Conversion is the land of mystery where feeling meets faith, where reason fuses with religion, where creature and credo blend in harmony. To emphasize the mystery of it, one need only consider the individual who lives as a Catholic all his life, but is never really converted to the faith; the person who believes so strongly and so deeply much of what
is contained in a religion, but still cannot be converted to it; the person who is slowly turned on the rack of life's problems finally to be converted when all goes well, or the individual who, in time of crisis, is suddenly, as if by some single powerful force which cannot be identified, converted to a new belief.

Conversion is in fact the land of many mysteries, and it would be presumptuous to suggest that we could explore them all. The mystery of grace itself and its action on the human psyche, the complex inner factors which operate to bring one to decisions, the myriad environmental factors from one's background as well as from the present life situation are all topics which expand beyond the scope of a single discussion. I would even suggest that genetic factors may influence the individual's capacity for conversion, much as intelligence and personality traits have hereditary limitations.

In this article we shall consider some of the factors that make up the psychological set that makes conversion possible. When speaking of conversion, we are talking about something which happens to the entire individual. It is not something which happens just within the mind any more than it is something which happens just within the heart. To speak of intellectual conversion as a valid conversion when it carries no currents into the open seas of emotional life is about as accurate as speaking of religious conversion when an arthritic's fingers turn in new directions from disease. Conversion comes to the entire man, or it does not come at all. It is not the product of cold logic alone, but it partakes of reason. It is not as ephemeral as feeling, but it carries lightness in it. It is not the storm of overpowering emotion, but it gathers winds from many quarters. It is not measured in cubic centimeters of adrenalin or volume of cardiac outflow, but it shares in somatic resonance. It is important to remember that one converts the whole man, the psychosomatic unit, the entire person; because remembering this, one is more likely to reflect that all the things that are happening to that individual have some role in effecting positively or negatively the possibility of conversion. How can anyone expect to convert a man to a belief in the Three Persons in God while ignoring the fact that he has three starving children? How can anyone expect a person to believe in the brotherhood of man while ignoring the fact that he is the victim of race prejudice? How can anyone expect another to accept the teaching that Christ came down from heaven and died for him while ignoring the fact that he has no recognition of his own worth as a human being? How can anyone
expect a man to believe in the providence of God when his son is dying of incurable cancer? These factors of environment are the soil on which the seeds of doctrine must fall, and they must be reckoned with to reap the harvest of faith.

This amounts to saying that you must see the individual as he is. When you have done this, then you must accept him as he is and where he is. After all of this is accomplished you may by force of argument, by persuasive manner, or by some quality you may never recognize precipitate this person across that chasm that lies between belief and unbelief.

Seeing the person as he is is not a simple task. Perhaps this is the most intricate part of the road to religious belief. Seeing a person as he is takes time, time to listen, time to reflect, time to understand, time to ask questions, time to be interested more in another than in one's self. It means knowing about the problems that confront him day by day and how their solutions slip continually over the horizon. It means sifting the sands of human needs and human weaknesses and finding the precious stones of natural virtues which form the foundation for the chapel that is built by his personal conversion. All of this adds up to a very personal factor in conversion, a very intimate, meaningful relationship between two people, a relationship through which one person is somehow prepared psychologically to accept some new belief. This personal factor directly involves the psychological set for religious conversion which operates on the natural level. It is, of course, true that some conversions apparently do not involve such a personal encounter. One could think of the person who is converted through attendance at public instruction classes, or through attendance at a series of Lenten sermons, or perhaps through listening to a lecture on the radio. In these cases, as in all cases of conversion, many converging influences culminate in the final act of faith. This personal relationship might actually be pieced together like a jig-saw puzzle through many different people, each one supplying a peculiarly shaped part until the final piece is in place, and the gestalt is formed which the gift of grace then infuses. It might be a humbling thought, but your role in the conversion of any individual is undoubtedly just a piece in the jig-saw puzzle which, when it is completed, brings a new dimension to life. If you provide that final piece which forms the picture, you may be inclined to think that you have wrought a marvelous thing, and forget the people who shaped the other parts. By the same token, every effort which you make with a potential convert may not pro-
duce the result which you had hoped for, yet it might provide an important part of the picture which is being formed and give a new direction for rapid progress later. Your part may never be realized by you or by anyone else, perhaps not even by the person who is later converted.

While your relationship with the potential convert may not seem to be a very personal one, since your contact may only be through a public instruction class or a sermon, the personal element may be strongly manifested in your manner of presentation as well as in the substance of your talk. You are probably a bit tired of hearing the laity criticize the priest's sermon. No doubt the criticisms are so varied that they contradict one another. Some say Father talks too long, others say, not long enough. Some say Father talks over their heads, others that he talks down to them. Some say Father is too theatrical, others that he is too mundane. And so it goes. Perhaps only one criticism is justified, and that is the criticism that Father really doesn't understand much about people. I know that religion is your business, but people are as essential to your business as they are to mine. As I understand it, religion is a bond between God and man. You spend years studying about God, perhaps to the fault of losing contact with men. Probably no one could precisely define the difference between the priest who somehow seems to understand something about people and the priest who just doesn't reach first base when it comes to understanding other people. It is not that the one is sincere and the other is insincere. It is not that the one is more interested or dedicated than the other. We all recognize the difference; you recognize it in your fellow priests, the laity recognizes it in you, the potential convert sees it too. Certainly the priest who has this gift of understanding others (and I say gift for two reasons: first of all, it excuses me from attempting to explain what it is; and secondly, I think perhaps there is a definite "gift" quality in it—it is more "given" than learned), the priest who has this gift establishes more of a personal relationship with others than does the priest without it. He can, in fact, establish a more personal relationship with the members of a large audience than another priest might do on an individual basis. However, we should not belittle the priest who is less adroit in presenting the personal touch. He too may provide many pieces along the way toward making the puzzle a complete picture which would then no longer be a puzzle at all.
We have talked about seeing the person as he is—what this means in terms of time, how essential it is in conversion. I said previously that after one sees the individual as he is, one must accept him as he is, where he is. Let us develop this a bit more fully.

Seeing the person as he is becomes so complicated a task and so impossible to achieve completely that it often keeps one from accepting the individual as he is. In psychiatry we spend hundreds of hours talking to one person about all the facets of his early experiences and later reactions that he can possibly remember. Yet I think it is presumptuous to ever say "I understand everything about this person." On the contrary, such extensive exploration only brings us to the sharper realization of the limitless complexity of the single individual. One need not understand. It is sufficient to want to understand. It is important to know that one can never fully understand. Our acceptance of others should not be measured by our ability to understand them.

If we do not accept someone as he is, how can we expect him to change, to convert to something else? Or at least how can we expect him to do so freely, without undue influence? To accept him as he is does not mean that you must approve of him as he is. It does mean that you do not disapprove of him as a person because he is the way he is. It demands your respect for his inherent right as an individual to be what he is, be it Communist, Protestant, atheist, sinner. It requires a recognition of the sacred quality of his freedom as a person, a freedom which God gave to him and which another human has no right to take from him. We condemn conversion to Communism by political coercion or by physical violence. What about conversion to Catholicism by psychological coercion, by emotional conquest? To watch the process of conversion to Catholicism in this new era of ecumenism will be fascinating. I suppose your arguments must be changed to some extent, your approach must be altered. Perhaps you will have to work harder for converts. At least a great deal of honesty and openness is in the air.

I emphasize this point of accepting the person as he is because it is an essential ingredient of true conversion. By true conversion I mean a clearly free, non-neurotic decision to change one's beliefs in a radical way. Certainly some converts never should have become Catholics, just as some priests never should have been ordained, and some married people never should have received the sacrament, at least from a psychological frame of reference. I most certainly do not pretend to
understand or to question the divine plan of things. If, in the work of conversion, you are not willing to accept the person as he is, even if he does not want to change, even if he does not want to become a convert, then you may well be playing into his neuroticisms. The most common problem among psychiatric patients is their lack of conviction regarding their personal worth. In this age of machines that solve problems and displace people, in this age when microbes become more virulent than the men who discover them, in this age when knowing what the moon is made of becomes more important than providing cheese for starving men, human beings once more in history are losing sight of that glorious vision of what they are. Their brilliance of thought has grown dull along side the machines their minds have fashioned. The luster of their imagination and the genius of their creativity is darkened by the forces of disease and destruction which they discover but cannot dominate. The force of their love which spanned both time and distance is now dimmed by the spectacular space ships that go beyond the reach of reason.

Ours is a particularly competitive society and life is approached on a piece-work basis. Children often associate their own value with the good report card they bring home from school, the prowess they display in athletic activity, the popularity they achieve in frequent dating or in being elected to class office. Adult authority heaps high around them the cluttered piles of new demands which they must somehow surmount if they are to be seen at all and recognized at least for what they do. As they reach maturity the demands to prove themselves find new voices—in the structure of their job which rewards the man who produces the most, in the fabric of society which stimulates them to manifest their values by being better than everyone else, by having more than others have. It is no wonder that the human being's greatest unmet need is to be recognized as a creature of value not because of what he thinks, but because, as a human, he has the ability to think; not because of how he lives, but because he lives, because he exists.

Since this feeling of inadequacy, this sense of insecurity is so common, and since the natural tendency is to meet the demands of others in order to prove one's adequacy, in order to establish one's security, you must be careful not to take advantage of this state of the individual. You do take advantage of this neuroticism if you refuse to accept the person as a being of great worth in the exact condition in which you may find him. However, if he is accepted as he is, the corollary of such acceptance is to refrain from some negative judgment about him if he chooses
to remain as he is. In other words, he is allowed to maintain that fundamental right he has as a human being to choose freely his course of action. He has the right to be wrong, and you have the right to judge his error as a subjective one, and therefore, no right to judge him for it.

In speaking of renewal to the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul said, "The first change, and most important of all, is what is ordinarily called conversion of heart." He was not speaking of conversion to the faith, but conversion within the faith. I hope you do not take exception to Reverend Billy Graham's recent statement that conversion is not a purely intellectual process but one which involves emotional response, a response which Pope Paul might call a "conversion of heart." We are considering here the intellectual and emotional components of the relationship between the potential convert and the priest. Lengthy elaboration would be required to separate the purely intellectual from the purely emotional in what is being discussed. And such an exercise is of little value. However, it is a mistake to think that when instructing a person in the faith, even in a most formal manner, you are not creating in him some emotional response and dealing with the vast reservoir of emotional reactions that are a part of his personality.

Appropriate to the discussion of the psychology of conversion is the question: Why do people put their trust in other human beings? But more important than that question and antecedent to it is the question: How do people put their trust in others? We can distinguish two principal kinds of trust. The first is a kind of infantile trust. "I trust you because I must. I trust you because I cannot trust myself. I trust you because I depend on you and because you respond to my dependency and take over responsibility for me. I trust you because it gives me security. I trust you because it relieves my anxieties." This is what I mean by infantile trust. It is seen in many converts I am sure. They are the victims of the priest whose firm handshake, whose strong, forceful manner, whose reassuring voice tells them in capital letters, "Father knows best. Trust in Father. Father will tell you what to do." Their conversion is about as real as that of the infant who is converted from one formula to another. Their understanding of the process is about at that level. They change one dependency for another—the new one happens to be religion. I am not saying they are not good converts. They are perhaps the best converts they are capable of being. Nor am I suggesting that some glad-handing troubador of the cloth should not bring them into the fold. However, in all fairness one should then
in turn not be critical of the "conversions" of the modern Merlins and magnetic Mesmers of revival tents.

People have another kind of trust in their fellowman. This trust is coupled with personal freedom and psychological independence. "I trust you to be honest with me. I trust you not to deceive me. I trust you because I respect you and because you respect me. I trust the information you give me, but I must assimilate it into my own frame of reference, because we are separate human beings and you cannot think for me any more than I can live for you." This is adult trust. This is the trust of mature men, and such men, if they become converts, are mature members of the Church and often surpass in understanding and commitment lifetime Catholics who have never really matured within themselves or developed their faith beyond the scope of Sunday school and a simplistic approach which they mistake for sanctity.

We raised the question a moment ago: What brings people to put their trust in other human beings? Briefly one might say that earlier experiences shape the person's reaction in trusting or not trusting others. After the infant has distinguished himself from his mother as a separate being, he learns to interact with her and with others. He trusts her to meet his needs: his need for food, his need for love, and later on his need to grow up. If she or other important adult figures betray that trust by not responding in ways which are ultimately advantageous for the child he withdraws his trust and guards against being again betrayed.

Such factors also affect the faith of those who believe, block the vision of those who do not believe, and cause confusion to those who wander in that tortured land between belief and unbelief. These psychological factors can be somewhat arbitrarily divided among the senses, the emotions, and the intellect. I say arbitrarily, because in fact we cannot separate the function of sense from intellect or intellect from emotion, or any one of these from the other in the intact human being. We have already considered some points regarding the intellectual and emotional factors that may be involved in belief and unbelief. I would like now to add some points about the sensory role in the phenomenon of conversion.

The senses of man are tuned in on two worlds, the world of matter outside himself and the world of sensory experience inside himself. Nothing within the grasp of sensory experience would in itself bring man to God. His sensory life is an exclusively material one and the immaterial
world cannot impinge on it. The external senses bring us knowledge of the world outside us. That world is the world which God has made and His handiwork is manifest in the wonders of nature. Last spring as I walked in a park, I saw a boy, perhaps seven years old, little and alone, dressed rather poorly, pause before a flower, look at it admiringly, lean over to smell it, and then pass on. It seems to me that this boy is better prepared to accept the fact of God than is the little boy who has never been taught the sensory pleasure in a flower. If our senses are intact, we can shut out the world only through sleep, drugs or death. Some fear the use of their sensory powers so much that they want to drug themselves with tranquilizers and sedatives, not to increase their sensory pleasure, but to deaden their sensory experience. We must appreciate the fact that through their senses people partake of the world about them and know the beauty and depth of its sensible reality.

The sensory must not be confused with the sensual. People are closer to the enjoyment of pure sensory experience than we are willing to admit. Because we do not understand intimacy with the material, the sensate, we lose the opportunity of directing their interest and bringing them to the Author of Nature and the Source of their sensory powers. We are sometimes too negative about their noise, instead of encouraging them to listen to the song of birds, the crash of thunder, the whisper of the plaintive winds. We are sometimes too critical of their visual curiosity, instead of channeling their interest into works of art, the beauty of stars, the delicate loveliness of flowers. The moon may well arouse their passions, but there is no reason they should not appreciate the visual thrill of seeing the satellite God gave us. Perhaps what I'm trying to say has been said poetically by Joseph Mary Plunkett in the following:

I see His blood upon the rose—
And in the stars the glory of His eyes—
His body gleams amid eternal snows—
His tears fall from the skies.

I see His face in every flower—
The thunder and the singing of the birds—
Are but His voice—and craven by His power—
Rocks are His written words.

All pathways by His feet are worn—
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea—
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn—
His cross is every tree.
Young people are particularly impressionable. Their senses are more active than ours. Their contact with life is more readily established through the flash of colors, be it bright red fingernail polish or purple eye shadow. Their ears are tuned to the beat of life about them, whether it comes from the Beatles, the bongo drums, or the surf at midnight, or the dissynchronized throb of a hot rod.

The error in warning youth or adults about the pleasures of sense is that sensory pleasure can be a spring board into the mysteries of God’s creation. After all, sexual pleasure brings husband and wife to the threshold of creation, and God joins them in the act of procreation. Why should not sensory pleasure bring men and women to the threshold of God’s creation, where their intellect can join in and precipitate them into the expanse of that drama. When we speak of the sensory powers as somewhat close to sinful, we disturb this natural relationship to life. Religious who talk only of sensual sins and not of legitimate sensory pleasures give a one-sided picture of this fundamental side of humanity. It is negative to suggest that downcast eyes are the solution to visual curiosity. The eyes can fulfill their natural end of seeing things. They must be educated. They must be filled. They must be fulfilled. It is their nature to see, their need to want to see. Downcast eyes will never see the glorious purple hues of a sunset or the brilliant beauty of the sky on a clean, moonless night. Equating the sense of touch with sins of touch deprives this natural sensory power of any fulfillment. One reason young men enjoy working on cars is the tactile pleasure they obtain from the feeling of grease. Perhaps this is one reason young girls enjoy the grease of make-up and the stickiness of the many substances to treat their hair. A pure sensory pleasure is involved in a warm bath, or a cool room in the heat of summer, or a glass of cool liquid when one is thirsty. These are all sensory delights, and, as far as I know, perfectly legitimate.

We must foster healthy, morally acceptable, and satisfying outlets for the use of sensory powers. We may have become so negative about those powers, that we have tried to wish them, or to preach them, out of existence, that we have failed to appreciate their validity, that we give no thought to their development and expression. Nearness to nature, the birthright of country children, may help to explain their lasting faith which is as deep as their furrows, as rich as their soil, as firm as the fences protecting their fields.

The other immediate sensory experience which mankind must deal
with in its raw form is the experience of pain. Children learn of this early in life through skinned knees, cut fingers, and the inevitable scourge of modern medicine—shots. A philosophy of pain is learned early from their parents, but their understanding of suffering continues to be modified by later experience. Parents who participate in the game of pretending pain does not exist are denying reality. The mosquito bite theory of immunization and antibiotic shots is not only naive, because shots hurt more than any mosquito ever did, but also gives children the impression that pain is to be avoided at all costs, even at the expense of right reason. If they can attain some respect for the vulnerability of their bodies, if they can obtain some regard for the limitations of that material world which they know most intimately, they can then reach out for the spiritual life which will hold the only promise of reprieve from pain. Unwillingness to accept personal pain, inability to understand suffering have caused some to find faith unattainable, others to find past faith untenable. Yet faith makes suffering understandable, and pain makes faith more real. Indeed there have been those whose faith was priced on their ability to accept pain and to endure suffering.

If we try to hide from people the reality of pain, we can hardly expect them to understand the stark reality of suffering that confronts them when they see the hungry mouth and cold arms of poverty, the blind eyes of prejudice, the broken back of disease, the shackled feet of ignorance. Adults who cannot understand the pain their sharpened senses tell them is within, or the suffering their eyes and ears pick up from all around them, may come to doubt that God is good or even that He could exist. What faith they may have grows weak because their senses cannot bear the burden of pain. Their attitude that pain must be avoided and pleasure sought brings tumbling down the structure of their faith.

Those who preach Christ crucified and who make personal sacrifices for the faith in which they believe must help other men to face the inevitability of affliction, to give them an appreciation of its meaning, and to prepare them by this for the terminal loneliness that is death.

Faith is something which takes us beyond the reach of reason, beyond the movement of our emotions, beyond the stretch of our senses. It is something which must somehow touch the inconstant heart of man if it is to be meaningful, yet it must not be too much a part of his passions. Faith is something which must make the mind of man less subject
to its own inner laws, yet it must not deprive the individual of his right to reason, his obligation to think. Faith exceeds the limits set by our senses, yet employs those senses in proof of faith’s limitless expanse.

Though faith may give new meaning to our sensory experiences, though it may raise the functions of our reason to the fruit of new truths, though it may contain and control the powerful forces of our emotions, for all of this, faith partakes of each of these, our sensory experience, our emotional reactions, our intellectual achievements.

In your work of conversion you know that you possess the truth. Your task is to make that truth meaningful to the integral human beings whom you confront, and in that confrontation to preserve their integrity as full human beings. These truths come to deaf ears, unless those ears are opened to the sounds of God’s universe. These truths fall on cold hearts, unless those hearts beat with the force of emotional life. These truths fall on closed minds, unless those minds are open to the value of self. That simple truth which applies to all virtue applies also to faith—the supernatural is built on the natural.

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