



CONVERSIO MORUM

Conversio Morum or *Conversatio Morum* is one of the three Vows taken by those entering Benedictine life, one of the basic tenets of which is that searching for God which gives expression to our desire for Him. On beginning monastic life the novice is asked what they seek and the answer given that they come to seek God. This seeking involves a conversion, a *metanoia*. Over the centuries the Vow has been translated as 'conversion of manners' or 'conversion of life', each having its own particular meaning. Today it is understood as incorporating both meanings: to continually strive for conversion in one's own personal behaviour and to faithfully persevere in living the monastic observance within the monastery.

"Dramatic experiences of conversion may have their value but their meaning is in opening a new phase of life. This (monastic) vow is a commitment to be always a pilgrim, living an ongoing conversion of one's way of life by an ever fuller harmony with the principles of peace, tolerance, selflessness and generosity and the courage to say the truth about injustice." (Dom Laurence Freeman OSB)

Conversion in the Bible

'Although the *Rule of Benedict* does not use the word "conversion," the idea was prominent in ancient monasticism, which saw monastic profession as "a second baptism" and a sharing in the dying and rising of Christ. " **Personal conversion is at the heart of every vocation**, particularly the monastic calling, which is a specific form of putting of the "old man," and being clothed with Christ.

In the Hebrew Old Testament the word for conversion was "*shub*" (שׁוּב) which means "to turn" and could be used in the sense of "turning one's life around" (e.g., *Is 6.10*). The same verb also can mean "turning again" or "returning," "reversal" (*Ps 51.13; Is 55.7*). God (re)turns toward his people with a new attitude when they turn to him (*Ps 85.1-3; Deut 13.17; Hos 11*). The word "*shub*" is not used frequently, but the prophets speak often of the need for a change of heart, a conversion (*Is 44.21b-22; 45.22*). The heart of conversion is to turn away from sin and turn toward God.

In the New Testament the word "conversion" (*epistrophe*) appears only in Acts 15.3, but more frequent is the word "change of heart/mind" (*metanoia*). The Kingdom of God, announced and inaugurated by and in Jesus, requires a radical conversion. The initial proclamation of John the Baptist and Jesus calls for a change of heart (*Mk 1.8, 15 and parallels*), a concept which is very akin to repentance. The apostles' preaching also called for such a change of heart (*Acts 2.38-39*), and the Acts are full of stories of conversion (2.5-47 [*crowds at Pentecost*], 8.26-39 [*Ethiopian eunuch*], 9.1-22 [*Paul*], 16.27-34 [*jailor at Philippi*]). Those who convert hear the word, are open and accept it, their change of heart is expressed in ritual and in their transformed lives. Conversion is, in fact, a lifelong process by which one is transformed into the image of God (2 Cor 3.18).'

(*'Conversatio or Conversio?: Fidelity to the Monastic Life'* by Catherine Mary Magdalene Haynes, ob/OSB. And Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB)

'The term *conversio morum* came into common use consequent to the development of the Benedictine notion of *conversatio morum*. The word *conversatio* was used by Pliny to mean *frequent use* or a *frequent sojourn* in a place. When combined with *morum* (*mos, moris* – from which we get our English word *mores*), it speaks of a way of life – what one does, if you like. Returning to the text of the Rule and put very simply, it could be construed as *the way one loves one's life*.

The word *conversatio* later became altered to *conversio*. This gave a new understanding – that of *conversion of life*. The Latin *conversio* means 'turning around', similar in meaning to the Greek word 'metanoia' (μετάνοιά).

This, later, term speaks to us of a process, an action. On one level, the disciple, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recognises a need for a change in his or her way of life. S/He therefore would seek admission to the Monastery so that s/he may turn her/his back on her/his old ways and seek the way that leads to life

On another level *conversio* is not a one-off process. Conversion is a journey in which we are engaged every day of our lives, even at every moment. Sin, the distractions of the world (however legitimate they may be) draw us away from Christ and we must be for ever turning around to face him. This speaks of action on our part, but action that is always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Conversio morum is one element in *conversatio morum* which speaks far more of a whole way of life in which continual conversion is one element, albeit a vital one.'

(adapted from a talk by Bishop Richard Moth to Oblates of Douai Abbey, 2008)

