

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONVERSION

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It is with diffidence that anyone born into the Faith can approach the tremendous subject of Conversion. Indeed, it is easier for one still quite unacquainted with the Faith to approach that subject than it is for one who has had the advantage of the Faith from childhood. There is at once a sort of impertinence in approaching an experience other than one's own (necessarily more imperfectly grasped), and an ignorance of the matter. Those born into the Faith very often go through an experience of their own parallel to, and in some way resembling, that experience whereby original strangers to the Faith come to see it and to accept it. Those born into the Faith often, I say, go through an experience of scepticism in youth, as the years proceed, and it is still a common phenomenon (though not so often to be observed as it was a lifetime ago) for men of the Catholic culture, acquainted with the Church from childhood, to leave it in early manhood and never to return. But it is nowadays a still more frequent phenomenon-- and it is to this that I allude--for those to whom scepticism so strongly appealed in youth to discover, by an experience of men and of reality in all its varied forms, that the transcendental truths they had been taught in childhood have the highest claims upon their matured reason.

This experience of the born Catholic may, I repeat, be called in a certain sense a phenomenon of conversion. But it differs from conversion properly so called, which rather signifies the gradual discovery and acceptance of the Catholic Church by men and women who began life with no conception of its existence: for whom it had been during their formative years no more than a name, perhaps despised, and certainly corresponding to no known reality.

Such men and women converts are perhaps the chief factors in the increasing vigor of the Catholic Church in our time. The admiration which the born Catholic feels for their action is exactly consonant to that which the Church in its earlier days showed to the martyrs. For the word "martyr" means "witness." The phenomenon of conversion apparent in every class, affecting every type of character, is the great modern witness to the truth of the claim

of the Faith; to the fact that the Faith is reality, and that in it alone is the repose of reality to be found.

In proportion as men know less and less of the subject, in that proportion do they conceive that the entrants into the City of God are of one type, and in that proportion do they attempt some simple definition of the mind which ultimately accepts Catholicism. They will call it a desire for security; or an attraction of the senses such as is exercised by music or by verse. Or they will ascribe it to that particular sort of weakness (present in many minds) whereby they are easily dominated and changed in mood by the action of another.

A very little experience of typical converts in our time makes nonsense of such theories. Men and women enter by every conceivable gate, after every, conceivable process of slow intellectual examination, of shock, of vision, of moral trial and even of merely intellectual process. They enter through the action of expanded experience. Some obtain this through travel, some through a reading of history beyond their fellows, some through personal accidents of life. And not only are the avenues of approach to the Faith infinite in number (though all converging; as must be so, since truth is one and error infinitely divided), but the individual types in whom the process of conversion may be observed differ in every conceivable fashion. When you have predicated of one what emotion or what reasoning process brought him into the fold, and you attempt to apply your predicate exactly to another, you will find a misfit. The cynic enters, and so does the sentimentalist; and the fool enters and so does the wise man; the perpetual questioner and doubter and the man too easily accepting immediate authority--they each enter after his kind. You come across an entry into the Catholic Church undoubtedly due to the spectacle, admiration and imitation of some great character observed. Next day you come across an entry into the Catholic Church out of complete loneliness, and you are astonished to find the convert still ignorant of the great mass of the Catholic effect on character. And yet again, immediately after, you will find a totally different third type, the man who enters not from loneliness, nor from the effect of another mind, but who comes in out of contempt for the insufficiency or the evil by which he has been surrounded.

The Church is the natural home of the Human Spirit.

The truth is that if you seek for an explanation of the phenomenon of conversion under any system which bases that phenomenon on illusion, you arrive at no answer to your question. If you imagine conversion to proceed from this or that or the other erroneous or particular limited and insufficient cause, you will soon discover it to be inexplicable.

There is only one explanation of the phenomenon--a phenomenon always present, but particularly arresting to the educated man outside the Catholic Church in the English-speaking countries-- there is only one explanation which will account for the multiplicity of such entries and for the infinitely varied quality of the minds attracted by the great change; and that explanation is that the Catholic Church is reality. If a distant mountain may be mistaken for a cloud by many, but is recognised for a stable part of the world (its outline

fixed and its quality permanent) by every sort of observer, and among these especially by men famous for their interest in the debate, for their acuteness of vision and for their earlier doubts, the overwhelming presumption is that the thing seen is a piece of objective reality. Fifty men on shipboard strain their eyes for land. Five, then ten, then twenty, make the land-fall and recognise it and establish it for their fellows. To the remainder, who see it not or who think it a bank of fog, there is replied the detail of the outline, the character of the points recognised, and that by the most varied and therefore convergent and convincing witnesses--by some who do not desire that land should be there at all, by some who dread its approach, as well as those who are glad to find it, by some who have long most ridiculed the idea that it was land at all-- and it is in this convergence of witnesses that we have one out of the innumerable proofs upon which the rational basis of our religion reposes.

--The Editor [Hilare Belloc].