

THE CONVERSION OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD

A homily given on 2 March 1952, the first Sunday of Lent

We are at the beginning of Lent: a time of penance, purification and conversion. It is not an easy program, but then Christianity is not an easy way of life. It is not enough just to be in the Church, letting the years roll by. In our life, in the life of Christians, our first conversion — that unique moment which each of us remembers, when we clearly understood everything the Lord was asking of us — is certainly very significant. But the later conversions are even more important, and they are increasingly demanding. To facilitate the work of grace in these conversions, we need to keep our soul young; we have to call upon our Lord, know how to listen to him and, having found out what has gone wrong, know how to ask his pardon.

“If you call upon me, I will listen to you,”¹ we read in this Sunday’s liturgy. Isn’t it wonderful how God cares for us and is always ready to listen to us — waiting for man to speak? He hears us at all times, but particularly now. Our heart is ready and we have made up our minds to purify ourselves. He hears us and will not disregard the petition of a “humble and contrite heart.”²

The Lord listens to us. He wants to intervene and enter our lives to free us from evil and fill us with good. “I will rescue him and honour him,”³ he says of man. So we must hope for glory. Here again we have the beginning of the interior movement that makes up our spiritual life. Hope of glory increases our faith and fosters our charity; the three theological virtues, godly virtues which make us like our Father God, have been set in motion.

What better way to begin Lent? Let’s renew our faith, hope and love. The spirit of penance and the desire for purification come from these virtues. Lent is not only an opportunity for increasing our external practices of self-denial. If we thought it were only that, we would miss the deep meaning it has in christian living, for these external practices are — as I have said — the result of faith, hope and charity.

The risky security of Christians

“He that dwells in the aid of the Most High, shall abide under the protection of the God of heaven.”⁴ This is the risky security of the Christian. We must be convinced that God hears us, that he is concerned about us. If we are, we will feel completely at peace. But living with God is indeed a risky business, for he will not share things: he wants everything. And if we move toward him, it means we must be ready for a new conversion, to take new bearings, to listen more attentively to his inspirations — those holy desires that he provokes in every soul — and to put them into practice.

Since our first conscious decision really to follow the teaching of Christ, we have no doubt made good progress along the way of faithfulness to his word. And yet isn’t it true that there is still much to be done? Isn’t it true, particularly, that there is still so much pride in us? We need, most

¹ Ps 90:15 (Entrance antiphon of the Mass): *Invocabit me et ego exaudiam eum*

² Ps 50:19

³ Ps 90:15

⁴ Ps 90:1: *Eripiam habitat in adiutorio Altissimi, in protectione Dei coeli commorabitur*

probably, to change again, to be more loyal and humble, so that we become less selfish and let Christ grow in us, for ‘He must become more and more, I must become less and less.’⁵

We cannot stay still. We must keep going ahead toward the goal St Paul marks out: ‘It is not I who live, it is Christ that lives in me.’⁶ This is a high and very noble ambition, this identification with Christ, this holiness. But there is no other way if we are to be consistent with the divine life God has sown in our souls in baptism. To advance we must progress in holiness. Shying away from holiness implies refusing our christian life its natural growth. The fire of God’s love needs to be fed. It must grow each day, gathering strength in our soul; and a fire is maintained by burning more things. If we don’t feed it, it may die.

Remember what St Augustine said: ‘If you say ‘enough,’ you are lost. Go further, keep going. Don’t stay in the same place, don’t go back, don’t go off the road.’⁷ Lent should suggest to us these basic questions: Am I advancing in my faithfulness to Christ, in my desire for holiness, in a generous apostolate in my daily life, in my ordinary work among my colleagues?

Each one of us, silently, should answer these questions, and he will see that he needs to change again if Christ is to live in him, if Jesus’ image is to be reflected clearly in his behaviour. ‘If any man has a mind to come my way, let him renounce self, and take up his cross daily and follow me.’⁸ Christ is saying this again, to us, whispering it in our ears: the cross each day. As St Jerome puts it: ‘Not only in time of persecution or when we have the chance of martyrdom, but in all circumstances, in everything we do and think, in everything we say, let us deny what we used to be and let us confess what we now are, reborn as we have been in Christ.’⁹

It’s an echo of St Paul’s words: ‘Once you were all darkness. Now, in the Lord, you are all daylight. You must live as children of the light. Where light has its effect, men walk in all goodness, holiness and truth, seeking those things which please God.’¹⁰

Conversion is the task of a moment; sanctification is the work of a lifetime. The divine seed of charity, which God has sown in our souls, wants to grow, to express itself in action, to yield results which continually coincide with what God wants. Therefore, we must be ready to begin again, to find again — in new situations — the light and the stimulus of our first conversion. And that is why we must prepare with a deep examination of conscience, asking our Lord for his help, so that we’ll know him and ourselves better. If we want to be converted again, there’s no other way.

Here is the time of pardon

‘We entreat you not to offer God’s grace an ineffectual welcome.’¹¹ Yes, God’s grace can fill us this Lent, provided we do not close the doors of our heart. We must be well-disposed, we must really want to change; we cannot play with God’s grace.

I don’t like to speak of fear, for the Christian is moved by the charity of God, which has been shown to us in Christ and teaches us to love all men and the whole of creation. However, we should speak about being responsible, being serious. ‘Make no mistake about it; you cannot cheat God,’¹² the Apostle Paul warns us.

⁵ John 3:30: *Illum oportet crescere, me autem minui*

⁶ Gal 2:20

⁷ Sermo 169,15 (PL 38,926)

⁸ Luke 9:23

⁹ Epistola 121,3 (PL 22,1013)

¹⁰ Eph 5:8-10

¹¹ 2 Cor 6:1 (epistle of the Mass): *Exhortamur ne in vacuum gratiam Dei recipiatis*

¹² Gal 6:7

We must decide. It's wrong to have two candles lighted — one to St Michael and another to the devil. We must snuff out the devil's candle: we must spend our life completely in the service of the Lord. If our desire for holiness is sincere, if we are docile enough to place ourselves in God's hands, everything will go well. For he is always ready to give us his grace, especially at a time like this — grace for a new conversion, a step forward in our lives as Christians.

We cannot regard this Lent as just another liturgical season which has simply happened to come around again. It is a unique time: a divine aid which we should accept. Jesus is passing by and he hopes that we will take a great step forward — today, now.

“Here is the time of pardon; the day of salvation has come already.”¹³ Once again we hear the voice of the good shepherd calling us tenderly: “I have called you by your name.”¹⁴ He calls each of us by our name, the familiar name used only by those who love us. Words cannot describe Jesus' tenderness toward us.

Just think about the wonder of God's love. Our Lord comes out to meet us, he waits for us, he's by the roadside where we cannot but see him, and he calls each of us personally, speaking to us about our own things — which are also his. He stirs us to sorrow, opens our conscience to be generous; he encourages us to want to be faithful, so that we can be called his disciples. When we hear these intimate words of grace, which are by way of an affectionate reproach, we realize at once that our Lord has not forgotten us during all the time in which, through our fault, we did not see him. Christ loves us with all the inexhaustible charity of God's own heart.

Look how he keeps insisting: “I have answered your prayer in a time of pardon, I have brought you help in a day of salvation.”¹⁵ Since he promises you glory, his love, and gives it to you at the right time; since he calls us, what are you in turn going to give to the Lord, how are you going to respond, and how will I respond, to this love of Jesus who has come out to meet us?

The day of salvation is here before us. The call of the good shepherd has reached us: “I have called you by your name.” Since love repays love, we must reply: “Here I am, for you called me.”¹⁶ I have decided not to let this Lent go by like rain on stones, leaving no trace. I will let it soak into me, changing me. I will be converted, I will turn again to the Lord and love him as he wants to be loved.

“You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your whole mind.”¹⁷ And St Augustine comments: “What is left of your heart for loving yourself? What is left of your soul, of your mind? He says ‘the whole.’ He who made you requires you to give yourself completely.”¹⁸

After this affirmation of love, we must behave as lovers of God. “In everything we do, let us behave as servants of the Lord.”¹⁹ If you give yourself as he wishes, the influence of grace will be apparent in your professional conduct, in your work, in your effort to divinise human things — be they great or small. For Love gives a new dimension to everything.

But during this Lent, let us not forget that to be servants of God is no easy matter. The text from this Sunday's epistle continues: “As God's ministers we have to show great patience, in times of affliction, of need, of difficulty; under the lash, in prison, in the midst of tumult; when we are tired out, sleepless and fasting. We have to be pure-minded, enlightened, forgiving and

¹³ 2 Cor 6:2 (epistle of the Mass)

¹⁴ Is 43:1: *Ego vocavi te nomine tuo*

¹⁵ 2 Cor 6:2 (epistle of the Mass)

¹⁶ 1 Sam 3:5 *Ecce ego quia vocasti me*

¹⁷ Matt 22:37

¹⁸ Sermo 34,4,7 (PL 38,212)

¹⁹ 2 Cor 6:4 (epistle of the Mass): *In omnibus exhibeamus nosmetipsos sicut Dei ministros*

gracious to others; we have to rely on the Holy Spirit, on unaffected love, on the truth of our message, on the power of God.”²⁰

In the most varied activities of our day, in all situations, we must act as God’s servants, realizing that he is with us, that we are his children. We must be aware of the divine roots burrowing into our life and act accordingly.

These words of the Apostle should make you happy, for they are, as it were, a ratification of your vocation as ordinary Christians in the middle of the world, sharing with other men — your equals — the enthusiasms, the sorrows and the joys of human life. All this is a way to God. What God asks of you is that you should, always, act as his children and servants.

But these ordinary circumstances of life will be a divine way only if we really change ourselves, if we really give ourselves. For St Paul uses hard words. He promises that the Christian will have a hard life, a life of risk and of constant tension. How we disfigure Christianity if we try to turn it into something nice and comfortable! But neither is it true to think that this deep, serious way of life, which is totally bound up with all the difficulties of human existence, is something full of anguish, oppression or fear.

The Christian is a realist. His supernatural and human realism helps him appreciate all the aspects of his life: sorrow and joy, his own and other people’s suffering, certainty and doubt, generosity and selfishness. The Christian experiences all this, and he confronts it all, with human integrity and with the strength he receives from God.

Christ is tempted

Lent commemorates the forty days Jesus spent in the desert in preparation for his years of preaching, which culminated in the cross and in the triumph of Easter. Forty days of prayer and penance. At the end: the temptations of Christ, which the liturgy recalls for us in today’s Gospel.²¹

The whole episode is a mystery which man cannot hope to understand: God submitting to temptation, letting the evil one have his way. But we can meditate upon it, asking our Lord to help us understand the teaching it contains.

Jesus Christ being tempted... tradition likes to see Christ’s trials in this way: our Lord, who came to be an example to us in all things, wants to suffer temptation as well. And so it is, for Christ was perfect man, like us in everything except sin.²² After forty days of fasting, with perhaps no food other than herbs and roots and a little water, he feels hungry — he is really hungry, as anyone would be. And when the devil suggests he turn stones into bread, our Lord not only declines the food which his body requires, but he also rejects a greater temptation: that of using his divine power to solve, if we can express it so, a personal problem.

You have noticed how, throughout the Gospels, Jesus doesn’t work miracles for his own benefit. He turns water into wine for the wedding guests at Cana;²³ he multiplies loaves and fish for the hungry crowd.²⁴ But he earns his bread, for years, with his own work. And later, during his journeys through the land of Israel, he lives with the help of those who follow him.²⁵

St John tells how after a long journey when Jesus arrived at the well of Sichar, he sent his disciples into town to buy food. And when he sees the Samaritan woman coming, he asks her for

²⁰ 2 Cor 6:4-7

²¹ Cf Matt 4:1-11

²² Cf Heb 4:15

²³ Cf John 2:1-11

²⁴ Cf Mark 6:33-46

²⁵ Cf Matt 27:55

water, since he has no way of getting it.²⁶ His body, worn out from a long journey, feels weary. On other occasions he has to yield to sleep to regain his strength.²⁷ How generous our Lord is in humbling himself and fully accepting his human condition! He does not use his divine power to escape from difficulties or effort. Let's pray that he will teach us to be tough, to love work, to appreciate the human and divine nobility of savouring the consequences of self-giving.

In the second temptation, when the devil suggests Jesus throw himself off the temple tower, Christ again rejects the suggestion to make use of his divine power. Christ isn't looking for vainglory, for show. He teaches us not to stage God as the backdrop for our own excellence. Jesus Christ wants to fulfil the will of his Father without anticipating God's plans, without advancing the time for miracles; he simply plods the hard path of men, the lovable way of the cross.

Something very similar happens in the third temptation: he is offered kingdoms, power and glory. The devil tries to extend to human ambitions that devotion which should be reserved wholly for God; he promises us an easy life if we fall down before him, before idols. Our Lord insists that the only true end of adoration is God; and he confirms his will to serve: "Away with you, Satan; it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and serve none but him."²⁸

We should learn from Jesus' attitude in these trials. During his life on earth he did not even want the glory that belonged to him. Though he had the right to be treated as God, he took the form of a servant, a slave.²⁹ And so the Christian knows that all glory is due to God and that he must not make use of the sublimity and greatness of the Gospel to further his own interests or human ambitions.

We should learn from Jesus. His attitude in rejecting all human glory is in perfect balance with the greatness of his unique mission as the beloved Son of God who takes flesh to save men. He has a mission which the Father affectionately guides with tender care: "You are my son; I have begotten you this day. Only ask, and you shall have the nations for your patrimony."³⁰

And the Christian who, following Christ, has this attitude of complete adoration of the Father, also experiences our Lord's loving care: "He trusts in me, mine it is to rescue him; he acknowledges my name, from me he shall have protection."³¹

Jesus says "no" to the devil, the prince of darkness. And immediately all is light. "Then the devil left him alone; and thereupon angels came and ministered to him."³² Jesus has stood up to the test. And it was a real test, because, as St Ambrose comments: "He did not act as God, using his power. If he had, what use would his example have been? No. As a man he uses those aids which he shared with us."³³

The devil, with twisted intention, quoted the old testament: God will send his angels to protect the just man wherever he goes.³⁴ But Jesus refuses to tempt his Father; he restores true meaning to this passage from the Bible. And, as a reward for his fidelity, when the time comes, ministers of God the Father appear and wait upon him.

It's worth thinking about the method Satan uses with our Lord Jesus Christ: he argues with texts from the sacred books, twisting and distorting their meaning in a blasphemous way. Jesus doesn't let himself be deceived: the Word made flesh knows well the divine word, written for the

²⁶ Cf John 4:4 ff

²⁷ Cf Luke 8:23

²⁸ Matt 4:10

²⁹ Cf Phil 2:6-7

³⁰ Ps 2:7: *Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te. Postula a me et dabo tibi gentes hereditatem tuam*

³¹ Ps 90:14 (tract of the Mass)

³² Matt 4:11

³³ Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam, 1,4,20 (PL 15,1525)

³⁴ Ps 90:11 (tract of the Mass)

salvation of men — not their confusion and downfall. So, we can conclude that anyone who is united to Jesus Christ through Love will never be deceived by manipulation of the holy Scripture, for he knows that it is typical of the devil to try to confuse the christian conscience, juggling with the very words of eternal wisdom, trying to turn light into darkness.

Let us look for a moment at this appearance of angels in Jesus' life, for it will help us to better understand their role — their angelic mission — in all human life. Christian tradition describes the guardian angels as powerful friends, placed by God alongside each one of us, to accompany us on our way. And that is why he invites us to make friends with them and get them to help us.

In suggesting that we meditate on these passages of the life of Christ, the Church reminds us that during Lent, when we recognize our sins, our wretchedness and our need for purification, there is also room for joy. Lent is a time for both bravery and joy; we have to fill ourselves with courage, for the grace of God will not fail us. God will be at our side and will send his angels to be our travelling companions, our prudent advisers along the way, our cooperators in all that we take on. The angels "will hold you up with their hands lest you should chance to trip on a stone,"³⁵ as the psalm says.

We must learn to speak to the angels. Turn to them now, tell your guardian angel that these spiritual waters of Lent will not flow off your soul but will go deep, because you are sorry. Ask them to take up to the Lord your good will, which, by the grace of God, has grown out of your wretchedness like a lily grown on a dunghill. Holy angels, our guardians: "defend us in battle so that we do not perish at the final judgment."³⁶

Children of God

How do you explain this confident prayer — this knowledge that we shall not perish in the battle? It is a conviction rooted in something which is always a cause of wonder to me: our divine filiation. Our Lord, who during this Lent is asking us to change, is not a tyrannical master or a rigid and implacable judge: he is our Father. He speaks to us about our lack of generosity, our sins, our mistakes; but he does so in order to free us from them, to promise us his friendship and his love. Awareness that God is our Father brings joy to our conversion: it tells us that we are returning to our Father's house.

This divine filiation is the basis of the spirit of Opus Dei. All men are children of God. But a child can look upon his father in many ways. We must try to be children who realize that the Lord, by loving us as his children, has taken us into his house, in the middle of the world, to be members of his family, so that what is his is ours, and what is ours is his, and to develop that familiarity and confidence which prompts us to ask him, like children, for the moon!

A child of God treats the Lord as his Father. He is not obsequious and servile, he is not merely formal and well-mannered: he is completely sincere and trusting. Men do not scandalise God. He can put up with all our infidelities. Our Father in heaven pardons any offence when his child returns to him, when he repents and asks for pardon. The Lord is such a good Father that he anticipates our desire to be pardoned and comes forward to us, opening his arms laden with grace.

Now I'm not inventing anything. Remember the parable which Jesus told to help us understand the love of our Father who is in heaven: the parable of the prodigal son.³⁷ "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and took pity on him; running up, he threw his arms

³⁵ Ps 90:12 (tract of the Mass): *In manibus portabunt te, ne forte offendas ad lapidem pedem tuum*

³⁶ Missale Romanum, prayer to St Michael: *Defende nos in proelio, ut non pereamus in tremendo iudicio*

³⁷ Cf Luke 15:11 ff

around his neck and kissed him.”³⁸ That’s what the sacred text says: he covered him with kisses. Can you put it more humanly than that? Can you describe more graphically the paternal love of God for men?

When God runs toward us, we cannot keep silent, but with St Paul we exclaim: Abba, Pater: ‘Father, my Father!’,³⁹ for, though he is the creator of the universe, he doesn’t mind our not using high-sounding titles, nor worry about our not acknowledging his greatness. He wants us to call him Father; he wants us to savour that word, our souls filling with joy.

Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father’s house. We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart which means a desire to change, a firm decision to improve our life and which, therefore, is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving. We return to our Father’s house by means of that sacrament of pardon in which, by confessing our sins, we put on Jesus Christ again and become his brothers, members of God’s family.

God is waiting for us, like the father in the parable, with open arms, even though we don’t deserve it. It doesn’t matter how great our debt is. Just like the prodigal son, all we have to do is open our heart, to be homesick for our Father’s house, to wonder at and rejoice in the gift which God makes us of being able to call ourselves his children, of really being his children, even though our response to him has been so poor.

What a strange capacity man has to forget even the most wonderful things, to become used to mystery! Let’s remind ourselves, this Lent, that the Christian cannot be superficial. While being fully involved in his everyday work, among other men, his equals; busy, under stress, the Christian has to be at the same time totally involved with God, for he is a child of God.

Divine filiation is a joyful truth, a consoling mystery. It fills all our spiritual life, it shows us how to speak to God, to know and to love our Father in heaven. And it makes our interior struggle overflow with hope and gives us the trusting simplicity of little children. More than that: precisely because we are children of God, we can contemplate in love and wonder everything as coming from the hands of our Father, God the Creator. And so we become contemplatives in the middle of the world, loving the world.

In Lent, the liturgy recalls the effect of Adam’s sin in the life of man. Adam did not want to be a good son of God; he rebelled. But we also hear the echoing chant of that *felix culpa*: ‘O happy fault,’⁴⁰ which the whole Church will joyfully intone at the Easter vigil.

God the Father, in the fullness of time, sent to the world his only-begotten Son, to re-establish peace; so that by his redeeming men from sin, ‘we might become sons of God,’⁴¹ freed from the yoke of sin, capable of sharing in the divine intimacy of the Trinity. And so it has become possible for this new man, this new grafting of the children of God,⁴² to free all creation from disorder, restoring all things in Christ,⁴³ who has reconciled them to God.⁴⁴

It is, then, a time of penance, but, as we have seen, this is not something negative. Lent should be lived in the spirit of filiation, which Christ has communicated to us and which is alive in our soul.⁴⁵ Our Lord calls us to come nearer to him, to be like him: ‘Be imitators of God, as his dearly beloved children,’⁴⁶ cooperating humbly but fervently in the divine purpose of mending

³⁸ Luke 15:20

³⁹ Rom 8:15

⁴⁰ Missale Romanum, paschal Praeconium

⁴¹ Gal 4:5: adoptionem filiorum recipemus

⁴² Cf Rom 6:4-5

⁴³ Cf Eph 1:5-10

⁴⁴ Cf Col 1:20

⁴⁵ Cf Gal 4:6

⁴⁶ 1 John 3:19

what is broken, of saving what is lost, of bringing back order to what sinful man has put out of order, of leading to its goal what has gone astray, of re-establishing the divine balance of all creation.

At times the Lenten liturgy, with its emphasis on the consequences of man's abandonment of God, has a suggestion of tragedy, but that is not all. It is God who has the last word — and it is the word of his saving and merciful love and, therefore, the word of our divine filiation. Therefore, I repeat to you today, with St John: 'See how greatly the Father has loved us; that we should be counted as God's children, should be indeed his children.'⁴⁷ Children of God, brothers of the Word made flesh, of him of whom it was said, 'In him was life, and that life was the light of man.'⁴⁸ Children of the light, brothers of the light: that is what we are. We bear the only flame capable of setting fire to hearts made of flesh.

I'm going to stop now and continue the Mass, and I want each of us to consider what God is asking of him, what resolution, what decisions grace wants to encourage in him. And as you note these supernatural and human demands of self-giving and continuing struggle, remember that Jesus Christ is our model. And that Jesus, being God, allowed himself to be tempted, so that we might be in better spirits and feel certain of victory. For God does not lose battles, and if we are united to him, we will never be overcome. On the contrary, we can call ourselves victors and indeed be victors: good children of God.

Let us be happy. I am happy. I shouldn't be, looking at my life, making that personal examination of conscience which Lent requires. But I do feel happy, for I see that the Lord is seeking me again, that the Lord is still my Father. I know that you and I will surely see, with the light and help of grace, what things must be burned and we will burn them; what things must be uprooted and we will uproot them; what things have to be given up and we will give them up.

It's not easy. But we have a clear guide, which we should not and cannot do without. We are loved by God, and we will let the Holy Spirit act in us and purify us, so that we can embrace the Son of God on the cross, and rise with him, because the joy of the resurrection is rooted in the cross.

Mary, our Mother, 'help of Christians, refuge of sinners': intercede with your Son to send us the Holy Spirit, to awaken in our hearts the decision to go ahead confidently, making us hear deep in our soul the call which filled with peace the martyrdom of one of the first Christians: 'Come, return to your Father,'⁴⁹ he is waiting for you.

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ John 1:4

⁴⁹ St Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistola ad Romanos*, 7,2 (PG 5,694): *Veni ad Patrem*