

# SIN AND CONVERSION

By PETER McVERRY

CONVERSION is not so much an event as a process. No doubt there are some very significant events which occur within this process, of which the most memorable may well be for some an initial break-through from unbelief to belief, or from 'conventional' belief to committed belief or some similar experience. In this article I am trying to describe, from my own experience and that of others, a particular segment of this conversion process which we may call, for want of a better phrase, *a conversion to justice*. For some this may be experienced as an event, perhaps a very protracted event; for others it may be a gradual process with no particularly memorable event associated with it. In both cases, however, I am aware that something significant has changed in myself; that an irreversible process has occurred, and that the world will never appear the same again.

I believe that we are all called to this conversion today with an urgency that matches the preaching of Jesus: 'The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the good news' (Mk 1,15). The questions or doubts that initiate this conversion are perhaps similar to the following: how can a British Prime Minister wage a war, at enormous expense in lives and money, for some eighteen hundred people living on the other side of the world, while millions at home can find no relief from her in their poverty? How can the same Prime Minister support a Minister who presides over policies which openly espouse increasing economic inequality in society, but feels obliged to occasion the resignation of an adulterous Minister who cannot decide whom to live with? How can a President commit himself to a build-up of nuclear arms while fervently supporting compulsory prayers in public schools? How can a Christian spend £20,000 on a car or £1,000 on a fur coat while others are short of necessities? How can I . . . ? The reader can supply his own less extreme examples. I think that for those to whom the above or similar questions are not a nagging dilemma the rest of this article will make little sense.

To analyze this conversion event or process, we might look at Luke's account of the conversion of Peter:

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Now he was standing one day by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the crowd pressing round him listening to the word of God, when he caught sight of two boats close to the bank. The fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats — it was Simon's — and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch'. 'Master', Simon replied, 'we worked hard all night long and caught nothing, but if you say so, I will pay out the nets'. And when they had done this they netted such a huge number of fish that their nets began to tear, so they signalled to their companions in the other boat to come and help them; when these came, they filled the two boats to sinking point.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus saying, 'Leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man'. For he and all his companions were completely overcome by the catch they had made; so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were Simon's partners. But Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on it is men you will catch'. Then, bringing their boats back to land, they left everything and followed him (Lk 5,1-11).

In this account of Peter's conversion, Luke presents the three crucial elements involved in any conversion. Peter is confronted with *a new experience* (a miraculous, or at least extraordinary catch of fish) which *reveals to him a reality* of which, up to that time he was unaware. That new reality led to a recognition that he was a sinner: 'Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man'; and this acknowledgment of his sinfulness was the precondition for a following of Jesus that would *radically alter his life*: 'they left everything and followed him'. Thus the three central elements in the process of conversion are clearly outlined: a new experience which we could call 'conversion of the feet'; a new way of seeing things or 'conversion of the head'; a radical change in life or 'conversion of the heart'. We can use these three elements in the conversion process to describe the conversion to justice that we are considering here. The first element we look at is the central pivot: conversion of the head.

#### *Conversion of the head*

Conversion of the head essentially signifies coming to see the world in a new way. To understand what this means for our purpose here let us take as our starting point a passage in *Gaudium et spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.

In other words, we look at the suffering of the majority of mankind and ask why? We are called to analysis. Such an analysis is not the same as proving a geometrical proposition. There are many conflicting analyses presented for the suffering of others. For example, some would see the root cause of the hunger of the majority of mankind in the population explosion; others in the lack of wealth available to our world at this point in history; others in the exploitation of some by others. These analyses conflict because they depend on the ideological presuppositions that we bring to that analysis — and for most of us, comfortable, middle-class, first-world citizens, our ideological presuppositions tend to support the *status quo*. Thus our analysis is often one that does not bring us into conflict with the structures of our world or society. Our ideology is a world-view, which is perhaps not articulated but present nevertheless, and indeed even more dangerous when it is not articulated or when we are not aware of it. This ideology makes sense of and holds together the vast complex of individual experiences that we have accumulated and which, in the absence of a world-view, would overwhelm us by their complexity and chaos. For most of us life has been good. We have a standard of living, which if not luxurious, is nonetheless comfortable; we have sufficient opportunities for personal development, educationally, culturally, socially; and we have the power to control much in our own lives. Hence an analysis that indicts our economic, political and social structures, and that therefore threatens our security within those structures, is not an easy option for us.

The key element in this conversion of the head, it seems to me, is the recognition of structural sin. That is to say, the recognition that much of the pain and suffering that others have to endure is caused by the way the world has been ordered by those who benefit from that particular ordering. For example, a family, Mr and Mrs Smith and their child, are living in a leaking, rat-infested tenement flat with no sanitation facilities. Why? You are led to examine the housing policy of the local authority; that housing policy is in large part determined by the central government who allocate finance to housing according to a hierarchy of priorities. Although there may well be personal, individual sin at places along the line (corruption,

over-pricing of building materials, land speculation, poor quality materials, etc.), the ultimate cause of the lack of suitable accommodation for Mr and Mrs Smith does not depend on the malevolent decision of any person or group of persons who wish them to remain there. Indeed we would be horrified at, and rightly condemn, anyone who insisted that they should remain there. Yet they do remain there, because their housing needs have a lower priority for those who make the decisions in our society, and with the consent of our society, than other needs, as for example the modernization of Britain's nuclear fleet at a cost of thousands of millions of pounds. The situation was revealed in all its nakedness at the time of the Falklands war: while thousands of low-paid workers in the public service were striking for higher pay which the Government insisted was not available, that same Government could suddenly find £1,000,000,000 which had not been budgeted for, to fight a war in the South Atlantic. If the need is sufficiently urgent, the money can be found.

Alternatively take the example of José and his family: they owned a small plot of land and grew their basic food needs. But their country was a poor one, and in order to earn foreign currency to improve that country's standard of living, José's land and that of all his neighbours was bought, at a good price, by a multinational company, which, using modern methods and machinery, was able to produce far more food for export than José and his friends could ever do. The money José received kept him and his family for quite a while, but eventually it ran out and now they are living in a shanty town on the outskirts of the capital city and scouring the local rubbish dump for their food. Nobody wished José to end up there — neither the directors of the multinational company, nor its executive managers, nor its shareholders and certainly not those who bought its products. Yet the cumulative effect of the actions of all those thousands of people resulted in José being there. His suffering, like that of Mr and Mrs Smith, is no less painful because it is not the result of any individual malevolent decision; indeed, it would be far better if it were, because it would be so much easier to rectify.

So the way in which our society works is such that it damages some people — indeed the majority of our world. We would never dream of doing such damage to people *face to face*; we would never compel Mr and Mrs Smith to live in such conditions or José to live on a rubbish dump. Yet such is the consequence of the accumulated

decisions of good people like ourselves. *We* are involved. We may be shareholders in that multinational company or a consumer of its products — and without shareholders and consumers the company would not exist. We elected those in local and central government and we accepted the broad outline of the policies they proposed. We participate in those structures and therefore we are accomplices in the damage they cause.

The conversion of the head requires that we come to see the root cause of the pain and suffering of others in the way in which we have organized our structures and to see our participation in them. Thus the concern for others takes on a political dimension. There are many obstacles to this conversion of the head:

(a) First, there are unexamined ideological presuppositions. Most of the readers of this article, like the writer, enjoy a relatively comfortable position in our society, and so our ideology or world-view tends to be supportive of those structures. Underlying this world-view are certain assumptions and values that may well be unexamined. These unexamined assumptions and values express themselves in our prejudices and biases that we may well be unaware of — but which others see more clearly! Thus we may believe that we have reached our present positions through hard work and intelligence — and that the poor are where they are through laziness or apathy, a prejudice that one sees often in statements of Conservative politicians. Or we may believe that there are no poor in Ireland or England today, a belief which conveniently abolishes the threatened sense of discomfort. Or we may believe that economics is a neutral science, and that its functioning is not dependent on moral decisions, a cul-de-sac that the complexity of modern life encourages us to enter. Our ideology and its hidden assumptions and values are revealed, not by what we think or say we think, but by how we act and react when faced with situations. Thus we all consider ourselves to be sinners, but when we read of the latest horrific crime our indignant condemnation may well reveal the Pharisee hidden in us: 'I thank thee Lord that I am not like this tax-collector here' (Lk 18,11).

These unexamined assumptions and values tend to support an analysis which does not call into question the structures on which we depend for our status and position in life. We can only question those structures if we are secure enough to be able to disengage ourselves from the prevailing system. In other words, the spiritual question arises: in what do we find our security? Where do our

dependences lie? To many, the thought of life without a car is a nightmare. For others the possibility of a significant reduction in their standard of living, or of a change in the type of work they do, or the clientele for whom they do it, or a change in their position in life with its status and opportunities, is a source of dread. For example, a great deal of the disturbance and hurt in the lives of religious persons, including vowed religious and priests, which the changes of today's world bring about, has more to do with their chosen or inherited dependences than with their theology. The set of symbols, systems and structures which guide, enclose and protect their lives are taken away or, at least, shaken. Similarly, the resistance to the call to make justice a central thrust of our christian commitment has, I suggest, much more to do with the fear that our dependences will be disturbed. The demand for a clearer theological link between faith and justice, as a precondition for a commitment to the justice issue, may often be a cover-up. Again, in religious orders, the resistance which is often encountered to any fundamental reappraisal of apostolates betrays the same insecurity. Yet is not this to be confronted with my idols, the gods in whom I am at rest? We are called to find our security in the Lord and not in what he has created and given to us. How many of us live in the security that 'neither life nor death, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8,38-39)? To find our security in the Lord and not in any created thing requires psychologically secure people. Only then can we really accept that we do not have here a lasting city, and that dissatisfaction with the *status quo* is a characteristic that is eminently suitable for the Christian.

My ideological assumptions and values may prevent me from accepting the structural causes of the sufferings of others and of my participation in them. Thus my idols are revealed. But even if we do surmount this hurdle, we may still ask: in our participation, are we really sinners? Are not these structures, dreadful though they be, an unfortunate, undesired actuality to which it is inappropriate to give the term sin? To answer that question, we must first ask one more: what is it that God wants? Is it the salvation of Mr and Mrs Smith's souls? Is it José's acceptance of his lot in life in return for a heavenly reward? And so we call into question our whole idea of God. A God who is more concerned about our life-after-death than about our life

here-and-now, who is more concerned about our souls than our bodies; a God who values our acceptance of the way things are (more commonly called acceptance of his will) rather than our struggle to change the way things are; a God who (from our viewpoint) loves all equally, rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed — such a God does not seem to me to be the God the bible talks about. Besides the little created idols in whom we find our rest, we may well be worshipping a big idol, created by our own ideology, which we call God. The God of the bible, is he not the God who heard the groanings of the children of Israel when they were in slavery in Egypt and rescued them (Exod 6,4-7)? Is he not the God who rescues the oppressed (Ps 35)? Is he not the God who through the prophets denounced the injustices of his own chosen people (Isai 41,17)? Is he not the God who will judge the oppressor (Ps 94)? Is he not the God who sent Jesus to bring the good news to the poor (Lk 4,18) as is magnificently summarized in the beatitudes (Lk 6,20-26)? The pain and the suffering of others, caused by the structures of our world and society, are not the will of the God of the bible; he passionately wishes them to be removed. Such pain and suffering are truly called sin, in the sense of being against the will of God. And our participation in them makes us truly sinners. If our solidarity with the human race makes us guilty (in any meaningful sense) of original sin, then our solidarity with those groups in our world and society that create and maintain the structures which oppress others makes us just as surely guilty of the sin which is the suffering of others. So we are sinners, trapped in our sinfulness, needing to cry out daily to the Lord to save us from our sin. Our prayer is always the prayer of the tax-collector: 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner' (Lk 18,13).

(b) A second obstacle to conversion of the head is our isolation from the suffering of others. Our ideological resistance to an analysis that threatens our position in society is supported by our isolation from those who suffer from that position. Our cities are carefully constructed so that the middle-class are often insulated from local authority housing estates where the majority of the poor or unemployed live. Our friends belong to our own social group and our interests and recreational habits often ensure that we remain unaware of what life is like for those who are oppressed by the structures that support us. Indeed we find more and more a resistance in many communities to the presence in their midst of hostels for the homeless, the ex-prisoner, the alcoholic, the young

offender. Perhaps this resistance arises ultimately from the fact that we cannot bear to be reminded that life does not support everyone. The lack of awareness among most of those in the middle-class groups of society of how others who are poor have to live, is perhaps more of a danger to the security of our society than the russian menace many of them are so afraid of. The vast majority of decisions which affect the poor are made by those who have little idea of the problems and difficulties that the poor face. The resulting alienation of whole sections of society lies unnoticed until they riot. All our ideological positions are erected upon and supported by a myopic view of the world. To change our ideological position, we need to see the world from a different perspective, a perspective that allows a vital part of the world to come into focus, namely, the pain and suffering of the poor and powerless.

### *Conversion of the feet*

How then do we arrive at this conversion of the head which calls into question structures which support our present way of life, our present way of looking at things? I believe that no amount of reading can accomplish it. If our ideology is a world-view that holds together and makes sense of our experiences, then that ideology can only be called into question by a new experience that does not easily fit. A new experience that we find difficult to integrate into our ideology without distorting it *ad absurdum* is called for. Hence we need to share in some way the experience of the poor.

An experience of the poor in itself may not lead me to question my ideology. Unless I am open to the possibility that there is a different viewpoint, then my experience of the poor may just confirm my ideological prejudices. There needs to be an unease, a latent doubt, perhaps caused by the Church's insistence on justice as a central issue in the preaching of the gospel, which I feel somehow does not affect my life and I wonder why not. Here the Holy Spirit is sowing seeds over which we have little control. Those who are convinced that the root cause of poverty is laziness may only be more convinced than ever by an experience of the poor. For I tend to see what I want to see, to hear what I want to hear. However, given that openness to questioning my own views and values, the normal starting point for this conversion to justice will be an experience of the poor. It is the poor who call me to conversion, because the fundamental conversion is the recognition that they have been excluded from a meaningful participation in life and that I have been involved in that exclusion.



Such a 'conversion of the feet' for many is exceedingly difficult. We are aware of being trapped in our middle-class culture, attitudes, values, even vocabulary; we may fear being rejected, laughed at, misunderstood; perhaps above all we may fear being useless. In our activity-oriented culture, we have become accustomed to being useful (or at least to feeling useful) and by this we often value ourselves and others. But in the first steps to sharing the experiences of the poor, we have the humbling experience of not being useful, not being needed. We are there not because the poor need us, but because we need them. We are there not to achieve, but to be; not to change the poor but to allow them to change us. In this being-with-the-poor, we glimpse the powerlessness, the frustration, the hopelessness and perhaps even the anger that is part of their situation. We also glimpse the companionship, the joys, the sharing that make it almost tolerable. Perhaps, above all, we glimpse their dependency on others like us, who are not poor, yet who make the decisions that control their lives. They wait — for they have little choice — for us to change *our* values and priorities so that *they* can be included; to change the economic, social and political criteria which govern *our* society to *our* benefit and *their* exclusion. In this experience I am led to a recognition of the greed and selfishness, and the desire for position, status and power, which distorted my ideology, unknown to myself. The call to justice, to seek the transformation of the world, constantly brings me back to the call to change myself — not to rest there in an individualistic spirituality, but to move out and challenge the world. The recognition of the exclusion of the poor reveals to me my sinfulness, my incapacity to love them because I am trapped in my selfishness and in the structures that have been erected on the selfishness of millions of good people like me. I cannot love them enough to let go, to move out of my dependencies, to abandon my little idols; and I cannot hear the call of God because he is hidden behind the big idol I have erected between me and him. While God is free to call us in diverse ways, I believe that his normal way for most of us is through sharing the suffering, in some small way perhaps, of those we have come to love. In that experience, we recognize their exclusion and our participation in it.

#### *Conversion of the heart*

If, through an experience of the poor, I am led to question the structures of the society that supports me, then I am compelled to do

something about it. There are two responses I can and ought to make:

(a) The first is a personal response. On the personal level, I am called to question the lifestyle, status and position that the structures of society have conferred on me. Such a questioning may well lead to radical decisions about my lifestyle, work, place of residence and so on. Such radical decisions will change nothing — except my own personal circumstances. To many they will seem useless, absurd and unnecessary; and they may even at times seem so to me. In this they resemble the cross — when Jesus died on the cross, the only observable difference that resulted was that he stopped breathing — a waste of a life. They resemble the call of Peter, giving up a good job and the security of home for the dubious benefit of following a poor itinerant who was clearly going to come to no good. Such a personal response seems merely symbolic — it does not change the world nor the structures which organize the way we live; it is of little help to the poor in their concrete difficulties. Yet we may feel, for our own authenticity, that some such decisions have to be made. Perhaps we could liken such symbolic actions to the contemplative dimension of the christian call; for contemplation 'achieves' nothing; we contemplate for its own sake. It allows us to enter into life more deeply, more intimately. While it achieves nothing in itself, yet nothing worthwhile is achieved without it. So too our personal symbolic actions allow us to share in, to participate in, to experience in some small way the powerlessness of the poor, without which our political activity is at least suspect. Anyhow, we will certainly feel the need to challenge in some concrete way the greed, the consumerism and the desire for power and status that we recognize in ourselves.

(b) The second response is political. We will certainly feel the need to make more than just a personal, symbolic response. To remove the suffering of others becomes a central thrust to my life and my Christianity. I recognize that much of that suffering is caused by the structures of our world and society. And so I seek to change those structures. I may decide that revolution is not the best path to changing structures and so I am committed to a political radicalism within the democratic process. The urgency of bringing others to an awareness of the need for radical structural change becomes a priority that my faith and its demand to love impose on me. And I soon realize the enormity and slowness of the task. I have to face the sense of helplessness that soon overcomes me and

integrate that into my spirituality: the power that Jesus gives us is not the power of the world, but the power of the Cross, of failure — there is no resurrection without death. My faith commits me to the *struggle*, not to the achievement of what *I* consider the goal. 'Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts' (Isai 55,9).

One sees too a new vision for the Church, a Church that is committed to challenging the *status quo*, those very structures which support it; a Church too which feels the need to make symbolic responses to the discomfort it feels when it looks at its own position in society. Nothing less than a prophetic Church seems adequate to the following of the prophet Jesus.

The three stages I have described, 'conversion of the feet' leading to 'conversion of the head' leading to 'conversion of the heart', are not strictly an event but a process, indeed a never-ending process. The decisions that the conversion of my heart lead me to make will almost certainly give me, or lead me to, a new experience of the poor which in turn will lead me to question more deeply my own hidden assumptions and values and lead to a new conversion of the head. This in turn will lead to a new conversion of the heart and new decisions. And so the process goes on in one unbroken circle. I am continually being called to conversion.

In the description of this particular segment of the conversion process, I am aware of all that has been omitted. In particular, little has been said explicitly about the individual's relationship to God and his awareness of being loved and guided by God's providence. Little has been said about the direct interpersonal love that the central commandment of the gospel imposes on us. This is not because such matters are overshadowed or minimized by the call to conversion to justice, but simply because it precedes the conversion I have attempted to describe here, and is taken for granted. Indeed the conversion to justice introduces one to a new experience of both these aspects of the total conversion process.