had integrated the full implications of his encounter with Christ into a compelling message that reflected the personal change that had taken place in him.

By submitting the conversion of Paul and the conversion of Augustine to closer examination it became clear that the usual understanding of conversion as a sudden, dramatic, life-changing event was only partially correct. Conversion does require a personal experience of God: it may come as a “bolt from out of the blue” or it may come like “the still, small voice” that Elijah heard at the cave on Horeb (1 Kings 19: 12). But in any case, the personal encounter either needs to be preceded by a time of discernment beforehand or it needs to be followed by a period of integration afterwards if the conversion experience is to have its full and lasting effect.

Without this, as T.S. Eliot wrote, we will have “had the experience but missed the meaning.”<sup>6</sup> This approach to understanding “conversion” seems to be both more human and more Catholic. It respects the organic development which is consistent with all human change while it allows for the element of surprise, and it joins them together with the typical Catholic assertion that *both one and the other* are required for an adequate explanation of the whole process.

This became even more apparent when I considered another of my conversion heroes: Saint Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>7</sup> If you are familiar with the bare outline of his life, you know that as a young man, Iñigo was enamored with the trappings and regalia of court life, that he had a great desire to win fame for his exploits in battle, and that by his own admission he was “fairly free in the love of women.” In fact, it is widely believed that he had fathered a child.

Then when he was thirty years old his right leg was shattered by a cannonball. A lengthy convalescence followed during which he read, and reread, a four-volume life of Christ and

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<sup>5</sup>There is no scholarly consensus on Pauline chronology. The complexity and diversity of opinion are discussed in Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997, pp. 426-430.

<sup>6</sup>*The Dry Salvages*, line 93.

<sup>7</sup>Much of this historical information about Saint Ignatius can be found in “The Pilgrim” by Ron Hansen. *A Tremor of Bliss. Contemporary Writers on the Saints*. Edited by Paul Elie. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995, pp. 111-146.

various lives of the saints, after which “he was left with such loathing for his whole past life and especially for the things of the flesh, that it seemed that all the fantasies he had previously pictured in his mind were driven from it.”<sup>8</sup> When he was well enough to travel he went to the Benedictine monastery at Montserrat where he made a full confession of his past life in writing (which took three days), he gave his fine clothes to a beggar, and he dressed himself in penitential sackcloth and rope sandals. He then withdrew to a cave in Manresa where for a year he fasted, did penance, recited the liturgy of the hours in Latin (which he didn’t understand), and spent seven additional hours a day kneeling in prayer.

Clearly, Ignatius’s life had changed dramatically in a short space of time. But was this a true religious conversion? The external aspects of his life were radically different, but interiorly he was still dominated by ambition and the need to compete and excel, albeit for different goals. When he read of the heroic accomplishments of the saints, he imagined that he might do better. When he learned of the ascetical practices of the spiritual life, he embraced mortification to excess. And in a naive display of literalism, he made the arduous journey to the Holy Land so that he might follow in the actual footsteps of Jesus. After a few weeks in Palestine, the Franciscans threw him out of the country and sent him back to Europe.

Ignatius’s religious conversion began during his convalescence in 1521 but it did not reach its fruition until nearly 20 years later when, with a small group of his friends, he founded the Society of Jesus. All throughout his life he was favored with extraordinary mystical visions, but very early on in his conversion process he began to become aware of another entryway into the realm of the sacred.

During his convalescence he noted that when he thought of worldly matters this cheered him up at the time, but afterwards he felt empty and discontent. However, when he thought of spiritual matters and the practices of religion, these delighted and consoled him not only as he was thinking of them, but even after he put these thoughts aside he remained content and happy. He wrote that “little by little he came to recognize the difference between the spirits that agitated him, one from the demon, the other from God.”<sup>9</sup> This was the beginning of his discovery of the method for the discernment of spirits which forms the backbone of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius.

At the heart of the Spiritual Exercises lies the conviction that every human being is capable of having a personal relationship with God, and through attentiveness to one’s inner feelings and the affections and fluctuations of one’s inner dispositions it is possible to discern the will of God. The purpose of the Spiritual Exercises is to help guide the individual along the path that leads to personal discernment of the Spirit of God. On the very first page, Ignatius instructs the one directing the Exercises to give only a very brief explanation of the method and the content

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<sup>8</sup>*The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola.* Translated by Joseph F. O’Callaghan. New York: Harper & Row, 1974, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 24.

of the meditations.

“The reason for this is that when one in meditating takes the solid foundation of facts, and goes over it and reflects on it for himself, he may find something that makes them a little clearer or better understood. This may arise either from his own reasoning, or from the grace of God enlightening his mind. Now this produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if one in giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length. For it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.”<sup>10</sup>

A little further on Ignatius cautions the one who is directing the Exercises not to suggest any of his own ideas nor encourage the retreatant to choose one course of action or another. Rather, he writes, “while one is engaged in the Spiritual Exercises, it is more suitable and much better that the Creator and Lord in person communicate Himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will, that He inflame it with His love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve God in the future. Therefore, the director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature with his Creator and Lord.”<sup>11</sup>

Human beings cannot control or manipulate God nor can they summon up his presence on demand. Nevertheless, human beings have been created with a divine destiny and they have been endowed by their Creator with the potentiality and the need for union with God. The “spiritual exercises” that Saint Ignatius spells out are designed to help people remove the obstacles to union with God, as well as to aid in the discernment of those movements of the spirit which signal his presence or reveal his will in our regard. The goal of the Spiritual Exercises is to lead the one making them to recognize the experience of God in his or her life.

There are several other “conversion heroes” who have inspired, instructed, or otherwise influence me in important ways, but I don’t have the time (nor is it really necessary for my purposes) to discuss their role in my life. Let me recapitulate what I think I’ve learned from the four converts I have mentioned. From my mother I learned to appreciate the need to personally appropriate one’s faith and that it is not sufficient to live off the tradition that one has inherited. From my reappraisal of Saints Paul and Augustine I learned that the dramatic moment of conversion is only one element or aspect of the full conversion experience. The “conversion moment” must always be preceded by a long process of discernment that paves the way for conversion, or it must be followed by a lengthy time of integration during which the full meaning and rich implications of the experience are realized and brought to fruition in the convert. And from Saint Ignatius I learned that personal experience of God is the destiny of every human being and the transforming nature of this union with God is an ongoing process of

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<sup>10</sup>*Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Translated by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951, n. 2.

<sup>11</sup>*Spiritual Exercises*, n. 15.

purification and enlightenment that lasts a lifetime.

From the perspective afforded by these insights I now found it necessary to revise my original assertion that I have never had a conversion experience. I have had one; although I had never considered it a conversion, I had always recognized this experience as a defining moment of my life. In fact, I have considered it of such deep personal significance that I have never spoken about it to anybody else—it's *that* personal. And I certainly never had any intention to speak about it publicly, not even before a group as small as this. But as the First Letter of Peter says that we should always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us (3: 15), I find that I cannot speak honestly about conversion without giving an account, as best I can, of my experience.

In the summer of 1955 I was thirteen years old. I had just graduated from eighth grade and I was going to start attending Queen of Peace high school in the fall. The previous year my newly-ordained brother had received his first assignment as a priest and was stationed at Saint Joseph's Indian School in Chamberlain, South Dakota. That summer he invited me to come for a visit. I knew that South Dakota was a great big empty Nothing out in the middle of Nowhere, but the thought of traveling half way across the country by myself, of taking my first airplane ride, and of seeing for myself the Wild West of my imagination proved irresistible. I was to spend the month of August on the banks of the wide Missouri.

When I arrived at St. Joe's I met up with Louie Paz, a boy my own age, from Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in East Chicago, Indiana. The only thing we had to do for an entire month was to play and have fun; we were not expected to do any work. When work needed to be done, there were five students from the minor seminary in Donaldson, Indiana, who had been pressed into a type of indentured servitude for the month prior to the start of their senior year.

Among the seminarians was a young Frank Wittouck and a thin Tony Russo. As soon as Louie Paz and I sized up our privileged situation, we added tormenting the seminarians to our list of things to do. We had the run of the place: we fished in the river, we swam in the lake, and we bludgeoned rattlesnakes to death and cut off their rattlers to wear as trophies. It was like "Lord of the Flies" on the prairie. We even found time to set booby traps for the seminarians and we saw to it that they got blamed for any mischief that Louie and I had caused.

I don't remember if it was expected of me, but I attended community Mass every morning. One day after breakfast, in the shadow of the steps of the main school building, Father Pete Miller asked me what I wanted to be in life. I honestly didn't know and I told him so. Then I got The Talk. I had half-suspected that at some point during my visit I would be given The Vocation Talk. Since I knew it was coming I had prepared myself to listen politely but to remain noncommittal.

I don't remember any of the substance of what Miller said to me, but I do remember at one point my brother came out of the new community residence across the way. He was dressed, of

course, in cassock, collar, and black cincture. As soon as he emerged from the building a voice cried out “Father, Father,” and from out of view a little girl came running and leapt into his arms and gave him a big hug. The girl was known as “Patti Cake,” she was about seven years old and her most distinguishing physical characteristic was her two front teeth, which were missing. She was one of the number of children who, for one reason or another, would not or could not return home for the summer.

Father Miller said something to the effect that this could be the kind of life that I could have, that I could make a difference in people’s lives just like that. At that moment I heard within myself, but not in audible way, a “Yes” that reverberated all throughout me. The “Yes” was totally within me, but it did not come from me. It was not a calculation, or a conclusion, or an opinion that I had reached. It came from within me, but it was not from me.

The instant that it made itself known, I knew instantly that it was true. There was no reasoning, no evaluating, no weighing of the pros and cons. It spoke the truth, and I knew it was true. It was a voice, though inaudible, but undeniable, that came unbidden. It was simply there, but authoritatively there; within me but not from me, revealing me to myself in a way that I had never expected but could not doubt and could only affirm like a stunned Lotto player who just discovered that his ticket contains all the winning numbers.

I said nothing of this to Father Miller at the time, but told him that I would think over what he had said. Several weeks later when I announced my intention to go to the seminary, I still said nothing of the experience. A couple of times, over the years, Pete Miller recalled that morning chat under the steps of the main building at St. Joe’s; in fact, the last time I saw him in the nursing home he brought it up, but I never told him what I had experienced. I suspect he knew that *something* had happened. A few times in my life I’ve met people who told me about similar experiences that they had had at approximately the same age, but I never told them about my experience.

Many years later when I began to study the history of spirituality I came across instances that bore a similarity to my experience. For example, in his *Spiritual Exercises* Saint Ignatius describes what he called, “Three Times for Election,” by which he means three ways of making a choice about one’s vocation or some other spiritual decision. He describes the First Time or the First Way as follows: “When God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that the devout soul without hesitation, or the possibility of hesitation, follows what has been manifested to it. St. Paul and St. Matthew acted thus in following Christ our Lord.”<sup>12</sup>

In this first way of making a choice God clearly makes his will known regarding what is to be done, and the individual is able to confirm that this is the working of the Holy Spirit because of the feelings of clarity, assurance and joy which follow as a consequence of responding to God’s

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<sup>12</sup>*Spiritual Exercises*, n. 175.

initiative. Because this way of discernment depends on a special, free disclosure of God's will, some commentators (like Karl Rahner) hold that it is a rare occurrence, practically akin to a private revelation. Other commentators (such as Hugo Rahner) point to historical evidence that it was not uncommon and that many people experienced this sort of discernment first hand. I tend to side with Hugo Rahner on this issue.

In any case, even though Saint Ignatius alludes only briefly to this first way of making a choice, it contains an important element which is characteristic of all discernment and it is worth calling attention to this distinctive quality. All discernment is a way of making a decisive choice, but it is not a choice that arises from our own deliberation and will. Rather, it is a choice that is received, we could even say that the choice is imposed, it is required of us by God. It is not my choice, it is my response to God's manifest, deliberate will. The dramatic examples of Saint Paul and Saint Matthew should not lead us to restrict this experience to those extraordinary circumstances that sometimes (rarely) accompany it. In itself it is an experience of enlightenment which is potentially possible for anyone who sincerely seeks to do God's will. It all depends on God, who from time to time reveals himself in this way.

I believe that Leo Dehon had an experience like this when he was thirteen years old. In his *Memoirs* he described the profound experience he had on Christmas eve, 1856. He wrote: "As a choir boy I participated in the midnight office of the Capuchins. It was there that I received one the strongest impressions in my life. Our Lord strongly urged me to give myself to him. The power of grace had been so pronounced that the impression remained with me for a long time that my conversion dated from that day."<sup>13</sup> I have written about this in the booklet "Father Dehon's Discernment" so I won't repeat here what I said there, but I simply call it to your attention.

But for me the most compelling confirmation of this sort of experience, aside from the experience itself, is found in the Vatican II document, "The Church in the Modern World," where we read: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor" (GS, #16).

There are three elements of this citation which are pertinent to our reflection on conversion. First, the words "heart" and "conscience" are used interchangeably to refer to the spiritual depths of the human person. Second, these words refer to the core of the human being where we are most truly ourselves and where we encounter God. Third, in the depths of our

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<sup>13</sup>Notes sur l'Histoire de ma Vie. I, 26r.

conscience we feel the urging and prompting of a law or a command that is within ourselves but which does not come from ourselves.

Thus, this conciliar passage on the relationship between human conscience and the Holy Spirit indicates what takes place in the process of discernment or conversion. In the spiritual center of the human person—in our heart, our soul, our conscience—we experience the movement of the Spirit of God drawing us, attracting us, even sometimes commanding us, to do this and avoid that. This felt attraction pulls us toward our true personal identity, yet it is experienced as a call and a command from an Other.

Conversion takes place in the human conscience, conscience being understood not simply as the place where we make individual moral decisions but, in a more fundamental sense, conscience as the spiritual center of a person where we become aware of our identity. It is in our conscience that we discover the gap between our actual condition and the ideal self that we can and ought to become. We experience this self-awareness not merely as a disclosure of the way things are but also as a call or a summons. To recognize the gap between the self we currently are and the self we could and ought to become is, simultaneously, the recognition of the need for change.

All genuine conversion is a response to the personal demand that we be true to the identity we are called to be as this ideal image of one's self is disclosed to us in the depths of our conscience. Whether this disclosure is made with the suddenness of a "Damascus road" encounter or if it comes to light only after a lengthy gestation, it requires self-sacrifice and the denial of all the pursuits, desires, and wishes that are incompatible with the realization of the true self we are called to be. And this is the daily work of a lifetime of being single-mindedly committed to the personal vocation that God discloses to each of us in that privileged place of contact with the divine which is called our conscience.<sup>14</sup>

And what of that experience of the divine as Saint Ignatius describes it in "The First Time of Election"? Obviously, for those who have such an experience, it is an indelible reminder they carry with them for the rest of their lives, just as surely as Jacob limped forever after he wrestled with the angel. But this sort of experience is no magic bullet, and though the one who has it may feel the scales fall from his eyes, he still has to get up, take up his cross, and daily follow Jesus, just as anyone who has never had such an experience has to do precisely the same thing.

As William James wrote 100 years ago, the genuineness of a conversion is not judged by its origin but by its fruits. The real testimony to transformation in the spirit is not to be found in voices, visions, or other supernatural phenomena, but in the qualities of a permanently patient heart where self-love and self-seeking have been eradicated to be replaced by the dispositions

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<sup>14</sup>Cf., Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion*. New York: Paulist Press, 1986, pp. 16--23.

of a genuine child of God. And these attitudes, as we all know, can be found in those who have never passed through a crisis of the spirit and who have no awareness of ever having been touched palpably by the presence of God.<sup>15</sup> In the Rule of Saint Benedict<sup>16</sup> it says that the abbot should love all the monks equally, and therefore treat each one differently. Such is the way our heavenly Father deals with each one of us.

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<sup>15</sup>Cf., Walter Conn, 186-187.

<sup>16</sup>Cf., Chapter 2, "What Kind of Man the Abbot Should Be."