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# **EEC, Congress of Celje, 27<sup>th</sup> May – 1<sup>st</sup> June 1, 2015 Conversion. The Act, the Process and Accompaniment Stories of conversion in the first centuries of the church. What is conversion?**

## **1. Introduction: conversion in the early Christian world**

Looking for the sources of conversion in the first centuries of the Church is not a simple process: the study is wide ranging from the process of conversion in the ancient world – long and varied – to personal narratives of conversion.<sup>1</sup> The same concept of conversion was not equivocal. For us today, the meaning is obvious: it has to do with the passage from one religion to another, or from an agnostic or atheist position to a religious conviction and practice. In the ancient world, in which the proclamation of the Gospel made its first steps,<sup>2</sup> the problem was not posed in this way because religion was primarily

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<sup>1</sup> For a wide view of the theme, which can be summarised in the question about how and why the ancient world became Christian, one may see the contributions compiled and edited by H. Inlebert, S. Destephen and B. Dumezil, *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique*, ed. Picard, Paris 2010.

<sup>2</sup> This has to do with the world linked to the Roman Empire, even if not exclusively, because Christianity also knows a dissemination beyond the borders of the empire, to the east, and in Mesopotamia and beyond,

a social phenomenon, a phenomenon linked to a nation and to traditions, more than linked to personal convictions. It drew its legitimacy from a twofold point of reference: tradition (antiquity) and ethnic belonging. Every nation, every city has its own religion.<sup>3</sup> It did not concern primarily the “truth” of divinity (a notion linked to the investigation of philosophers who reflect on first principles), but on the correct and legitimate way of worshipping the divinity, a way which is easily recognisable precisely in that sanctioned by tradition. This meeting is sometimes a fusion of peoples and different traditions within the framework of the Roman Empire which allowed access to different religious traditions, under the great heading of public worship, the official worship of the empire. The adhesion to the official religion or even to that of a group with which one was in contact did not require the renunciation of the religion practiced before: the same person could have the divinity of the family or group, to worship the divinity or divinities of his/her own nation, and within the limits provided for by law or tradition, take part in “public” worship. In this religious context the passage from one religion to another did not feature, but rather a plurality of adhesions. The experience of conversion in this religious sphere simply lacked the conditions to exist; even the vocabulary to refer to it was missing.

The term was rather present within the framework of philosophy, intended as a search for authentic life based on the value of things, of their consistency and the weight given to them by human beings, on “truth”, on the excellence and the care of the soul. Here conversion was seen as a passage from a superficial life which is linked to exterior habits, to the search for wisdom, for balance, for moderation, as the transformation of oneself, as a passage to the truth of “oneself”. It was precisely linked to living philosophically. A good example may be the conversion of Polemone as narrated by Diogenes Laertius in “The Lives of the Philosophers” (4.16–20). Listening to the call to a “balanced” life formulated by Senocrate in the academy (Plato’s school whose second successor he was), Polemone passes from an “uncontrolled and degenerate” life to a life devoted to philosophy; he assumes a lifestyle which can be described as “a quiet firmness”, far away from any variations. Within daily life philosophical practice introduces elements of awareness and rationality that enables persons to become aware of themselves and of their actions. The comparison between the “before” and the “after” highlights the change, the conversion, on the basis of a new outlook on life,

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<sup>3</sup> “Sua cuique civitati religio” (Cicero, pro Flacco 26, 69).

acquired at the master's school and nourished by appropriate exercises (such as attention, dialog as a practice of self-awareness, the thought of death, reflection on the words of the wise...) to which the teacher and school introduced them. It deals with conversion to the authentic life through the adoption of a wise lifestyle based on a tradition conveyed by teachers who facilitated the link with great thinkers (Socrates, Plato, Zeno...).<sup>4</sup>

The Jewish tradition had a peculiarity of its own by reason of the exclusive and national character of its monotheism. The profession of faith in One God implied taking a distance from any other figure of divinity which was classified as an idol, as false. In biblical tradition conversion occupies a very important place: prophets underline the urgency of "turning back to God", to "return to Him with all your heart" (Joel 2,12). The faith of the fathers in God, of a God who gives freedom, a God of the promises and of the covenant, calls for a unique place in the heart and life of the human being, and not breaking down this hosting by sharing it with other "gods." The ethnic character however offered a possibility of integration or at least of a partial reception within the current vision of the Roman Empire. Certainly there could be adhesions to the one God also by non-Jews, as in the case of Izate of Adiabene, at the time of emperor Claudius, which is referred to by Josephus Flavius (*Antiquities of the Jews* XX). Here we have a passage from one religion to another, which can be placed in a category of its own: that of proselytes. The integration in the new religion was not however total; to some extent the link between the proselytes, the "God-fearing", had the stigma of something strange. In the same way, let us understand the story of the conversion of Asenet, narrated in the Jewish-Hellenistic novel *Joseph and Asenet* (early second century AD)<sup>5</sup>. In this case, the adhesion to the Jewish faith is presented as linked to the encounter with Joseph the Jew as the future husband and as a divine illumination. The outcome is described as a passage

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<sup>4</sup> Some good details on philosophical conversion and Christian conversion can be found in: J. Alonso, *Conversión Filosófica y Conversión Cristiana*, "Scripta Theologica" 41 (2009/3), p. 687–710. On the theme you can see the classic work of P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Études Augustiniennes, Paris 1987.

<sup>5</sup> For the two examples mentioned above you can see R. Penna, *Vangelo e inculturazione*, ed. S. Paolo, Milano 2001, p. 275–288. For the terminology and the biblical theme of conversion the bibliography is abundant. In this same volume you can see the broad excursus that is dedicated to it in pp. 536–580. A quick discussion is offered by R. D. Witherup, *Conversion in The New Testament*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 1994 (in the first chapter he recalls the OT and proposes a synthetic vision at the end).

from death to life. The story is perhaps as a sign of Jewish missionary practice during the Alexandrian diaspora.

The beginning of Christian proclamation in the ancient world has brought with it a novelty which cannot be easily collocated: as the Judaism in which Christianity was born, Christian proclamation implies an adherence to God, the God of the fathers and the Father of Jesus the Messiah, which implies a break with any other image of divinity, with every other cultic tradition. However, at the same time declaring its universal appeal, without reservations and differences. The adherence to the Gospel of Jesus introduces all, in the same way, into the People of God. This results in a call to conversion that is addressed to everyone, because it is from the one God. Conversion here is seen as a path by means of which through listening to the proclamation leads to faith. It is a gift available to everyone. It is the grace of “turning to god from idols, to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1, 9). It is understandable that in that environment this appeared to be an “exaggerated allegation” of a religion which was foreign,<sup>6</sup> and at the same time it could draw attention for its innovative stances because it did away with “Preferences” and with discrimination (see Acts 10, 34–35).<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Stories of conversion

The “narratives of conversion” that have been transmitted to us from ancient church writings are a privileged way to get in contact with the impact of the Christian proclamation in the life of real people and with the process through which adhesion to the faith took place, with factors which helped and accompanied this process. As a corollary, these narratives allow us to see, from the receiving

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<sup>6</sup> This is what the first official reactions demonstrate: *superstitio exitialis* (Tacitus), *nova et malevolent* (Suetonius), *prava et immodica* (Pliny).

<sup>7</sup> Classical studies which familiarise us with the theme: A. D. Nock, *Conversion. The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Oxford University Press 1961 (first ed. 1933; reprinted in 1998); G. Bardy, *La conversion christianisme au durant les premiers siècles*, ed. Montaigne, Paris 1947; P. Aubin, *Le problème de la conversion. Étude sur un terme commun à l'Hellénisme et au christianisme des trois premiers siècles*, ed. Beauchesne, Paris 1963. The analysis of some narratives of conversion of ancient Christianity can be found in: D. Vineyards (ed. ), *La conversion chez les Pères de l'Eglise*, ed. Words et Silence, Paris 2014. On the broader context it is interesting to see the studies compiled by H. Inglebert, S. Destephen and B. B. Dumezil, *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique*, ed. Picard, Paris 2010.

end, the action of Church practices that were proposed to guide those who were in sympathy with the Gospel and becoming acquainted with it up to the profession of the faith which was endorsed by the reception of baptism.<sup>8</sup> These stories are not numerous, they have different details that go from quick glimpses of real narratives to cases which form an entire work such as the famous *Confessions of Augustine*.<sup>9</sup> Their literary nature poses delicate questions on the approach used, beginning from the foundation of their function in their contexts to the probable use of literary clichés that do not make it always easy to draw on information of the real experience. We must not forget that they are all stories written in retrospect and that they give the current situation of the narrator and the journey covered to get to the present situation. The meaning achieved at the end flows from the narration of the stages of the way; however, this does not prevent us from recognising traces from daily life.<sup>10</sup> Daily life events and meanings act as witnesses to a proposal that is available to all because this is recognized by God, the God of all. The autobiographical narrative has a discreet apologetic and missionary value. It is also “liturgical” – a celebration of God’s grace.

By way of illustration I am selecting three, and reserving a concluding note to Augustine’s work, taking into account that this, together with the story of the Paul’s “conversion” by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9, 22.26), has in our tradition assumed a paradigmatic characteristic. These are the stories of an autobiographical nature by Justin, Cyprian, and Hilary.<sup>11</sup> They are distributed over three centuries (from the second half of the II century to the middle of the IV century) and they are situated in three different ecclesial environments:

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<sup>8</sup> These are the practices of missionary Churches, in particular of the catechumenate, which we know from liturgical texts/canons and which describe and control them, and from the preaching of the Fathers. Hearing their echo in the perception of the recipients is certainly interesting.

<sup>9</sup> Apocryphal literature where the theme is well attested also merits attention. By way of example: A. Pasquier, *Itinéraires de conversion dans le christianisme ancien*, Cahiers d’Etudes du family. Recherches interdisciplinaires [en ligne], 9 (2011), 1–21 (examines the theme in the Acts of Andrew).

<sup>10</sup> See the wise and serious observations of M. Canevet, *La schéma de conversion dans le prologue du De Trinitate d’Hilaire de Poitiers et le livre VII des Confessions d’Augustin. Problématique d’un temps*, “Augustinianum” 27 (1987), p. 165–174; I. Bochet, *Le livre VIII des “Confessions”: recit de conversion et réflexion théologique*, NRTTh 118 (1996), p. 363–384.

<sup>11</sup> Of particular interest although brief is the narrative of Tatian, *To the Greeks* 29, 1–3 (Cfr. G. Aragione (ed.), *Taziano, Ai Greci*, ed. Paoline, Milano 2015, p. 250–252, with the comment in note 330).

Palestine/Asia Minor, Carthaginian Africa and Gaul. We must not forget that the fourth century is under Constantinian rule which changes the social condition of the Christian presence in the framework of the Roman Empire. In order to facilitate our concentration I am (with some elasticity) going to apply some reading guidelines to every story: (a) the function of the story in its own context, (b) the structure or dynamics of the story (the initial situation, the process of transformation, the point of arrival), (c) factors of change (and resistance).

### a) The conversion of Justin

Justin (born in Flavia Neapolis in Palestine shortly after 100AD, a martyr in Rome around 165AD) mentions several times the reasons for his adhesion to the Christian faith: in 2Ap. 12, 1 he indicates that a decisive factor was the witness of the martyrs; during the interrogation to which he is submitted before his martyrdom (Mart. 2, 3) he motivates his position by invoking his search through philosophical schools and his arrival to Christian proposal because it is recognized as true. The most known story of his conversion can be found in the first chapters of Dialog with Trypho (I–VIII).<sup>12</sup>

The function of the story is already expressed by its place in the opera: in the opening, it has a value as a self-presentation to his interlocutor, Trypho the Jew, whom Justin meets at Ephesus in the aftermath of the second Jewish War (132–135). The dialog which is about to start does not take the form of a discussion to establish superiority. Rather it is to accept the light of the revelation of God in the words of the prophets that had come to fruition in Jesus the Messiah. In the opening, Justin intends to show how this light had reached him. It is a gift available to all, which each of us can welcome; the narration is both a good memory of Justin and a consideration to turn our gaze and heart to the gift. The dialog thus becomes a dialog between Christianity and Judaism in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem, a dramatic consequence of the second Jewish war. Indeed, according to the structure of the work, Justin invites Trypho and the Jews of the diaspora to a dialog on the Scriptures, on their interpretation, recalling a decisive dialog that he already had, the dialog with the elderly who

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<sup>12</sup> Cfr D. Vigne, *La conversion de Justin de Rome*, in Id. (éd.), *La conversion chez les Pères de l'Eglise*, ed. Parole et Silence, Paris 2014, p. 29–50. In a note the Author gives the main bibliography. Very useful are the introduction and the notes that accompany the translation of G. Visona, S. *Giustino, Dialogo con Trifone*, Milano 1988.

had proclaimed the gospel to him. The entire work is dedicated to “dear” Marco Pompeo (Dial 141, 5) who was interested in the Christian good news. The narration of the conversion of Justin is thus situated within a communication process aimed at generating and rendering s conversion. The conversion has its place within a communicative and dialogical theme. By becoming a story, an autobiography, it assumes a literary form using forms of expression that were available in the contemporary culture, according to a plurality of easily deducible functions (apologetics, philosophical exhortation, encouragement). This perspective leads to giving importance to the significance of the journey more than to the individual facts. Conversion is the narration of an interior story.

Justin’s point of departure on a journey is the desire for truth and a good life that orient him to philosophy according to the spirit of the time. The objectives that the itinerary of different schools give him, permit him to move and the failures which he goes through, lead him to a stalemate, which then becomes a choice to loneliness, of personal meditation.<sup>13</sup> There, the proposal of an “elder” (possibly the figure of the Christian community) gets to him and promises him access to the truth, to God, through a new way, that of revelations, of which the prophets are witnesses, and whose words had been fulfilled in Jesus. The search for the truth, the disappointments to the person which it exposes due to the fragmentary state to which it is reduced when search for personal glory is taken by surprise through God’s initiative that procures disinterested and reliable witnesses, precisely the prophets, God’s friends who are docile to his Spirit. Their witness, found in their writings which have come down to us, allows us to recognize the hand of God in history: it has the promise-fulfilment dynamism. The search gives the primacy to listening, reflection becomes a prayer, access to the truth has the form of a door that opens and from which the light comes in, that becomes a fire that rages in his heart. The desire for truth and the good life that is at the beginning of philosophical research is fulfilled in God’s initiative and determines the adherence to his Word who came to us: “A fire was kindled in my heart in the moment and I was imbued with the love for the prophets and for those men who are friends of Christ. Pondering his words in my heart I found that this was the only certain and fruitful philosophy” (Dial VIII, 1).

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<sup>13</sup> The choice of solitude was already an obligatory part of the philosophical path to conversion. It recalls the need for a position is personal. It is the moment in which everyone is called upon to speak about the way one is to choose. Solitude comes at a time of disorientation and dizziness to the fact that you are being called.

In retrospect, the search for the truth, for the good life, which puts us on the way, is a result of the availability of God for us; it is a clue of his coming towards us, a path which is characterised by surprises, by that we could not predict from our behalf. From this experience we can evidence at least two fundamental aspects: (a) the “dramatic” character of the conversion, which is marked by the irruption of a message that comes from elsewhere, and that redirects the research on the basis of listening. The disconnection between the “before” and “after” is sharp. The need to search and to reflect is not however set aside, it is honoured in a new way in the word offered by the prophets and fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. (b) Witness, the hearing of the word found in Scriptures, the proclaiming ministry of the Christian community (the elderly), prayer as availability to the light given by the Spirit, emerge as factors and attitudes that structure the process of conversion and the path to Christian life. Just as conversion is a spiritual journey, so Christian life remains a journey. Interesting is the link between the before and the after which the narrative allows us to glimpse. For a while, reaching the faith is not seen as the outcome of the search; on the contrary it exposes it to failure. Faith is the fruit of a proclamation which comes from elsewhere, through another way, the way of the revelation of the prophets and of Jesus the Messiah. On the other hand, the Christian proposal becomes the fulfilment of the search in a surprising way, in the manner of the gift, in the light that breaks free, like a door that opens for us from the inside. The search is not being let down, its questions are respected but through another road; thus the search learns to become a question, a prayer. A search that does not accept to become an act of listening and a prayer would be presumption, an obstacle to the light. “The only certain and profitable philosophy” is based on the Word of God who has proven himself in history even to Jesus the Messiah and which has come to us through an choral testimony which is disinterested in itself but which propagates itself.

## b) The conversion of Cyprian

Even the story of Cyprian<sup>14</sup> (who became a Christian around 245AD, bishop of Carthage as of 249AD, martyred in 258AD), presents itself as an account of his adhesion to the Christian faith to a dear friend, Donato, who had just

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<sup>14</sup> You can see A. Carpin, *L'esperienza battesimale di san Cipriano*, “Sacra Doctrina” 5 (2002), p. 88–131; D. Ramos Lisson, *La conversion de san Cipriano*, “Revista Augustiniana” 27 (1986),

been baptized and who perhaps for his social position hesitated to practice all the breaks with the past that the Christian faith asked for with respect to contemporary social habits.

The aim of this fraternal narrative of conversion is immediately marked in the opening: it deals with the greatness of the grace of baptism, the depth of the step that was realised by who received it and which is waiting to be fully achieved throughout the life of the person. Cyprian intends to encourage and confirm the choice made, emphasizing its merits and goodness. Since the story is written, the narration of his own conversion discreetly becomes a witness and an invitation to his context never to exclude a dialog about the faith.

The story (*To Donatus* 3–5) focuses around two nuclei: the change between the before and after, and the new journey that it now takes. The beginning of the journey is marked by a two-fold anxiety: that dictated by the dissatisfaction of a way of life bound to opulent surroundings, over indulgence, eagerness for praise, and the successive way of life produced from the perception that the high standards of the Gospel were inaccessible for those who had been long accustomed to the world: “I thought that what divine mercy promised me to get to salvation was extremely difficult and hard for my habits at that time [...] I said to myself, how can such a profound conversion be possible?” (*To Donatus* 3).

The difficulties felt are not only of a moral nature but also compatibility with the environment, with its current modes of living and the evaluation of the current context. Conversion involves taking a distance with respect to the current life, a distance which may marginalize. A number of counter images and values denote the new condition: dark-light denotes the passage from opulence to sobriety, from exteriority to modesty, from desire of success to care of the interior life (solitude). A new human being comes to light, healed, at peace, rich in the inside by the presence of the Lord. A new way of seeing and of considering things emerges, thanks to belonging to God: “But after the aid of the water which regenerates, the stain of the past life being wiped out, in my purified and cleansed soul a light from above was spread; having received the heavenly Spirit from above, my second birth transformed me into a new human being. Suddenly what was doubtful became wonderfully certain, that which was impenetrable became clear, what was dark appeared bright to me, what first seemed difficult to me became easy, what first seemed impossible to

me became possible; including also that which belonged to my previous life, born of the flesh, that which was subject to sin now started to belong to God, that which the Holy Spirit had already given life. [...] Our every possibility belongs to God” (*To Donatus* 4).

If first Cyprian had the clear perception of belonging to a world as if at sunset, without strength, on the brink of exhaustion, now he knows that he is on a journey to the Kingdom of God, he is part of a new humanity, rich in new resources due to the gift of the Spirit. Christian life is a life on the border, on the edge between an aged way, exhausted, near the end, and the new world that has the full bloom in the kingdom of God in front of it. In this condition, Christian life bears a savour, prophecy; while in this condition one is always at risk of being reported backwards from the fragility of nature and from the pressures of the old world by which s/he is surrounded.<sup>15</sup>

The tone of the story is one of astonishment at the miracle of “*so many conversions*”, for a conversion so deep, the entire work of the Spirit. “As if from a high peak” (*To Donatus* 6) it allows you to clearly evaluate the merit of the liberation from the “darkness of a blind world”: the gloom of theatrical performances, the inconsistencies of private life, the bullying in the practice of justice, the arrogance and vanity of power, the attachment to wealth (ib. 6–13). The gift of the Spirit that enables the soul to acknowledge the Creator while looking at the sky gives a taste of an innocent life and according to justice in fraternal joy. Cyprian here does not mention the factors that brought him to accept the journey of grace. He gives an indirect signal only at the end and as a way to convey that the journey continues: “Be thou diligent to prayer and to reading. Now you speak with God, and then God with thee” (*To Donatus* 15). His deacon Pontius, who wrote the biography, tells us of the apprenticeship of reading the Scriptures and of the effectiveness of the presence of the priest Caecilian as “the father of his new life” (*Life of Cyprian* 4).

### c) The story of Hilary

Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers around the years 353/54–367AD, was involved in the Arian controversy, and for this he was exiled by the Emperor Constantius II in

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<sup>15</sup> On the theme of *senectus mundi* and of the liminal condition of Christian life according to Cyprian, one can see: E. Zocca, *La “senectus mundi”. Significato, fonti e fortuna di un tema cipriano*, “Augustinianum” 35 (1995), p. 641–677.

355AD. He speaks of the journey that led him to the Christian faith as a sort of “prologue” to his major work, *De Trinitate* (I, 1–14).<sup>16</sup>

To prepare his readers to follow him in the exposure and deepening of the Trinitarian faith, he declares from which point of departure he will commence, which path has led him to serve the faith as a bishop, to guard the true meaning of the baptism which is the subject of the Arian controversy. He narrates to help us to place ourselves in front of the faith with the right meaning, beyond the narrow lanes of the controversy.

The narrative unfolds between two extremes: the beginning of the journey towards faith is due to “looking around” in the search for a direction in life (I, 1), the conclusion consists in finding oneself at the service of the Gospel as a bishop in the church (I, 14.1). The journey goes through three steps: from common opinion to philosophical wisdom (I, 1–4), from wisdom to Jewish prophecy (I, 5–9), from prophecy to the freshness of the Gospel (I, 10–14). Hilary secures a starting point to his journey in the search for meaning in life, which cannot reduce the person to “passive opulence”. The human being is not a receptacle of desires greater than those of animals, and reduced to consume these desires between the unconsciousness of childhood and the physical and mental limitations of old age. The criticism that philosophy gives to this type of life indicates that it is a good thing to pursue the practice of virtue; but leaves much doubt about the identity of God in which this life should be grounded and find a guaranteed point of arrival. The encounter with Jewish Scriptures (Ex 3, 14 commented through Is 40, 12 and 66, 1–2) allows one to recognize God as the One who embraces everything, who is present at every moment and ensures who gives value to everything. Eventually, the sudden appearance of the Christian novelty (Jn 1, 1–14; Col 2, 8–15), synthesized in the fatherhood of God, in the coming of the Son in flesh among us, in the grace of being children, allows our existence on earth to become a path to freedom from evil, according to the dignity of sons and daughters, towards the fullness of life.

At first glance the story of Hilary seems to give the impression of a solitary, interior endeavour, following a dissatisfaction, of an inspiration that has always pushed him forward. In reality his narration makes us understand him well as

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr R. Gounelle, *L'itinéraire spirituel d'Hilaire de Poitiers* (De Trinitate I. 1–14), in: D. Vineyards (ed.), *La conversion chez les Pères de l'Église*, ed. Words et Silence, Paris 2014, p. 107–119 (at p. 119 he give a reference bibliography); G. Laiti, *Ilario di Poitiers. Le fatiche del cuore e la speranza insperata del Vangelo*, “Communio” 214 (2007), p. 68–74.

a man of his time who shares contemporary problems and questions with the high social strata of the society to which he belongs. The way in which he gives an account of his approach to the Scriptures, to their articulation in OT–NT, the law (Ex 3, 14), prophecy (Is 40, 66), wisdom literature (Wis 13, 5), the Gospel (Jn 1, 14 ) and the Apostle (Col 2, 8–15), shows the plan used for catechesis that leads to baptism in the Church. Faith is generated from the history of salvation that collects and asks questions about life and about God and attempts at answering them on the basis of encountering them definitively in Jesus, the Son who became man. In this way, we can live in the world as our house as long as it has been created by God, who visited it and saved it. The change of feelings, of the interior condition, which punctuate the story (the soul/the mind is tired, anxious, pleased, in joy ...), indicate that the path is not only of a theoretical one, a purification of concepts, but it is rather a personal relationship that is first subject of an intuition, then surprise and finally a place for re-thinking the meaning of life, a place of peace and of service.

The path that leads to the faith is also one that keeps him in the correct path, in the orthodox profession. Heresy indicates the danger to which the faith is exposed, and a risk which takes the form of a temptation of assimilating the Christian faith in the way of thinking about God from a human being's point of view. In Hilary's time, this is the symptom of the resistances that the newness of the Gospel encounters. The approach to Scriptures as the history of salvation, the ever-deepening of the faith, maintaining the intelligence in the condition of a constant discipleship are a permanent benefit of conversion that needs to be guarded and practiced. Hilary hands this on all the readers at the very end of *De Trinitate*: „I beg you, keep my faith, the one which I believe in without any stain, and allow me to give witness to my conscience until the last breath of my soul. O Lord, may I always remains faithful to what I professed in the Symbol during my rebirth, when I was baptized in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That I adore thee, our Father, and together with thee thy Son; that I deserve your Holy Spirit, which proceeds from you through your Only Begotten Son ... Amen” (*The Trinity* 12, 57 ).

The baptismal faith is the anchor point on which to regulate life. In his new unpredictable newness with us, Jesus Christ is not a meteorite which is foreign to the world of human beings. In his gratuity he is the secret that governs the world and the existence of human beings. He is the Word, the Creator and the Saviour. Coming to faith signifies being able to inhabit the world as one's home since it was created and saved by the Spirit who dwells in it.

The story of Augustine is too well known because one needs to stop and think for long moments.<sup>17</sup> His *confession* which became a masterpiece has many aspects: a personal meditation, spiritual exercises for which all are invited, a celebration of the grace of God. Biographical information, reflection, and prayer show the richness of the Christian memory which allows us to summarize it poetically: “Too late did I love You, O Fairness, so ancient, and yet so new! Too late did I love You! For behold, You were within, and I without, and there did I seek You; I, unlovely, rushed heedlessly among the things of beauty You made. You were with me, but I was not with You. Those things kept me far from You, which, unless they were in You, were not. You called, and cried aloud, and forced open my deafness. You gleamed and shine, and chase away my blindness. You exhaled odours, and I drew in my breath and do pant after You. I tasted, and do hunger and thirst. You touched me, and I burned for Your peace” (Conf X, 27).

This “balance” contains all the journey made by Augustine. It was a fifteen year journey, in which he himself speaks of three conversions: of the will, of the mind and of freedom. This is the journey which Augustine acknowledges as the unfolding of his own personality which is an echo of a relationship with God, with God of Jesus Christ. The opening calls the decisive factor in a very emotional way: the initiative of God which Augustine had resisted for a long time, so long that he risked arriving too late for the meeting. Those things which at the time were considered legitimate objections now constitute a painful delay in time to reach to God, on his presence that embraces the entire history, on his non-comparable prestige. What follows is the identification of the reasons for his “delay”: his regardless condition, the inability to recognize the link of everything and of the value of all things with God, up to the paradox of a God who on his part is very close and of the distance from him by Augustine. Finally the grace of faith is seen as a healing of the entire human condition because of its capabilities of accessing reality. The adhesion to the faith takes place through the recovery of hearing, of sight, of smell and of taste. At this point, the desire is now focussed on peace, on accepting God’s gifts. The famous scene of the

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<sup>17</sup> A recent detail: P. Langa Aquilar, *La conversión de san Agustín*, “Teología y Catequesis” 127 (2013), p. 193–218. Very useful, I. Bochet, *Le livre VIII des “Confessions”*: récit de conversion et réflexion théologique, *NRTh* 118/3 (1996), p. 363–384; I. Bochet, *L’expérience de la conversion selon les 32 premières Enarrationes in Psalmos d’Augustin*, in: *L’esegesi dei Padri Latini dalle origini a Gregorio Magno*, XXVIII Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana, Roma, 6–8 maggio 1999, Roma, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum (coll. “Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum” 68) (2000), p. 307–330.

garden (Conf. VIII 12, 28–30) shows how hearing is healed through the passage to the “performative” value of the word of God contained in the Scriptures; this listening allows you to go through the last obstacle on the path to the Gospel, the fascination for the type of life which until then was not undertaken, the career of the imperial *cursus* (Conf. VIII 12, 29–30)<sup>18</sup>. Augustine is led to this last seashore by listening to the Word explained by Ambrose: it allows him to be linked with affection to the name of Jesus which was given to him in the first education which he received from his mother (Conf. I, 11.17), as the coherent plan of a Christian life, fraternal life, gathering around a single service of the Lord. The path towards faith is actually an apprenticeship of a new way of living in the world made possible by the Word that God gave us by becoming one of us in His Son Jesus made man. I. Bochet and A. M. Vannier from a cross-reading of the “Confessions” and from the “Explanations on the psalms” derive a valuable indication: Augustine found in the psalms a language to speak about his own experience, and what is more, to interpret it, and to decipher its depth. The psalms are a school to learn how to praise God, to recognize his action at the centre of your life and bear witness to it, so as to awaken in others the desire to live the same experience.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Conversion as permanent form of Christian life

Conversion does not only signify the path toward the Christian faith, it means a permanent form of life. This is a theme that recurs frequently in homilies of the ancient Church. The voice of Origen is particularly eloquent: “There are in the Christian Church some who have faith in God, and they do not discuss his commandments, who perform their duties even in respect to the servants of God; they are truly zealous when it comes to help the Church or in ministry. But then in their actions and in their private life they are impure, still engulfed in vices, they did not ‘shed the old life and its works’ (Col 3, 9). They show respect towards the servants of God and the worship of the Church, but in their

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<sup>18</sup> For this aspect you can see C. Lepelley, *Un aspect de la conversion d’Augustin: la rupture avec ses ambitions sociales et politiques*, BLE 88 (1987), p. 229–246.

<sup>19</sup> I. Bochet, *L’expérience de la conversion selon les 32 premières Enarratoines in Psalmos d’Augustin*; A. M. Vannier, *Narration et herméneutique de soi dans les Confessions de S. Augustin*, “Lo Sguardo” – Rivista Elettronica di Filosofia – 11 (2013), p. 57–70.

conduct show no signs of improvement and inner renewal” (Origen, Homilies on Joshua 10, 1).

The era of a church made of up of a few baptized, all fervent, seems to belong to a distant past, that of his childhood marked by the martyrdom of his father Leonid. The temptation to make of Christianity a religion to which one belongs and not a deep personal commitment was part of what the context at the time suggested. Origen exercises his ministry of an “exegete of Scripture” as a task that recalls the newness of the life to which his faith is committed, the taking distance which it calls for. On the one hand, it demarcates the difference between the relationship with God and that of a dictatorial imperial power, on the other hand it calls for consistency with one’s way of life. God calls in ways which are distinct from power and at a much more profound level. God reveals himself in a coherent and integral way to the entire person and to interior life: “If we who have converted to God have done this with reserves, we deserve to be criticised for not being converted wholeheartedly. True conversion consists in seeing the old things (OT) [...], in reading the books of the New Covenant, the words of the apostles; after reading this we need to write all this in our own heart, conforming our life to the words [...], learning to glorify God almighty through Jesus Christ. To him be glory and power for ever and ever” (Homilies on Jeremiah IV, 6).

Conversion leading to baptism does not mark the end of a process but the beginning of an ongoing journey. Christian life brings with it a tension that is congenital, nourished by the superabundance of God’s gifts, contained in the quality of life that it promotes. An aristocratic solution of this tension, a solution which would consider the possibility of the perfect life only to a few, a spiritual life (a gnostic temptation) must be rejected as foreign to the Gospel.

Still St Zeno, Bishop of Verona just after the second half of the fourth century, trying to identify those to whom Jesus refers when speaking of those who loves darkness rather than light, even after the light has come into the world (Jn 3, 19), observes: “he wished to indicate uncertain and feeble Christians, who are in the middle way between the pious and the wicked, not adhering completely to any part, while not ceasing to take either one side or the other. They are not faithful, because in them they have some infidelity, they are not infidels, because in them there is a shadow of faith, in as much as with words they serve God, with the facts the world” (I, 35, 2.4–5).

The journey toward faith and in the faith remains always a delicate one in the fragility of the human person, in the ambiguity of motivations, in its

exposure to social conditions. The post-constantinian condition has increased these aspects which are clearly visible in “conversions of returning individuals”. The most fragrant episode is that of Julian once he became an emperor; but it is not unique.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Characteristics and factors of conversion

The analysis of stories, even though brief, allows us to detect an overall pattern for conversion marked by constants and variables:

1. *Conversion is a path of change* in a double sense which as content has the unfolding of a change and its own reasons for this, and of a change which produces a journey, a new way of living. Adherence to the Christian faith is achieved as conversion that remains a constant requirement for the entire Christian life.

2. *The encounter with the Word of God in Scriptures has a fundamental role.* It is an experience of a fundamental change: the first decisive step is not of the human being but of God. God commences and comes towards us. Scriptures bear witness to this through the prophecy-fulfilment dynamics (according to Justin a proof of prophecy), as the gift of a “new birth” in Cyprian, as a progressive revelation of the face of God in Hilary, as a proof of the infinite proximity of God, the “*via humilitatis*” in Augustine. By virtue of what the Scriptures demonstrate, access to God moves from cosmology to history. God entrusts his word to human beings (prophets), makes it happen as events of salvation, until the Word and the preacher coincide in the Lord Jesus, until the Word of God is totally exposed to the proof of historical existence. The attestation of this event puts the truth in a state which was never seen before, that of the self-revelation/self-communication of God who transforms the search in an act of discipleship, asks tradition to make room for the newness of a gift that is guaranteed in the goodness of its giver.

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<sup>20</sup> A Bishop of Ilio named Pelagius was re-admitted by Emperor Julian to the priesthood of the revived pagan cult (cfr. Julian, Briefe, hsrsg. Von B. K. Weis, Heimeran. München 1973, p. 97–101 e p. 290–292). Under the same Emperor Julian, the Sophist Ekebolios, for several times went from Christianity to “hellenic cults” and vice-versa (Socrate HE III, 13). It is not by coincidence that the Theodosian Code had ten measures against apostasy. One can see P. L. Malosse, *Conversion et culture dans le monde grec du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C.*, CIER 7 (2009), p. 1–9.

3. *The ministry of the Christian community.* In fact the Christian community is the place where Scriptures can be accessed (a practice of the catechumenate) and of the ministry of the Word (cfr the elderly who acts as a guide to Justin, Caecilian to Cyprian according to the biography of Pontius, Ambrose and Simplicius for Augustine).

4. *The physiognomy of the new life.* A new access to God becomes the source of a new way of living human life: a new birth, a true philosophy. This is to be considered in the “lordship” of Jesus Christ which has a visible space in the church. Life becomes witness and ministry.

The stories are not simple reports but an interpretation of the journey made: they let us see that the resulting life at the end is not always corresponding to that lived in a direct way: personal needs (a search, dissatisfaction motives...), the network of relationships (witnesses), the value of the message (a revelation from God) are factors that intervene on the way. At the beginning one's situation in life acts as a stimulus, the meetings are a space that activate the journey, the prestige of the message emerges slowly and at the end becomes the decisive motive. In the re-reading which precedes the final version of the narrative, it is the value of the message that has a decisive role; however, it is understandable that the lived experience unfolded gradually, while the relation to the social context set everything in motion. The fact that conversion is a dynamic aspect of the entire Christian life renders all the children of God attentive to the task of restructuring their lives in the world, of the incessant need to restructure their behaviour in a consistent way (even that which is socially approved) on the Good News of the Gospel, of the life of the children of God. The stories reveal that the decisive point is the excess of grace, a light that leads one to recognize Sacred Scripture as the good news, which is true for their lives, a Word that indicates and assures the way. At the beginning it is often a situation of unrest, of research, of distance between desire and a project for life which the environment conveys. At the end, becoming part of the Christian community unfolds in a repositioning in the world.

## 5. Conclusion

Conversion according to the biblical and specifically Christian concept was always in trouble in the ancient world which was used to a plurality of religious affiliations and to the way in which the Jewish religion was tolerated as something

“strange” of a small nation. The proposal to join the message and the lordship of Jesus is not based on ethnicity, and with no connection to political power was looked upon with suspicion. Notwithstanding this, the appeal was taken up increasingly by people from all walks of life, even if those who could give it to us in writing did it because they formed part of the middle-high class in the culture of that time.

Conversion is always a personal experience that the narrator offers us according to the meaning it has been given to it, after making the journey and achieving faith that is perceived as the gift of a good life, of a saved life. As such the story aims to bear witness and to be a proposal for all, according to the opportunities and the difficulties that the different cultural and ecclesial contexts pose.

Conversion always happens in cultural contexts that are not indifferent to the way in which the act is implemented. Until the beginning of the fourth century the adherence to the Christian faith called for the formation of a different personal identity which was far from the social one. It asked for a series of evident breaks with the current lifestyle and marginalised the person. The novelty was clear, the temptations of environmental influences which were their own habits, accompanied the Christian life. The possibility of a high price for fidelity was part of the contract. The adherence to the Christian faith had two very visible difficulties: a new disconnection between the religious sphere and the political sphere (an end to “public worship”, sanctioned by tradition and by the law as an act of membership to the political society), and the re-expression of the religious sphere, which has become one’s interior reason for living and way of life (the philosophical quality of life). With the “Constantinian change” the condition changes to the point of overturning. At the end of the century, with the Teodosian era, the risk of marginalization was for non-Christians, the Christian identity was identical to the social identity. The urgency of making an emphasis on “a Christian difference” was taken up by the monks. “Conversion” often came to mean putting on the monastic habit.

The way to live in the world remained a very strong question for a faith which proclaimed that the Gospel is for all, and for the world, but never in the world. Faith is made up of converting and of the necessity to remain on the path of conversion.