

Amazing Grace: Kinds of Conversion

*“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.”*

(John Newton, c. 1760-1770, Olney, England)

Because of the song, “Amazing Grace,” by Rev. John Newton (1725-1807), along with the conversion of St. Paul (Acts of the Apostles 9:1-9; 22:3-16; 26:2-18), and the lives of many Saints down through the centuries, we often envision conversion as being a single, dramatic, and earth-shattering event. “I once was lost, but now am found,/ Was blind, but now I see!” But, what many people do not know is that John Newton went through multiple conversions, from slave trader—to believing Christian—to reformed Christian slave-ship captain—to Anglican clergyman—to a leader in the abolitionist movement against slavery. Personal experiences of conversion can vary, even though conversion is “a profound and radical transformation of mind and heart, reorienting one’s life to follow Jesus Christ.” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 48). While some of us become instantaneously conscious of the Holy Spirit’s action and a dramatic call to turn from sin and follow Christ, others only become aware of such promptings over a long period of time. For them, conversion is almost unnoticeable until they look back over many years of trying to live as active Catholics (dynamic conversion).

And furthermore, our Catholic theology points out that conversion is a life-long, ongoing, and overlapping process of going deeper; of getting “lost” many times and being “found” by Christ over and over again; of being “blind” and of receiving new sight by the light of the Holy Spirit. “This is crucial: we must be converted—and we must continue to be converted! We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ.” (USCCB, *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, no. 14)

Catholic writers describe many different types or kinds of conversion that set us on a spiral of transformation that is lived out at different times and under different circumstances, always moving deeper in discipleship to Jesus Christ. Among them are Religious, Awareness of God, Christian, Ecclesial (Church), Emotional, Intellectual, Moral, and Socio-political conversions.

The chart below briefly describes a few kinds of conversion and what the Holy Spirit wants to move us “From” and “To”:

Kinds of Conversion	From	To
Religious	Life as a series of problems and/or achievements. No deeper sense of meaning or purpose.	Life is a mystery and gift, a journey with and toward God with all creation.

Kinds of Conversion	From	To
Awareness of God	God is a force or energy out there.	God is a person desiring a personal relationship with us.
Christian	Knowing ABOUT the historical Jesus and the commandments.	Encountering the person of the risen Jesus who wants to be at the center of each of our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.
Ecclesial (Toward a Church)	Church as <i>they</i> , the institution, hierarchy and/or buildings.	Church as <i>we and Jesus</i> , our community, and spiritual home.
Emotional	Blockage of feelings. Self-absorption and self-centeredness.	Unconditional self-surrender to God and desire to love others.
Intellectual	Knowledge as only scientific and historical facts about world, people, or God.	Knowledge as meaning and wisdom enabling us to think with Christ and the Church.
Moral	Relativism: do whatever feels good because there are no absolute truths.	Being and doing what is good and just as revealed in Christ, Scripture, Church teaching and Tradition.
Socio-political	Public life and action based primarily on one's personal goals and wants.	Bringing Gospel of Jesus Christ and Christian values into daily work, business, politics, military, and social life.

How Conversion Happens

To summarize a Catholic view of conversion, we might say that it:

- May occur suddenly (dramatic conversion) or gradually (dynamic conversion).
- May be triggered or precipitated by “events” or by very ordinary experiences.
- Can be fostered by various means – stress, transition, change, people, nature, Scripture, liturgy, crisis, doubt, loneliness, and life’s circumstances.
- Does not occur in any fixed progression through the different kinds.
- Is life-long and ongoing, a never fully completed journey in this life.
- Can be both personal and social.

Conversion is brought about by the Holy Spirit inviting us, empowering us, and guiding us. We never really know what kinds of conversion someone else is struggling with, unless we get to know them very well. We cannot assume that because they have gone through one kind of conversion—encounter with Christ—that they have gone through other kinds of conversions, such as moral or socio-political, etc. Our role as Catholic evangelizers is to facilitate conversion by offering intercessory prayer to God for each person, by serving them with the love of Jesus Christ, by listening for how the Spirit is moving in their life, by sharing our own stories of conversion, and by inviting them to move forward in the process of conversion with us as disciples of Jesus Christ within the Catholic Church, the Body of Christ. “Conversion to Christ involves making a genuine commitment to him and a personal decision to follow him as his disciple. Through this discipleship the believer is united to the community of disciples and appropriates the faith of the Church.” (*National Directory for Catechesis*, 17B)

Reflection Questions for Sharing in Small Groups:

(3 or 4 people—20-25 mins.)

1. What kind of conversion have you experienced? How did this conversion change your relationship with Jesus and the Church?
2. What one or two kind(s) of conversion are you struggling with right now? Why?
3. What kinds of conversion does your parish promote? How is that working out?
4. How can we, as parishes, facilitate one another’s deeper conversion to Jesus Christ and the Church?

Take an Evangelization Challenge:

Conduct an informal survey of three people from your every day life. Ask them to look at the “Kinds of Conversion” chart and to talk about two or three kinds of conversion they have experienced. Then ask them about the kinds of conversion they might like to experience. (You might schedule a time right now to come together again as a group in order to share the results of this informal survey.)

An excellent pastoral tool that goes deeper into some of the different kinds of conversion can be found online. It is called the “Catholic Faith Inventory.” You can use it as an individual or as a small group at <https://www.catholicfaithinventory.org/>.