

27 November 2022—Advent 1: Romans 13 11-14 (Year A) Conversion: Part 1 of 4

Today we begin a new Church Year: Be intentional in this new beginning by renewing your commitment to Christ. Conversion is the traditional word for continued renewal in Christ, living always deeper into Christ. Today and the next three Sundays we will be reminded of the eight dimensions of conversion. Today we will consider the context and the means of conversion. In the weeks ahead we will see the mission and fruit of conversion, the magnitude and the place of conversion, and the purpose and length of conversion.

Today Paul provides the context for conversion. Just before today's passage Paul has urged the Christians in Rome to fulfill societal obligations, like paying taxes and appropriately obeying civil authorities. Paul wants Christians to be free from anxiety, worry and unnecessary, complicating entanglements. By fulfilling 'secular' obligations we no longer 'owe' civil authorities anything and are free to serve others in Christ's Name. He writes in verse 8: *Owe no one anything, except to love one another.* We seldom think of love as something owed, but as a gift freely given and received. Indeed, some must recover from relationships in which 'love' was a demanded by-product of emotional extortion. Such manipulation and abuse may be called 'love' by emotional extortionists, but it is not real love.

Paul knows love is only practiced, only grows, in healthy relationships. To be converted into Christ is to learn—often slowly and painfully—how to love and be loved by God, how to love and be loved by others. Therefore, the context for our conversion into Christ is the community of Christ.

We 'owe' love to our sisters and brothers because through our relationships with them we learn, practice, and grow in God's love. If love remains within, focused on self, it dies. If love is, in a sense, 'paid' to those whom God places in our lives, then God's love grows, resulting in our conversion, and theirs. St. John Chrysostom, in the 4th Century wrote, "Love is a debt which you owe to your brother and sister because of your spiritual relationship to them...if love departs from us, the whole body is torn in pieces. Therefore, love your brother and sister, for if you can fulfill the law by befriending them, then the benefit you receive puts you in their debt." (Homilies on Romans, 23).

We see our 'debt of love' to others as we accept that God places them in our lives, and we in theirs, for our mutual conversion. We cannot love, obey, serve, and rejoice in God, if we cannot love, obey, serve, and rejoice in our brothers and sisters in Christ. First John Chapter 3 tell us it is impossible to love God without loving our brothers and sisters. The Church is the context for conversion. Without others, we are stunted; we will never grow in love. With them, we will grow and be converted together.

The means for conversion is in the last sentence: we *put on Christ*. This image occurs at least 12 times in Paul's letters. With God's help, we live with others in such ways that we are mistaken for Christ. That may sound naïve, heretical, or silly. The Bible tells us it is possible and essential. We *put on Christ* by living his teaching and example. To be with others—even the difficult and the stranger—as Jesus would, is to wear the garb of the one we call our Master. Conversion is not thinking right thoughts, being polite, or wearing crosses. Conversion is patterning one's life on Jesus in every relationship and context. Conversion is the holiness of Jesus made real in our lives. We put on Christ. We do this by offering ourselves to Christ more and more; offering all our relationships to Christ, bringing them under the Holy Spirit's guidance; wanting and accepting the healing grace of God to mend our broken hearts and wounded lives, so that we become ministers of healing for others. Conversion is Christ living in us and we in him, continually.

The context for conversion is the Church; the means of conversion is putting on Christ. I end with another quote from a 6th Century theologian: "Therefore, whatever you do, do it for the love of Christ, and let the intention or end of all your actions look to him. Do nothing for the sake of human praise but everything for the love of God and the desire for eternal life. Then you will see the end of perfection, and when you have reached it, you will want nothing more" (Caesarius of Arles: Sermons 137.1).

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.