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Conversion and Catholic Bioethics

Bridget Campion, PhD

INTRODUCTION

One of the centrepieces of the Acts of the Apostles is the conversion of St. Paul (Acts 9:1-19).¹ Known as Saul prior to his conversion, he was a committed persecutor of Christians. Then, on the road to Damascus, he had an experience that would change him and the course of Christianity.

So dramatic are the story and its consequences that often overlooked is another remarkable experience: the ongoing conversion of Ananias, the man who was called by God to minister to Saul. It is an event that has a great deal of relevance to people interested in Moral Theology and, by extension, Catholic Bioethics.

WHAT IS CONVERSION?

In Moral Theology, the term often used to describe the phenomenon is *metanoia* which means to do an about-face, a complete turning away from one thing and turning towards something else. It includes an element of regret or repentance that accompanies insight into the inadequacy of the way of life one is currently following.² In Christian terms, conversion, effected by the grace of God, is a complete turning away from a life of sin and about embracing wholly and unconditionally a new way of

living centred on Jesus. Entailing “a radical turning around of the whole person,”³ conversion is not simply a change of behaviour but a change of being.

St. Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus is illustrative of the radical nature of conversion: a powerful man, he was knocked down, blinded and made dependent on others (Acts 9: 4, 8). Used to giving orders, he obeyed the voice that identified itself as Jesus, the one whom he was persecuting (Acts 9: 4-6). An individual who took zealous action against Christians, he was humbled and spent three days in fasting and prayer, becoming contemplative at least for the time being (Acts 9: 9, 11). Ultimately he would be healed and brought into the community of believers by Ananias (Acts 9: 18-19), after which he would go on to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to Jews and to Gentiles.

Using the example of St. Paul, it may seem that conversion is a process which, if not always outwardly so dramatic, nevertheless involves a complete change of heart, of one’s worldview and of one’s identity. It also seems to have an endpoint, that with absolute acceptance of a new way of life, the process is complete. It is rather like being “born again”: with the rebirth, the task of the convert is to live faithfully and to keep the conversion experience alive. After all, when one has turned oneself around 180 degrees,

there is nowhere else to go except back again. But is this the only way to understand conversion?

ANANIAS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION

Ananias lived in Damascus. St. Paul described him as “a devout man according to The Law, well-spoken of by all the Jews who lived there.” (Acts 22:12) He was a member of The Way, that is, he had already undergone a conversion to what would become Christianity (at this point it was still a Jewish sect).⁴

His conversion meant that he had been baptized into and belonged to a community of believers. It also appears that he had an intimate relationship with God, one with which he was comfortable. He was not alarmed, for instance, when in Acts 9:10, the Lord called to him in a vision. Instead, his response was unhesitating; he replied, “Here I am Lord.” (Acts 9:10). He trusted that this was indeed the Lord speaking to him and he was ready to listen to and serve God. But even with his conversion, it seems that Ananias had some expectations about what that service would, or perhaps would not, entail.

As it turns out, God’s command to minister to Saul was something of a challenge for Ananias. While he didn’t refuse outright, Ananias took it upon himself to enlighten God about Saul, pointing out that he had done “much evil ... to thy saints at Jerusalem” and that he had similar authority to persecute believers in Damascus (Acts 9:13-14). It is possible that, until God’s command, it was inconceivable to Ananias that he or any member of The Way would

have anything to do with such an evil and dangerous person. But the Lord was adamant. Saul had been especially chosen by God to take the Gospel to the Gentiles and the Jews. Ananias was to go to him (Acts 9:15).

In an act of faith and obedience, Ananias “departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 9:17) With this, Saul regained his sight and was baptised after which he bore witness to Jesus in Damascus, amazing both believers and non-believers before returning to Jerusalem (Acts 9:18-22). Ananias, meanwhile, returned to obscurity.

CONVERSION AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Moral Theology is about the human journey to the Good, which, ultimately, is the human journey to God who is the Highest Good. We make this journey through our decisions and actions based on a deepening (one hopes) understanding of who God is and what God requires of us.

Human beings are limited creatures, always contending with the effects of sin, and, until we are graced to meet God in the Beatific Vision, we must necessarily be receptive to an ever-unfolding knowledge of God and of God’s will for us. We are to engage in what John Paul II calls “a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good.”⁵

This is the lesson of Ananias. His initial conversion to The Way was the not terminus of his moral and religious development.

Against his limited knowledge of what was expected of him as a believer, he was led to do the inconceivable. He went to the house where Saul was, actually laid his hands on the “dreaded persecutor”⁶ and addressed him as “Brother” (Acts 9:17). He baptized him and welcomed him into the community of the faithful. This encounter had profound effects on St. Paul, and Christianity.

It is hard to imagine that Ananias was unaffected. He, after all, witnessed intimately the love and power of God at work in the world—and in his own life—in a dramatic and unexpected way.

CONVERSION AND CATHOLIC BIOETHICS

From the perspective of Catholic Bioethics, being open to ongoing conversion might lead to an ever-deepening understanding of what a Culture of Life might require in the twenty-first century, of what it means to protect and respect all of human life at all of its stages.

In *The Gospel of Life*, for instance, John Paul II expresses his deep concern for embryonic human persons threatened with abortion because of physical anomalies they may have (so-called genetic abortions).⁷ He also takes parents into account, insisting that “the Church is close to those ... who with great anguish and suffering willingly accept gravely handicapped children” and he praises those generous members of the community who foster and adopt such vulnerable children.⁸ However, John Paul II also notes the importance of societal support in helping people choose life.⁹ Unborn human life, parents, society—all must be considered when growing a Culture of Life.

Similarly, ongoing conversion might lead us more deeply into the meaning of person-centred care so that vulnerable patient populations are treated with dignity and respect. This may mean something as simple as understanding that patient wellbeing means reducing the anxiety and alienation experienced by people in emergency-room waiting areas where they may sit for hours uncertain, unattended, and with nowhere else to turn.

It may mean probing more deeply into the relationship between justice and health care, especially with regard to the most marginalized among us. In this respect it might be worth studying further the effect that poverty has on health, treating it as seriously as we do viruses and bacteria.

Ongoing conversion might return us to the roots of Catholic health care—to the healing ministry of Christ which was intimate, powerful and surprising. Even as Jesus healed incurables of their physical afflictions, he attended to their spiritual welfare, forgiving their sins and encouraging them in their faith. These miracles were also a vivid testimony to the power of God and the love that God has for us.

Catholic hospitals stood as a similar witness as they took in the sick. The demise of many of these hospitals may have left some Catholics shaken. However, it is possible that Catholics are being called to serve in different and unexpected ways—in ways still to be determined.

It is possible that we are in a situation where a corrective is needed to current models that treat health care as an “industry” and patients

as “consumers”. And it is possible that we will be taken somewhere else entirely, just as Ananias was. ■

Bridget Campion, PhD, is a bioethicist, researcher, educator, and staff member of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute.

¹ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version (New York: Collins, 1973).

² David Bohr, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, revised edition (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1999), p. 105. See also: M.A. Jeeves, “Conversion” in *The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson and David H. Field (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 260.

³ James J. Walter, “Conversion” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Konomchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 233.

⁴ Ernest W. Burch, “Acts of the Apostles” in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, ed. Frederick Carl Eiselen, Edwin Lewis and David G. Downey (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1957), p. 1094. See also: W.H.C Frend, *The Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 25-26; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, revised edition (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 15-16.

⁵ John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Sherbrooke: Editions St. Paul, 1993), sect. 64, p. 96.

⁶ Richard J. Dillon, “Acts of the Apostles” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, student edition, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), p. 744.

⁷ John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* (Sherbrooke: Médiaspaul, 1995), sect. 63, p. 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, sect. 88, pp. 156-158.