

Divine Disruption, Happy Faults, and a Godly Grief

Sketch of a Phenomenology of Conversion

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The Judeo-Christian religious tradition is replete with calls to conversion and a return to God, though narratives of conversion are as diverse and disparate as the individuals themselves. This paper seeks to provide a phenomenological accounting of unifying structures underlying the experience of conversion and its effects upon one's lived experience, attitudes, perceptions, self-understanding, and experience of God and the world. Drawing primarily from the phenomenological works of Jean-Louis Chrétien and Jean-Yves Lacoste, and supplemented by the Christian theological and spiritual tradition, this paper argues that the life of conversion is marked by (1) the uncovering of an essential and originary vulnerability or fragility which must be embraced; (2) an acceptance of one's dependency before God; and (3) constitutes an ongoing project marked by repeated failures, continual recommitment, and constant recollection. Far from a singular point of initiation or a terminal point of Christian perfection, conversion emerges as an ongoing way of life that is characterized by ongoing vulnerability, dependency, gratitude, and yet also repeated failures and recommitment.

1. Introduction

On the road to Damascus, a prominent Pharisee was thrown to the ground in a sudden flash and, despite the blood of countless Christians on his hands, had an encounter that led him to embrace the very faith he had despised. After three days of sitting in a bedazzled blindness, he would subsequently dedicate – and ultimately give up – his life as witness to that faith, shedding his own blood alongside those whom he himself had martyred.

In the 4th century CE, a tearful mother in North Africa pled repeatedly with God for the sake of her wayward son – a young man who passed the time by stealing pears and philandering. Monica's tears did not go unheeded, nor her prayer unheard, as her son not only repents but goes on to become bishop, and one of the greatest Fathers of the Church.

Centuries later, an innocent young man from Savoie struggled with feelings of worthlessness, shame, and guilt. Even with neither a judge to condemn him nor mortal sins against his name, he nonetheless felt unlovable and abhorred in the eyes of God. Yet after years of agonizing, scrupulous struggle he would go on to become – in St. Ignatius' own

estimation – the greatest master of the *Spiritual Exercises* and tireless voice for reconciliation.¹

The Christian religious tradition abounds with disparate accounts of ‘conversion’ – exemplars of diverse backgrounds venerated as saints, a motley crew of characters documented across the scriptures and salvation history. Accounts range from Saul’s dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19) to more long-standing, painfully drawn-out struggles with scruples as for Ignatius of Loyola and Peter Faber. Some, such as Augustine of Hippo, recall the long road to overcoming apathy and resistance with the help of others, while for others the process appears actively pursued, as in the scriptural accounts of those desperately seeking the Christ so as to be liberated from sickness and sin, thus enabled to get up and “follow him along the way” (Mark 10:52). Indeed, the individuality of each Christian vocation yields so diverse a communion of saints that it is often joked that one can find a patron saint for just about anything, or to find personal resonances with at least one saint’s story, disparate and varied as they may be. What holds these experiences together as an experience of conversion, beyond an abstract notion of ‘faith’ or pointing to a watershed moment of change? Seemingly very little on the surface. One’s sins are not the others’, nor do their attitudes and desires even align. For some the path seems rather easy and welcome, perhaps long-desired – for others, a burden reluctantly endured, hesitantly undertaken, or an unwelcome disruption. Awareness of one’s own sinfulness ranges from the blissfully ignorant to the painfully hypersensitive, and even one’s own agency in this process varies significantly. Moreover, the temporal dimensions of conversion run the gamut, from the slow and arduous to faster than a blinding ray of light – not to mention that the process is rarely linear, marked by instances of regression and relapse into former ways of life.

Yet in this communion of the converted, certain commonalities or threads emerge that characterize a reshaped outlook on life, that recast one’s sinful history into a future, hope-filled destiny. I contend that three important features or structures come into relief when reading various calls to the life of conversion, namely: (1) the uncovering of an essential vulnerability or fragility which must be embraced rather than resisted; (2) an acceptance of one’s poverty and ongoing dependency upon the divine, ‘clinging to God in love’ rather than relying on one’s own self (Ps. 91:14); and (3) the converted life is an ongoing project, marked by a need for continual recollection and constantly reinterpreted in light of gratitude – even for past sins and present stumbling. Of critical importance, in no instance is the experience of conversion seen as a *fait accompli*. Conversion initiates the unfolding of an outlook, a change in lifestyle, and one with which the faithful Christian continues to grapple. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, for all the sincerity of more dramatic moments of conversion, even the most faithful of disciples will struggle and lapse out of the converted outlook. The *habitus* of having “put on the heart and mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:2) may not always be readily apparent, nor always be in the converted believer’s consciousness. Conversion ultimately entails an ongoing process, a journey in the life of faith marked by holy

¹ Luís Gonçalves de Câmara, *Memoriale* §226, in: *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola: The Memoriale of Luís Gonçalves da Câmara*, trans. by Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz, St. Louis 2004, 130.

and honest desires and yet also by repeated failures. Conversion thus marks an initial stage in the unfolding and development of the Christian vocation, requiring ongoing recollections and recommitments, rather than a terminal point of Christian perfection.

Talk of conversion most readily conjures up images of the wayward leaving behind a former way of life or of neophytes awakening for the first time to the life of faith, yet it cannot be reduced to a singular past moment that simply marks a major life change. The Judeo-Christian tradition employs the trope of conversion as a lifelong process applicable even for those *already* initiated, as a requisite part of the *ongoing* life of faith. Certainly, moments of initiation and liminal spaces exist (e. g., catechumenate, baptism, perhaps dramatic personal experiences with a sinful history or past traumas). The initial encounter and response are critical, to be sure, yet the experience of conversion is ongoing and leaves its imprint upon the lived experience, attitude, perceptions, self-understanding, and comportment of the converted moving forward.

Methodologically I draw primarily from the works of post-theological turn phenomenology and hermeneutics of religious experience, notably Jean-Louis Chrétien, Emmanuel Falque, Christina Gschwandtner, and Jean-Yves Lacoste. Scripture and the Christian tradition also factor prominently in these considerations, though I do not intend to offer a systematic account of conversion. My aim remains limited to a consideration of the outlook on life, the ongoing process, and the call to ongoing conversion as the Christian vocation, and to find certain threads or commonalities in those experiences. I also recognize that a good number of other considerations are worth investigation on the topic of conversion, though which extend beyond the scope of this short paper and wait for exploration at another time (such as the transformation of memory, the role of the will, the necessity for detachment and surrender, making recompense and amends, and even the role of joy).

Finally, a brief note on terminology and the 'liturgical': in keeping with the wider definition and use of this term in contemporary phenomenology, I do not employ the term 'liturgy' or the 'liturgical' in a strict, reductionist sense limited to the Divine Liturgy or the celebration of mass, sacraments, or religious rites. Liturgy includes yet also exceeds these practices, embracing one's being-before-God and capturing the experiences of prayer, sacrament, liturgy, and turning toward the divine or the Absolute. As Christina Gschwandtner helpfully notes regarding contemporary phenomenology of liturgy, "liturgy refers to our entire relation to God, including the spiritual life and prayer," or what Lacoste describes as "the resolute deliberate gesture made by those who ordain their being-in-the-world a being-before God," and yet that this is a choice to be made – neither a necessity nor a default mode of being.² Common human experiences and the persistent realities of atheism, agnosticism, and general religious apathy make this abundantly clear. Gschwandtner expounds that for Lacoste on the liturgical, "although we can all enter into this experience, we can also refuse it," making the choice rather to remain in the existence as "a Dasein in the world without God. We are not destined to choose either atheism or paganism or

² Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy*, New York 2013, 167. See also Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. by Mark Raftery-Skehan, New York 2004, 39.

faith.”³ And yet, the choice does open up a new horizon of experience, of encounter with the Absolute, and a deeper, richer dimension of human experience. For Lacoste, it is in liturgical experience that human beings “turn over their lives to God in order to receive God’s Word. What it is to be human, is now entirely in God’s hands.”⁴ Such shall be the operating understanding of the ‘liturgical’ in our turning over and opening toward God – a process in conversion that begins with a fragile and vulnerable heart, able to be moved and open to receive the word of God.

2. Vulnerability and Fragility – Humility and Obedience

“Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart [...] rend your hearts, not your garments!” declares the Prophet Joel, in one of the many oft-repeated calls to conversion (Joel 2:12 f.). This call opens the Ash Wednesday liturgy each year in the Latin-Rite Catholic tradition, a regular reminder of the need for ongoing conversion, of a return made possible only with an open and wounded heart. The scriptural narrative of God’s people and the wider story of salvation history are replete with such calls to conversion – repeated calls seeking ears to hear, invitations for the wayward to return, and even unexpected encounters that erupt and recast the life trajectory of the disciple (individually) and of the people of God (communally).

Yet while scripture and the tradition recount numerous instances of this call to conversion taking root and flourishing in the hearts of “those with ears to hear,” in the “good and fertile soil that produces much fruit” (Matt. 13:3–9), there nonetheless remain stony and obstinate hearts, closed off and resistant to the invitation. Deaf ears fail to recognize, or perhaps choose to ignore, the words of invitation spoken before them. Whether it be in the examples of the obstinate Pharisees throughout the Gospels or the condemnations levied by the prophets against the stone-hearted people of Israel, regular resistance, refusal, and isolation present constant obstacles to the call to conversion.

Ears open to hear, a heart open and exposed – these appear regularly as preconditions for the call to conversion to take root, and as a necessity in the ongoing life of such conversion. The scriptures frequently contrast this dynamic of, on the one hand, the ‘stony heart’ that is self-enclosed, isolated, turned in on itself, guarded and incapable of being moved with, on the other hand, the ‘fleshy heart,’ open and vulnerable, exposed and capable of being moved with compassion or touched by the divine. In the encounter of conversion, God promises to break the hearts of stone and replace them with fleshly, human hearts – where God can then write directly onto the soft and exposed heart rather than the stony and guarded parts (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10; Ezek. 36:26). Even the account of the Fall and humanity’s first dalliance with sin picks up on such themes – sin leads Adam and Eve into hiding, fleeing from God in their shame and attempting to cover over their (exposed) orig-

³ Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?* (see fn. 2), 167.

⁴ Joeri Schrijvers, “Jean-Yves Lacoste: A Phenomenology of Liturgy,” in: *Heythrop Journal* 46 (2005) 314–333, here 321.

inary vulnerability. Those who had once walked freely and openly with God now turn inward on themselves, hiding from God in shame and casting blame on one another (Gen. 3). Where sin abounds, isolation becomes the norm.

More recent work in phenomenology of religion, such as in the writings of Emmanuel Falque, reinterpret the Pauline anthropology and Saint Paul's exhortation to live out of the life of the 'spirit' rather than the 'flesh' in a similar manner – where the life of the 'spirit' comes to characterize a life open to God, while the life of flesh represents the more 'stony' life of self-enclosure, isolation, and self-absorption.⁵ In a distinct though commensurate way, other contemporary works on the phenomenology of liturgy and worship place great emphasis on such openness before God and before the community, emphasizing the essential roles of fragility and vulnerability, of weakness and even suffering, and an acceptance of human finitude.⁶ The exhortations of Pope Francis similarly make this point, contrasting obstruction and closing inward from a more vulnerable, yet blessed and authentic, disposition before God: pride and arrogance become a 'wall' that obstruct and prevent us from encounter with the divine gaze of mercy, whereas humility and vulnerability leave us open to the divine encounter – decentering and uncomfortable as it may be.⁷

An essential vulnerability and fragility thus emerge as constitutive of the converted experience – yet again, as noted above for Lacoste's sense of liturgical experience as being-before-God, this is not a default position nor something all will inevitably embrace. Such an essential vulnerability and fragility have always already been present, though denied, forgotten, covered over, or fled from. One can, indeed, live a life in such constant denial or blissful ignorance, failing ever to attain to a more originary level of fragility, vulnerability, and the unsettling delight of dependency before God. The life of conversion, however, relies on such openness, for God does not force against one's will. And such openness to encounter with God depends upon a heart turned outward rather than self-enclosed and isolated.

Liturgical experience and the divine encounter thus demand, and in some cases actually effect, a level of exposure and vulnerability. Lacoste calls our attention to exposure as a fundamental attitude or disposition before God in the liturgical encounter, and Gschwandtner presses this analysis further to consider exposure as a space of invitation – an invitation to offer our fragility and finitude in all humility before God.⁸ The opening of oneself and one's history, in particular a sinful history of struggle or shame, becomes a

⁵ As Falque notes of the 'glory' of the Resurrected body in the life of the spirit rather than the way of the flesh, the resurrection "only indicates a new relationship of the human body with the body of God [...] the features that constitute and characterize Pauline anthropology [...] are (a) the body (soma) as site of a relation with and openness to God, (b) the flesh (sarx) and the spirit (pneuma) as modalities of the body (soma), and (c) the distinction between the kinds of 'flesh' (sarx) according to the quality of their glory rather than according to their substance" (Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. by George Hughes, New York 2012, 55).

⁶ Christina M. Gschwandtner's *Welcoming Finitude: Toward a Phenomenology of Orthodox Liturgy*, New York 2019; and *Reading Religious Ritual with Ricoeur: Between Fragility and Hope*, Lanham, MD 2021, esp. 174–184, are two such examples.

⁷ Pope Francis, Papal address: "No Saint Without a Past, Nor Sinner Without a Future." (April 13, 2016), in: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160413_udienza-generale.html [17.06.2025]

⁸ Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude* (see fn. 6), 77–80; see also 95–100

consummate act of prayer in which such humility and vulnerability are realized, and the beginning of a converted life. If, as noted above, ‘where sin abounds, isolation becomes the norm’ from the human side of affairs, Saint Paul counters that from God’s side, “where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more” (Rom. 5:20). It is not the sin itself here that differs in the reception of divine grace, it is one’s openness rather to receive it.

Thus a world is opened: one that operates within and yet which also transcends the world we naturally inhabit. And while “liturgical space is opened for us and by us in a particular fashion,” it also invites us into its own world to transform our experience of self, world, and other.⁹ Lacoste casts liturgy as a space that opens onto a distinct and markedly different manner of being than that of our being in the world.¹⁰ Gschwandtner undertakes an analysis of specific liturgical actions, postures, spaces, and times. She considers how affect, posture, communal relation, and action all express varying degrees of vulnerability and exposure as fundamental to liturgy, a space where our “posture of self-sufficiency and self-absorption” are transformed “into one of humility and vulnerability.”¹¹ Though the self (or selves) may open and enact the liturgical space, the liturgical itself nonetheless effects a very real change on those selves – for those who may yet be open and receptive to it. Ultimately in both accounts, liturgical experience takes hold of us: rendering us open, exposed, and vulnerable in the encounter before God and with others in the faith community. At base, this ‘taking hold’ of us opens the space for a potential encounter (though, as shall be explored in the subsequent section, is no guarantee of control over the freedom of the divine and transcendent Absolute).

It is here, recognizing the essential rootedness of the call to conversion in fragility, vulnerability, and openness, that the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien likewise proves helpful to unpack further the experience of ‘conversion,’ elicited by encounter with the divine and which manifests in experiences of struggle, suffering, and a feeling-with God. For Chrétien, fragility and vulnerability are essential themes running explicitly through his wide-ranging works – weaving them across his more religious work on the phenomenology of prayer, of liturgy, and of encounter before God, as well as in his considerations of interiority, the call and the response, and silence and the voice. Chrétien’s prolific writings return regularly to these themes, yet he provides a convincing link between fragility and vulnerability of the human condition with ongoing struggle – even in shame and sorrow – which can open onto spaces of humility, obedience, and an ever-deepening relation to the divine.¹²

Chrétien’s account of prayer is startling in its embrace of vulnerability, mixing intimacy with violence and struggle, but it holds a consistent and even Christ-like logic to his explorations. Vulnerability dovetails with humility and obedience, culminating in a loving but

⁹ Ibid., 77 f.

¹⁰ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute* (see fn. 2), 37–44.

¹¹ Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude* (see fn. 6), 92.

¹² These themes recur frequently across Chrétien’s works, specifically drawing in this section from his writings in *Jean-Louis Chrétien*, *Fragilité*, Lonrai 2017; id., *Saint Augustin et les actes de parole*, Paris 2002; id., *Symbolique du corps: La tradition chrétienne du Cantique des Cantiques*, Paris 2005; and id., “The Wounded Word,” in: Jean-François Courtine (ed.), *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’: The French Debate*, trans. by Jeffrey L. Kosky and Thomas A. Carlson, New York 2000, 147–175.

oftentimes violent experience of kenosis. Prayer is, in its essence, an act of such self-disclosure made out of a space of vulnerability and an underlying, originary fragility; it bears suffering and struggles in the ordeal. Even our own crying out to God is somehow fragile and weak, an attempt at responding to a preexisting call that precedes and exceeds my abilities. He draws heavily from Augustine's sermons and soliloquys to demonstrate the fact of being found precisely in a space of vulnerability, articulating the experience of 'crying out to God' (in joy or in despair), as an act that has already preceded and touched me in the most interior and intimate of ways.¹³ This crying out appears as an 'irruption' of God within us, a cry which simultaneously includes struggle and soothing, nourishment and violence – albeit a loving struggle, a tender violence. This site of encounter in spaces of fragility and vulnerability can be contentious, spaces of great struggle, and yet also of deep and intimate encounter – the most vulnerable spaces becoming the very sites of blessing and grace.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Chrétien writes in a similar vein of spaces of struggle with God as the spaces of intimate encounter, blessing, and relation. In the life of the converted, such struggles open onto a space of gratitude and dependency on divine mercy, rather than a denial or repression of the past. Painful as they may be, the struggles can become sites of rejoicing and gratitude. Chrétien offers two prominent models as depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures: Jacob wrestling with the Angel (or God), as he expounds in *The Wounded Word*, and in the vulnerability and exposure of the body in the Song of Songs. Chrétien frequently refers to prayer disclosures and encounters with God using language of "struggle," a "passion," and an "ordeal" to be suffered which "shatters and reconfigures us" in the process.¹⁵ Sites of blessing are simultaneously the spaces of woundedness, where grace occurs in tandem with our brokenness and calls forth a new type of identity. Chrétien captures this strikingly in his meditation on Jacob wrestling the angel, in which the naked voice of the prayer addressed to God becomes the "prey" to the one addressed. The struggle with fragility and woundedness open the space for a passion with God – passionate desire, and passionate suffering.¹⁶

Such is, for the experience of repentance and conversion, the dynamic of blessing and grace: painful struggle which embraces and lives out of a fragile, vulnerable, and exposed personal history before God. Our voice in prayer is, as Chrétien argues, "exposed in all that it seeks to hide, excuse, justify, obtain."¹⁷ And yet this very space of struggle becomes a site of divine blessing, of ongoing relationship. For the seeming struggle and 'loving violence' of divine blessing – even in the depths of sorrow and struggle – necessarily implies relationship. Jacob struggles all through the night, and yet is never divorced from the divine embrace; Augustine recognizes in retrospect the providential care of God watching over

¹³ Cf. Chrétien, *Saint Augustin et les actes de parole* (see fn. 12), 164 f.: "Car un cri, c'est aussi ce qui traverse et franchit les espaces, et qui, même poussé de loin, vient nous atteindre et nous toucher au plus intime [...] le cri de Dieu vers les hommes et le cri des hommes en Dieu et vers Dieu s'entrelacent et se conjoignent dans le cri du corps du Christ."

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 163: "Ce cri forme comme l'irruption de Dieu en nous," un "cri savoureux, qui apaise et nourrit...la violence du cri forme donc une violence amoureuse, qui n'exclut pas la douceur."

¹⁵ *Id.*, "The Wounded Word" (see fn. 12), 156.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 175 f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

even his wayward youth; Paul finds at base in his weakness a heavenly treasure held in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7).

This space of vulnerability and fragility also leads Chrétien to link virtues of humility and an explicitly Christlike obedience – unto kenotic outpouring of self – with the exposure and vulnerability of prayer. He offers a comprehensive accounting of the symbolism of the body in the Song of Songs, and it is specifically in his writings about the appearance of the neck [*du cou*] that he finds a consummate expression of and intertwining of vulnerability, humility, servitude, and obedience.¹⁸ The neck stands as an exposed and vulnerable place of essential life for the body, carrying lifeblood to the head and brain. It also appears as the site upon which the yoke of servitude and slavery is laid, as well as the place where symbols of majesty and status adorn the bearer, a place where majesty and obedience are joined in the humility of servitude and obedience of the ‘kingship’ of Christ – a kingship marked by humble service and obedience even unto death.¹⁹

The vulnerability and fragility that are thus ‘opened’ to the Absolute (rather than ‘covered over’ or ‘denied’) are marked by humility – a humility that leads to a Christlike and kenotic obedience in Chrétien’s reading. Self-assertion or prideful self-concern can occlude the authentic liturgical experience into which it invites us by masking our fragility and vulnerability, as Christ himself contrasts in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican at prayer (Luke 18:9–14). Christ’s own ‘glorification’ and ‘exaltation’ are not in the traditional trappings of majesty, but in abasement and outpouring – not seeing equality with God as something to be grasped, but rather emptied himself (Phil. 2:2–5). For his ‘glorification’ he embraces the shame of the cross, bruised and abused, exposed in shameful humiliation, “marred [...] so far beyond human appearance” (Isa. 52:14). So, too, in liturgy we find a prohibition against self-aggrandizing display or exhibition: “be not like the hypocrites who seek recognition for their fasting and prayers in the streets!” (Matt. 6:5). Gschwandtner draws a helpful distinction, phenomenologically speaking, from acts of exposure that are “self-display or self-exhibition,” or even “self-assertion” to more of a stance of openness, humility, vulnerability, and even fragility. As she notes, the former merely “draws attention to the self, folds the other in on the self, instead of unfolding the self beyond itself.”²⁰ Liturgical encounters invite us into a space of authentic being, in which we embrace our finitude and fragility, admit our weaknesses, recognize our need for God and for grace, and pray for the healing which God so desperately desires to give us. Our finitude becomes an essential element of this exposition, as Gschwandtner notes:

“Liturgy inscribes humility on the body: the body is no longer proudly upright and self-sufficient, but bent before the other and before ‘God,’ both for healing of the self and care for the other [...]. Liturgy is hence not a denial or erasure (or overcoming or suspension) of finitude, as Lacoste would suggest. Nor is it simply an affirmation or embrace of finitude, as Falque

¹⁸ Id., *Symbolique du corps: La tradition chrétienne du Cantique des Cantiques* (see fn. 12), 125–141.

¹⁹ Ibid., 126 f.

²⁰ Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude* (see fn. 6), 97.

implies. Rather, it asks us in our very corporeality to make of our finitude an offering and to do so together, while acknowledging our fragility.”²¹

Weakness and frailty can thus provide potential places for encounter, a space for sustained, ongoing relationship. Gschwandtner and Chrétien take seriously the physical, bodily component of this enacted liturgical vulnerability – an exposure that is embodied physically so as to underscore and enact this fragile human reality before God, whether that be in the incarnate physicality of the voice, or in liturgical gestures such as bowing, kneeling, prostration, and anointing. In the experience and encounter with the Absolute, human beings always stand before the Absolute as a finite and feeble being – exposed, vulnerable, fragile – so as to be receptive. Such is an inescapable human reality, but one which we can often actively deny or simply fail to uncover. Yet it is also the way in which God chooses to come to us, for this very vulnerability and our exposure enable the encounter to heed the invitation and thereby to reform our lives, to turn back to a different path and a new way of life. The scriptures regularly afford examples of such vulnerability as spaces of invitation and grace: Moses removing his sandals before the burning bush (Exod. 3:5); Peter, sinful and incompetent, encountering the call to discipleship from Jesus (Luke 5:1–11); Saul on the road to Damascus, blinded and cast down (Acts 9:1–14), recognized by self-admission as one born ‘abnormally’ and the least apostle of all (1 Cor. 15:8). It is further telling that throughout many of the direct scriptural encounters with Christ, those keenest to receive the call and showing the greatest openness to a change are those both *physically* and *socially* wounded: a paralytic dependent on friends to lower him through a ceiling, leprous outcasts with neither place nor face in society, an unnamed hemorrhagic woman at her wits end. The places of most profound suffering and struggle enable the encounter and become the very sites of transformative grace.²²

Ultimately, the space of conversion and the ongoing struggle, the continued relation opening onto the divine, requires that vulnerability and fragility to be embraced, humbly acknowledged, and offered up to God. When either arrogance, apathy, or shame lead to self-enclosure in the face of sin, vulnerability is denied and the possibility of conversion is forestalled. Yet Pope Francis is fond of reminding the faithful that, “there is no saint without a past, nor sinner without a future,” and that repressive denial of past sins or arrogant attempts at finding a self-sufficient path forward close off the authentic relationship with the divine. He continues: “[I]t is sufficient to answer the invitation with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of the perfect, but rather of journeying disciples who follow the Lord because they recognize themselves as sinners and in need of His forgiveness. Christian life is therefore a school of humility that opens us up to grace.”²³ It is in that space of grace that the converted come to recognize their poverty and dependence before God, and a continued source of thanksgiving and gratitude.

²¹ Ibid., 99 f.

²² For a compelling treatment of such transformation of woundedness into sites of grace from theological, philosophical, and psychoanalytic perspectives, see especially *Tomáš Halík*, *Touch the Wounds: On Suffering, Trust, and Transformation*, trans. by Gerald Turner, Notre Dame 2023, 115–127.

²³ *Pope Francis*, “No Saint Without a History, Nor Sinner Without a Future” (see fn. 7).

3. Embracing Poverty and Dependency: Being ‘Laid Bare’ Before God

This fragility and vulnerability in the religious encounter open onto a poverty and dependency experienced in the life of faith – the one who enters into conversion begins to recognize him- or herself not as a self-sufficient master of one’s own destiny, but rather as dependent and laid bare before the Absolute. Lacoste speaks of the liturgical encounter in which one is ‘laid bare’ with nothing to one’s name, a space in which a new self-understanding and identity before God is established.²⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, upon reaching a state of conversion and repentance when this sheer dependency upon God is embraced, many will take on a new name as a signifier of a new identity: Simon is recast as Peter by Christ; Saul becomes Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles; Iñigo the Soldier becomes Ignatius the Pilgrim, and neophytes take on the name of Christian, to name but a few prominent examples.

Lacoste develops this in his concepts of asceticism and dispossession, in abnegation, which characterize a “disappropriated man” living in a “preeschatological” space, yet as if in his “eschatological destiny”²⁵. To the outside observer, this type of existence may appear as foolishness or madness – a not uncommon trope for recent converts and those living in the tension of an ‘already – not yet’ mode of a converted life, one trusting in the saving power of God and yet anticipating the coming of the kingdom (1 Cor. 4:10).

As Lacoste writes, the human being is the only animal “capable of challenging his participation in the play of appropriation,” in other words, human beings can choose to “subvert the situation he natively occupies in the world” in a “violence”²⁶ of an ascesis. There is a sense that non-possession defines human beings “more primitively than does his participation in the play of appropriation,” a more primitive determination that “can govern the experience we have of ourselves and of the world.”²⁷ Importantly for Lacoste, however, there is an essential precarity in all of this. The desire for conversion, the calling out to God, the opening of a liturgical ‘space’ for encounter does not necessarily entail that an experience takes place – yet another essential aspect of our poverty and dependency upon an Absolute who remains transcendent and beyond our ability to control. Absolute eschatological satisfaction, as Lacoste describes it, is not possible even for the most devout or sincere of the faithful, and that even the “act of making oneself present that instigates liturgy could not fail to be affected by the distance, pre-eschatologically exacerbated, which remains between whoever prays and definitive realities.”²⁸ Complete eschatological satisfaction eludes humanity this side of the eschaton, further highlighting humankind’s sheer and utter dependency before the Absolute.

Through his analysis of boredom in prayer, of time seemingly wasted, and of what he identifies as ‘liturgical inexperience,’ Lacoste preserves both the Absolute’s freedom and underscores our essential poverty and dependence. Liturgical inexperience and the precarity of prayer may not always give rise to boredom, but that very boredom nonetheless serves

²⁴ *Lacoste*, Experience and the Absolute (see fn. 2), 174.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 172 f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

as a “constant and useful reminder to us that nonexperience is essential to liturgical play – and that it can be intolerable to us.”²⁹ I have neither a monopoly nor control over God. The act of coming to prayer and opening oneself before God does not oblige a divine response or presencing, for the faithful do not become glorified magicians in prayer, commanding and compelling the Absolute. Lacoste is careful to note that in any such encounter or opening, if it should occur, then “God will in fact be the subject, and we the object,” in a what he terms denial of the “privileges of the I [Je].”³⁰ What emerges is a clear affirmation of utter dependency: before becoming “self-same” in the I, I experience myself primarily as a relation with the You/Thou [Tu], being the “thou” whom God finds first before becoming I to myself³¹.

This effects a “liturgical disorientation of consciousness” where a soul would “be the name of a passivity more essential than all intentional activity – it would be man’s pure *exposition* to God,” a liturgical critique of consciousness itself: “Disoriented, and deprived of the object it would enjoy possession of [...] inexperience contradicts the worldly reasons that govern what we are; and should we consent to it, this contradiction takes its place along with all the subversions of our worldliness carried out in God’s name.”³²

This liturgical encounter is precisely what lays the human person bare. “There is no question of lording things,” for “strictly speaking, those who liturgically face the Absolute neither have anything nor can take possession of anything. Nothing they could have in their possession contributes to the expression of their identity, and they are offered nothing they could take possession of.”³³ This laying bare through dispossession, Lacoste is clear to emphasize, “does not kill man,” but rather “proves that man can survive even though the ties uniting him to the world have come undone,” thus bracketing all that is inessential and revealing the “disappropriated man” as an “eschatological destiny, and represents what is fundamental and constant.”³⁴ In the life of the converted, dispossession and poverty become markers of one’s identity and reliance – defined in relation to, and by constant openness toward, God. Dependency and poverty, fragility and vulnerability, intersect in the life of the converted to show a continual reliance in an ongoing opening onto God. With nothing left to one’s own name or abilities, we are invited into a Christlike existence modeled on kenotic outpouring of oneself – not as having anything to be grasped at, but rather emptied, open, and clinging to God in sheer dependency. Lacoste strikingly concludes with an embrace of the kenotic existence: “Man takes hold of what is most proper to him when he chooses to encounter God [...]. [W]e can now assert that man says who he is most precisely when he accepts an existence in the image of a God who has taken humiliation upon himself – when he accepts a kenotic existence.”³⁵

²⁹ Ibid., 149.

³⁰ Ibid., 151.

³¹ Ibid., 152.

³² Ibid., 152 f.

³³ Ibid., 174.

³⁴ Ibid., 174.

³⁵ Ibid., 194.

4. Gratitude and Ongoing Conversion

Out of these experiences of fragility and vulnerability, of humility and obedience, of poverty and dependency, the converted heart comes to a space of gratitude – gratitude expressed not merely for the mercy and pity of God, but even for the darkness and sins themselves which ultimately gave rise to the dynamic of this new and unfolding life.

For the converted, there is neither a denial of one's past nor an attempt to rewrite history. Rather, they are seen in a new light, one of the "tender compassion of God" that breaks upon us in the midst of the darkness (Luke 1:78–79). Augustine cries out in joyful abandon to the God who "looked upon my heart, which you took pity on at the very bottom of the abyss," the God who, "in the name of your mercies [...] say to my soul, 'I myself am your rescue.'"³⁶ The spiritually mature and converted individual is invited to examine the deeds that led to repentance, that initiated the converted life, even with a spirit of joy and gratitude. Out of the struggles of scrupulosity and shame, both Saints Ignatius and Peter Faber found joyful repose in God's abundant mercies without repressing the past. Their sins and struggles became pathways to witness God's goodness, and reminders of their sheer dependence on the goodness of God.³⁷ This gratitude effects epistemological as well as existential shifts, not merely a source of knowledge or an interpretive heuristic key for life events but as a way of living itself – of living with joyful abandon even in the midst of pain and sorrow. Saint Paul holds that even his weaknesses can become cause for glorying, for *boasting* in the Lord whose "power is made perfect" in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Gratitude emerges as the rightful disposition out of the space of grief and the struggle – not to glorify the sins and failings themselves, but for the path that they unfolded before us, for the transformative mercy of God. One's outlook on personal sin is changed, reframed as a reminder of past faults and yet with recourse to ongoing divine mercy, opening a path to connection through the very obstruction of sin. Shame and fear give way to appropriate sorrow and gratitude. This mercy takes me out of my struggles and suffering, to find the consolation of recognizing God's power made perfect in my own weakness – ongoing reliance upon God for a rescue that I cannot provide for myself.

Saint Paul knew this well, reiterating it throughout his letters to the early Christian communities embarking, oftentimes tumultuously, on a newfound converted life. He expresses grief for past sins, for the fractious disagreements and wanderings of these communities, and guilt for the grief that leads to despair. But he identifies another kind of grief – a 'godly grief' that leads one closer to repentance, to sheer dependency upon God (2 Cor. 7:10). Such grief displaces the convert to a turning outward, to a relationship with the divine that is not ignorant of the past but entrusts one's history and commends oneself to the divine mercy and redemption. One commentator notes:

"Paul juxtaposes two kinds of grief within the overall context of Christian joy. On the one hand, Paul feels at least a certain amount of guilt for grieving the Corinthians, perhaps out of concern that they fall into the grief that belongs to the world [...] the excessive grief that leads to despair.

³⁶ *Augustine*, *Confessions*, trans. by Sarah Ruden, New York 2018, I.5, II.9.

³⁷ *Ignatius of Loyola*, *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. by Joseph N. Tylenda, San Francisco 2001, §3. See also *Pierre Favre*, "Memoriale," in: *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, Saint Louis 1996, §§6–7.

Worldly grief produces only death, the refusal of Christian joy even amidst suffering. On the other hand, Paul extols the effects of a 'godly grief' upon the Corinthian community."³⁸

This godly grief is one that leads to salvation, for true sorrow and heartfelt contrition but without an overly facile ignorance or denial. The grief, the sin, the evils committed are not in and of themselves salvific (and they rightly ought to be condemned). Yet they set in motion a trajectory that can lead to recognition – an embrace – of dependency on God, of vulnerability and humility. The wages of sin can be death, but can also cast the converted back into the merciful embrace of the Father.

Importantly, the godly grief inspires action on the part of the converted – measurable changes, real attempts to find a new path forward, a struggle which leads to a newness of life. The converted will continue to struggle and to fall, and yet a path forward is opened before them to journey upon. Conversion does not imply perfection (and in fact, demands for perfection can stand as a hindrance to genuine attempts at converting oneself to God, arrogantly assuming a degree of self-sufficiency in attaining the perfection desired). Quite the contrary – continued actions and ongoing attempts are inspired for this unfolding pathway of conversion. The grief felt for and by the Corinthian community "inspires a series of actions [...] repentance does not remain interior, but expresses itself outwardly as well," in feelings of eagerness, indignation, longing, zeal, and fear.³⁹ The sadness elicited by their sins "shakes up the community and awakens them to their shameful situation," and that such sadness serves a purpose to open their eyes – "to the presence of sin and to the need for compunction and concrete action. Sadness leads to conversion, the restoration of joy in the risen Lord."⁴⁰

To express gratitude for past sins and evils committed does not glorify or excuse them, but casts them in a new light. Former sites of helplessness, sin, and even despair yield to opportunities for hope and healing. Such is the nuanced point made by Paul who, from his own experience of conversion and sin, sees his weaknesses and the continued thorn in his side as opportunities to encounter the Lord more deeply – as potential spaces of divine grace upon which he depends and to which he returns constantly. Even the earliest Christian communities expressed gratitude without celebrating sinfulness: perhaps most notably, the great and ancient hymn of the Easter *Exultet* proclaims the essential and felicitous role of the Fall in salvation history, famously singing, "O happy fault! O truly necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer," celebrating that the salvation that follows the Fall elevates humankind to an even greater state than in the original Paradise.⁴¹ Here we paradoxically find a certain gratitude and joy even in the face of sin – not despite the sin, but because of what God has been able to do with it; how the reality of sinful struggles led to a death to the (self-enclosed) self, rent open in its woundedness before the divine. Perspective on the past shifts for the converted, no longer trapped in self-consumed guilt and worry, but in a hopeful and forward-looking godly grief that encompasses a spirit of

³⁸ John F. Gavin, "'The Grief Willed by God': Three Patristic Interpretations of 2 Cor. 7:10," in: *Gregorianum* 91/3 (2010) 427–442, here 433.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁴¹ *Roman Missal*, Third Edition, Totowa, NJ 2011, 206.

gratitude, as well. Gratitude in the face of vulnerability and fragility leads to authentic joy, a joy that is ‘complete,’ an abiding sign of God’s presence in our life (John 15:11).

Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear from Christian history – and scripture itself, notably these very same Pauline letters – that one can fall in and out of the converted state. A spirit of gratitude and recognition of one’s dependent relationship and vulnerability before God is not always the conscious state of one’s mind. The faithful inevitably struggle; sinful habits persist. We can fall in and out of this outlook, losing sight of God. Saint Peter stands as a cautionary reminder in this regard: Peter walked the waters toward Christ in the midst of the tempest, but only so long as he kept his eyes fixed on the Lord. The second he became distracted by storms and realities around him, he begins to sink (Matt. 14:22–33). Peter similarly falls back into the depths of sin through his denial and betrayal of Christ, taking his eyes off God and looking inward to his own protection and self-assurance (Matt. 26: 69–75). Paul’s letters likewise highlight the frequent reversion or collapse of the converted communities back into factionalism and greed, debauchery and sin. He must constantly remind them, exhorting them to put back on the heart and mind of Christ (Phil. 2:2) in a dynamic of putting on and taking off – of taking upon oneself what is given by God and pouring out oneself in totality. This ‘habit’ of the converted life, of the Christian vocation, is one that requires reminder and recollection, that relies upon a commitment regularly renewed and kept always before one’s eyes. Without denying the profound depths and seismic shift of watershed ‘conversion moments,’ they nonetheless require regular reminders, constantly recollecting and calling back to that initial love to which we had once been awoken (Rev. 2:4–5).

Yet there is cause for rejoicing here, despite the distress of many trials (1 Pet. 1:6). Indeed, for the converted soul still struggling to follow Christ, “yet is our hope full” (Wis. 3:4), even in weakness and fragility, even in all dependency and the sheer emptiness of human poverty. Repeated sins and our failings do not have to have the last word; they need not define us. Good news has been proclaimed to the open ears and wounded hearts: blessed and happy are the faults, an invitation to the ongoing struggle of a ‘godly grief’ (2 Cor. 7:10).

Die jüdisch-christliche Tradition ist voll von Aufrufen zur Bekehrung und zur Rückkehr zu Gott, wobei die Bekehrungs-Erzählungen so vielfältig und unterschiedlich sind wie die Menschen selbst. In diesem Beitrag wird versucht, eine phänomenologische Darstellung jener vereinheitlichenden Strukturen zu geben, die der Erfahrung der Bekehrung und ihren Auswirkungen auf die Lebenserfahrung, die Einstellungen, die Wahrnehmungen, das Selbstverständnis und die Erfahrung von Gott und der Welt zugrunde liegen. Gestützt auf die phänomenologischen Arbeiten von Jean-Louis Chrétien und Jean-Yves Lacoste und ergänzt durch die theologische und spirituelle Tradition wird in diesem Beitrag die These vertreten, dass ein Leben aus Bekehrung gekennzeichnet ist durch (1) die Entdeckung einer wesentlichen und ursprünglichen Verwundbarkeit oder Zerbrechlichkeit, die es zu überwinden gilt; (2) die Akzeptanz der eigenen Abhängigkeit vor Gott; und (3) eine Vorläufigkeit, die durch wiederholtes Scheitern, ständige Neuorientierung und ständige Rückbesinnung gekennzeichnet ist. Jenseits der Einschränkung auf einen singulären Anfangspunkt der Initiation oder einen Endpunkt der christlichen Vollkommenheit erweist sich Bekehrung als eine Lebensweise, die durch fortwährende Verwundbarkeit, Abhängigkeit und Dankbarkeit, aber auch durch wiederholtes Scheitern und erneutes Engagement gekennzeichnet ist.