
✠ Contra Mundum ✠

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The Congregation of St. Athanasius

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THE VALUE OF CONVERSION STORIES

By Peter Kreeft

THERE are thousands of conversion stories. How is mine different? How might you profit from hearing mine? How is mine different?

Of course every story is different because every person is different. But how is mine different?

For one thing, I am a philosopher: a fairly unusual occupation. What profit might you get from listening to a philosopher?

Philosophers look for general principles rather than particular facts. So my talk will be unique by not focusing, primarily on what is unique and particular to my story but also on what is universal. I will first reflect on some general principles of conversion stories, before I tell my own unique story.

All conversion stories are different and all are the same. They are different in their beginnings and the same in their endings. There are many places to begin from, but all paths lead to Rome. (Some of us are blessed enough to get there in *this* life.)

NOVEMBER
1st ALL SAINTS



ALL SAINTS' DAY

Tuesday, November 1, 2005

Procession, Solemn Mass & Sermon

7:30pm

Convent Chapel

Holy Day of Obligation

All *honest* conversion stories are journeys from falsehoods to truth, or from partial truths to the fullness of truth. This is the reason why conversion stories begin in many different places and end in the same place: because truth is one and error many. As Chesterton says, there is only one angle to stand upright but many angles to fall.

There is only one honest reason to become a Catholic: because it is true. No matter how good, beautiful,

loving, peaceful, consoling, joyful, or pastoral a church may be, no honest person can enter it unless he is convinced that its good is the true good, its beauty the true beauty, its love true love, its peace true peace, its consolation true consolation, its joy true joy, and its pasturing true pasturing be the true pastors. Truth trumps everything.

Since we all have arrived at one and the same place, and since we have arrived here by such a variety

of paths, and since all these paths are paths from error to truth, or from less truth to more truth, and since we

*“There is only one honest reason to become a Catholic: **because it is true.**”*

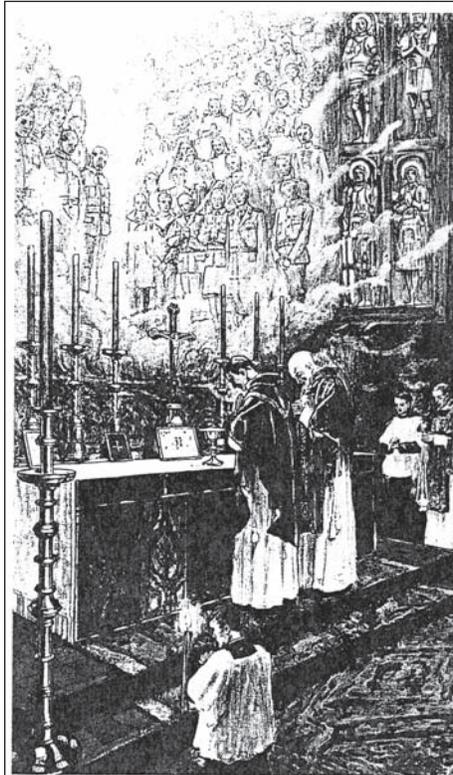
all seek truth first if we are honest, therefore the question arises: Of what possible use is a conference like this, in which we share our different conversion stories? Of what use could my story be to you, who already have come to know the same single Catholic truth I have come to know? The only part of my path you do not know is the errors, not the truths. Why listen to error stories?

This is not just a clever logical puzzle but a real question that honesty demands we ask. Is this conference really only gussied-up gossip? Why wallow in remembrance of darkness when we have emerged into the light?

I have to answer this question in order to know what would be valuable to you in my story. I must first find the universal principle about the value of conversion stories in general before I can judge what is of value in my story in particular.

A universal principle is best seen in a classic instance of it.

Next to the story of the conversion of St. Paul, in Acts 9, the most famous and most important conversion story in history is probably St. Augustine’s. Next to the Bible, Augustine’s *Confessions* was the most popular book in the world for over 1000 years. It is the book that would still win first place if a contest were held among all the Christians who have ever lived, asking which book they would choose to take with



ALL SOULS' DAY

Wednesday, November 2, 2005

Solemn Requiem Mass

7:30pm

Chapel of St. Theresa of Ávila
Church

them to a desert island for the rest of their lives if they could choose only one in addition to the Bible. (When Pascal knew he was dying, he gave away all his books except the Bible and the *Confessions*. That explains much of the power of his *Pensees*.)

The whole history of the world would have been more radically different, and more individual lives would have been more radically different, and *your* life would have been more radically different, if Augustine’s conversion story had not happened, than any other since St. Paul’s.

So let us take it as our paradigm case to find out what value conversion stories have. Why did August-

ine write the *Confessions*?

Twice in the course of his narrative, he stops to consider that question: what value is there to others in his telling his story to the rest of mankind, or ‘that small portion of mankind that may chance to read this book,’ as he modestly says? And his answer is: “So that they may know out of what depths we cry to Thee.” Confessing both darkness and light, confessing the emergence from darkness into light, is a way of praising divine grace, and is a rehearsal for what we will do forever without boredom in Heaven. The *Confessions* begins, in its very first sentence, and ends, in its very last sentence, with praise: like human life itself, like the universe itself. Here is one principle of conversion stories: they should be forms of praise, not complaint or bragging, and they should be theocentric, not anthropocentric—as the universe is, and as human life should be.

Augustine’s question (“Why am I writing this book?”) is an utterly honest question (one among hundreds of questions; I know of no book with more interrogative sentences than the *Confessions*), and an utterly honest answer to the question. For the whole of the *Confessions* is ablaze with the burning honesty that comes from its being written in the presence of God. It is addressed not to man but to God, like Job’s speeches, rather than being merely ABOUT God, like Job’s three friends’ speeches. It is not just theology but prayer, or theology as prayer.

And here is a second principle for conversion stories: they should be prayers, they are addressed to God, they are confessions of truth in the presence of Absolute Truth.

Other men are allowed to overhear. They are the eavesdroppers, the third party. God is the first. The convert is the second.

And why does Augustine let us eavesdrop? To preach the Gospel of divine grace to us. And here is a third principle: conversion stories should be a form of evangelism. That is their genus, their frame. They are personal, not only in their author but also in their audience. Like the Bible, they are not junk mail or spam. They are arrows shot at hearts,

And here is a fourth principle: the eavesdroppers are allowed to overhear only if they qualify. Not everyone qualifies. What qualifies is an alignment—not yet of head but of heart. Not yet of head because new truth is about to enter the head of the one who is being evangelized, so the two heads, the head of the convert and the head of the prospective convert, the reader, begin in a state of nonalignment. But the hearts must be aligned to begin with, at least in a fundamental honesty. The recipient's heart must beat for truth, like the speaker's heart. Otherwise, says Augustine, readers will certainly misunderstand, for “they do not have their ear to my heart, where I am what I am.”

Jesus used exactly the same hermeneutical criterion for understanding scripture in John 7:17 when He told inquirers who asked how they could understand His teaching, “If your will were to do the will of My Father, you would understand My teaching, for it comes from

“... in this world, God uses our own darkness and even our own sins to liberate us from darkness and sin.”

Him.” That is the most important sentence ever uttered about how to interpret the Bible.

This helps us to answer the question why is it good for us to know “out of what depths we cry to Thee,” why it is profitable to study the different roads by which God's grace draws us home: because it is important for us not just to understand but also to stand under, to stand under the authority of, to be in the real presence of, to appreciate with both head and heart, to be totally tutored by, God's grace—to do so with our whole being, especially that central point of our being that scripture calls the “heart,” which means not the feelings but the mysterious non-objectifiable subject or “I” or image of God the “I AM.” With this “heart” we understand God and ourselves, the only two realities we will never be able to escape, to all eternity.

So this gives us a fifth principle of conversion stories: they are valuable not just for knowing God and grace but also for knowing ourselves. For to know ourselves we must know what we most ignore in ourselves, namely our errors, of both mind and will, since these two are so closely intertwined: the mind's ignorance often comes from the will's ignoring.

So the bottom line is that we are all here to sing variations on “*Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound That Saved a Wretch Like Me. I Once Was Lost But Now I'm Found, Was Blind But Now I See.*”

Our blindnesses, consequences of sin, are inevitable throughout this second act of humanity's three-stage drama, between the end of Act One in the Garden of Eden and the begin-

ning of Act Three in Paradise. During this stage, i.e. in this world, God uses our own darkness and even our own sins to liberate us from darkness and sin. That sounds like an unintelligible contradiction, but it is neither. For in this present state we appreciate everything best by contrast: life by death, peace by war, riches by poverty, health by disease, pleasure by pain, freedom by slavery, salvation by sin, truth by error, orthodoxy by heresy. (That will no longer be so in Heaven, of course.) That's one reason why God allows us to err: for us to appreciate truth. That's why converts usually appreciate their faith more than “cradle Catholics.”

Thus we have a sixth principle of conversion stories: they are useful for appreciating Catholic truth by means of contrasting errors.

The Church is a ravishingly beautiful woman at a very large party. All she has to do to get the men at the party to fall in love with her is to take off her makeup and let her inner beauty shine forth.

And that is not the task primarily of bishops or priests or administrators but of us in the pews. They are just the oil; we are the motor. How many converts the Church has, how much of the world she saves, is up to you and me. And what must we do? Simply what St. Francis said: “Preach the Gospel. Use words if necessary.”

¶ Peter Kreeft is Professor of Philosophy in Boston College and a well-known author. This talk was given at an annual “Path to Rome” conference organized by Miles Jesu. The article is used with permission. Dr Kreeft frequently assists at Mass in the Anglican use in Boston.

AFFIRMING CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

A MARRIAGE petition drive is being conducted this fall with the permission of the Massachusetts Bishops' Council. Its purpose is to gather signatures for a petition to put a referendum to the people of Massachusetts affirming heterosexual marriage. Eva Murphy is helping to gather petitions, which must be individually signed.

In June 2004, our late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II told the bishops that failure to proclaim the truth about marriage and the family is a grave omission. Regarding marriage, he told the bishops that today "we witness a current, very widespread in some parts, which tends to weaken its true nature."

"It is necessary to continue to proclaim with firmness, as a real service to society, the truth on marriage and the family established by God. To fail to do so would be a grave pastoral omission that would lead believers to error, as well as those who have the grave responsibility to make decisions on the common good of the nation. This truth is valid not only for Catholics, but for all men and women without distinction, as marriage and the family constitute an irreplaceable good of society, which cannot remain indifferent in face of its degradation or loss of identity."

FROM THE WRITINGS OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

MY whole intellectual formation had been shaped by Scripture and the Fathers and profoundly his-



SOLEMNITY OF
CHRIST THE KING
Sunday, November 20, 2005
Solemn Mass & Sermon
10:30am
Convent Chapel
Solemn Evensong
& Benediction
5:00pm
Chapel of St. Theresa of Ávila
Church

torical thinking. The disputes were more and more portrayed according to the party model of modern parliamentarianism. When information was presented in this way, the person receiving it saw himself compelled to take sides with one of the parties. But the destruction of theology that was now occurring (through its politicization as conceived by Marxist messianism) was incomparably more radical precisely because it took Biblical hope as its basis but invested it by keeping the religious ardor but eliminating God and replacing Him with the political

activity of man. Hope remains, but the party takes the place of God. It becomes an unrelenting challenge when the ideology is presented in the name of the Faith and the Church is used as its instrument in order not to jeopardize the instruments that were to serve their own private ends: all of this could and should not be made to look harmless or regarded as just another quarrel.

Milestones

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica November 9th

TODAY is the anniversary of the dedication of a special church. And so the gospel account of Christ cleansing the temple is an appropriate reading.

There is a famous sermon by St. Caesarius of Arles which was apparently preached in the Lateran Basilica on this feast day, and in which the archbishop connected the church's beauty with that of a faithful christian soul.

"If we wish to observe the anniversary of a church building, then let us not destroy the living temple of God in ourselves. We must prepare our hearts to be as beautiful as we expect this church to be."

Such an argument speaks to you and me, for we also enjoy the surroundings of a beautiful church. It is made and kept that way for the glory of God and to inspire us to remain constant in the way of christian discipleship.

Saint Caesarius was a distinguished guest preacher in the 6th century when he asked his congrega-

tion “do you wish to find this basilica immaculately clean? Then do not soil your soul with the filth of sin. Do you wish this basilica to be full of light? God too wishes that your soul be not in darkness but that the light of good works shine in us.”

Today we honor the anniversary of a church building in a far away place. There are some of us here who have been fortunate enough to have visited and prayed in the Lateran Basilica, which is the Cathedral for the City of Rome. Remember that the English word CHURCH comes from the German KIRCHE or kirk, and it means “what belongs to God.” Churches are dedicated; souls are baptized. And we all belong to God, Who promises, “I shall live in them, and I shall walk the corridors of their hearts.”

¶ *A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Mass in St. Theresa of Ávila Parish on November 9, 2001*

ANGELS

“But for our body one whole realm of God’s glory — all that we receive through the senses — would go unpraised. For the beasts can’t appreciate it and the angels are, I suppose, pure intelligences. They understand colours and tastes better than our greatest scientists; but have they retinas or palates? I fancy the ‘beauties of nature’ are a secret God has shared with us alone. That may be one of the reasons why we were made — and why the resurrection of the body is an important doctrine.”

C. S. LEWIS
Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer

SAINT OF THE MONTH



St. Elizabeth of Hungary
(1207-1231)

NOVEMBER 17th is the anniversary of the death of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, one of many religious persons of the Franciscan tradition remembered by the Roman Catholic Church. She is best remembered for her care of the sick and the poor.

She was born in Saros Patak (Hungary) to King Andrew II of Hungary and Gertrude of Andechs-Meran. Betrothed at a young age to Prince Louis IV, son of Herman I, Landgrave of Thuringia (Germany), she was tutored at court at Wartburg castle. They were married when she was 14 and he, 21, and it was known to have been a happy one. Three children were born to them.

Her husband set out to join a Crusade under Emperor Frederick

II to the Holy Land and died in 1227 on the journey.

Franciscans had come to Thuringia in 1221, and she sought spiritual direction from them. Among royalty at court she was sometimes ridiculed for her faith and almsgiving. She was known to have given away many of her possessions. After her husband’s death she removed to Marburg with her children. In 1228 she joined the Third Order of Franciscans and established a hospital in honor of St. Francis.

She is often depicted wearing or carrying her crown. One of the colorful legends around her involved the miraculous transformation of loaves of bread that she was going to deliver to the poor. When asked what she was carrying, she opened her cloak to reveal roses.

She died of broken health in 1231 and canonized four years later by Pope Gregory IX. Her remains were interred in the church of St. Elizabeth in Marburg (Germany) in 1236.

THE BRITISH MARTYRS

OVER the years 200 men and women have been beatified for their heroic witness to the Catholic Faith in the British Isles during and after the Protestant Reformation. Here we continue brief mention of some of these individual martyrs.

BLESSED PETER WRIGHT

Priest, Religious, and Martyr
(c. 1603-1651)

In his teenage years, Peter Wright, of Slipton, England, strayed from the



THANKSGIVING DAY

Thursday, November 24, 2005

Solemn Mass & Sermon

10:30am

Catholic faith, but soon repented of his lapse. Journeying to the continent, he entered the Jesuit Order in Watten, Belgium. Devoting his energies to his spiritual life, he strove to overcome his tendency to irritability. He also catechized children. Following his ordination, Father Wright served as a chaplain to the many Catholic soldiers in the English army of King Charles I fighting in the Low Countries. After returning to England, he was captured by the Parliamentary forces that had revolted against Charles I. Sentenced to death in London for his priesthood, Father Wright managed to celebrate a Mass in his cell on the morning of his execution. As he was taken up Oxford Street to the scaffold of Tyburn, many Catholics stood at their windows or on their balconies to receive his blessing. At the scaffold, he told the bystanders that he was being put to death “for propagating the Catholic faith, which is spread through the whole world, taught through all ages from Christ’s time, and will be taught for all ages to come.”

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BLESSED RICHARD THIRKELD *Priest and Martyr († 1583)*

Following his ordination to the priesthood in Rheims, France, Father Richard Thirkeld told another ordained with him, “God alone knows how great a gift this is that has been conferred upon us this day!” The Mass was to become Father Thirkeld’s favorite subject of meditation. After returning to his native England, he was arrested while visiting an imprisoned Catholic layman. At his own trial, the priest boldly wore the cassock and biretta of his state of life. He was sentenced to death for having brought several Englishmen back into the Catholic Church. Before going to his execution, Father Thirkeld reconciled to God several convicted felons imprisoned with him.

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SHORT NOTES

Contributions for hurricane relief are still being made via the Congregation of St. Athanasius. Or if you prefer, you may call Catholic

Charities USA at 1-800-919-9338, or mail your contribution directly to CCUSA, 2005 Hurricane Fund, P.O. Box 25168, Alexandria, VA 22313-9788.

Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV, who was our preacher at Evensong on Corpus Christi this year, has recently had a book published. It is *The Discernment of Spirits*, an Ignatian Guide for every day living. Fr. Gallagher, a member of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, has been directing retreats worldwide for over 25 years. The book is published by Crossroads.

Congratulations to Monica Whitlock who received First Communion at Sunday Mass on October 9th. A reception following Mass was held in her honor. Monica is the daughter of Ken and Barbara Whitlock. The family lives in Concord.

We are always pleased when our friend Fr. James O’Driscoll is able to join us for a service. He served at Deacon of the Mass on Saint Michael’s Day, which is the anniversary of the Anglican Use in Boston. Fr O’Driscoll is parochial vicar of St. Clement’s Church, Somerville. After the anniversary Mass, Peggy Evers hosted a reception in the St. Theresa Church pavilion.

An Advent reader, published by *Magnificat* magazine will be available for purchase at the chapel doors in mid-November. The 93 page booklet is titled “He Comes! The King of Glory,” and a donation of \$3.00 is requested.

Fr. & Mrs. Bradford will move into a new rectory in mid-November. The house, which was purchased by the Archdiocese of Boston, is in West Roxbury. As we go to press the



rectory telephone number after mid-November may be different. In any event, you may reach Fr. Bradford at St. Theresa of Avila Church, 617-325-1300.

Confirmation classes for adults begin Thursday, November 17th in the St. Theresa Rectory at 7:00pm. Classes serve as preparation for reception and/or confirmation.

EVERY MEMBER CANVASS

Our parish canvass for financial support of the Anglican Use in Boston is now underway for our mission and program next year. Pledge cards have been sent to members of the congregation, and to those who receive our monthly parish paper. Last year we received over \$1600 from our readers, for which we are grateful. We know many people welcome our monthly paper and are pleased to be able to send it to you. We look forward to your continued support. Many thanks.



The Congregation of Saint Athanasius,

The Revd. Richard Sterling Bradford,
Chaplain

Sunday Mass 10:30am
St. Theresa Convent Chapel
10 St. Theresa Ave.
West Roxbury, Mass.



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

November 27, 2005

Litany in Procession
Solemn Mass & Sermon
Begin Year B Lectionary
Readings

A PROCESSION WITH
CAROLS FOR ADVENT
Wednesday, November 30,
2005

7:30pm
Chapel of St. Theresa of Ávila
Church

Fellowship and Coffee in
the Solarium after Mass
Adult Class two Sundays a
month

Rectory: 192 Foster Street,
Brighton, MA 02135-4620
Tel/Fax: (617) 787-0553
<http://www.locutor.net>

St. Theresa Church and Convent Chapel,
West Roxbury, MA 02132 Pine Lodge
Road (off St.. Theresa Avenue)

Park either in the church parking lot or on Pine
Lodge Road. The side door of the convent is open
during the time of our services.

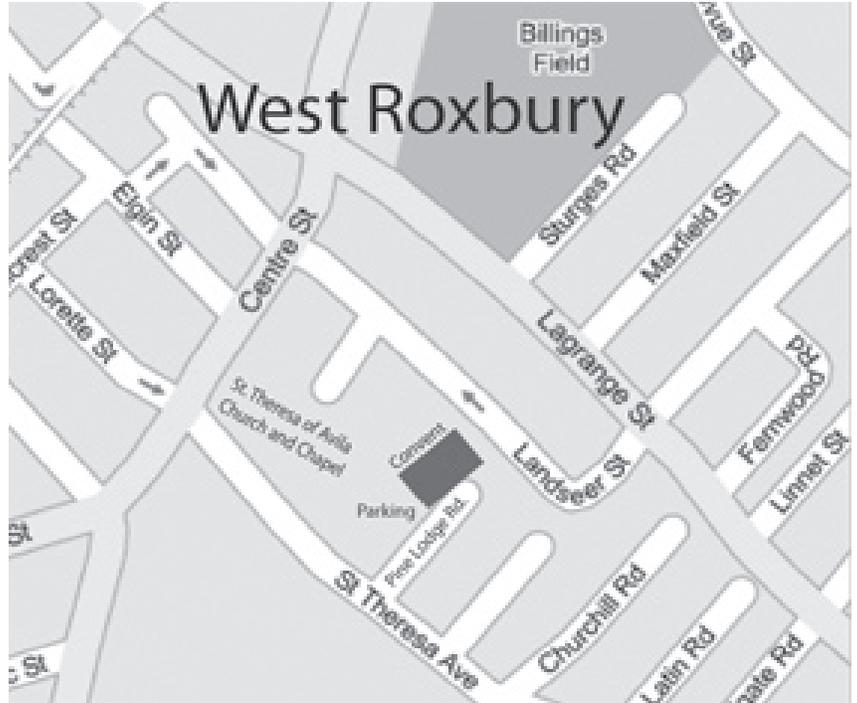
Directions by Car: From the North: Route 128 to
Route 109, which becomes Spring Street in West
Roxbury. Spring Street ends at a traffic light at
Centre Street in sight of the church. At this light
bear left onto Centre St.. and immediately turn right
at the next light onto St.. Theresa Ave.

From the South: Route 1 north through Dedham
to Spring Street. Turn right onto Spring Street then
follow the directions above.

From Dorchester and Mattapan: Cummins High-
way to Belgrade Avenue to Centre Street left on St..
Theresa Ave.

From Boston: VFW Parkway to LaGrange Street.
Turn left onto LaGrange Street, crossing Centre
Street and turn right onto Landseer Street. Turn left
into the church parking lot.

Directions by Public Transportation: Orange line
to Forest Hills terminal. Bus to West Roxbury. #35
bus to Dedham Mall. #36, #37, and #38 also stop at St..
Theresa’s. Commuter train to West Roxbury Station is a short walk to St..
Theresa’s. Departs from South Station, but no Sunday service is available.



Contra Mundum
The Congregation of St. Athanasius
10 St. Theresa Avenue
West Roxbury, MA 02132

