Sacraments

Celebrations of the journey of conversion

Kathleen Hughes

Sacraments redefined

MOST LITURGICAL SCHOLARS ARE IN AGREEMENT that the *Rite of Christian initiation of adults* (RCIA)[1] has, in a variety of ways, redefined the way each of the sacraments is understood and celebrated in the life of the Church. Many scholars would also suggest that the underlying ritual pattern of adult initiation, with its various periods and stages of preparation and subsequent reflection, provides an intriguing model for the exploration and interpretation of every other sacrament. The new pattern of initiation invites us to ask questions about sacramental process, personal readiness and stages of celebration that we have not previously considered.

The new rite of initiation of adults – in fact a whole complex of rites – conceives of entry into the Christian community as a process that occurs over a substantial span of time of no fixed duration, and it takes place publicly and visibly in the midst of the community. Baptism itself is conceptually redefined by the RCIA, its emphasis shifting from the washing away of original sin to incorporation into Christ dead and risen, and entrance into the community bearing Christ's name. In the process of adult initiation, human experience is taken seriously – the experience of coming to faith, of needing the ministry of others, of finding consolation and challenge in rituals which mark various movements in this larger journey of conversion. In other words, the RCIA publicly celebrates the process of *conversion* lived out in the *community* and marked by significant *rites* along the way. Finally, the RCIA envisions a period of post-sacramental pastoral and liturgical *care*. Once the rites of initiation have been experienced at font and table during the Easter Vigil, the individual's sacramental experience continues to be nurtured in a formal way throughout the Easter season and, in some parts of the world, for a full year after the celebration of the sacraments of initiation.[2] One may rightly conclude that a mystagogical rhythm of celebration–reflection–celebration is envisioned as a constant cyclic feature of parochial life. In all of this, the RCIA offers a new template for our understanding and celebration of all the other sacraments, a template incorporating time, process, visibility, community and, above all, the experience of conversion.

Conversion rediscovered

'Conversion' is a term which has undergone a dramatic reinterpretation in our day. A popular understanding of conversion not so long ago conjured up a climactic personal upheaval – a once-in-a-lifetime reorientation of one's life under the powerful impulse of God's presence and grace. Conversion was what happened to great sinners – for example, Paul or Augustine – who became great saints. Such a conception of conversion as rare, miraculous and relatively instantaneous is neither accurate nor helpful, but it persisted for centuries and it separated the chosen from the rest of us, keeping the demands of conversion safely at arm's length from the average Christian.

We also used the word 'conversion' for what happened to someone inspired to move from unbelief to faith or from one denomination to another. Impelled by God's gift and grace, and after suitable instruction, one joined the new community and was called a 'convert', a person who had completed the transition. In this instance, the very word 'convert' suggested that the process, however arduous in itself, was finished. Conversion had been accomplished. It was all very tidy, or so our language might have implied.

Those understandings of conversion have been supplanted more recently by a new appreciation of conversion as the journey of one's whole life into God. No longer is it a once-for-all process for some few chosen ones of God, nor a process circumscribed by the period of assimilation into one's newly selected church. Now conversion is understood as that way of life into which each Christian is plunged in the waters of baptism. Rather than marking the end, baptism symbolizes the beginning of one's assimilation into Christ, a process of putting on Christ in the company of other disciples, a process which is coterminous with the whole of a Christian's life.

Few concepts in contemporary spirituality have attracted more attention than conversion. The basic meaning of conversion, elements or features typically associated with it, and some of the classic patterns it assumes, are the topic of a growing body of literature.[3] Similarly, lives of individuals that exemplify the dynamics of conversion are regularly the subject of biographies and their writings are frequently collected in anthologies.[4]

Conversion has been a feature of the holy life from ancient times and its meaning is illumined in Old and New Testament passages as an experience of turning, return, reversal, restoration and change of one's orientation. In the Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, conversion or *metanoia* includes an internal process and the inevitable and radical change in one's existence and way of life that are its external effects.

It is possible, thanks to the insight of Bernard Lonergan and others,[5] to distinguish several entry points to levels of the phenomenon of conversion: the intellectual, the moral and the religious. The person in the process of conversion begins to apprehend differently, value differently and relate differently because the person *is* different. The words of the Second Letter to the Corinthians are apt: 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Cor 5:17). As a person engages in the process of conversion, *everything* changes both in one's interior experience and one's way of being in the world. The metaphor of journey or pilgrimage communicates that conversion is a lifelong striving for holiness in the midst of others. Conversion plays out at the levels of intellect and affection, it implies particular ethical choices, and it issues in a commitment to mission, broadly conceived – to living no longer for oneself.

The process of conversion

What starts any one of us on this inner journey? What makes any of us sensitive to the inner movements in our hearts and to God's longing for our happiness? Generally we do not identify these first movements as 'conversion'. Initially, at least, we do not name them anything at all. The experience of the journey into God is begun often without fanfare. We are in the midst of our daily lives with their multiplicity of commitments and pressures. We move from thing to thing, responding to the needs of our family and friends, keeping up with the demands of our profession, eking out a bit of leisure as possible, and mostly just living as best we can from day to day, relatively content with our lot. We live our lives, for the most part, in ordinary time.

Then our world starts to change, but barely perceptibly. Conversion, despite some classic hagiography to the contrary, is rarely instantaneous or dramatic, and it is hardly ever convenient. Sometimes the first stirrings of conversion surface in our consciousness as a vague awareness that something is missing or something is wrong or something just does not make sense. It can be a nebulous feeling of dissatisfaction or restlessness, of being bogged down, of being unsettled.

Then something happens to break into our awareness, to precipitate a crisis of meaning for us, not just at mid-life but at any time at all. Sometimes we are made to examine the meaning and direction of our existence because of another person who has come into our lives, a spouse, a friend, a colleague at work – someone whose vision and values seem to have a depth or a meaning which we wish we, too, could possess. Sometimes the conversion journey starts with a word that we hear, a word of hope or forgiveness. Or perhaps it is a word of challenge to us which, unlike other potentially disturbing words, we are unable to brush off. Something starts to stir in us. Our vague restlessness and dissatisfaction become more acute.

Major life moments are often the occasion for some soul-stirrings. The birth of a child, for example, provokes a myriad of feelings that leave us vulnerable to the action of God. Falling in love can bring a person suddenly and unexpectedly to a conversion crossroads. Joy, gratitude, a sense of peace, self-worth, knowing we are loved unconditionally – all of it can be the start of a movement toward God. So, too, a lingering or a sudden death of one we love. Living in a culture not our own is often the occasion of radical questioning and personal upheaval, and it sometimes leads to profound inner change and growth. A new job or its loss, a move from one place to another, some public recognition, the completion of a project, a false accusation, the unexpected gratitude of another, a struggle with addiction, a grudge we finally admit is eating away at our hearts – the possibilities of some new in-breaking experience of God are endless. So, too, God's grace.

Whatever it is – a large or small happening, a person, word or event that precipitates a crisis of meaning and brings a vague dis-ease to conscious awareness – such a critical incident is a turning point. 'Turning' appears to be the heart of conversion. Sometimes turning means a movement away from sin and the company of sinners, from evil of every kind, from idols of one's own creation, and turning toward the living God, desiring a change of heart, choosing life and embracing friendship with God. Sometimes the turning of conversion involves a choice between two relative goods as one tries to discern God's desires in the here and now.

Conversion after the manner of Christ

Jesus' life provides a perfect model. Others discovered in his life and ministry a continuous invitation to repentance, to friendship – even intimacy – with God, and to the acceptance of whatever changes such friendship might entail. In the Gospels, acceptance of Jesus' invitation invariably led to faith and to a life of discipleship. Implicit in many encounters is a turning or a return to relationship, together with embracing its inevitable consequences – the latter described quite starkly as, for example, 'leaving everything' or 'taking up one's cross' or 'a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying' for the sake of new life.

Conversion *is* a matter of life and death. Often the inevitable consequences of one's decisions are experienced truly as a form of death, a giving up of something, a letting go, a surrender, a dying for the sake of new life. Often such decisions are very costly; rarely are they made either quickly or lightly. That is why it is helpful to recognize that the stages of death and dying identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross apply equally well to these inner 'deaths'. Some or all of the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are routinely part of the journey one must negotiate in choosing to live a life faithful to God's invitations. A typical pattern of conversion then includes: hearing the voice of God or a mediated word of life; initial openness and acceptance; some active personal engagement in the process of transformation; and the living out of that decision over a lifetime of gradual transformation. The shorthand for this process is vague dissatisfaction, a critical incident, a personal choice, and, if the grace of the moment is accepted, the choice involves changes and new beginnings. The lifetime journey that conversion launches is nothing less than transformation into the image of the divine as shown to us in Jesus. It involves an ever-deepening friendship with God and disentangling oneself from everything that is not of God in one's life. It is as simple as that!

Conversion is thus a process which entails a gradual reorientation of one's mind and heart according to the pattern of Christ. As lifelong pilgrimage, conversion has a few critical moments of choice, a few radical decisions that must be made in negotiating crossroads. For the most part, however, there is a dailyness about the journey, daily dying and rising in the ordinary events, a daily need for faithful living that is undramatic but no less demanding over a lifetime of small choices. As we shall see, the sacramental life of the Church celebrates the dramatic and critical moments of choice *and* the dailyness of the journey. It is this process of conversion, this coming to faith and commitment to discipleship, which is the heart of the process called the RCIA.

Initiation: nurturing conversion and celebrating faith

The process of conversion obviously plays itself out in the sacramental pattern of Christian initiation. Even in the earliest days of the Church, when the expectation of an imminent parousia dictated a foreshortened process for those seeking membership in the community of faith, there is still some evidence of a process of conversion including hearing, initial openness, active personal engagement, and then lifetime commitment to 'the way'. Think, for example, of Peter's speech in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. In one of the earliest recorded post-Pentecost events, Peter stands in the market place preaching the good news of Jesus Christ: a man foretold by the prophets, powerful in word and deed, handed over and crucified, raised by God and exalted, source of the outpouring of the Spirit. Peter concludes with a great challenge to his hearers: 'Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:36).[6] Peter's proclamation is received by the crowds who 'were cut to the heart' and said 'What should we do?' Then Peter urges them to an active personal engagement in this process of coming to faith: 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:37-38). On the strength of Peter's preaching and the action of God in the hearts of his hearers more than three thousand persons came to faith and were baptized. Finally, Acts provides a glimpse of the way of life to which they had committed themselves: the praise of God, the sharing of goods and the regular celebration of the breaking of bread. Daily the community attracted others on the strength of their witness to the presence and power of the Risen One in their midst (Acts 2:39-47).

From the very beginning of the Church until our day, every age has had to grapple with the question of how and under what conditions it might join newcomers to itself. What does it take to hear and to believe the good news? What is the essential core of our belief in Jesus Christ which we want to hand on? How do we socialize individuals into the community of faith? What is the best introduction to our patterns of word and sacrament? How do we instil in candidates a sense of mission and witness? These questions of faith, community, liturgy and mission are questions a community must pose as it shapes its initiation patterns and as it seeks to discern God's action in the hearts of newcomers.[7] In every age, the way these questions are answered suggests anew what 'coming to faith' will entail and what evidence of conversion will be required prior to the celebration of initiation.

One of the mandates of the Second Vatican Council addressed such concerns for the late twentieth century. The *Constitution on the sacred liturgy* called for a restoration of the catechumenate,[8] a 'school of conversion and faith' which had flourished from the end of the second to the sixth century. Christians are made, not born – that was the wisdom of Tertullian which contributed to the rigour of the catechumenate in the late second century and which dictated demanding patterns of formation for potential members. Perhaps it is the presence of so many baptized pagans in the twentieth-century Church which determined a restoration of a more rigorous formation into the Christian way of life.

Formation for transformation

Whatever the reason, the catechumenate has been adopted as a process of formation for the sake of transformation, a process which takes place in stages and which is marked regularly by liturgical celebrations of the journey. Thus is reintroduced the several stages of becoming a Christian: initial inquiry (period of the pre-catechumenate), an intense process of formation (period of the catechumenate), a time for reflection and deepening of the conversion experience (period of election) immediately preceding the Easter sacraments of initiation, and a final period of profound reflection on all that has transpired under the grace of the Spirit (period of mystagogical reflection or reflection on the mysteries which have been experienced and celebrated).[9]

The RCIA redefines the way the whole of the Christian life is conceived, namely, as a never-ending journey of conversion. Furthermore, the RCIA process is not just a barometer of change among those candidates and catechumens who are so publicly transformed before our eyes. The introduction to the RCIA states that this gradual process of initiation is an opportunity for the *whole* community to join the candidates and catechumens in reflecting on the meaning of the paschal mystery – the redemptive power of Jesus' life, death and resurrection – as that core reality touches and transforms all of our lives.[10]

The RCIA introduction also states that because of the presence of seekers in our midst we are literally face to face with the need to renew our own conversion (RCIA 4). The company of catechumens in our communities acts as a stunning reminder that conversion is *not* a once-for-all-time event. Rather, conversion is that experience of putting on Christ over a lifetime, appropriating his pattern of discipleship, thinking and feeling with him, recognizing his pierced heart in the pierced heart of humanity – in a word, transformation. In witnessing the dynamic of grace operating in the lives of the candidates and catechumens who stand before us week after week, our own lives are mirrored back to us, God's word may be heard in new ways, and their journey into God becomes our own. Just as our newest members have become more conscious, deliberate, purified and readied for their public celebration, so, too, that same dynamic is possible for every person. That is why we have an annual retreat called Lent, not a time of narcissistic mortification nor a time of self-adulation for our own goodness and generosity, but a span of the year when we live in the tension between dying and birth and try to learn the difference. Lent leads inexorably to the Vigil, enlightening, purifying and preparing us like athletes in training for the renewal of baptismal commitments at the Easter Vigil. The vigil is an annual event at which we publicly and ritually reclaim our lifelong participation in the paschal mystery of Christ, joining our daily dying and rising to his for the life of the world.

Conversion and the other sacraments

We have rarely thought of most of the sacraments in such terms, but the pattern and process of conversion is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of each of them. Each sacrament is a public, ritual celebration of a personal, interrial experience. *Each* sacrament celebrates an experience of conversion – whether of sorrow for sin, need for healing in the face of grave illness, self-donation to another in love, desire to dedicate one's life to God in service to the community, and so on. Each sacrament begins *with* and *in* human experience. But before we are prepared and ready for sacramental celebration, that initial experience must become conscious, deliberate, purified and readied for public expression. Otherwise, the poignant line from T. S. Eliot will be true of us, too: 'We had the experience but missed the meaning'.[11] It is all too easy to celebrate sacraments prematurely.

First stirrings of love for another, initial glimmerings of vocation, incipient sorrow over ruptured relationships – these nascent experiences must come to some maturity prior to sacramental celebration. Sacraments take time, and they each invite us to a process of conversion before their celebration. That is what readiness for sacraments involves. Sacramental readiness is not a juridical, and even less a punitive measure. Readiness implies a genuine reverence for the unique relationship of each of us with God. Readiness is a question of the maturity of one's conversion. Normally it is a process that takes a significant amount of time.

Because conversion is each person's unique response to the initiative of God it will play itself out in singular human ways. But some features will be common to the conversion required of each sacrament. Sacramental marriage, for example, brings to public ritual expression the unconditional gift of love of two people for one another, 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part'.[12] What an astonishing conversion is required before one can make such a commitment to another human being! Presumed is the dying to egocentrism of every kind, the forging of an undivided heart, the willingness to grow into a sacramental sign of divine love. The three questions posed at the beginning of the marriage ceremony[13] are a test of readiness, an assurance before the marriage is consecrated that habits of heart have been forged and deepened in the process of sacramental preparation: freedom, fidelity and the willingness to stretch one's heart and one's world to incorporate children and thus extend the boundaries of sacramental love.

Other forms of vocational choice involve a similar process of conversion, whether the choice is throwing in one's lot with others of like vision in order to follow Jesus, poor, chaste and obedient in a community of life and mission, or the experience of call to the imitation of Jesus whose ministry was that of word, unity and charity. Both preparation for religious profession and for ordained ministry are structured over several years precisely to allow time for the conversion of heart necessary to wholehearted commitment. While the triple questions at the beginning of the marriage rite are not repeated in the rites of profession and orders, they are equally apt in determining readiness in freedom, faithfulness and large-heartedness for participation in the ministry of Christ. These are questions of conversion, of death and life, of 'turning from' and 'turning to' as is implied in any form of *metanoia*.

It may sound somewhat odd to speak of conversion with regard to the anointing of the sick and yet there is a conversion involved in coming to terms with one's sufferings whether from sickness or the debilitation of old age. There is a conversion required to place one's trust totally in God and to 'associate oneself willingly with the passion and death of Christ, and thus contribute to the welfare of the people of God'.[14] When someone is diagnosed with a grave illness, it generally takes time, a great dose of faith and the support of others to welcome what some have called the vocation of the sick to be a mirror to the whole community of our suffering God.

The place of conversion may seem most obvious in the celebration of reconciliation. The rite of penance describes a sinner's wholehearted conversion as an inner conversion of heart which embraces sorrow for sin on the one hand and God-directed attitudes on the other, by which one begins to consider, judge and arrange one's life according to the holiness and love of God made manifest in Christ.[15] The conversion involved in reconciliation, then, is about sin *and* grace, self *and* God, past *and* future. It involves acknowledgement of sin, to be sure, but much more is at stake, namely re-establishing relationship and discovering that we are sinners *loved* by a God of mercy and compassion who continually invites us to new and deeper life in Christ. These attitudes are not forged overnight. It is a process which takes time before the personal, internal process of conversion is ripe for public ritual expression.

Eucharist: food for the journey

And what of the eucharist? The eucharist relates to this lifetime journey of conversion as its nourishment and its recurring celebration. While every other sacrament celebrates a crossroads moment on the journey – birth, grave illness unto death, vocational choice, times of alienation – eucharist is the food for the daily struggle of dying and rising, the food for ordinary time. Eucharist also is a repeatable sacrament of conversion, gathering up, supporting and sustaining all other sacramental commitments. Eucharist is the repeatable sacrament of initiation, the primary sacrament of reconciliation, the recapitulation of every promise and vow, the sacrament of soul healing. Eucharist, then, gathers up, celebrates and deepens one's lifetime of choices and promises with every Amen that we utter.

Every eucharist, then, is a mystery of grace to which we return again and again, for the holy life is like a spiral. It plays itself out over time, yet always deeper. Just when we come to terms with one invitation to new and deeper life, one invitation to obey the Spirit more generously in the daily details of our lives, along comes another, asking more, yet offering deeper relationship with God through Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Every sacrament is a celebration of the paschal mystery of Jesus and our participation in his life, death and rising for the life of the world. The eucharist is the perfect expression of this mystery and the centre of our prayer that that transformation, begun in baptism and celebrated throughout our sacramental lives, will one day be complete: Send your Spirit upon these gifts, we pray, and upon us that we, too, might be transformed into Christ's body. It is the work of a lifetime.

Kathleen Hughes, a religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is Professor of Liturgy at the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago. She served on the Advisory Committee of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy for nineteen years and has completed three terms as an advisor to the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the United States. Her latest book, *Saying amen: mystagogical reflections on the sacraments*, is available from Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago, Illinois.

NOTES

1 *Rite of Christian initiation of adults*, prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL), 1988 edition.

2 See, for example, the National Statutes for the Catechumenate for the United States 24: 'After the immediate mystagogy or postbaptismal catechesis during the Easter season, the program for the neophytes should extend until the anniversary of Christian initiation, with at least monthly assemblies of the neophytes for their deeper formation and incorporation into the full life of the Christian community'.

3 See, for example, the extensive and somewhat eclectic bibliography in Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp 209-234.

4 See Robert Ellsberg, *All saints: daily reflections on saints, prophets, and witnesses for our time* (New York: Crossroad, 1997); Hugh T. Kerr and John Mulder, *Conversions: the Christian experience* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

5 See especially Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and being: an introduction and companion to insight*, eds Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli (New York and Toronto: The Edward Mellen Press, 1980).

6 Citations from Scripture are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

7 See RCIA 75, a key paragraph of the RCIA which summarizes the priorities of the period of the catechumenate, namely, suitable catechesis, familiarity with the Christian way of life, introduction to patterns of liturgical prayer and participation in the community's apostolic activity. Note: because of the pastoral rearrangement of the text in the ICEL edition, paragraph 75 is a translation of paragraph 19 in the *editio typica*.

8 *Constitution on the sacred liturgy* no 64, in *Documents on the liturgy 1963–1979* (DOL 1:64) (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982).
9 RCIA 6–7 and corresponding sections of the ritual book.
10 RCIA 4–5.
11 T. S. Eliot, 'Dry Salvages' in *Collected poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970), p 194.
12 *The rite of Christian marriage* 25.
13 *Ibid.*, 24.
14 *Pastoral care of the sick: rites of anointing and viaticum* 5.
15 *Rite of penance* 6–7.