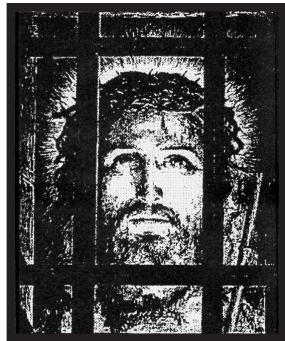


Follow Me **Conversion & Commitment to Christ**

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Follow Me

Conversion & Commitment to Christ

Are we converted? That can be a pretty intimidating question. It makes us wonder. Do I really follow Christ? What am I living for?

What does it mean to be converted? For Catholics, conversion is not a one-time thing. Rather, it happens again and again throughout life. We are pilgrims on a journey that is never complete here on Earth. This does not mean there are not breakthroughs. There are. But any breakthroughs we experience are the start, and not the end, of our journey and our Christian task.

Jesus and Conversion

In the gospels of Mark (1:15) and Matthew (4:17), Jesus' first words are: "Now is the appointed time. Convert! The Kingdom of God is at hand." We can reflect on two things in these simple words.

*Conversion means:
Change your mind.
Turn your brain
upside down!
Start seeing the
world differently.*

The first is the word "convert." It is often translated as "repent," in the sense of having regrets about past deeds. But the word in its Greek root means more than this. It means: Change your mind. Turn your brain upside down! Start seeing the world differently.

In this sense, conversion is about the vision we have in life, what we think life is about, what we think is important and essential. Jesus is asking us to flip over the usual values we normally have so that we can see God's values.

The second point has to do with “conversion.” Conversion is about the Kingdom of God. We are converted when we change our lives in such a way that we can see the values that Jesus brings to us. Until this happens, we think that life is about getting ahead, making money, having as much pleasure as we can, and being able to beat up on weaker people. Not so! says Jesus. When we experience conversion, we begin to see life as God intends it.

Breakthroughs

Many people are baptized as children and grow up in the faith of Jesus. Their experience of faith comes as a steady growth. They never got in trouble, messed around, got addicted, or did terrible sins.

Many others, however, need a breakthrough. They are stuck, trapped in destructive patterns, addicted, inclined to use and abuse others, with hearts turned away from God. They need a radical change. When that change comes, it feels like relief—freedom.

*The breakthrough is only the start
But then what?*

But, after the breakthrough, what happens next? This is the crucial question for believers. The breakthrough is only the start. We get the insight, we see the message, we hear the Word, we make a decision. But then what?

Either we do the things necessary to sustain our conversion, or else we backslide, as some put it. We revert back to where we were. We see this so often in the criminal justice system. People “get saved” in jail, but then, once back on the streets, return to what they did before, and get sent back to jail again.

True Conversion

So conversion is not primarily about breakthroughs. Rather, it concerns our living as disciples, and our doing things that we need to do to maintain our discipleship. We remember the parable that Jesus gives us in the Gospels of Mark (4:1-20) and

Matthew (13:1-23) about the Sower and the Seed. The seed (God's Word) is widely scattered. But it falls on different kinds of soil. Some people experience conversion, but get absorbed in one thing or another, and fall away. Not everyone stays on the path of conversion.

Conversion means being committed to living as a disciple, whether one has experienced one breakthrough, many breakthroughs, or no breakthroughs. God has given us all a path to walk.

A path has four principle guides: Word, Worship and Prayer, Community, and Service.

- **Word** means that I read and reflect on the Word of God in such a way that I hear what it is asking of me and respond through my relationship to God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
- **Worship and Prayer** means I express this relationship by personal prayer and by praying with others at the Eucharist—the Mass—on Sunday, or when possible.
- **Community** means that I realize the sincerity of my conversion is shown by how I love and care for others—we must live without hate!
- **Service** means that I know discipleship is not about me but what I do *for* others, how I serve them in the name of Jesus.

So that's the choice. It's not only whether to be converted or not. It's whether we will stay on the road of conversion and one day attain salvation's fullness in and through Jesus Christ.

Following Christ

While people often claim to be saved because of an experience they have had, we know that the point is not just an experience. Rather, it's about becoming a disciple. Here is one story about becoming a disciple from the Gospel of Matthew (9:9-13):

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Matthew is a tax collector. In ancient Israel, that meant that people saw Matthew as a betrayer of his people, for he collected taxes for the enemy. People also undoubtedly saw Matthew as a cheat, for he charged extra and put this money in his own pocket. We do not know what made Matthew get up and follow Jesus. In many ways, we do not know what makes people change, except, of course, the power of God.

But we see what follows: Matthew and his associates are sitting down at table with Jesus, learning from him, and eating with him. In other words, they become disciples, the group that will call Jesus their Teacher, and will continue to learn from him.

Four Parts of Discipleship

We also see here the seeds of the four parts of discipleship—
■ Word; ■ Worship and Prayer; ■ Community, and ■ Service.
Let’s explore what these mean more fully.

Word. Disciples are learners. They listen to their Teacher. They learn the Word of God. Just as Matthew sits down with Jesus to hear him at table—and what a lesson Jesus teaches about God’s mercy—so every disciple has to be willing to sit down with Jesus and learn from him.

We do this in a variety of ways. First of all, we listen to the Gospels

and the other scriptures. We can do this as the scriptures are read to us. We can also do it in our own private reading. The important thing is to put ourselves into the story, into the Word. Are we like Matthew, or Matthew's friends (still fence-sitting) or the leaders who do not get the point?

Listening to the Word means talking with Jesus and making Jesus the center of my life. It also means being willing to follow Jesus in my actions and being willing to learn more from him.

So the Word of God leads to: ■ Conversion to Jesus (making him the center) and ■ Relationship (making Jesus the key to all my relationships).

Worship and Prayer. Notice what happens when Matthew follows Jesus. He and Jesus sit down at table with others. He shares life with Jesus and shows his relationship by staying, praying, and eating with Jesus. From the very beginning, Jesus shared himself with his disciples at a meal. And, from the very beginning, Jesus' disciples have continued his meal. We call this the Mass or the Eucharist (which means the Thanksgiving).

Lots of people say they follow Jesus, but they never express that following by worshipping with others at Mass. Mass is the way we continue to eat with Jesus and learn from him. Similarly, lots of people claim they pray, but they never really give Jesus the time of personal prayer. As a result, they don't really know the Father of Jesus, or the Holy Spirit.

I am a disciple then when I: ■ Put aside time to pray personally every day, ■ Put aside time to participate in Mass at least once a week.

Community. After Matthew follows Jesus, he doesn't go into a corner. He hangs out with Jesus, and he hangs out with others who are listening to Jesus. Following Jesus, then, means following him *with* others, in community. And it isn't always the community of the perfect, the people who never sin. Rather, it's the community of others who are striving to follow the Lord.

We have often made religion a private matter, something in our heads or in our emotions. It wasn't that way for Jesus, or for the first followers of Jesus. If you said you loved Jesus, then you had to show it by how you treated your brothers and sisters. How often have we met people who said they were "saved" but didn't really care about anyone else?

So if I follow Jesus, I do so by: ■ Sharing my spiritual walk with our brothers and sisters, ■ Showing my love for Jesus by loving others.

Service. Jesus startles everyone by saying that he did not come for the healthy (those who think their lives are OK). He came for those who are hurting, those who know they need help (see Matthew 9:12). In this way he taught his followers what he was all about—serving other people, particularly those in the greatest need.

Salvation is about being part of the kingdom of God and serving others just as Jesus did.

Salvation is not just about me, and how I feel, and whether I am turned on. Salvation is about being part of the kingdom of God and serving others just as Jesus did. While we may not be doing miracles like Jesus, we know when people are hurting—and how to help them. We know the lonely, the struggling, those being picked on, those who need a hand.

So if I follow Jesus, I do so by: ■ Offering to others my help, my presence, my prayers. ■ And for the Christian community wherever we are, we do so by offering to others our help, our presence, our prayers.

We can think of the Kingdom of God as a ripple stirring in the water. Jesus makes the first splash—but Jesus needs his followers to continue that splash. Jesus, after all, is looking at us just as he looked at Matthew. He sees our messy lives. But he still looks and says, "Follow me!" We're looking back at him. What do we say in return?

Testimonies from Prison

Each person's conversion is different, although there are similarities. These testimonies about conversion and commitment to Christ are from prisoners.

Thanks to all those who sent us their stories.

Jennie, from Arizona:

My pleas changed from “comfort me” to “conform me, Lord.” Right then I made a commitment to showing up. I showed up early every morning at his throne with my Bible, a journal to write in, and a heart and mind that were clear, open, and willing. God became my heart's desire and my “One and Only.”

Jeff, from Florida:

I found myself wanting to pray and worship frequently. I attended Bible study and Christian church whenever possible. While I found myself growing greatly in faith I was still searching for comfort in a place to worship.

During this period of time, a Catholic friend of mine had been providing meditations and daily scripture readings. He answered, patiently, my many questions concerning the Catholic Church. His answers combined with my own Bible study left only one possible conclusion. Jesus Christ has founded the Catholic Church and called us all to be members.

When I arrived at my permanent camp I was very happy to learn Fr. Gonzales had Mass every Thursday evening. After my first Mass I realized that Jesus had indeed guided my journey and in fact walked me to the front door of his church. All I needed to do was to open the door and go in.

Frank, from Ohio:

My journey with the Lord began in 1990 when I was baptized in prison. Before my conversion, I was living a life filled with acts of frustration and lack of understanding. After my baptism I had many ups and downs through many trials. When we decide to change our priorities we ultimately change our lifestyle. Once I made those changes, God assured me that my reward would definitely outweigh any benefits of following the worldly crowd.

No matter what we may go through in here or out there we are never alone. In these difficult days we need a constant reminder about the admirable possibility of human beings excelling when the divine life is released through the Christian community. Many prisoners have grown up in a system that breeds people to hate. The love of God is the only answer to change that.

Kane, from Georgia:

Here is my conversion story. At a young age I professed atheism. Around the time I began forming these ideas, drugs became a major part of my life. I spent the next 13 years buying, selling and using all kinds of drugs, and using all kinds of logical arguments to turn people away from God....Another addiction I had was lust and a pornography addiction. I committed the worst crime of molesting and abusing my young stepdaughter. But what Satan intended for evil, God used for good for this sin led to my arrest and later conversion. Although I had no visions like St. Paul, my conversion was every bit as miraculous. With a lengthy prison sentence I have had time to look back at all the times God was with me, even when I was denying him, saving my physical life so that he could save me spiritually. God took me, a drug addict, child molester, anti-Christ and made me clean with his love through Jesus Christ...and he will do the same for you, no matter who you are or what you've done.

Joseph, from Connecticut:

Who I am on this journey through this world is unimportant. But who I am in Christ is an entirely different matter. Unfortunately for me, my family, and the victims of my crimes, it is only now—after serving nearly 20 years in prison for five separate offenses—that I am discovering who the Lord wanted me to be all along....It is not unfortunate that I am discovering this purpose, but because that so many people had to suffer because of my inability to see what was right in front of my face: A free and wonderful relationship with the Father, in the Spirit, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

How you might ask, could I have been blind to something so obvious? That's simple: It's not because I was living my life with my eyes closed, but with my heart closed. Closed to the Lord, closed to forgiving myself, and closed to everyone who kept reaching out to help me. But then I did something that I never thought I would or even could do: I got on my knees, opened my heart, and invited the Lord inside. And let me tell you this: you have never seen anyone respond so fast. The Lord rushed right in, took me by the hand, and said, "It's about time. I have been waiting for this moment for a long, long time." And now, several years after that invitation, I am happy to say that the Lord is no longer a guest in my heart, but a permanent resident.

Gary, from New Mexico:

I was out of prison this time for seven years but did something very bad and ended up with a 38-year sentence. I was back in prison again and still angry and very unhappy for letting down my family again. I still had not changed or allowed God to help me with the problems I was going through until one day my little brother who was also in prison wrote to me and informed me that he was dying. After he passed on I began to realize how precious and short life really is and I took a good long look at myself and decided that if I were ever going to really find true

happiness it could only be in serving God rather than my own foolish desires. Slowly I began to change my ways of thinking and began attending church and prayed earnestly that God would help me to change and become the man he wanted me to be. I still continue today to ask God everyday that he continue to mold me and cleanse me of the old me that ruined so much of a life that I could have had with family and loved ones.

Today I still have three wonderful children and the addition of seven terrific grandchildren and all my family, minus one brother who helped me see the precious gift that life really is. I am a leader in our church community here in prison and I reach out with love to all the other brothers here in this facility to help and change the lives of those still searching for the beautiful and so simple gift that God has to offer each and every one of us.

Rene, from Iowa:

Even though I had grown up in a Christian home, I had lived most of my teenage years outside of God's will. I had been searching for my manhood within the gang energy. It wasn't until my negative experience that I realized that I had been looking in the wrong place. During my negative experience, at the beginning, I found it hard to turn back to my Catholic faith. I had heard time and time again how only the weak, those who need a crutch, came to Christ. I didn't want to seem weak! ... Yet I found myself inclined to learn more about my faith and its roots. As I immersed myself in the teaching of my faith, I came, little by little, to develop a sense of hope that had been known to me only as a child. I had found what all along I had been looking for Christ! I'm not going to say that my anxiety has completely been cured due to my new hope, because it hasn't, but I will say that through the Spirit of Christ I've been liberated from the fear of my anxiety. He gave me life, life that can only be complete in him.

Steven, from Tennessee:

Our Lord speaks to us in many ways. He will rescue us if we let him, for I believe that Jesus is who he claims to be: Jesus is God! Through his guiding Spirit for some 492 days I have led a daily Bible study, and I have personally hand-written daily devotions that are distributed throughout this facility. I write three copies and they are taken from cell block to cell block by the trustees, guards, or passed by inmates. Many guards have personally expressed their desire to receive them as well.

Kristine, from Indiana:

When I entered prison in 1996, I constantly felt ostracized because of my crime and I truly believed that everyone judged me. I didn't really fit in and I had no place where I could find comfort or peace. I was invited to the Holy Cross faith sharing group and Catholic Mass. I met the priest, some ladies from the convent in town, and the Holy Cross community.

These people were unlike any I had ever met...I could not believe that there were people like this in the world....In the Catholic Church I was embraced like I was their family. I was taught a different way to worship and to be a member of the Body of Christ.

I shared my sense of isolation and the condemnation I have received from others. I will never forget what I was told. "Nothing can take God's love from you. We all love you and are grateful that you are here with us." I was floored. I never expected to receive a response like that after my incarceration. I knew I wanted to be like them and to share the knowledge they shared with me.

Two years later, at Easter I was received into the Catholic Church. I found family, unity, strength, and peace with God's love and the amazing community God blessed me with. I am proud to be a member of such a loving family and community.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

To get more out of this pamphlet take some time to think about these questions. If possible and appropriate, discuss the questions with others who have read the pamphlet.

1. Catholics understand conversion as something that happens over and over again, not just as one-time event. (See page 1.) Why? Is this your experience?
2. Conversion means being committed to living as a follower of Jesus, to becoming a disciple. (See page 3.) Have you made the decision to follow Jesus? If so, what has come from your decision? If not, what stands in the way?
3. Have you ever sensed Jesus saying to you, "Follow me"? Was this a "big moment" or a "quiet calling," or a bit of both? (See page 4.) If so, what did you do? How have you responded?
4. Listening to Jesus means talking with Jesus and making Jesus the center of our lives. It also means being willing to follow Jesus in our actions and being willing to learn more from him. (See page 5.) Do you think you are "listening to Jesus"? What helps you to listen to him? What turns you off from listening?
5. Think about the "Four Parts of Discipleship." (See pages 4 to 6.) What role do they play in your spiritual life? Can you describe "special moments" in each of these areas in your life?
6. Were any of the testimonies from prisoners especially meaningful to you? (See pages 7 to 11.) Which ones? Why?
7. Write down your own story about your conversion and growth in commitment to Christ. What are some of the significant events on your way to conversion and commitment? Where are you along the way? What helps you to move forward with Jesus? What keeps you back? What can you do to keep moving forward?