
LENT : ROAD TO CONVERSION



With the 1999 Lenten season beginning today I hope that this period will be of great benefit to you in our every searching for God and relating to our brothers and sisters. May prayer, fasting and almsgiving be part of this undertaking, as our liturgy says. And may the following lines on the subject of conversion penned January 22, 1999 by Pope John Paul II himself, [Pope John Paul II, post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*. (Mexico City,) January 22, 1999, Nos. 26-28] especially for us who live in North America, be our guide.

URGENT CALL

"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is close at hand: repent and believe the Good News" (Mark 1:15). These words with which Jesus began his Galilean ministry still echo in the ears of Bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women and the lay faithful throughout America. Both the recent celebration of the fifth centenary of the first evangelization of America and the commemoration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus, the Great Jubilee we are preparing to celebrate, summon everyone alike to a deeper sense of our Christian vocation. The greatness of the Incarnation and gratitude for the gift of the first proclamation of the Gospel in America are an invitation to respond readily to Christ with a more decisive personal conversion and a stimulus to ever more generous fidelity to the Gospel. Christ's call to conversion finds an echo in the words of the Apostle: *"It is time now to wake from sleep, because our salvation is closer than when we first became believers"* (Rom. 13:11). The encounter with the living Jesus impels us to conversion.

CHANGE OF MENTALITY

In speaking of conversion, the New Testament uses the word *metanoia*, which means a change of mentality. It is not simply a matter of thinking differently in an intellectual sense, but of revising the reasons behind one's actions in the light of the Gospel. In this regard, Saint Paul speaks of *"faith working through love"* (Gal. 5:6). This means that true conversion needs to be prepared and nurtured through the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture and the practice of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Conversion leads to fraternal communion, because it enables us to understand that Christ is the head of the Church, his Mystical Body; it urges solidarity, because it makes us aware that whatever we do for others, especially for the poorest, we do for Christ himself. Conversion, therefore, fosters a new life, in which there is no separation between faith and works in our daily response to the universal call to holiness. [...] To be true disciples of the Lord, believers must bear witness to their faith, and witnesses testify not only with words, but also with their lives. [...]

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CONVERSION

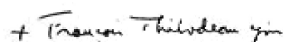
Conversion is incomplete if we are not aware of the demands of the Christian life and if we do not strive to meet them. In this regard, the Synod Fathers noted that unfortunately at both the personal and communal level there are great shortcomings in relation to a more profound conversion and with regard to relationships between sectors, institutions and groups within the Church. *"He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen"* (1 Jn. 4:20). Fraternal charity means attending to all the needs of our neighbour. *"If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide*

in him?" (1 Jn 3:17). Hence, for the Christian people of America conversion to the Gospel means to revise all the different areas and aspects of life, especially those related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good. It will be especially necessary to nurture the growing awareness in society of the dignity of every person and, therefore, to promote in the community a sense of the duty to participate in political life in harmony with the Gospel. Involvement in the political field is clearly part of the vocation and activity of the lay faithful. [...]

CONTINUING CONVERSION

In this life, conversion is a goal which is never fully attained: on the path which the disciple is called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, conversion is a lifelong task. While we are in this world, our intention to repent is always exposed to temptations. Since "*no one can serve two masters*" (Mt. 6:24), the change of mentality (*metanoia*) means striving to assimilate the values of the Gospel, which contradict the dominant tendencies of the world. Hence there is a need to renew constantly the encounter with the living Jesus Christ, since this [...] is the way which leads to continuing conversion.

The universal call to conversion has special implications for the Church in America, involved as she is in the renewal of faith. The Synod Fathers expressed this very specific and demanding task in this way: "This conversion demands especially of us bishops a genuine identification with the personal style of Jesus Christ, who leads us to simplicity, poverty, responsibility for others and the renunciation of our own advantage, so that, like him and not trusting in human means, we may draw from the strength of the Holy Spirit and of the Word all the power of the Gospel, remaining open above all to those who are furthest away and excluded."



+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

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