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## Conversion in Church Documents

Julian Saldanha, SJ

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**Keywords:** *Redemptoris Missio*, *Ad Genies*, John Paul II, Conversion, Catholic Church

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## Conversion in Church Documents

Julian Saldanha

Dept. of Systematic Theology, St Pius College, Mumbai

For the purposes of this article, I divide Church documents into two groups: those which were issued during the “colonial mission” and those which date from “*Ad Gentes*” (AG) to the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, “*Redemptoris Missio*” (RM). I give greater attention to the latter group of documents, since they are of greater contemporary significance.

### 1. Documents of the Colonial Mission

Pope Clement X (1670-76) had the mission of Tongking in mind when he issued the Brief, “*Apostolatus officium*”, in order “to promote the greater glory of God and the conversion of the infidels”. An Instruction of Propaganda Fide (18/10/1883) to the Vicars Apostolic of China refers to the “conversion of the gentiles to Christ the Lord” as “the chief goal of missions.” A Decree of the same Congregation in 1920 exhorts the missionary “to hold no other goal, propose no other measure than the conversion of people to God and the salvation of souls”.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.1. Popes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century up to Vatican II

For this period we can count five encyclical letters. According to these, the mission is to aim at the conversion

of people to the Christian faith, with a view to the “expansion” or “extension” of the Church. In continuity with his recent predecessors, Pius XII described the “final goal” of the missions as “the establishment of the Church in new territories”. Accordingly in “*Fidei Donum*” (1957) he issued a special appeal on behalf of Africa, where Islam was spreading: “Twenty more priests in a particular region would make it possible to plant the cross there today, while tomorrow this same land, tilled by other workers than those of the Lord, will probably have become impervious to the true Faith.” Conversion is clearly implied here, as a means to plant the Church. Conversion is understood primarily in terms of Church membership.

The next important text on conversion comes from Vatican II and bears quoting at length. The following exposition is based on the comments of various Council fathers as well as the “*Relatio*” of the Conciliar Missionary Commission (CMC), charged with the task of drafting the mission decree. This material is here being published for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. *Ad Gentes* 13

After urging the proclamation of Christ to all people, “wherever God opens a door of speech”, the Council

describes the process of conversion: “Thus, when the Holy Spirit opens their heart (cf. Acts 16.14) non-Christians may believe and be freely converted to the Lord, and may sincerely cling to Him who, as ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14.6), fulfills all their spiritual expectations, and even infinitely surpasses them.”

Some Council fathers wanted conversion to be defined more “theologically”, taking up what had been defined by the Councils of Trent and Vatican I. But the CMC judged this useless and preferred to stick to the pastoral bent of chapter II.

The second paragraph of AG 13 describes the stage of conversion in which there must be a consciousness of sin and a reference to Christ. The text speaks of a spiritual journey in the Christian faith, whose primary object is the paschal mystery. It does not mean, as five Council fathers felt, that non-Christians may not be living religiously and fighting sin or that they have no spiritual life/journey: “This conversion, to be sure, must be regarded as a beginning. Yet it is sufficient that one realizes that one has been snatched away from sin and led into the mystery of the love of God, who has called him/her to enter into a personal relationship with Him in Christ.”

The following section describes conversion and its consequences, as desired by Bp. Paul Seitz of Kontum (Viet Nam) and several others:

For, by the workings of divine grace, the new convert sets out on a spiritual journey. Already sharing through faith in the mystery of Christ’s death

and resurrection, he journeys from the old man to the new one, perfected in Christ (cf. Col 3.5-10; Eph 4.20-24). This transition, *which brings* with it a progressive change of outlook and morals, should manifest itself through its social effects, and should be gradually developed during the time of the catechumenate. Since the Lord he believes in is a sign of contradiction (cf. Lk 2.34; Mt 10.34-39), the convert often experiences human breaks and separations. But he also tastes the joy which God gives without measure (cf. I Th 1.6).

Four Council fathers had wanted the phrase “which brings” to be replaced by “in so far as it brings”. They felt that the text as it stands gives the impression that all non-Christians are ‘simply bad’, since they have to be carried progressively from complete wickedness to a changed mentality and behavior. The CMC denied that the text supposes this; Christ himself calls all to *metanoia*, in which true conversion consists.

The next section enjoins respect for religious freedom, with reference to Vatican II’s “Declaration on Religious Freedom”, Nos. 2, 4 and 10: “The Church strictly forbids forcing anyone to embrace the faith, or alluring or enticing people by unworthy techniques. By the same token, she also strongly insists on a person’s right not to be deterred from the faith by unjust vexations on the part of others.”

The point is not new, as pope Alexander VII (1658) had rejected the use of inducements and force in this context.<sup>3</sup> An earlier draft of the above quoted text had prefaced this section with the statement: “The freedom of this

conversion should be established”. However, this was objected to by three Council fathers, including Bp. Oscar Sevrin of Ranchi. He felt that the statement added nothing definite to the following clear sentence. He referred to the infamous Niyogi Commission Report (1956) on Christian missionary activity in the state of Madhya Pradesh, as an example of how hostile governments could use such a statement to legitimate their official ‘inquisitions’. In deference to this objection, the CMC deleted the said statement and inserted the word “freely” (underscored above) in the opening paragraph of N. 13.

The controversy did not end there, for 54 Council fathers wanted to replace the opening sentence of the present section (“The Church ... techniques”) with the following: “The act of faith cannot arise out of external constraint nor out of unfit artifices or from promises of temporal goods, but from the free and sincere will of the person.”

These Council fathers were moved by the desire to avoid insinuating that Catholic missionaries induce non-Christians to the faith by means of compulsion. But the CMC pointed out, that the new redaction in fact insinuates that such means are indeed used; it is open to the same false interpretation by those who seek scandal. Further, added the CMC, it can smack of Pelagianism. Accordingly, the proposed amendment was rejected.

## Conclusion

The Council describes conversion in holistic terms. It is basically a total spiritual renewal focused on Jesus

Christ and takes place in an ecclesial context. This renewal is a life-long process, which is to manifest itself in personal change and renewed relationships with others. The freedom of the person must be respected in this ‘journey’.

In the Indian context, a peculiar problem arises regarding large numbers of Hindus, who while choosing to remain outside the Church, are converted to Christ who is sometimes understood in a different manner from what the Church professes in its creeds. Paul Palathuruthil, Exarch of Chanda, drew attention to this phenomenon in an observation which he submitted to the CMC. He noted that the words and deeds of Jesus make a profound impression on many non-Christians. They even have sympathy and reverence for the Church. But they do not wish to become Christians. Apart from the fact that this phenomenon should be more profoundly investigated, we seem to ignore this group. They are Christ’s, he said. And as for their syncretism, “Who is not against us is for us.” There is no juridical or liturgical term to designate them. The Gospels, translated into different languages, should be distributed among them. Some sort of permanent bond should be established between the Church and non-Christians who read and love sacred Scripture. In response to this Note of the Exarch, the CMC agreed that the Church should have regard for these “sympathizers”. This is sufficiently taken care of wherever the text speaks of dialogue and the presence of charity. The CMC added: How these principles should be translated into practice, depends on such diverse circum-

stances that the matter cannot be dealt with here.

It is plain from the foregoing that the responsibility for dealing with this issue devolves primarily upon the Indian Church. The matter would be brought up again in the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1974 on the theme of evangelisation. In a written intervention at the Synod, bishop Patrick D'Souza of Varanasi referred to the 'sympathizers', who "would seem to surpass Christians in number". (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 24/10/1974, p.12).

### 3. Conversion in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

This is the Apostolic Exhortation on evangelisation in the modern world (1975), published by Pope Paul VI as a sequel to the Synod of Bishops of the preceding year. The pope asserts that salvation in the Kingdom of God is obtained through a process of abnegation required to imbibe the spirit of the beatitudes. Each individual gains this salvation "through a total interior renewal which the Gospel calls *metanoia*; it is a radical conversion, a profound change of mind and heart" (N. 10). It is plain that such an interior renewal must always accompany a change of social structures, because "the best structures and the most idealized systems soon become inhuman if the inhuman inclinations of the human heart are not made wholesome, if those who live in these structures or who rule them do not undergo a conversion of heart and of outlook" (N. 36). This is a matter of daily experience in India, where many excel-

lent laws and directives remain largely confined to paper. So there is no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons. The Church is very conscious of the importance of this interior change as forming the heart of evangelization:

if it had to be expressed in one sentence, the best way of stating it would be to say that the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs (N. 18).

It is clear that the pope does not limit conversion to the narrow sense of Church membership, though some persons may opt for such membership. But even for such persons, the process of conversion is never complete, for the Church is a people "immersed in the world and often tempted by idols". Hence she "is evangelized by constant conversion and renewal, in order to evangelize the world with credibility" (N. 15). Conversion is understood as a process of interior renewal, which may in some cases culminate in faith in Jesus Christ. This "profound change of mind and heart" must affect society: the activities and concrete milieux of people.

### 4. *Redemptoris Missio* (1990)

This is the encyclical letter of pope John Paul II on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate. It was published on the 25th anniversary of "*Ad Gentes*". Here the terms "conversion" and to "convert" are thrice more numerous than in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, but they are used in the nar-

rower sense of faith in Christ and baptism (See Nn 20, 23, 35, 44, 46, 47). Conversion refers to adherence to Christ within the Church. The pope makes it clear that conversion to Christ must not be separated from baptism and membership in the Church. It is this “Christian conversion” which is the aim of proclamation and which is forbidden in certain countries. No doubt, “accepting the saving sovereignty of Christ” implies a continual turning away from sin. And this remains a life-long task, for: “We cannot preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted anew every day”.

The pope seems cognizant of the situation obtaining in India, when he refers to historical, cultural and social factors which militate against the acceptance of baptism. In some places:

conversion is seen as a rejection of one’s own people and culture... sociological considerations associated with baptism obscure its genuine meaning as an act of faith. This is due to a variety of historical and cultural factors... many profess an interior commitment to Christ and his message yet do not wish to be committed sacramentally, since, owing to prejudice or because of the failings of Christians, they find it difficult to grasp the true nature of the Church as a mystery of faith and love (Nn 35, 47).

The pope exhorts the local ecclesial communities to remove such blocks where they exist, “so that the sacrament of spiritual rebirth can be seen for what it truly is”. At the same time he reminds prospective converts that, “if they feel drawn to Christ, it was he himself who desired that the Church should be the ‘Place’ where they would in fact

find him”. Nevertheless, many such persons continue to exercise their religious freedom in adhering to Christ outside the Church.<sup>4</sup> In this context we would do well to heed the remarks of pope Paul VI while describing the signs of that love which the evangelizer should have for those being evangelized. One of these signs is: “Respect for the religious and spiritual situation of those being evangelized. Respect for their tempo and pace; no one has the right to force them excessively. Respect for their conscience and convictions, which are not to be treated in a harsh manner” (*EN* 79).

A Colloquium organised by the CCBI Commission for Proclamation in December 1998 reflected on this issue, as recorded in its final Statement:

Due to various social, religious and cultural situations in India and the nature of the prevalent Church form in our country, many who have been decisively influenced by the person, message and values of Jesus are facing real difficulties in embracing the full Christian fellowship in the existing form of Christianity. In view of this situation we have to develop certain forms of ministry for and living relationship with such persons. Their relationship to the Church should be further explored.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Concluding remarks

Conversion, understood as including baptism, cannot be isolated from the overall goal of mission. This goal needs to be clarified further in Church documents, so as to achieve an harmonious integration of the various elements which make up evangelisation. For in-

stance, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* sees evangelization as aiming at the transformation of humanity and the evangelization of cultures (Nn 18-20). In *Redemptoris Missio*, on the one hand it is stated that “the Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the Kingdom”, of which she is “the seed, sign and instrument”. On the other hand, it is asserted that “the proclamation of the word of God has Christian conversion as its aim ... This must be our motto: All the churches united for the conversion of the whole world” (Nn 46,

84). And: “The mission *Ad Gentes* has this objective: to found Christian communities. . .”

So we have: promoting the Kingdom of God, evangelization of cultures, conversion, Church planting. All these elements have their place in missionary activity. However, it is important to be clear about their mutual relationship and relative value in the context of the goal of mission: not least because this has practical and pastoral consequences for the conduct of missionary activity.

## Notes

1. T. Ohm, *Machet zu Jüngern alle Völker*, Freiburg: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1962, p. 279.
2. My sources are: 1) *Observations, emendations proposed in writing or in speeches in the Aula, by Conciliar Fathers and Observers* (8 Vols.). 2) *Schema Decreti de Activitate Missionali Ecclesiae, Textus Emendatus et Relationes* (1965). 3) *Schema Decreti de Activitate Missionali Ecclesiae, Modi a Patribus Conciliaribus propositi, a Commissione de Missionibus Examinati* (1965).
3. *Collectanea S. C. de Propaganda Fide*, Rome, 1907: n. 129, xv, t. 1, p. 40.
4. J. Saldanha, “Unbaptised Disciples of Christ”, *Third Millennium*, 1998, N. 3, pp. 20-27.
5. *Ishvani Documentation and Mission Digest*, 1998, N. 3, p. 364