



RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

CONVERSION OF LIFE

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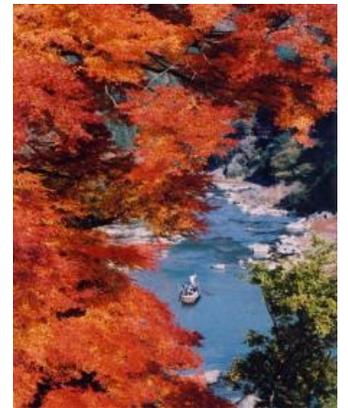
You were taught
with regard to your former way of life,
to put off your old self,
which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;
to be made new in the attitude of your minds;
and to put on the new self,
created to be like God
in true righteousness and holiness.

~ Ephesians 4: 22-24

The call to conversion of life is as old as human society. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, conversion is strongly linked to atonement for wrong-doing and the need to repent and do penance for sin. However, as Richard N. Fragomeni observes in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*:

... in recent years a more comprehensive understanding of conversion has sought to include the full depth of biblical insight into the understanding of the process as a turning from and a turning toward.

This new understanding places the emphasis on the transformation of personality and on God's gift of grace within the process. Without denying the reality of sin and guilt, contemporary approaches to conversion foster the development of self-awareness rather than self-judging and introspection as the effective means of bringing about healthy change.



Conversion refers to a complex process of transformation. It may begin simple, but inevitably it involves the entire personality and all of one's life. Despite appearances to the contrary, there is nothing static about the human condition. We find ourselves nearly at all times in flux. Throughout the life process the body with its vital needs and urges undergoes constant change. Our psychic life (mind and soul) is typically governed by subtle and not so subtle changing moods. And the spiritual life, potentially accessible to us at all times, often seems to be beyond our reach. Willful attempts to live the spiritual life and to control its course lead to frustration and constrain the Spirit, which, paradoxically, establishes itself in our lives the more it is set free and *slowly breathed*. Our prospects of conversion and transformation arise from and are set against a welter of contesting forces. There are upward pulls drawing us toward authentic fulfillment, and downward pulls adding elements of struggle to every part of the journey. The poet Rilke's famous line, "You must change your life . . .," articulates thousands of years of religious and psychological insight. It recognizes the fundamental need in human personality for transformative experience, and calls out to us to do the work.

In *The Transcendent Self* Adrian van Kaam contrasts repentance and repression. Repression represents denial of sinfulness and failure. It sets up a division in our personality:

Our energy is absorbed in defense and denial of what is a real part of us. Our repressed dark side keeps poisoning our life . . . The older and weaker we grow the more pernicious this taxation of our waning energies by repressed guilt becomes. If in old age the guilt suddenly breaks through we may panic. We did not learn in time to live with guilt; we remained novices in the art of reconciliation. By not following the call of repentance, we wasted a great deal of time. (133-134)

Repentance thus viewed is not meant to depress and drag us down. Mature repentance, van Kaam affirms, brings peace by keeping us present to our woundedness. Remorse can become a daily, silent power of union with the divine image deep within us. By the practice of loving sorrow the human heart is deepened and transformed. (136) A similarly positive view of repentance is presented in Irma Zaleski's *The Way of Repentance*:

Repentance—conversion of heart—does not mean being filled and tormented by guilt. It means being ready to admit our responsibility for our actions and our need for forgiveness, and having a firm desire to change our lives: to turn away from ourselves in prayer and in love. It means our willingness . . . to embrace fully the gift of our salvation. (8)

Our acts of mortification should be viewed as merely one aspect of the repentance/conversion process. The greater part belongs to the gift of grace that makes change and renewal possible in the first place. Our attempts to alter ourselves and reality pale before the power of the Spirit in our lives to inspire new possibilities of being in the world. A softened, mellowed will — a will converted to love — *allows* change to occur. Conversion then becomes a graced willingness to respond to the heart's innate desire to be "more" in every situation and circumstance of life. The gradual process of conversion of life is thus an instruction in wisdom: it inclines us to choose to do what we must do to continue freeing ourselves to opt for the "more" that a full spiritual life is always offering us.

Finally, repentance and conversion of heart are to be understood within the larger context of faith, i.e. the capacity of opening to something "more" that we call transcendence. An *act of faith*, according to Raimon Panikkar, is "that activity by which we put our faith into practice." It is in acts of faith surging from the heart that the human being is realized. Transformation occurs when the processes of conversion are based on living acts of faith. Panikkar's description of faith could well be applied to those practices associated with repentance:

The act of faith is a saving act. . . . The act of faith is not a conditioned reflex; it is a free act that does not cut us off from the human condition but, on the contrary, allows it to attain its plenitude. (*The Experience of God*, p. 31)