

CONVERSION

You will all recall from our profession ceremony this past Sunday that Brs. Isaiah and Samuel promised, among other things, *conversatio morum*. We've all heard many times that this term refers basically to the entire monastic way of life but that, in the centuries after Benedict, it was often not understood and so was sometimes changed by scribes to the more readily intelligible term *conversio morum*, referring in a straightforward way to the need to change or convert one's former way of life. Even if the change in terminology was in some respects regrettable, stemming simply from ignorance about ancient monastic terminology, it was at least in accord with one of the most central challenges that Jesus gave and still gives to all who would be his followers. His very first words in the oldest Gospel, that according to Mark, are these: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." That word "repent" is in Greek *metanoieite*, which literally means "have a change of mind" and could just as well be translated as "be converted." Our entire life should be one of ongoing conversion, of doing what St. Benedict refers to in his prologue when he writes: "The Lord waits for us daily to translate into action ... his holy teachings. Therefore our life span has been lengthened by way of a truce, that we may amend our misdeeds. As the Apostle says: *Do you not know that the patience of God is leading you to repent* (Rom 2:4)? And indeed the Lord assures us of his love, [saying]: *I do not wish the death of the sinner, but that he turn back to me and live* (Ezek 33:11)." For that reason, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Benedict is primarily calling us to a life of conversion.

Rather than continue on this topic in a general way, I would like to illustrate it with reference to the man who is surely the most talked-about person in the Church today, Pope Francis. It is going to take a while for a really well-researched work to be published about him,

but even the books and articles that have so hurriedly been rushed into print give us some precious insights into his own humble and honest acknowledgement of the need for conversion in his own life. All of us can learn a lot from him.

Perhaps the best way to begin is with that interview published in *America* on September 30 and simultaneously in many other Jesuit publications throughout the world. Early on in that interview, Antonio Spadaro, the Jesuit editor of an Italian Jesuit journal, asked: “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” and he got this reply: “I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.”¹ We have, of course, no way of knowing exactly what Pope Francis was referring to, but it could well have referred to certain actions he took as a young Jesuit provincial during the brutal era of dictatorship in Argentina in the 1970s. At that time, a few Jesuits, including two who had been Bergoglio’s former teachers, had set up a new community called Rivadavia in a slum area of Buenos Aires. Among those with whom they worked in the slums was a group with Marxist leanings. Bergoglio was determined to have the Jesuits end this association, both because it was dangerous and because it represented the kind of Liberation Theology that he had been appointed to purge from the order. The men were told that they had to choose either the Rivadavia community or the Society of Jesus.

What happened next is a matter of dispute: whether they were expelled from the Society or whether they simply resigned, although at their provincial’s suggestion. At any rate, Bergoglio then had the archbishop of Buenos Aires withdraw the two priests’ license to say Mass. One of the two later said that this was like a green light for the military to move against them, since they no longer had the clear support of the Church. Three days later they were arrested and brutally tortured, though not killed as so many thousands were in those years, and they were freed five months later, quite possibly because of Bergoglio’s intervention. One of the

two died of a heart attack in 2000, the other spent some time in the U.S. and then went to Germany to reside in a Bavarian retreat house, where some years later he and his former provincial met. They concelebrated Mass together, ending with a solemn embrace. An eyewitness at that Mass said that they actually fell into each other's arms and cried, in a "visceral intermingling of relief, remorse, and repentance."²

That may well have been part of what Pope Francis referred to when he spoke of himself as a sinner. What we do know is that after some further tumultuous time as provincial he was replaced and sent to Frankfurt, Germany to begin work on a doctorate in theology. Somewhat surprisingly, he soon returned to Argentina and taught for a while in Buenos Aires, but he began to be so critical of various minor details about courses and administration that the new provincial sent him off to the city of Cordoba, where he had no duties other than saying Mass, hearing confessions, giving some spiritual direction, and continuing work on his doctorate (which he never completed). The time in Cordoba, however, seems to have been absolutely central in what could truly be called a conversion. One of his biographers writes of that time as follows:

It was in that wilderness that Bergoglio, a prayerful man who spent at least two hours a day in the presence of God before the tabernacle, looked deep into his own heart and made a radical change.... [He had time] to reflect on his divisive leadership of the Jesuits in Argentina—and on what he had done wrong or inadequately during the Dirty War [at the time of the dictatorship]. He had to confront the fact that, in his inexperience as a young leader, he had allowed the breakdown of the pastoral relationship between himself and the priests in his care....

Bergoglio's soul was touched profoundly in all this. To understand how deep the examination of his conscience went, it is only necessary to look at his preaching. The need for forgiveness and for God's mercy has been his dominant theological refrain, both before and after he became Pope. 'Guilt, without atonement, does not allow us to grow,' he has said. 'There's no clean slate. We have to bless the past with remorse, forgiveness, and atonement.' The final Lenten letter he left for the people of Buenos Aires before he left for Rome said: 'Morality is not 'never falling down' but 'always getting up again.'"³

At the time of his installation as pope, he also spoke by television to a huge crowd in the main square of Buenos Aires, and the words he chose are a fine example of what that biographer referred to as the main themes of his preaching. To the tens of thousands gathered at 3:30 a.m. Argentine time, he said:

Dear sons and daughters ... I want to ask a favor of your. I want to ask for us to walk together, to care for one another, for you to care for each other. Do not cause harm. Protect life. Protect the family; protect nature; protect the young; protect the elderly.... And draw near to God. God is good. He always forgives and understands. Do not be afraid of him. Draw near to him, and may the Virgin bless you.⁴

Those words about walking together and caring for one another are a fine summation of what St. Benedict says in the 72nd chapter of his Rule, and the entire trajectory of Pope Francis's words about "always getting up again" reflects what Benedict writes in his prologue about turning back to the Lord that we may live. Knowing our own imperfections and failings, we can

rejoice that the Church has a leader who knows himself to be imperfect but who shows that we need never despair of God's forgiving mercy.

1 "A Big Heart Open to God," *America* Sept. 30, 2013, <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview> (accessed Oct. 24, 2013).

2 Paul Vallely, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 142.

3 *Ibid.*, 192-93.

4 *Ibid.*, 168-69.