

Conversatio or Conversio?: Fidelity to the Monastic Life

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Introduction

For many Oblates, and even (I assure you) some of our solemnly professed Benedictine brothers, a request to explain the promise of *conversatio morum* often elicits an initial moment of silence, followed with a mumbled response about "being faithful to living a monastic life,' or "being open to constant conversion in our life,' or "well, that's really hard to answer" Until 50 years ago, the word *conversatio* in the Rule of Benedict was replaced by, or equated with, *conversio*. However, we now know that in writing his Rule, Benedict used *conversatio*. We also know that he did so deliberately. When he copied passages from the Rule of the Master, Benedict substituted *conversatio* for *conversio*.

Rule of Benedict, 58: Monastic Profession

The most commonly quoted and translated verse pertaining to *conversatio* is in RB 58, describing the procedure for receiving new members into the monastery:

When he is to be received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability, *conversatio morum* (fidelity to monastic life), and obedience.¹

The English translation gives the impression these are the three distinct vows of Benedictine life. This is not so. Our actual promises are discussed elsewhere in this manual, but before any real examination of *conversatio morum* and *conversio*, it is critical to first establish that Benedict was not writing about vows as we understand them today. Instead, Benedict uses a common literary formula of his time, the three-member phrase taken as one. Thus, *stabilitas* and *oboedientia* are given the same weight and aspect as *conversatio morum*, and all three are considered integral to the others. The authors of RB 1980 make this clear:

" it is not a profession formula, but rather a rubric " to describe the content of the *promissio* in terms of the monastic realities it encompasses. The profession consisted of a promise to live the entire life prescribed by the Rule.²

Widely respected author and monastic Terrence G. Kardong's research supports this view:

" the three promises " are really not equivalent to the three modern vows, for *conversatio morum* includes the other two and describes the whole life. "The term *conversatio* contains the root *converti* (to change or convert) but in the iterative form it simply means the monastic style of life.³

In her excellent workbook and commentary on the Rule, Oblate Norvene Vest adds:

(*Conversatio*) is ongoing conversion to God, as expressed in the whole monastic manner of life (simplicity and humility for example) and deepened formation of the heart toward virtue and grace.⁴

And finally, Oblate Director Fr. Hugh Feiss states it this way: "In other words, the three promises seem to boil down to one: to embrace the monastic life in a particular community."⁵

The Scholarly Interpretation of *Conversio/Conversatio* in the Rule of St. Benedict

The traditional Latin text of the Rule of Benedict used the word *conversio*. *Conversio* was a common word in classical and post-classical Latin meaning "circular movement," "change" or "moral conversion," and "switching places." In 1912, after studying the best Latin manuscripts of the Rule of Benedict, Abbot Cuthbert Butler concluded that where the traditional text had *conversio*, Benedict had actually used *conversatio*. In fact, the word "*conversio*" is not in the Rule. "*Conversatio*" only appeared in late classical Latin and meant "frequent use, frequent abode in a place, conversation."⁶ It entered into Christian Latin and its peak use was around Benedict's time. It could mean return (Eccl 18.24); moral conversion (Hilary of Poitiers), manner of life (Eph 2.12), city [Phil 3.20), moral conduct (Tertullian), close relationship (Dan 2.11; Ex 21.10), conversation. In particular, Christian authors around Benedict's time used it to mean monastic life (Gregory the Great, Cassian).⁷

RB 1980 succinctly trace a history of the interpretation of "*conversatio morum*" (RB 58). "it is often used in Christian literature to translate the Greek *askēsis* and hence can mean 'the ascetic life' or 'the monastic life.' St. Benedict uses it in this sense nine other times in the Rule. " The combination with *morum suorum*, however is difficult. What can be the meaning of "the way of life of his behavior' or "the monastic life of his behavior"?⁸

Three general classes of solutions have evolved. Some scholars favor the explanation that the terms are similar, and that a traditional understanding of *conversatio* includes the idea of conversion. Odo Lottin of Mont-Cesar suggested looking to the context of the Rule itself to incorporate a social meaning into *conversatio*; i.e., life together with, association with. But RB 1980 rejects this, saying that without a qualifier identifying the associates, the entire phrase becomes "unintelligible.' A third solution has the greatest scholarly support. This third opinion holds that *conversatio* means

"way of life,' 'behavior'; in a monastic context it can mean "the monastic life.' The promise is general, not specific; the novice simply commits himself to follow the way of life observed in the monastery, with all that it entails.⁹

Fr. Terrence Kardong writes that "the word actually means a lifestyle, a 'turning around' in a given milieu. For monks, it means the external behavior befitting that calling." Essentially, *conversatio* "refers to the traditional external practices of monasticism\96the things that monks ordinarily do."¹⁰

Finally, Marilyn Wylde, in an MA dissertation submitted at Boise State University in 2002, argues that Lottin was right to insist on the social emphasis of "*conversatio*." However, she argues that Benedict had in mind conversation with God, listening to what God says, replying with praise, and putting what God says and one responds into action (hence the addition of "*morum*"). In her words, "by living in the present and being actively attuned to how God is speaking through one's

surroundings and one's companions, one fosters a daily communion and interaction with God". "Shines forth from each."¹¹

Ignoring some of the fine nuances of these positions, one could say that "conversatio morum" means living according to the profession of monk as that profession is spelled out by rule, abbot and community. The monastic profession is a way of life which involves conversation, communication, between the monk and God, the monk and the abbot, the monk and other monks, the monk and the surrounding world, a conversation that is prayer or prayerful.

Conversion in the Bible

Although the Rule of Benedict does not use the word "conversion," the idea was prominent in ancient monasticism, which saw monastic profession as "a second baptism" and a sharing in the dying and rising of Christ. " Personal conversion is at the heart of every vocation, particularly the monastic calling, which is a specific form of putting of the "old man," and being clothed with Christ."¹²

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the word for conversion was "shub," which means "to turn," and could be used in the sense of "turning one's life around" (e.g., Is 6.10). The same verb also can mean "turning again" or "returning," "reversal" (Ps 51.13; Is 55.7). God (re)turns toward his people with a new attitude when they turn to him (Ps 85.1-3; Deut 13.17; Hos 11). The word "shub" is not used frequently, but the prophets speak often of the need for a change of heart, a conversion (Is 44.21b-22; 45.22;). The heart of conversion is to turn away from sin and turn toward God.

In the New Testament the word "conversion" (epistrophe) appears only in Acts 15.3, but more frequent is the word "change of heart/mind" (metanoia). The Kingdom of God, announced and inaugurated by and in Jesus, requires a radical conversion. The initial proclamation of John the Baptist and Jesus calls for a change of heart (Mk 1.8, 15 and parallels), a concept which is very akin to repentance. The apostles' preaching also called for such a change of heart (Acts 2.38-39), and the Acts are full of stories of conversion (2.5-47 [crowds at Pentecost]. 8.26-39 [Ethiopian eunuch], 9.1-22 [Paul], 16.27-34 [jailor at Philippi]. Those who convert hear the word, are open and accept it, their change of heart is expressed in ritual and in their transformed lives. Conversion is, in fact, a lifelong process by which one is transformed into the image of God (2 Cor 3.18).

Conversion and Conversation

Thomas Merton playfully entitled the edited version of some of his journals *A Vow of Conversation*. One cannot convert to God or live in harmony with a monastic community without conversation. Moreover, today theologians are grappling with the differences and connections between conversion and conversation. Some Muslim societies regard conversion as a capital crime; some states in India are passing anti-conversion laws; the Russian Orthodox Church accuses Catholics of "proselytism," and Catholic and Jewish scholars are discussing the propriety

of the conversion of Jews to Christianity. Yet Jesus launched a missionary endeavor that aimed at preaching the gospel to the whole world and calling everyone to baptism.

There are many reasons for this distrust of "conversion." Some people think religious conviction makes no sense. Others think that all religious convictions are equal. Some committed Christians think that in the present world situation, it is better to go easy on efforts at conversion, or that the church should work at evangelizing and converting its own members. The word "conversion" also arouses suspicion because of specific forms of evangelism: e.g., walking the sawdust trail at a tent meeting or aggressive door-to-door proselytism.

To this one could reply that conversion at its most fundamental level concerns one's orientation toward God. One discovers that one is loved and called by God and reorients one's life in response. Often this happens in relation to a specific community or leads one to a specific community. One becomes aware that the same Spirit that led one to Jesus and the Father is at work in that community. Conversion thus has many levels and forms, from a sudden change of heart in one's relation to God, to joining a specific Christian community, to trying over a lifetime to continually align one's heart and life with the Gospel.

However, conversion is not simply something the Spirit effects in the individual's heart; it is also the goal of evangelization. Evangelization does not aim first of all at marketing membership in the church; it aims at proclaiming the gospel in word and deed to members of the church as well as to those outside the church. To the latter it is an invitation to listen to the gospel and to the Spirit who speaks in their hearts. If the Spirit moves them to conversion to the church, they are welcomed with rejoicing. What seems to distinguish evangelization from proselytism (both in regard to those in the church and those outside) is the absence of coercion.

Conversation, dialogue, need not aim at conversion; it may aim at mutual understanding. As such it leads to conversion of understanding, but not\96except incidentally and rarely\96to change of faith or church. Reuel Howe defined such conversation or dialogue as

that address and response between persons in which there is a flow of meaning between them in spite of all the obstacles that normally would block that relationship. It is that interaction between persons in which one of them seeks to give himself as he is to the other, and seeks also to know the other as the other is.¹³

Such dialogue creates a positive atmosphere, dispels ignorance and clarifies faith, leads to self-understanding, establishes relationships, and opens doors.¹⁴ It is made possible by the Spirit who is at work not just in the church but also in the others with whom the church dialogues.

Conversation, by helping us identify and overcome distorted habits of thought, feeling and speech, invites both parties to personal conversion, intellectually, morally and religiously. Bernard Lonergan, who thought deeply about personal conversion, formulated four rules which come into play in conversion: "Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and if necessary change."¹⁵

Conversatio Morum in the 21st Century

Benedictine conversatio, embracing the monastic life and values inculcated by the Rule, also incorporates turning; a constant turning away from, and toward. Esther de Waal beautifully expresses this need:

"to respond totally and integrally to the word of Christ sent to all of us: "Come, follow me!" " the vow of conversatio is a recognition of God's unpredictability, which confronts our own love of coziness or safety" Rather we must expect to see our chosen idols successively broken. It means a constant letting go. " Conversatio is simply commitment to facing up to the demands of growth and change.¹⁶

de Waal also addresses how our unwillingness to let go, and to resist the need for surrendering to the pattern of the Rule (which will, if we allow, transform us) is actually a definition of pride, and shows St. Benedict's easy identification of human weakness:

pride is the desire to control; to control my day, my future, the other people in my life, to make sure that world is put together the way I want it. It is to deny the control of God, perhaps even to take it from him. From this St. Benedict goes on to attack addictions, which is of course letting things control me rather than my controlling them.¹⁷

By fully embracing our promise of conversatio morum, we begin growing to spiritual, psychological and emotional maturity:

Maturing comes only by confronting what has to be confronted within ourselves. This is where the vows relate, and illuminate each other. " Conversatio, openness, means that I must be ready to pick myself up, and start all over again in a pattern of growth which will not end until the day of my final dying. " So it important to see that seeking God in fact means that we give him the opportunity of finding us.¹⁸

The profession promise of conversatio morum opens us to truly living the way of the monastic, to taking our place among our brethren in turning the wheel of prayer and work, or joining the flight patterns of a specific flock, and surrendering our own will. It means training our spiritual muscles to instantly respond to the slightest changes in the Leader's flight plan, to wheel and soar in perfect synchronization with our community. Naturally, it also entails an intimacy of conversation and trust in the relationships and behaviors of our community of monastics and fellow Oblates. It means constantly surrendering to the need to change, when the Spirit prompts it.