

There is a Conversion to the Church

While the primary conversion is to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, there is a related conversion to the Church and to life within the Church. In fact, the conversion to Jesus Christ remains incomplete and partial until there is a conversion to the Church and the living of the Christian life from within the Church.

We live in a very individualistic age. Most people believe that you don't have to be a member of the Church to be a good Christian, and that you should decide on your own beliefs independently of the Church. People have a restricted view of the Church and a lack of awareness of the extent to which individuals and their beliefs are bound up in, and shaped by, a larger context.

For the Episcopalian, three aspects of conversion to the Church are conversion to the Body, to the Christian Life, and to the Anglican tradition.

a. To the Body. This is acceptance of the corporate dimension of faith -of the fact that we are bound up with each other in Christ. We acknowledge the reality of creation: we live from each other, no matter what; we can choose to live with and/or each other.

This membership in the Church goes beyond institutional membership. It is membership in the Body of Christ. It is organic, as the arm is a member of the body, or the branch a member of the vine. It is quite different from being a member of a club.

b. To the Christian Life. Christian conversion is in one sense an unfolding into depth, height and breadth. People may initially relate themselves to the Church because of a lovely building, a sentimental feeling, an intellectual belief, a parish program of music or social outreach, or the warmth and friendliness of the priest and congregation. God will use any such starting point for the journey. But it is just a starting point. The end is maturity and holiness.

The Christian life is a life of transformation. Human lives are being recreated in the divine image. God is calling men and women to true humanity as we know it in the person of Jesus Christ.

This life is a call to respect human dignity even when you can't see much dignity, to look for the image of God in men and women, and to honor it. It is a life of striving for justice and peace, even when you can't see the possibility; of loving even when you don't feel like it. There is a cost, a cross; you must lose life to have it. It is a movement from a faith which leaves Christ at the edges of life, to life with Christ at the center.

c. To the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Tradition. The Christian life is lived within a particular context. It is always lived as part of a particular tradition. We are not inviting people into an abstraction, but into a real, historically shaped expression of faith. In calling men and women to faith the parish needs to present this tradition's experience of the Christian life clearly and directly. Our uniqueness is part of what we offer. We are an expression of the Catholic Church that has its own tone and climate.

To enter into this tradition is to be called beyond understandings of the faith with forms of authority that require Biblical or ecclesial literalism, a narrow, culturally limited moralism, or some specific type of emotional experience. It is to participate in a journey of faith that takes the historic faith seriously; that believes all truth is of God; that desires the mature, informed participation of its people; and that strives to speak to the current experience of the world.

Conversion to the Church requires a constant proclamation of the wholeness of the Christian Life. Some approaches to evangelization underplay one or more aspects of the Christian life in the hope that people will grow into these aspects as time passes. It is true that people will begin the adventure in limited ways and that the process is usually one of gradual growth. However, it is important that we present the nature of this Church honestly and adequately. We need to say it. It may not be fully heard at the time, but our statements may provide the basis for future growth. They will sound familiar when the person is ready to receive and act on the claim.