



# Catholic Social Thought and Conversion

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of two conversions. The first responds to the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ and leads to Baptism.<sup>1</sup> The call to conversion, however, “continues to resound in the heart of Christians” and is “an uninterrupted task for the whole Church.”<sup>2</sup>

This second conversion is critical to Catholic social teaching. Pope John Paul II described conversion as a call to revise all the different areas of life, “especially those related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good.”<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis teaches that an authentic faith “always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to

leave this earth somehow better than we found it.”<sup>4</sup>

Conversion is about *metanoia*, Greek for “a change of mentality.”<sup>5</sup> Even more, conversion involves a Gospel vision of the world, which requires “leaving behind our worldly way of thinking and acting, which so often heavily conditions our behavior.”<sup>6</sup>

A lifelong process, conversion takes personal struggle and occurs best in the context of a larger faith community.<sup>7</sup>

A lifelong process, conversion takes personal struggle and occurs best in the context of a larger faith community.<sup>7</sup> It is a share in Christ’s cross that calls us to “continually go beyond where we now are”; it “means separating ourselves from all attachments and affiliations that could prevent us from hearing and following our authentic vocation.”<sup>8</sup>

The difficulty of conversion to full Gospel is precisely because it means rejecting deeply seated human attitudes and assumptions and their embodiment in the life and structures of society:

*To embrace peace:* We choose “the disarmament of the human heart and the conversion of the human spirit to God who alone can give authentic peace.”<sup>9</sup>

*To pursue economic justice:* We place people before “the worship of the ancient golden calf [that] has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy...”<sup>10</sup>

*To preserve the earth:* We choose a simple lifestyle to “break with the logic of mere consumption” and promote agricultural and industrial production that will “respect the order of creation and satisfy the basic needs of all.”<sup>11</sup>

*To end personal and institutional racism:* We end “not only individual prejudice but also the use of religious, social, political, economic, or historical power to keep one race privileged.”<sup>12</sup>

*To promote solidarity:* We “recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property.”<sup>13</sup>

*To care for the needy:* “We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market” and embrace “decisions, programs, mechanisms, and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment, and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality.”<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, true conversions embrace the countercultural Gospel priorities of Pope John Paul II:

*The needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich; the rights of workers over the maximization of profits; the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion; production to meet social needs over production for military purposes.*<sup>15</sup>

Such a difficult conversion to stand against “a world that is increasingly estranged from Christian values”<sup>16</sup> must be inspired by prayer and Scripture reading, supported by a vibrant faith community, and nurtured by daily practice.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1427.
- 2 *Ibid.*, no. 1428.
- 3 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, no. 27.
- 4 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, no. 183.
- 5 *Ecclesia*, op.cit., no. 26.
- 6 *Ibid.*, no. 32.
- 7 U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, no. 328.
- 8 U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, 1983, no. 276.
- 9 *Ibid.*, no. 284.
- 10 *Evangelii*, op.cit., no. 55.
- 11 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 486.
- 12 Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, “*Made in the Image and Likeness of God*”: A Pastoral Letter on Racial Harmony, December 16, 2006, no. 16.
- 13 *Evangelii*, op.cit., no. 189.
- 14 *Ibid.*, no. 204.
- 15 Pope John Paul II, *Address on Christian Unity in a Technological Age*, September 14, 1984, in *Origins* 14:16 (October 4, 1984), p. 248.
- 16 *The Challenge of Peace*, no. 277.