

The Psychology of Conversion

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Every conversion starts with a crisis: with a moment or a situation involving some kind of suffering, physical, moral, or spiritual; with a dialectic, a tension, a pull, a duality, or a conflict. This crisis is accompanied, on the one hand, by a profound sense of one's own helplessness and, on the other hand, by an equally certain conviction that God alone can supply what the individual lacks. If there were *only* a sense of helplessness, there would be despair, pessimism, and eventual suicide. This is, indeed, the condition of the post-Christian pagan: He feels the total inadequacy of his own inner resources against the overwhelming odds of a cruel universe and thus falls into despair. He has one-half of the necessary condition for conversion—namely, a sense of crisis—but he fails to link up his powerlessness with the Divine Power, who sustains and nourishes the soul. But when this is done, paganism vanishes and gives place to what might be called creative despair: “despair,” because one realized one's own spiritual disease; “creative,” because one knows that only a Divine Physician outside oneself can bring healing to one's wings. This despair does not usually arise from a sense of one's stupidity or ignorance or mistakes, but because of one's inadequacy, one's sense of dependence, or even one's admission of guilt.

The soul becomes the battlefield of a civil war during a conversion. It is not enough that there be a conflict between consciousness and unconsciousness or self and environment, for such tensions can be simple psychological phenomena without profound significance for the soul. So long as the conflict is only psychological, so long as it is capable of being manipulated by the mind itself or another human mind, there may result “peace of mind,” but there is no God-conversion, or peace of soul. The tension or conflict is never very acute when the dueling forces are contained within the mind itself; conversion is not autosuggestion, but a flash of lightning from without. There is a tension only when the self is confronted by the nonself, when the within is challenged by the without, when the helplessness of the ego is confronted with the adequacy of the Divine.

Not until the tug-of-war begins, with the soul on one end of the rope and God on the other, does true duality appear as the condition of conversion. This crisis in the soul is the miniature and cameo of the great historical crisis of the City of God and the City of Man. There must be in the soul the conviction that one is in the grip of and swayed by a higher control than one's will; that, opposing the ego, there is a Presence before Whom one feels happy in doing good and before Whom one shrinks away for having done evil. It is relatively unimportant whether this crisis, which results in a feeling of duality, be sudden or gradual. What matters is struggle between the soul and God, with the all-powerful God never destroying human freedom. This is the greatest drama of existence.

[...] Involved in the struggle is the impression that one is being sought by Someone—by the “Hound of Heaven” in Thompson's language—who will not leave us alone. The tragedy is that many souls, feeling this anxiety, seek to have it explained away, instead of following it to where, at the end of the trail, it is seen as God and actual grace working on the soul. The voice of God causes discontent within the soul in order that the soul may search further and be saved. It embarrasses the soul, for it shows us the truth, tears off all the masks and masquerades of hypocrisy. But it consoles the soul, too, by effecting a harmony with self, with others, and with God. It is for man to decide—to accept or reject the voice he hears.

For a soul in crisis, one becomes conscious that he has become a stage wherein two great powers are waging war; his soul itself is with one power one moment and the other power at another moment. There is a whisper that solicits one to the mountain peaks, and there is a voice that summons one down to the valleys. There is a fear of what may lie ahead in the future, and a dread of continuing on as at present. The spirit calls to renouncement of old habits, but the flesh is reluctant to break the chains. Once these two currents of inner frustration and Divine Mercy meet, so that the soul realizes that God

alone can provide what it lacks, then the crisis reaches a point where a decision must be made. In this sense, the crisis is crucial—it involves a cross. The crisis itself can take a thousand different forms, varying from souls that are good to those that are sinful. But in both these extremes there is a common recognition that the conflicts and frustrations cannot be overcome by one's own energy. The common forms of crisis are the moral, the spiritual, and the physical.

The crisis is moral when there is an awareness of sin and guilt, existing not only as an historical phenomenon that affects social and international life but as something inwardly experienced as a *broken relationship*. Those who hold the opinion that the only guilt is the admission of guilt and that the only sin is the belief in sin render themselves incapable of conversion. Since they acknowledge nothing in their universe except their ego, then they cannot admit an outside Power from whom the saving experience will come. There can be no crisis so long as the soul thinks of itself as disturbed because of having violated some vague cosmic law or because it is out of tune with the universe. A crisis demands two persons: the human person and the Person of God. Then the remorse for its sins tortures the soul and makes it yearn for a peace that it cannot gain of itself. Thus, by a peculiar paradox, sin becomes the occasion of a loneliness and a void that God alone can relieve. This emptiness is not that of a bottomless pit; it is the emptiness of a nest that can be filled only by the Eagle descending from the heights above. A soul in such a crisis seeks God after a series of disgusts as, like the Prodigal, it turns from husks to the Bread of Life. Such a crisis involves sadness, because one has fallen from the ideal; but it is mixed with hope, because the original pattern can be recovered.

Up to this point, the soul had covered up its sins; now it discovers them in order to repudiate them. What is owned can be disowned; what is perceived as an obstacle can now be surmounted. The crisis reaches its peak when the soul becomes less interested in the internal revolution of its own spirit; when it swings swords, not outward but inward, to cut out its baser passions; when it complains less about the lying of the world and begins to work on making itself something less a liar than before. The moral sphere has two ethical poles: one, the immanent sense of evil or failure; the other, the transcendent power of God's mercy. The abyss of powerlessness cries out to the abyss of salvation. The Cross is now seen as a new light. At one moment it bespeaks the depth of human iniquity that, in essence, would slay God; at another it reveals the defeat of evil in its strongest moment, vanquished not only by the prayers for forgiveness from the Cross but by the triumph of the Resurrection.

The cascade of Divine Power cannot operate on a person so long as he lives under the illusion either that he is an angel or that sin is not his fault. He must first admit the fact of personal guilt; then—though the consciousness of having been a sinner does not vanish—the consciousness of being in a state of sin is relieved. God becomes a possibility to a despairing soul only as it begins to see that it can “do all things in Him who strengthens me.” [...] A new self is needed, and man cannot renovate himself. No vague humanism, no busy dedication to social causes, can root out the sense of guilt—because guilt implies a *personal relationship* with God. And a personal relationship implies love. For us to become truly moral, there must be a surrender to an all-loving Christ Who can do what no human can do. And then the pain passes away: Though the emptiness of soul that sin has given us sees itself confronted by Christ, the emphasis is immediately shifted from our sin to His mercy, from self to the Cross. Once the will to sin is abandoned, then the soul sees that it has become acceptable to the Savior—not because it was good, but because the Savior is Good. In other religions, one must be purified before one can knock on the door; in Christianity, one knocks on the door as a sinner, and He who answers to us heals. The moral crisis is ended when Christ confronts the soul, not as a law, but as Mercy, and when the soul accepts the invitation, *Come to Me, all you that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you.* (Matt. 11:28)

The crisis of conversion is sometimes spiritual rather than moral. This is frequent among those who have been seeking perfection but are not yet possessed of the fullness of the Faith and Sacraments. Some such souls have led a good life on the *natural* plane; they have been generous to the poor and kind to their neighbors and have furthered at least a vague fellowship with all peoples. Other souls have already had a smattering of the supernatural life; they lead as Christ-like a life as they know how, living up to the faith in Him as they see His light. The crisis begins in those souls at the moment

when they either recognize that they have tremendous potentialities that have not been exercised or else begin to yearn for a religious life that will make greater demands on them. Up to this moment of crisis, they have lived on the surface of their souls. The tension deepens as they realize that, like a plant, they have roots that need greater spiritual depths and branches meant for communion with the heavens above. The growing sense of dissatisfaction with their own ordinariness is accompanied by a passionate craving for surrender, sacrifice, and abandonment to God's Holy Will. Such a shift from mediocrity to love may be occasioned through the example of a saint, the inspiration of a spiritual book, the desire to escape from mere symbols to Divine Reality. However it comes, there is a duality present from the moment the soul hears Christ saying *Be you therefore perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* (Matt. 5:48)

Conversion from mediocrity to a full surrender is no easier than the conversion from sin to charity; in either case, there is a plucking out of an eye and the cutting off of an arm. It seems to the convert that he is asked to give up everything—not only all he has, but even control over his mind—but this is because he does not yet understand the joyous freedom of union with *God*. Pleasures of the flesh are always greater in anticipation than in realization, but the joys of the spirit are always greater in realization than in anticipation.

Not everyone accepts the demands made during a spiritual crisis. The rich young man, who had kept the commandments from his youth, went away sad when our Lord asked him to give to the poor and follow Him. His crisis passed as he chose an ordinary good life, instead of the spiritual life. The crisis had a different ending in another rich man, Matthew, who left his cashier's desk to become an Apostle. Probably none of the Apostles called by our Lord said, "Now I must begin to be good"; they said, instead, "Now I must begin to do His Will." Up to the time of a true conversion a soul has its own standards of goodness. After being confronted with the grace of God, it seeks nothing else but correspondence to His Will. Such a soul is as relentless in its love as the Divine Love is relentless.

The spiritual crisis is very general, for in every soul is some reflection of the universal yearning for perfection. After conversion there is a supernatural love of God, but even before conversion there is a natural love of God. The difference between the two has been explained by St. Thomas: "Nature loves God above all things as He is the beginning and the end of natural good, but charity loves Him insofar as He is the object of beatitude and as a man has a certain fellowship with God." Every person who loves, *naturally* loves God more than himself. This love is not conscious in many souls, and in others its practical effects are limited to concupiscence; but it is hidden in every pursuit of happiness, in every ideal large enough to satisfy all our longings. The individual may misname this Infinite which he seeks; he may identify it with wealth or flesh or power; but the motive force which drives him on is still his search for unending happiness. Even when a person settles for less and imagines it to be his Infinite, nevertheless the Supreme Good is even more desired; so that God is loved either consciously or unconsciously, by every being capable of love. But the desire to possess God in love would be an inefficacious desire if God did not elevate human nature. When this happens, when the soul passes from a natural to a supernatural love of God, a conversion has occurred.

The spiritual desire for the Infinite can also be directed to God as Divine Truth. The human intellect, conscious of the fact that it does not know all, can become docile in the face of the Divinity and begin to crave a light that only God can give. Disappointed in their broad-mindedness, which tried no truth with fire, some start a search for that Divine Truth that admits no compromise. Christopher Hollis, explaining his conversion, said: "When I looked at the New Testament, I did not find there any record of Christ talking as a friend talked; I did not find Him saying: 'These are a few observations that have occurred to Me. I should be very grateful if you would go away and think them over and see if you could find anything in them.' I did find Him teaching with authority, hurling dogmas at the heads of His audience, commanding His audience to accept His teaching and holding out to them the appalling threat of eternal damnation if they refused to accept. When I was at school, among my schoolfellows was a Presbyterian and a Methodist. One term the Presbyterian came back and said that during the holiday his parents had read the New Testament and as a result, they had become Catholics. The Methodist thought this was a very funny story. I did not see why at the time it was so particularly funny

and when some years later, I came to read the New Testament myself, I found it even less funny than I had imagined." Chesterton, too, was solicited toward conversion by the desire for infinite knowledge, and he explained himself in this way: "I am the man who, with the utmost daring, discovered what was discovered before."

It is possible that the decline of reason in the modern world may drive more and more souls to investigate the disparity between what *they* know and what is knowable. Only by seeking for what is above the human can the human mind preserve its dignity: Either its reason mounts to Wisdom, or its emotions enchain reason and man becomes a beast. As carnality and comfort become the common goal of modern life, those with intelligence will fight harder than ever for the deliverance of their reason and will finally come to see that, without a *Divine Word* behind the universe, there would never be reason in the universe.

Today there is in the world a vast army of good souls who have not yet entered into the fullness of the crisis; they are thirsty, but they fear to ask Him for a drink lest He pour it from a chalice. They are cold, but they fear drawing near His fires, lest those flames cleanse as they illumine them; they know that they are locked in the sepulchers of their own pettiness, but they fear that their Resurrection, like His, will bear the scars of battle. There are many who would like to stretch a finger to our Lord, they shrink back lest He should seize their hands and woo their hearts. But they are not far from the Kingdom of God. Already they have the desire; they need only the courage with which to pass through the crisis in which, through an apparent surrender, they will find themselves victors in the captivity of Divinity.

A third type of conversion is caused by a physical event. The crisis is physical when it comes through some unexpected catastrophe such as the death of a loved one, a business failure, a disease, or some suffering that forces one to ask: "What is the purpose of life? Why am I here? Where am I going?" So long as there was prosperity and good health, these questions were never in the foreground; the soul with only external interests does not concern itself with God, any more than the rich man whose barns were full. But when the barns are burned, the soul is suddenly forced to look inside itself, to examine the roots of its being, and to peer into the abyss of its spirit. This excursion is not the delightful voyage of a summer day, but a tragic inquiry into the possibility that we have neglected to seek for the best wealth, treasures that rust does not consume, moths eat, or thieves break through and steal—treasures that only God can give when hearts are emptier than any purse. All crises, even those of material disaster, force the soul inward, as the blood is driven back to the heart during some sickness or as a city under attack moves to its inner defenses.

It would be well today for us all to face the possibility of a great catastrophe. Whether the catastrophe will come as a result of atomic warfare or world revolution or as a cosmic upheaval matters little; the form of it is only a detail. But what does matter is this possibility for disaster of which we do know. A tragedy of catastrophic proportions would reveal to a skeptical world that the universe is moral and that God's laws cannot be broken with impunity. Just as failure to eat causes a headache, a judgment on the violation of a law of nature, great crises in history are judgments on the way people think, will, love, and act. Periods of delirium and the times of tragedy following a schism of the soul from God sometimes do for a whole people what sickness or personal disaster does for a sinful individual.

Illness, especially, may be a blessed forerunner of the individual's conversion. Not only does it prevent him from realizing his desires, it even reduces his capacity for sin, his opportunities for vice. In that enforced detachment from evil, which is a mercy of God, he has time to enter into himself, to appraise his life, to interpret it in terms of large reality. He considers God and, at that moment, there is a sense of duality, a confronting of personality with divinity, a comparison of the facts of life with the ideal from which he fell. The soul is forced to look inside itself, to inquire whether there is not more peace in this suffering than in sinning. Once a sick person, in his passivity, begins to ask: "What is the purpose of my life? Why am I here?" the crisis has already begun. Conversion becomes possible the very moment a person ceases to blame God or life for his troubles and begins to blame himself; by doing so, he becomes able to distinguish between his sinful barnacles and the ship of his soul. A crack has appeared in the armor of his egotism; now the sunlight of God's grace can pour in.

But until that happens, catastrophes can teach us nothing but despair.

When a soul in sin, under the impetus of grace, turns to God, there is penance; but when a soul in sin refuses to change, God sends chastisement. This chastisement need not be external, and certainly it is never arbitrary; it comes as an inevitable result of breaking God's moral law. But the entrenched forces of the modern world are irrational; people nowadays do not always interpret disasters as the moral events they are. When calamity strikes the flint of human hearts, sparks of sacred fire are kindled and people will normally begin to make an estimate of their true worth. In previous ages this was usual: the disordered individual could find his way back to peace because he lived in an objective world inspired by Christian order. But the frustrated individual of today, having lost faith in God, living, as he does, in a disordered, chaotic world, has no beacon to guide him. In times of trouble he sometimes turns in upon himself, like a serpent devouring his own tail. Given such a man, who worships the false trinity of 1) his own pride, which acknowledges no law; 2) his own sensuality, which makes earthly comfort its goal; 3) his license, which interprets liberty as the absence of all restraint and law—then a cancer is created that is impossible to cure except through an operation or calamity unmistakable as God's action in history. It is always through sweat and blood and tears that the soul is purged of its animal egotism and laid open to the Spirit.

It would be wrong to imagine that historical catastrophes are necessary because there is one side of the world where people are good and another side where they are wicked. When a germ gets into the bloodstream, it does not isolate itself in the right arm or the left; it is the whole body that is stricken. So with humanity. Being one body, everyone who belongs to our race is sinful to some degree. It is *our* wicked world, not *theirs*. It is not one group alone who are the cause of the world's ills. All of us stand in need of redemption. The more Christian a soul is, the more it sees itself responsible for its neighbor's sins; such a man or woman seeks to take that sin upon himself as if it were his own—as Christ, the Innocent, took upon Himself the sins of the whole world. As the truest sympathy for those who mourn is to weep, so the true love for the guilty is to atone for their guilt. The burden of the world's regeneration is therefore laid on the one who knows Christ and hears His voice in the Church and incorporates himself in His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. A sense of our solidarity in evil can then become a solidarity in goodness.

But there is no mathematical equality in the work of redemption. Ten just men could have saved Sodom and Gomorrah. In the divine reckoning, it is Carmelite nuns and Trappist monks who are doing more to save the world than the politicians and the generals. The alien spirit that preempts civilization can be driven out only by prayers and fasting.

In the face of evil there are three kinds of souls. There are those who do evil and deny there is evil and call it good. *Yea, the hour comes when whoever kills you will think that he does a service to God.* (Jn 16:2) There are also those who see evil in others, but not in themselves, and who "flatter" their own virtue by criticizing the sinful. *You hypocrite, cast first the beam out of your own eye, then you shall see to cast the mote out of your brother's eye.* (Mt 7:5) Finally, there are those who carry the burdens of another's woe and sin as their own.

We are being taught in this century that the divisions that sever some people from others are very frail. Physical calamities break down these barriers. Modern warfare destroys the boundary line of combatant and civilian—not that it should do so, at least, its violations reveal that in a crisis the peril is not mine nor thine, but ours. When enough devout souls transfer this oneness of humanity from the physical to the moral and spiritual order, the world will be reborn.

Catastrophe can be to a world that has forgotten God what a sickness can be to a sinner; in the midst of it millions might be brought not to a voluntary, but to an enforced, crisis. Such a calamity would put an end to Godlessness and make vast numbers of people, who might otherwise lose their souls, turn to God. After a succession of hot, sultry days in the summer, we sense that there must be a storm, we sense that there must be a storm before the cool days come back again. Similarly, in these days of confusion, there is an intuition of impending catastrophe, a feeling that some immense

preternatural disturbance must bring the evil of the world to ruins before we can be set free again. It is not a question of the end of the world, but the end of an era—a manifestation of the sublime truth that the denial of Christian morality and truth brings us all to the edge of catastrophe, to the very rim of dissolution.

Desire implies possibility: *Nothing is impossible with God*. If there is no God, then nothing is possible. The desire for God is to the soul what breathing is to the body—breathing brings into our beings the possibility of physical life from the outside, as prayer, which is the highest expression of desire, brings into our souls the possibility of participation in God. This desire is not wholly the soul's own, for it feels itself under a sweet compulsion; God is pressing the soul, all the while it seems to be pressing Him. Later on, the soul will understand that even the desire for God came from God and that the fires burned within itself were kindled from the hearth of God.

Conversion does not automatically follow on this longing; unless the desire for God is stronger than the old habits and passions, the crisis of desire can end in frustration. The grace of crisis can pass—then one has missed the boat, has missed the Bark of Peter. The desire was there; but, because it was not prized highly, the ideal of Christ was given up, and the carnal and the worldly remained.

There has never been a convert that has lacked desire—desire for God and also the desire to become a different person from any he has been before. Grace is God's party; cultivating and harboring the desire for grace is our God-given part: *Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you.* (Matt. 7:7)

God never refuses grace to those who honestly ask for it. All He asks is that the vague thirst for the Infinite which has urged the soul on to seek its good in a succession of pleasures shall now be transformed into a thirst for God Himself. All we need to do is to voice these two petitions: Dear Lord, illumine my intellect to see the Truth, and give me the strength to follow it. It is a prayer that is *always* answered. And it makes no difference whether the desire for God we voice has come from our disgusts, satieties, and despair or whether it is born of our love of the beautiful, the perfect. God is willing to take either our old bones or our young dreams, for He loves us, not because of the way we are, but because of what we can be through grace.

Curiously enough, it is a fear of how grace *will* change and improve them that keeps many souls away from God. They want God to take them as they are and let them stay that way. They want Him to take away their love of riches, but not their riches—to purge them of the disgust of sin, but not the pleasure of sin. Some of them equate goodness with indifference to evil and think that God is good if He is broad-minded or tolerant about evil. Like the onlookers at the Cross, they want God on their terms, not His, and they shout: "Come down and we will believe." But the things they ask are marks of a *false* religion: It promises salvation without a cross, abandonment without sacrifice, Christ without His nails. God is a consuming fire; or desire for God must include a willingness to have the chaff burned from our intellect and the weeds of our sinful pride purged. The very fear souls have of surrendering themselves to the Lord with a Cross is an evidence of their instinctive belief in His Holiness. Because God is fire, we cannot escape Him, whether we draw near for conversion or flee from aversion: In either case, He affects us. If we accept His love, its fires will illumine and warm us; if we reject Him, they will still burn on in us in frustration and remorse.

As all human beings are touched by God's flaming love, so also are all touched by the desire for His intimacy. No one escapes this longing; we are all kings in exile, miserable without the Infinite. Those who reject the grace of God have a desire to *avoid* God, as those who accept it have a desire *for* God. The modern atheist does not disbelieve because of his intellect, but because of his will; it is not knowledge that makes him an atheist, but perversity. The denial of God springs from a person's desire to not have a God—from his wish that there was no justice behind the universe, so that his injustices would fear no retribution; from his desire that there be no Law, so that he may not be judged by it; from his wish that there be no Absolute Goodness, so that he might go on sinning with impunity. That is why the modern atheist

is always angered when he hears anything said about God and religion—he would be incapable of such a resentment if God was only a myth. His feeling toward God is the same which a wicked person has for one whom he has wronged: he wishes the other dead so that he could do nothing to avenge the wrong. The betrayer of friendship knows his friend exists, but he wishes he did not; the post-Christian atheist knows God exists, but he desires He should not.

We cannot escape God's justice by denying Him, but His friendship is easy to evade. He never forces our love. The surrender of the will to God is all-important in conversion because of this: God will not destroy our human freedom. He will not give proofs so absolutely overpowering as to destroy all choice, for He always leaves a margin for love. Therefore a necessary prelude for conversion is a spirit become docile, teachable, and humble. For if we think we know it all, not even God can teach us.

As soon as a person becomes humble, he recognized his own long self-deception, the little tricks he has played on himself to conceal his unadmitted desire for God. Humility is truth, the recognition of ourselves as we are. That is why, when anyone accuses us of being a sheepstealer, we smile; but when we are accused of being a liar, we are apt to become angry, for it may be true. The penalty of pride is the inability to be really converted: *For the heart of this people is grown gross, and with their ears they have been dull of hearing, and their eyes they have shut; lest at anytime they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.* (Matt 13:15) And humility is so essential, indeed, that our Lord declared conversion to be dependent on our becoming childlike in affection and desire.

In conclusion then: This tension between the flesh and the spirit, between the pull of time and the leash of eternity—this dialectic between the love of selfish pleasure and the desire for spiritual peace is in every soul. The reason why more souls do not come to God is because they do not love God enough; they have placed a stronger longing on the side of the scales opposing Him. But they will never escape Him even so; the tug of war continues while they live.

Every frustrated soul who is not insane is in this state because it has fought off the high summons of Divinity. He alone is our way. Flee Him, and we are lost. He alone is our light. Depart from Him, and we are blind. He alone is life. Leave Him, and we must die. Are we afraid that, if we shake the fire of our souls with desire, the ashes will choke our life? Do we say that we have nothing to give—that our years have crackled and gone up in smoke? But if we cannot bring goodness to Him, we can bring our sins. You say you are depressed and of low spirits? He brought you low only to make you want His heights!