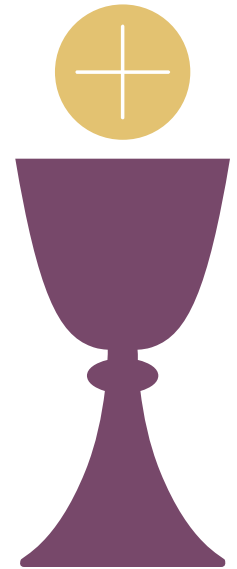


Called to Conversion— Through the Word



"Then they said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?'" (Luke 24:32).

With these words, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus share their joy and excitement. The Risen Jesus was in their midst! They had walked with him and shared their perplexities and sadness with him. But they did not perceive the truth of who he was, until he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. Then, their hearts burning with what this mysterious stranger had revealed to them, they did see. They recognized him in the breaking of the bread. They announced to others that Jesus is risen. They became witnesses, set on fire by what they had seen and heard.

In this powerful story from the Gospel according to Luke, we see the pattern that has been lived out in the Eucharist, from the earliest times. Hearing the Word is important. And it is no passive, ho-hum business. It sets our hearts on fire. The Word holds the answers to our most passionate and pressing questions. It provides direction for us when we are lost. It feeds us when we are close to starving. It brings news of such surpassing importance that our hearts burn within us as we listen, and our lives are forever changed.

A LIFE-CHANGING WORD

There are numerous stories of holy men and women whose lives were changed by encountering God's Word. The Word changed the life of Lydia, the first European convert to

Christianity, who listened to Paul and Barnabas preaching by the banks of the river in Philippi (Acts 16:11–15). She was baptized with her whole household, and thereafter supported the spread of the Gospel. It changed the life of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) in North Africa, who at a crucial moment in his conversion heard a child's voice saying *Tolle, lege* ("Take, read"). He took up the Bible and read a passage from the Letter to the Romans that *spoke directly to him*, and showed him the way out of his despair. It changed the life of Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680) in North America, who heard the Jesuit missionaries preaching in her Mohawk village and desired to become a Christian, going against the grain of her family but opening the way to a devout and joyful life. It changed the life of Maximilian Kolbe (1894–1941) in Poland, who volunteered to die in place of a fellow prisoner who had been condemned in a concentration camp. He helped his fellow prisoners prepare for death by meditating on Christ's Passion and reading the psalms.

The Word of God is powerful. By his Word, the heavens and earth were made. The sea was split in two in the Exodus, by the power of God's Word. The prophets, announcing God's Word, kept the faith of the people alive during national disaster and exile. God's Word has the power to do God's will. It is no wonder, then, that the Word today continues to open hearts and bring forth new life.

ONGOING CONVERSION

It would be a mistake to look for the power of God's Word only in dramatic changes and extraordinary circumstances, however. Its power to change us is not discovered only in the movement from unbelief to belief or in acts of heroic virtue, but also in the day-to-day movements of the heart that we call "ongoing conversion." Most people experience the transforming power of God's Word as a gradual process. Our conversion to Christ and his gospel way of life takes place little by little, over time.

Each Sunday, if we listen to the Word with a receptive heart, it subtly affects us. It stretches our imagination, challenges us, and calls us to be true to our best selves. The Word invites us, bit by bit, to enter into the world of God, and to see things as God sees them. The reign of God, like a seed that grows in secret, takes hold in the good soil of our life and is watered by the Scriptures we hear at Mass.

Our ongoing conversion may include a gradual awakening to the world's goodness, our own giftedness, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our midst. It may mean loosening the bonds of sin and gaining freedom to act in new ways by God's grace. It may be experienced in a growing love for the Church, a passion for justice, and a sense of deep inner peace. Are these movements "conversions"? They do not change us abruptly. But they do signal the turning of our heart to God ever more completely.

The Shaker song "Simple Gifts" sums it up well: "When true simplicity is gained, to bow and bend we shan't be ashamed; to turn, turn, will be our delight, 'til by turning, turning, we come round right."

WE RECOGNIZE HIM

Just as the disciples on the road to Emmaus knew the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread, so does our celebration of the Eucharist crown the experience of hearing the Word

at Mass. As we are touched and changed by the Word of God, the Eucharist itself becomes the confirmation of all that has taken place. Full participation in the Eucharist is our goal in this life as we are nourished on our pilgrimage to eternal life. We hasten on to the sharing of that meal with joy, as we realize—Jesus is with us at the table. He is alive. He is here.

REFLECT

What sort of conversion do I hope for this Lent? A conversion of mind, heart, action? Where in my own life do I sense a need for "more light" to break forth from God's Word?

ACT

Conversion in action means following through on our good intentions and inspirations, without hesitation or undue delay. Don't put off doing something good that you've thought of doing. Act now!

PRAY

Lord Jesus, you opened the minds of your disciples to understand their experience in light of the Scriptures. Help me to read "the signs of the times" in my own life. Holy Spirit, turn my life over to God more fully. Set my heart on fire with your holy Word!



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