

# Conversion

## Pruning, Time, and Help

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ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS to continue his persecution of Christians, Saul the Pharisee has a dramatic encounter with Jesus. Saul has a conversion experience: “As he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus.’”<sup>1</sup> “Conversion,” as the word appears in the New Testament Greek, means “to turn” – to turn in a new direction in response to Jesus. We see this literally in Saul’s story: He was headed in one direction, but because of his encounter with Jesus, he turned into a new path. On the other side of this dramatic conversion experience, Saul, now Paul, spends more than seventeen years in the desert of Arabia and Syria where the Scriptures are silent.<sup>2</sup> What he was doing all those years before his active ministry begins, we can only conjecture. I imagine it was about his ongoing conversion to Christ. He was practicing what he would later preach: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”<sup>3</sup> While it may have begun with a singular, dramatic experience, Saint Paul’s conversion to Christ would be a life-long process, and so for us.

You, too, may have had a life-changing encounter with Jesus sometime in your past – a conversion experience. That was not an experience of a lifetime; that was an experience of how to live life all the time. Every day, from dawn to dusk, we must make a good many decisions how we will respond to life: what we will say or do, what we will reveal or conceal, what we will keep or share. Conversion is about our life-long turning and returning to Christ Jesus for his cues and for his power as we navigate life. Saint Paul would say, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”<sup>4</sup> And so for us. Yet there are concrete things we can do to allow this conversion to take place in our lives and selves. Our life-long conversion to Christ requires pruning, time, and help. In the monastic tradition, we call this *conversio morum* – conversion of life.

## Conversion requires pruning

Not long ago I was having a conversation with one of my SSJE Brothers about my reaction to something. I said to him, “I guess I’ve got some baggage around that.” My

<sup>1</sup> Acts of the Apostles 9:3-9.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 2:20.

Brother responded, “Curtis, that’s not baggage, that’s freight!” Quite. Our past informs our life; it may also have *deformed* our life, leaving a residue. That residue will get in the way of living our lives abundantly, as Jesus promises us. The residue will leave us reacting rather than responding to life. Your life is a streaming invitation from God to say “Yes!” Our life-long conversion is our co-operating with how Jesus wants to set us free, his work in us “to bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”<sup>5</sup>

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus speaks of “pruning” as a metaphor for conversion of life: “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*”<sup>6</sup> Jesus obviously learned something about cultivating a garden and its cost. I’m not talking about the cost to the gardener – the time and labor expended, which is real – but rather, the cost to the plants. I cannot imagine that anything is more confusing to a living plant than to be pruned. For a plant, whose sole reason for being is to be alive and to grow, to be cut back . . . it must feel like death to a plant! And yet, every gardener will know that unless the plant is pruned back, the plant *may* grow, but it will likely grow wild and it will spend itself prematurely, missing its great potential to flower with form and beauty, season after season. Gardens need to be cultivated, and plants need to be pruned back to bring forth the best of what they’ve been created to be. Is there something in your life that needs to be pruned? Something you may carry as baggage or freight in your soul that would be helpful for you to part with?

It may have to do with forgiving someone. Jesus speaks of unforgiveness as an imprisoning experience. Is there someone who has negatively affected or infected your life? Not forgiving them leaves them imprisoned – impeding them from changing – and it leaves you imprisoned as their prison guard. Both the prisoner and the prison guard are in prison. Forgiveness is a liberating experience for the other person and for you. Should you wait for them to ask for your forgiveness? No, absolutely not. To wait is to continue to give them power over you. If they have hurt you, you are colluding with them by your unwillingness to forgive. Unforgiveness will metastasize in your own soul and become resentment. Very dangerous. Nelson Mandela, when he was freed at age seventy-two from his twenty-six years of cruel imprisonment in South Africa, felt bitter toward his captors, but was determined not to let it ruin the rest of his life. He spoke truth; he sought reconciliation. “Resentment,” he said, “is like drinking poison and waiting for it to kill your enemy.” Forgive. Forgiveness may need to be your daily practice, otherwise a residue may build up like barnacles, weighing you down, impeding your life.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:16-21.

<sup>6</sup> John 15:1-17.

Pruning in your life may have to do with an expectation, a plan, a goal, a presumption about something which you clearly see isn't going to be realized, isn't going to happen. To cling to this could unwittingly cultivate the poison of resentment or anger in the ground of your being. It needs to be pruned. It might have to do with something you believed or valued, which you're not so sure of now. Better to travel lighter. Is there some kind of pruning back of what once was alive in you but – for whatever reason – is no longer?

Life prunes us, whether or not we consent to it. Some of this comes in the form of disappointments: what we *could* have had or feel we *should* have had, but don't; because we *weren't* chosen for something; because we *were* chosen for something; because we grew up on the wrong side of the tracks; because we were let go (let go from a job; let go by a friend). Changes in our health, the experience of growing older and seeing our energies diminish, the experience of losing the loves of our life, the experience of simply not being able to have it all, and ultimately the anticipating of our own death and of dying: these experiences are some of the “pruning” that mortal life simply brings to us all, whether or not we choose it. But Jesus is saying to *choose* it. Choose to abide where you are now, which in itself is a kind of pruning from the delusion that what the MasterCard people say is true: “You can have it all.” You cannot. It's a snare and delusion to think that life offers us limitless options. It does not and it's not supposed to. To abide, as Jesus says, is to be rooted and grounded in the love of God – Jesus being the vine, and we the various branches that will bear the tough love of being pruned.

Pruning may also free you up from a self-image you have held since childhood but which does not fit, maybe never did. Somewhere, from someone, you may have learned what you could be or should be in life, and this simply is not who you are. You need to say “yes” to your life and yourself, amazing person that you are. If you find yourself having this internal battle – one part of you always critical about yourself, what should be different or better, and the other part pleading that you're doing the best you can – you need to get on good speaking terms with yourself. Jesus has come, not only to break down the dividing wall between us and other people; he has also come to break down the dividing wall *within* us. Claim your life, the whole of it. What is clearly good, cherish and cultivate. What is clearly broken, venerate, because your brokenness becomes a breakthrough for God. Never dismiss yourself. You are a work in progress, one that will require your attention for the rest of your life. Co-operate with God. That, inevitably, will involve pruning for you to be fully alive. There's an endearing word of insight in the Talmud: “Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers, ‘Grow, grow.’” Co-operate with your soul's God-implanted will to grow and be free.

## Conversion requires time

SSJE's founder, Richard Meux Benson (1824–1915), wrote of our life-long conversion being gradual and, for the time being, always beyond our reach. He encouraged us “to look forward to that perfection which God would give eventually.” Perfection is a word on Jesus' own lips: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” For some of us, “perfection” is a sore subject, a deforming word which we may long to prune from our soul's vocabulary. However, the word, as Jesus speaks it, is more accessible as a verb: to perfect.<sup>7</sup> To perfect implies a process or cultivation or conversion over time.

To perfect your life, start with the imperfections, which is how God most often attracts our attention. Where we feel strong, well equipped, confident, we probably feel quite self sufficient. Where we are incomplete or when we feel our life to be unmanageable, we are vulnerable. Our brokenness becomes God's point of break-through in our lives.<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre de Caussade, the eighteenth-century French spiritual director, writes, “Rejoice every time you discover a new imperfection.” He counsels, if you find yourself getting impatient, try to bear your impatience patiently. If you lose your tranquility, endure that loss tranquilly. If you get angry, don't get angry with yourself for getting angry. If you are not content, try to be content with your discontent. “Don't fuss too much about yourself,” de Caussade says. “Don't fight the truth of yourself. The time will come when the sight of your imperfection and brokenness, which may horrify you now, will fill you with joy and keep you in a delightful peace . . . . The fruit of grace must, for the moment, remain hidden, buried as it were in the abyss of your imperfection, underneath the most lively awareness of your weakness.”<sup>9</sup> So says Saint Paul, “In Christ, strength is made perfect in weakness.”<sup>10</sup>

Our conversion, like the attitude de Caussade counsels, takes time. Father Benson was of a mind that a pining for immediacy of spiritual knowledge and gifts was the core sin in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve's “fall” came when they yielded to the persuasion of Satan “to seize upon these higher gifts at once” on their own initiative and strength, rather than receiving them as a progressive gift of God. Father Benson writes, “We cannot bound into the depths of God at one spring; if we could, we should be shattered, not filled. God draws us on.”<sup>11</sup> Our conversion, our spiritual development, mirrors the development of children. In the Scriptures we are not referred to as “adults of God,” but rather, repeatedly, as children of God. We are God's children. Children are not ready to know everything at once. In the fullness of time we will know what we can bear. God knows what we know, God knows what we don't know, and God knows *that* we don't

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:48; Luke 18:9-14; John 5:44; also Romans 10:3f; Galatians 3:10.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2:13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Tugwell in *Ways of Imperfection*, p. 213, quoting and citing Jean-Pierre de Caussade in *Lettres Spirituelles*, vol 1 (Paris, 1962), pp. 117.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9.

<sup>11</sup> Cowley Evangelist, 1918, p. 53.

know. God certainly is not in a rush in God's work in our lives; God has all the time in the world. Our ongoing conversion to Christ requires our attention, and it takes time, a lifetime.

## Conversion requires help

Down through the centuries a recurring warning has come from the spiritual masters about self-deception. Left to our own devices, we are prone to go astray like lost sheep. We need help. Help is essential in our conversion to Jesus Christ. Our relationship to Jesus is personal, but it is not private. When we hear Jesus speaking to us in the Gospels, when he says "you," this is "you-plural": you all. Where we belong to Christ is in the context of what Saint Paul calls "the body of Christ," other followers of Jesus in whom Jesus lives and speaks and to whom we are joined. We need others, and they need us. Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), the Spanish Carmelite nun and mystic, said: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now." Live out your conversion by being generously available to bear the beams of Christ's light and life and love to others, and to accept their help in bringing Christ's light and life and love to you.

Needing help can be quite humbling. Father Benson writes that "humility is not only ready to do anything for anyone, but it is also ready to receive anything at other peoples' hands. Many people will humble themselves to do abasing actions, and will not humble themselves to receive little kindnesses at other peoples' hands." There will be some people in our life to whom we are naturally drawn, people whom we trust, look to, listen for. We recognize that they are Christ-bearers to us.

There are likely other people in our life whom we're more prone to see as an irritation, an obstacle, perhaps an enemy, certainly not a Christ-bearer. I recall Mother Teresa's being asked many years ago whether she saw Christ in the incredibly poor, maimed, dying people whom she and her sisters served. She said, "Yes, but Jesus oftentimes comes hideously disguised." The problem-people in our lives will often be our best teachers. Those people who snag us, who hold us fast like two interlocking strips of Velcro, hold onto us for a reason. When the "Velcro" of our own soul gets snagged on someone else's "Velcro," there's an invitation for us. Inside the irritation is an invitation for our own conversion because something that had been hidden – hidden to us about our own lives – has been exposed through this emissary, this other child of God. In that encounter, there is likely an invitation for ongoing conversion to Christ. As we say in our own Rule of Life: "Our diversity and our brokenness mean that tensions and friction are inevitably woven into the fabric of everyday life. They are not to be regarded as signs of failure.

Christ uses them for our conversion as we grow in mutual forbearance and learn to let go of the pride that drives us to control and reform our brothers on our own terms.”<sup>12</sup>

If we lean into life as a recurring invitation from Christ for our ongoing conversion, we will experience life as a gift, a recurring gift, with each passing moment of the day. Our quest is to recognize Christ in everyone. Father Benson said the work of conversion in our lives follows the course from indifference to one another, to compassion for one another, to identification with one another. This is not easy – because on the surface we all appear to be so very different – but it is the way to become real, to be fully alive.

Jesus is the beginning, and the end, and the way to our conversion. Late in life, Nikos Kazantzakis, the eminent 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek philosopher, asked a monk, Father Makarios, “Do you still wrestle with the devil?” “Not any longer, my child,” replied the Father. “I have grown too old and he has grown too old with me. He does not have the strength. I now wrestle with God.” “With God?” exclaimed Kazantzakis, “And you hope to win?” “No,” answered the monk, “I hope to lose.” And so for us. In the end, we want to be able to pray as Saint Paul did at the end of his life: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *The SSJE Rule of Life* - Chapter 5: “The Challenges of Life in Community.”

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 3:8-9.

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