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CONVERSION AND ECUMENISM
Presidential Address

George F. Kirwin, O.M.I.*

This year's convention of the Mariological Society of America responds to an urgent plea of Pope John Paul II, a man who seems to be preoccupied from a spiritual-theological perspective with the immanence of the millennium. It is a plea that we become more deeply involved in ecumenical dialogue. His apostolic letters Orientale Lumen¹ and Tertio Adveniente Millennio² served as an immediate preparation for the issuance of his twelfth encyclical, Ut Unum Sint³, the sub-title of which is "On Commitment to Ecumenism."

Our response is directed specifically to one of the doctrinal areas which the Pope believes is in need of clarification before a true consensus of faith can be reached. In his words, it is: "the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ's disciples and for all humanity" (no. 79).

If commitment to ecumenism requires much patience and courage, certainly a discussion of the so-called "Marian issues" will be quite demanding. Moreover, because of their theological implications and their concrete significance for the spiritual life, they are critical. I am sure that in our presentations and the discussions which will follow, it will become even more evident that the Marian question is central to the dia-

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Iogue. Even on the hypothesis that we were to agree that Marian devotion and doctrine were on the periphery of Christian revelation, or that they pertain to the so-called "secondary truths" of the faith, such conclusions could only arise after an in-depth, mutual study and discussion of God's word.

It would seem that it is precisely because of intense study on the part of some biblical scholars that our Catholic perspective on Mary has begun to deepen and broaden. We are becoming more aware of and sensitive to Eastern insights, even as we listen more attentively to the concerns of our Protestant brothers and sisters relative to our (Catholic) tendency to center our reflections on Mary the individual. More and more, we are looking at her as the personalization of the community. In our view, this does not detract from her importance as an individual called by God to be involved somehow in His designs for the world's salvation. It helps us, in fact, to focus our attention upon her relationship to the Christian community. These perspectives will indeed be at the heart of our discussions here. In this address, I would like to leave aside specific doctrinal questions and use the occasion as a springboard for our continued ecumenical collaboration. For I believe that therein lies our hope for a far greater impact upon the men and women of our world who have been given, in Peter's words, "a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us who by the power of God are safeguarded through faith to a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the final times" (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

Following upon the excitement of Vatican II, there seemed to be an eagerness to become involved in ecumenical dialogue. The doors were opening into a new era of frank and open discussion between Catholic theologians and their counterparts in the various Christian denominations. From "counterparts" they became colleagues as academic faculties were integrated, at first in the area of scriptural and historical studies and gradually in the area of systematics. Commissions on the international, national and even local levels were set up to promote ecumenical relations. And there was much that was successful.
in these endeavors. Friendships were formed among the participants at the same time that respect and mutual appreciation of the traditions grew. This has to have been the breathing of the Spirit where He willed.

In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul identified the underpinning for any truly ecumenical venture as conversion, a change of heart. In its reflections upon the relationship between scripture and tradition, the Council spoke of what it calls "the gospel" as the reality which is handed down through scripture and tradition. It is through fidelity to that same gospel that conversion takes place. And thus, ultimately, it is through fidelity to Jesus and His Spirit that the necessary change of heart will occur.

But what is this change of heart? Can we concretize it further in such a way as to avoid any narrow, one-sided interpretation? In all honesty, I believe that we must say that formerly, for us Catholics, conversion most often implied a change of heart in our direction, a "coming-over-to-our-side" mentality. In our naiveté, we "humbly" stated that we possessed the fullness of truth, while others had only a partial glimpse. Any real movement had to come from their side.

Conversion is multi-faceted, ongoing and at times tedious. I believe that Bernard Lonergan has given us some profound insights into this process of conversion; in fact, it forms the basis of his presentation of what he calls the functional specialties proper to theological discourse. I believe it will help us to reflect upon the fundamental role played by conversion in ecumenical endeavors.

Can there be any doubt that we humans are constantly searching for meaning? Meaning is related to values which in turn are rooted in truth, in judgments of fact, in convictions of faith. In his encyclical, Pope John Paul says: "Because by its nature the content of faith is meant for all humanity, it must be translated into all cultures. Indeed, the element which determines communion in truth is the meaning of truth. The expression of truth can take certain forms. The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning" (no. 19).
Conversion and Ecumenism

In a statement which could be considered complementary, Lonergan writes: "Christian theologians disagree not only on the areas relevant to theological research but also on the interpretation of texts, on the occurrence of events, on the significance of movements. Such differences can have quite different grounds. Some may be eliminated by further progress in research, interpretation, history, and they can be left to the healing office of time. Some may result from developmental pluralism: there exist disparate cultures and diverse differentiations of consciousness; and such differences are to be bridged by working out the suitable transposition from one culture to another or from one differentiation of consciousness to another. Others, finally, arise because intellectual or moral or religious conversion has not occurred. . . . 4

What precisely is this conversion about which he speaks? It is a transformation of the subject and his world. It is a radical change of course and direction. To the degree that we live lives animated by our conversion, all our intentional conscious operations are affected. As Lonergan says: "It directs [our] gaze, pervades [our] imagination, releases the symbols that penetrate to the depths of [our] psyche. It enriches [our] understanding, guides [our] judgments, reinforces [our] decisions."5

He speaks of intellectual, moral and religious conversions. The first of these takes place once an individual begins to know what it is he (or she) is doing when he (or she) is knowing. It is identified with the assumption of a critically realist stance, that is, that one knows through a process of self-transcendence in which one affirms as true realities one experiences. Knowing, then, is experiencing, understanding, judging and believing. It is a going beyond one's sense perceptions to a world outside of oneself. What one affirms to be true in a judgment is grasped as real. While this conversion puts one into a new world having a new horizon, it is just the beginning of further clarifications and developments. And it is crucial in the realm of faith, because it takes one beyond the mere use of words to the reality of God Himself. We can see the relevance of this stance

5Lonergan, Method, 131.
Conversion and Ecumenism

when we begin to consider the Marian doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, for example. If these are viewed as symbols, it is in the ultimately realist sense that "facts of faith" are affirmed as true, as something actualized in the life of one individual who in turn personalizes them for the rest of humankind.

Moral conversion deals with values, the values one decides to embrace. It is aligned with the truth but takes it a step further into decision. It is identified with the struggle to be authentic, to "make oneself good" by choosing the good and doing the right thing. It includes a willingness to be critiqued and to learn from others. Spiritually, it is rooted in humility, self-acceptance, in the sense of wanting to be what one is—dependent upon God, in constant need of redemption. This openness of spirit is essential for true dialogue as opposed to monologue. One's experience of the sincere question of Marian doctrines and devotions opens one further to the realization that what ultimately counts is truth and authenticity. One's motivation is not to prove oneself correct, not to win the argument, certainly not to prove another wrong. In love, one seeks only the truth—God's truth wrapped in mystery.

This is the context for religious conversion which happens when one is grasped by God who is mystery, when one falls in love with God and places no conditions upon this dynamic state of being in love. It involves the highest form of self-transcendence. It is identified, paradoxically, with losing oneself and finding oneself in God. Our Christian way of expressing this experience is borrowed from Paul who speaks of God's love flooding our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and Jesus.

This ultimate instance of self-transcendence motivates us and sustains us in our search for truth wherever it is to be found, enables us to embrace values which give direction to our lives and enables us to overcome the biases which are obstacles to our ongoing search for meaning. One's religious conversion enables one to endure the suffering which is a certain consequence of these instances wherein one is mocked, ridiculed, rejected and persecuted because one seeks to affirm
the truth in the midst of a secularized, unbelieving world in a state of decline.

The total process of conversion begins with the divine initiative, with God who speaks a definitive word in Jesus, a word which, nonetheless, needs to be repeated so that it will be heard. Fidelity to that word, which is the gospel, engages the whole person through a series of ongoing invitations to and possibilities for further conversions, further and deeper commitments to truth and ultimate values and, ultimately, to a never-ending plunge into mystery (who is God). The leap into mystery is not, however, a blind one, even though the light threatens to blind. It is the ultimate actualization of one's human capacities, insofar as they have been transformed by the eye of love which is faith.

To return now to our immediate concern: we are mutually engaged in a search for truth, the whole truth as it has been revealed in Jesus, God's Word. It is important that we hear that word again, that we listen attentively, that we share it in its fullness with those who are committed to it. We are not on a solitary journey; we are linked by bonds of faith, the eye of love.

Our duty as disciples of Jesus, the Master Teacher, is that we be attentive to His word; that we be intelligent in our search for understanding; that we be rational in our affirmation of that word; that we be reasonable when we decide upon our course of action in response to that word; that, most significantly, we allow ourselves to be grasped by our God in love; that we allow Him to "love us to death," to a real death to self, in order to experience the newness of life it brings. Only then shall we be faithful to the gospel; only then shall we be authentically ecumenical.

In relation to all that I have said, I wish to add that my experience of the meetings of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (ESBVM) over the past twenty years has convinced me that such conversion—on all the levels of which I spoke—is not only possible but is also more common than one might think.

Several of the members of our Society have been involved in this ecumenical dialogue, and I believe that they would corroborate my convictions concerning the hope for future de-
 developments in the area of Marian concerns. We are privileged to have with us Dr. Ross Mackenzie, the first president of the ESBVM of America, and I am sure we shall come to a deeper appreciation of the ecumenical dimension of our research as we listen to his presentation.

May Our Lady guide us on our mutual journey of faith into the mystery of God—Father, Son and Spirit!