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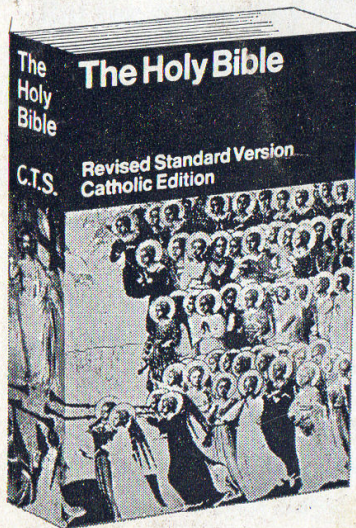
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Peter J. Elliott





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A Convert in a Changing Church

Peter J. Elliott

'I didn't bargain on this when I became a Catholic . . .'
What a familiar comment this is today. It voices all the indignation, fear and irritation of many converts caught in the problems of change in the Church. These problems can be a great burden in the life of someone who had to find their own way into the Church. They become magnified out of all proportion; for some they become an obsession. Nevertheless, for the individual they are real problems. Let us examine them in some detail, and let us propose practical solutions and possible answers.

Security and Change

The security seems to have gone. This is perhaps the basic problem for many converts. We came into the Church, finding the security of the rock of Peter, unchanging truths, clear doctrine, ordered patterns of hierarchy and worship, and now . . . the security seems to have gone.

But did we enter Christ's Church only for security? There is nothing wrong in seeking security, as long as it is the true security of Christ and his Gospel. This security is very different to that promised by this world,

indeed it seems to be folly and insecurity in the eyes of many.

No-one has perfect motives. Perhaps some of us entered the Church seeking a false security. But the rock of Peter is a symbol of that Rock which is Christ. Thus we call the Pope the 'Vicar' or representative of Christ, a sign, a 'sacramental' of Christ's pastoral rule of this world. If our security rests in loyalty to the Pope, this must be recognized as only a means for trust and obedience directed to Jesus Christ.

The difficulty of creating security comes from our fallen nature. We love to create idols for our comfort and protection – the idols of self, emotion, power, prestige, money, intellect, pleasure, activity, ease – and security. But Christ our Lord would strip away from us all our cherished idols, throwing us completely onto his own Person, for his Grace is all we can need. Ultimately there will be nothing for us but Christ.

St Ignatius Loyola expressed this surrender of security in his prayer, 'Take, O Lord, my entire liberty. Take my memory, my intellect and all my will . . .' But what did the Jesuits feel in 1762 when Clement XIII suppressed the Society of Jesus? All their security had gone. Many of them were left to starve. They had lost, for a time, the Society. But they had not lost Jesus. 'Take, O Lord, my entire liberty . . .'

That Peace of Soul

Another problem is the effect of our feelings. 'That Peace of Soul I once enjoyed seems to have left me. So much is changing. So much is disturbed . . .'

How did that Peace of Soul arise within us? It was a sign of the Gift of Faith. But where did we rest our Faith: in God, from whom the Gift came, or in the visible Church? Obviously this is not a matter of alternatives. True Faith in God involves Faith in the Church. However, some of us perhaps placed our Faith in 'being a Catholic', in adhering to the distinctive forms of the Church, to the areas of experience which marked us out as different from non-Catholics. I do not refer to incidentals such as vestments or incense, but to that pattern of ordered sacramental life, of ordered hierarchy, doctrine and ceremonial in which we found a secure way of life. Was this pattern of living true 'Peace of Soul'? If this was our 'Peace of Soul' then the changes will have shaken us from it.

As converts we know that Peace of Soul is much deeper than the pleasant feelings which come from an unruffled existence in a big organization. The Peace of Soul which is the unique Grace of the true Church is that Peace of Christ which is beyond understanding. This Peace is beyond pleasant feelings. I will illustrate this.

Some of us were unlucky enough to experience great joy from the moment we were received into the Church. Some of us had the strange Grace of a really unpleasant reception into the Church. But this is a paradox. How can I say it is 'unlucky' to experience joy? Surely it is a healthy sign to experience joy on one's conversion? Let us say that this is God's way with some of us, but he has other ways, perhaps surer ways – suffering, the loss of the consolation of pleasant feelings, the experience of the way of Gethsemani and Calvary. In marriage the

path of true love is often a painful process, not the fantasy honeymoon bliss of modern legend. In the end God leads us into true joy, and the astonishing situation of freedom where we are not running around trying to rouse up our faith and fervour. True Peace of Soul grows, and it grows in a costly adult way.

So the loss of those pleasant feelings we imagined as 'Peace of Soul' is no loss at all. Indeed, it is the beginning of a painful growth. The changes in the Church, strained relationships, pain at the actions of other Catholics, all this is God's means of taking all of us deeper into his Life.

I would not justify the irresponsible actions of some minorities in the Church today. But God can use this, even when it is full of error and lacks charity, and God is using it to temper and strengthen those who are willing to accept suffering. The 'Dark Night of the Soul' is not a special path marked 'For mystics only'. In different forms it is the common crucible where faith is put to the test. For many today the 'Dark Night' will be that sense of sorrow at dissension in the Church, anguish at attempts at rebellion, the suffering of our Holy Father. But God is using this. He calls us to co-operate with him in his purposes.

Let us consider St Catherine of Siena. In her time the Pope was a virtual exile from Rome. Already the schism and scepticism which broke out openly in the Reformation was festering in Europe. But the suffering, penance and prayer of St Catherine, no less than her activity, won the return of the Pope to Rome, and some brief peace and order was restored.

Fear and Change

'That was all very well for St Catherine. She was a saint. When I look at what's happening in the Church I get frightened.'

Fear of the future is a problem for many modern people. We tend to live in the future, never in the present. We are always peering anxiously into the future, ignoring the rich opportunities of the 'sacrament of the present moment'. But have we forgotten all we were taught in our instruction? The Holy Spirit has complete control of all that will come to pass. The Holy Spirit acts primarily within the Church, eventually leading all men into truth, in devious and winding paths which puzzle and perplex us. We can never understand or appreciate the Holy Spirit!

However, there is a simpler fear of what is happening at the present time. We must avoid a paranoid fear which suspects plots and conspiracies throughout the Church. There have always been forces at work in the Church, planning and manipulating for good or ill. The new 'open' quality of the Church, and much secular publicity, may lead us to suspect and criticize various publications, news agencies, publishers and societies. But let us remember Gamaliel's wise counsel in Acts 5: 38, 39: '... if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them'.

We must also avoid fear of everything that is new. Of all Catholics, converts should be most open to look at what is new. Let us remember that part of the Grace of

conversion is that exhilarating experience of being wrong, of admitting that, in some degree, our past was a pathway in which we were mistaken. Now if we experienced the true humility of coming into the Church as penitents, surely we can continue to grow in a humility which is ready to admit failings and mistakes. We should also remember that the outward changes in the Church – and they are mainly ‘outward’ – are trivial compared to the total change in the being of a person who has taken the step into the Catholic Church. In God’s eyes the conversion of one sinner is worth more than all the liturgical and theological developments of the past ten years. Knowing this, we can accept many outward changes because we see them in their due proportion.

Seeing things in proportion – what a problem this is! Here is another source of fear. We fix our eyes on what is happening in some small area of Europe, we expand it in our minds, exaggerating it until we imagine the whole Church is in chaos and ruin. We should rather look to what is happening in our own country, our own diocese and parish. But here we have to avoid the danger of generalizing from our own situation. English Catholics may be depressed at a decline in vocations. In Australia the situation is quite different. Always we must try to see things in proportion.

Seeing Reality

The problem of fear amidst change often rests on illusions. We do not see matters for what they really are. When Christ appeared to his apostles in his risen glory,

he said, ‘Do not be afraid’. We notice how after the Resurrection fear and lack of faith were linked together. Unwilling to put their faith in God, the apostles were frightened by the risen glory, imagining they saw a ghost or an illusion. So it is with us.

In many ways the changes in the Church are like the Resurrection. We are so perplexed and frightened that we fail to see that it is the same Church, that there is an essential continuity between the Church before the Council and the Post-Conciliar Church. What dogmas have changed? None. What essential structures have vanished? None. Are there still seven Sacraments? Is the Pope still infallible? Is Transubstantiation still a fact of Faith? Of course. It is the same Church. After the Resurrection it is still the same Christ. To his apostles he said, ‘Why are you troubled and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see . . .’ (Lk 24: 38, 39).

Seeing reality is hard. Before the Resurrection the apostles had all sorts of false notions about our Lord. Some of them saw him as a political leader or just a wise prophet. Perhaps some of us held to similar illusions concerning the Pope, seeing him as some sort of dictator or oracle who removed all personal responsibility from us. But we should see more clearly today that even in his most sublime teaching office the Pope is servant of all. The paradox of greatness in the Fold of Christ was shown when a young Man knelt before his friends and disciples and washed their feet. To see reality we look to Christ. We look to him in Love which casts out fear, and we see the realities of Christianity are

not always as we imagined them to be. Again, the past experience of conversion will have taught us much.

Seeing reality also involves a distinction between what is essential and God-given and what has been added by man. We know that the Church can change nothing she has received from Christ. She must continually change and adapt laws, customs and structures which are man-made, and which have obscured the ultimate reality, Jesus Christ. Anyone who thought of leaving the Church over some minor changes in discipline or worship would be more culpable than the weaker disciples of chapter 6 in the Gospel of St John. They withdrew because Christ's teaching on the Eucharist and his own Nature was too dogmatic and precise, the same teaching maintained by the Church today. Our Lord's reaction to this desertion is found in Jn 6: 67-69:

'Jesus said to the twelve, "Will you also go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" ...'

Three Solutions to the Problem

'Lord, to whom shall we go?' The convert can say this with great personal conviction. He knows that Christ alone is the answer to the yearnings and strivings of mankind. He knows that Christ is enfleshed in that authentic and continuous community men call the Catholic Church. He knows that by Grace he must seek practical solutions to life's problems as one of God's People, as a member of the Mystical Body, closely related to the other people who make up that Body. He is not alone.

As a member of this authentic Christian community, sharing its supernatural powers as an individual and part of a greater whole, the perplexed convert should seek strength in three ways. (1) He must be completely aware of the Holy Spirit. (2) In the life of the Spirit he must accept the Cross. (3) From this acceptance the convert will be able to enter a unique apostolate in the Post-Conciliar Church.

1. *The Holy Spirit*

Have we ever read the decrees of the Second Vatican Council? They are published in convenient form by the Catholic Truth Society, and may also be purchased in several bound editions. Reading the decrees of the Council makes one aware of the vitality of the Holy Spirit moving the hearts of men, preparing the Church for perhaps the greatest crisis in her history.

The crisis is not found in the changes and journalistic flourishes which disturb us so much. The crisis seems to lie in the future, a world crisis, a social crisis which we see as yet faintly, etched in such ominous strokes as the British abortion legislation. The forces of this world, 'principalities and powers', are moving about their purposes in modern society, purposes which run completely against the Gospel of Christ. At the same time, however, there are signs of great encouragement in much modern social development. The good in the modern world is to be accepted by Christians, for it is the goodness of creation moving as God wills. This positive optimistic approach is set out in the only document to have sprung directly from the floor of the Second

Vatican Council, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, *Gaudium et spes*.

The Constitution *Gaudium et spes* begins with the affirmation that mankind is led by the Holy Spirit and concludes by affirming that man's lively hope is the Holy Spirit. Every major area of modern man's life, his hopes, problems, tragedy and growing sense of community, is taken by the Council Fathers and related to the Life of God. The Church thus accepts both the goodness and the evil inherent in man, seeking to develop the good and redeem the evil. The Council is positive. It sees hope and joy.

Many of the more serious attempts to change the Church rest on these principles, endorsed by the Fathers of an Ecumenical Council of the Universal Church. If we tend to reject all change without understanding the positive Council teaching, the positive emphasis on the Holy Spirit moving within the human race, then can we dare to claim to be 'good Catholics'?

The Church has been described as 'The Holy Spirit and five hundred million sinners'. Perhaps our lack of hope and joy in the changing life of the Church has arisen because we fix our eyes on the sinners - and forget the Holy Spirit.

Gently and surely, with that eternal divine Patience, the Holy Spirit is bringing all men into the divine Purpose. God's People, those sinners bound together by the one Spirit, are at the heart of the human race which God is always creating. When we entered the Church we were drawn into a new creation, God's People. We know by experience how the Holy Spirit used people,

relationships, meetings, problems, even sin and tragedy perhaps, to lead us home. That same Holy Spirit moves in the Church. That same Holy Spirit is drawing all mankind together. How can we doubt or fear for one instant? Dare we doubt, we who received as adults the sacred Chrism of the Spirit at the hands of the bishop? In hope and joy let us trust and open our lives to the Holy Spirit we have received.

2. *Accepting the Cross*

Life in the Holy Spirit is practical and realistic. It throws us up against the Cross. We all want to avoid the Cross. We do not like suffering when it really is suffering.

Let us consider the new suffering of a convert who entered the Church some time ago. He or she is usually better informed about the doctrine and practice of the Faith. Thus, he or she will have appreciated the distinct traditions of the Church, understanding how they work and their value in adult living. What pain this sort of convert will feel hearing someone criticizing the Papacy, discounting confession, following some new theory of the Mass, etc. This sort of convert will also tend to feel a sense of loss now that most Masses are in the vernacular, a loss compensated for some perhaps by the opportunity of singing familiar hymns from one's non-Catholic past.

This sense of hurt can be a chance for real suffering. I do not mean any sort of self-pity, or sitting around in a depressed or pained fashion. Rather, let us seek to accept a more fruitful suffering, the suffering of going

beyond our own feelings to try and understand why others want change, how they appreciate certain changes, and, in some regrettable instances, to try to understand with sympathy what personal problem or bitterness has driven them to demand innovations far from the mind of the Church. This direct contact with people is costly. It is full of risks, charity is strained, tempers flare, other people outside the situation will criticize, people in the situation may reveal a hurtful ignorance, a hard arrogance. But this real suffering, distasteful and uncomfortable, is just the Cross which our Lord offers us if we are ready to step forward in courage, forget self-pity and try to understand.

The Cross of understanding demands that, like Pope John XXIII, we must be ready to look for the goodness in men's hearts, even as we may be aware of baser motives. This humility before those who may be quite wrong will show itself in a gentle reply to folly or extremism, not in dogmatic or offensive citing of authority, not in uncharitable language. Error cannot stand when truth is explained in a loving way. If a convert to Catholicism sees an aspect of the Faith which he knows is essential, which he knows by his experience as truth, then he must defend that truth. The Cross requires a patient and costly defence of truth, and an attempt to feel for the other person, even when the task is one of pointing out what the Council really said, as opposed to the paperback theology of some pundit.

The Cross will require personal sacrifices from us all. The convert will have an appreciation for the Interior Life, for discipline and devotion. This should lead to

extra acts of prayer and devotion, with intentions directed to some specific problem in the Church today. How many opportunities there are – that extra weekday Mass, that extra visit, a novena, a private Holy Hour, some new aspiration during the working day. The future of the Church depends on her prayer, and the two great pillars of prayer are devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to our Lady. The message of reparation, the Fatima phrase 'prayer and penance', is a practical matter of actions and sacrifices.

So we may summarize the life in the Spirit as taking up a new Cross in two ways: (1) in our daily life with others of differing opinions, loving and understanding, learning yet defending truth; (2) in the Interior Life, accepting further prayer and sacrifice, not for ourselves but for the changing Church.

3. A Unique Apostolate

The third solution to the problems of a convert facing change is the new and unique form of the apostolate which lies before the convert in the Church today.

Under instruction we were told that our previous experience, Christian or non-Christian, would be brought with us into the Church. In a sense the break with the past in the process of conversion is never a complete break. All that was good and true in our past life continues and grows in the authentic and continuous Church. At the same time, however, we were perhaps warned not to try and teach 'cradle Catholics' lessons from our past experience, especially if we came from some Christian tradition with a distinct emphasis: fine

liturgy, eloquent preaching, social action, good music, etc.

This latter warning is quite out of date now. Changes in the Church, Ecumenism and the dialogue with non-Christians are factors which rather compel the convert to speak out, to enrich the new life in the Church with his or her past experience.

The new apostolate for converts is appearing before us. Our duty is to bring our past experience to those new areas of Catholic action, the pastoral council, the parish council, ecumenical societies and activities, new social action, societies to maintain and extend the Faith, lay study groups in the parish, etc. Seeking always to understand, the convert will temper his contribution with a humility which still asks 'Why?' Perhaps many of us stopped asking 'Why?' when we were received into the Church. We must remedy this weakness. But let us consider the sort of practical wisdom we may be able to bring to a changing Church.

'That's not the way Humanists think! I was one once . . .'; 'That will only offend Methodists, I can assure you . . .'; 'When I was an Anglican we found that approach very useful, but this experiment you propose will not work . . .' This is the sort of outspoken approach a convert can bring to a new flexible situation. The convert will be able to check ecumenical blunders, possible mistakes, whilst advising and creating new forms of Christian activity, already proven by his or her past experience.

Converts have always exercised the apostolate of bringing others to know Christ and to love him in his

Church. This is a further area in which a new opportunity for service is open before us. The emphasis here has changed, and we must accept this change. No longer are we to seek to convert devout members of some other Christian tradition, unless they show signs of a desire for Catholic life. The new emphasis rests on the conversion of non-Christians, seeing our secularized society as a mission field with needs as great as central Africa. This is a difficult task indeed, for we imagine it is hard to discuss Christianity with the non-Christians with whom we work. Again the same Cross of understanding and patience must be accepted, with the courage to speak out when truth is attacked, humility that respects the other person, compassion which penetrates the personal anguish of those who are lonely and lost apart from Christ.

This apostolate is 'unique' because it uses the unique experience of the 'twice born', for some a road to Damascus, for others the less dramatic trudge to Emmaus: 'Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread' (Lk 24:35).

Prophets of Grace

Finally, there is a further task for the convert in the changing Church. He or she must be a prophet of Grace.

Modern Christians seem to be caught up in the false assumptions of the perennial heresy of Pelagius. Men imagine they can save themselves by their own actions. Modern man has 'come of age'. He sees every aspect of the Christian life depending on his behaviour, his

actions, opinions, rational understanding, every plan for renewal, every attempt to stem the movement for change. Earnest preoccupation stifles the mirth of a Catholic sense of humour.

Where has the Grace of God gone in this man-centred obsession? Of all Catholics, the convert knows how important the Grace of God is, how it is Grace, not human nature, which renews the life of the Church, for Grace alone renews the life of every man. The convert, having experienced God's free Grace in the saving Gift of Faith, must be a prophet of Grace in the changing Church. The convert must call his brethren back to the supremacy of Grace, the message of the Gospels, the powerful teaching of St Paul and St Augustine.

But the supremacy of Grace perfecting our nature is a further challenge to each of us. No-one can be a prophet of Grace in the changing Church if he sits around grumbling and bewildered, depressed and looking back to the 'good old days'. This depression is just as much a surrender to the heresy of Pelagius as the most frantic and rebellious struggles for innovation. It betrays a lack of Faith in the Holy Spirit, a refusal to accept the real Cross, a rejection of the new apostolate for converts. As such it betrays a lack of trust in God's saving Grace, in that mysterious Providence which will bring goodness out of all things and all men.

'Behold!' Christ says, 'I am making everything new!' Everything? Yes, great Lover of courageous souls, we know this to be true. In our hearts we know this, for from You we have received everything.

For further reading

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