

Some thoughts on conversion

A peasant met us, from whose mouth we learned / That from the spot which had perplexed us first / We must descend, . . . / We questioned him again, and yet again; / But every word that from the peasant's lips / Came in reply, translated by our feelings, / Ended in this, - 'that we had crossed the Alps'.

Those words are taken from William Wordsworth's *The Prelude – Book 6*, written over the first half of the 1800's. It includes poetically a chronicle of a walking tour he made with a friend into the Swiss Alps.

Have you ever undergone a conversion? I mean an experience in one way or another that so carried you beyond the everyday worries of life, your preoccupations with pressing concerns, from the chatter of the media and even the routines of piety itself, that left you, as St. Paul describes in today's second reading, *weeping as not weeping, rejoicing as not rejoicing, buying as not owning, using the world as not using it fully . . . [because] the world in its present form is passing away?* In other words: leaving you (at least for a moment) at a loss before a *clean slate* – old habits and opinions somehow no longer operative (at least for a moment) – as if, after climbing day after day after day, you are surprised to learn that *you have just crossed the Alps?* I had an experience like that – as I have mentioned in talks here at St. Leo's – it happened in a classroom in Rome during a lecture on St. Paul himself so that when I left the classroom I was in a different space and even time – as if my calendar had opened to a “thirteenth month” of the year.

You plod along from infancy through this and that situation, subscribed to this or that answer to things as society has conjured up. You acquire the appropriate identities – ethnic, national, racial, economic, even ecclesiastical. You carry your necessary “passports”. Things are predictable from day to day, leaving you with the usual errands and appointments for weeks ahead. You climb the ever ascending incline of time and then somebody or something informs you that *“you have just crossed the Alps.”* As Wordsworth continues: . . . *I was lost; / Halted without an effort to break through; / But to my conscious soul I now can say / - “I recognize thy glory.”* Given the boundless grace of God, such moments need not be rare – though they can, as happened to St. Paul, toss you to the ground, engaging you to reorient the way you see, speak, hear and do things: as with amazing grace.

Often conversions need no conscious effort on our part. God has plenty of time to waste – until by a word spoken, a question posed, a lyric heard and you pause. Or only if one day it crosses your mind to ask yourself who am I? what am I? where do we all come from? Such moments can open you up to a revelation, an experience, even as a flower opens up to a honeybee. Poets speak of such shocks, as did E. E. Cummings when he wrote:

no time ago / or else a life / walking in the dark / I met christ // jesus) my heart / flopped over / and lay still / while he passed (as // close as I'm to you / yes closer / made of nothing / except loneliness.

Geoff Wood