Conversion's Impact on Marriage

The implications of conversion for spouses and their marriages are far-reaching. Recalling our earlier discussions of covenant, charity, sacrament, and dignity, we can begin to see the ways a married individual is called upon to be converted: as an individual, within the marriage, and as one called to live in the image of God. To be covenanted to one's spouse requires setting aside one's former independent life in order to live in total union with another. The former life of the individual is, in a sense, lost so that the new life as one-with-another within the marriage can begin. The steadfast covenant of marriage becomes a locus of new life that requires conversion as a condition of entrance and as a condition of marital success.
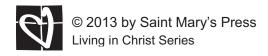
Charity, like covenant, requires a turning away from disordered self-love. To be charitable in the sense of loving through giving oneself in service to others is the central, moral response of Jesus to the Father. Conversion experienced as this moral response, in turn, becomes the central challenge of the New Testament to Christians.[1] Conversion to active love reflective of Jesus' values is required of all Christians and is to be lived out in relationship to intimates, to the Christian community, and to all neighbors of every sort. Marriage once again becomes a unique locus for the convert's call to live out active charity, especially as the New Testament charges spouses with this task.[2] Moreover, marriage acts as a locus from which family members are strengthened to show charity for neighbors and non-intimates. In this sense, Christian marriage both requires and enables conversion to charity.

The change of heart that constitutes conversion is both a matter of grace, with which the convert is gifted, as well as a matter of personal response and choice. As mentioned earlier, Christians have long debated the degree to which people are passive recipients or active participants in grace. Even a brief attempt at exploring that debate lies far beyond the reach of this present discussion. However, drawing on previous discussions of the Catholic theology of marriage as a sacrament, we can say that marriage constitutes a state of grace whereby spouses confer grace upon one another. To enter into a genuinely sacramental marriage requires at least the intent to be an occasion of grace for one's spouse. Again, sincerely marrying another with this intent represents a form of conversion from one's former life toward life with another, with the foremost responsibility of seeing to the other's spiritual and personal well-being. When two people bring to their marriage this intent, the marriage becomes a place for both receiving and participating in sacramental grace.

Finally, the dignity of all human beings may be inalienable, but this dignity is not always easy to see whether in oneself or in others. Particularly when people live together intimately, they frequently lose sight of each other's core dignity because they become familiar to the point of taking one another for granted. Conversion requires renewed sight and a return to seeing in every human being a creature made in the image of God. Marriage and family life provide a special context for negotiating the challenges of respecting, expressing, and fostering the personal dignity of oneself, one's kin, and one's neighbors.

In summation, when people see the dangers of self-aggrandizement and wish to let go of egotistical self-absorption, the process of conversion can begin. Conversion allows people to look outward for ways to serve, rather than ways to be served. Conversion enables people to find the joy in giving their talents, energies, and personhood away and ultimately to experience the ecstasy of finding happiness in others. True covenant, charity, grace, and dignity become possible for the converted heart and are essential to the good of marriage.

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[1] This is the main claim of Charles Curran, "Conversion: The Central Moral Message of Jesus," in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Con (New York: Alba House, 1978), 225–245.

[2] See Eph 5:21–32.

Character

We are mistaken if we believe conversion to be a "one-time" event. Individuals may and perhaps must have powerful moments in their lives when the need for personal change is glaringly obvious. Yet it is also easy to gain some distance from those moments and to forget the great insights that they revealed to us. Conversions may begin with dramatic moments, such as biblical Paul reports, but they are not limited to those kinds of experiences nor are they contained entirely by them. It would be better to say that conversions may begin by dramatic or deeply life-altering events, but they are lasting when they decidedly affect our decision to establish within ourselves a character marked by a transformation of heart, lived out in active expression.

Character development occurs over time through the deliberate cultivation of virtues.[3] The ancient Greeks identified four "cardinal" virtues, so called because the good life hinges on them (*cardo* is Latin for "hinge"). These virtues are justice, fortitude, temperance, and prudence. In the Christian theological tradition, the three "theological" virtues of faith, hope, and charity are coupled with these four cardinal virtues. Altogether, the seven virtues constitute a set of qualities whereby, when habitually demonstrated, a person achieves a virtuous character, able to live out the intentions born of conversion. These virtues play a key role in intimate relationships, moreover, as they constitute core characteristics of persons capable of living marriages as covenants.

At the heart of a system of ethics based on the habituation of virtues lies the notion that true human goodness is determined by a proper end or *telos*. A teleological understanding of virtues posits that some qualities are more truly human than others. To put it another way, one can contrast what a human sometimes is with what a human ought to be. Joseph Kotva summarizes this situation well:

> Virtue ethics has then a tripartite structure: (1) human-nature-as-it-exists; (2) human-nature-as-it-could-be; and (3) those habits, capacities, interests, inclinations, precepts, injunctions, and prohibitions that will move us from point one to point two. Thus, within a teleological virtue ethic certain kinds of actions, habits, capacities, and inclinations are discouraged because they direct us away from our true nature. Other kinds of actions, habits, capacities, and inclinations are encouraged because they lead us to our true end. Virtue theory deals with the transition from who we are to who we could be. A concern with this transition requires that we also try to discover or uncover our true nature or *telos* and ascertain our present state or nature.[4]

How do we know what we are and what we ought to be? From a Christian point of view, a human ought to be one who embodies the image of God. How is this achieved? Again the Christian view is that through grace a human being is converted and hence is able both to desire and to work toward manifesting that image through actions. The qualities of justice, fortitude, temperance, prudence, and especially the qualities of faith, hope, and charity determine the actions, habits, inclinations, and capacities that help human beings embody the image of God.

In the New Testament, as we have discussed, charity or love is the ultimate virtue, without which none of the others matters. In classical virtue ethics, charity is best expressed in the discussion of friendship.

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[3] For an excellent college student's introduction to virtue ethics, see William Mattison III, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

[4] Joseph Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 37.

Both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas establish important foundations for Christian thought on friendship.[5] Aristotle evaluates different types of friendship, with the fullest kind oriented toward the teleological good of the other. In full friendship, one is attracted to the other on the grounds of the inherent goodness of the other and seeks to contribute to that goodness through friendship. For Aquinas, this fullest kind of friendship has its optimal expression in the human friendship with God. William Mattison describes friendship with God as the highest form of charity because God is perfect goodness. Analyzing Aquinas, he says, "Charity is loving God above all else, not arbitrarily but because God is goodness, and the source of all that is good. . . . There is no further good to seek above or beyond God. And thus charity is resting in, enjoying God, as supremely good, much as we would appreciate and enjoy a true friend."[6]
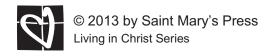
Friendship as described here is an important concept for a theology of marriage and family. For friendship between spouses, while many-layered, has its fullest meaning when spouses seek to nurture the inherent goodness of one another. Through their friendship, spouses can encourage this goodness and value, which we might also describe as dignity. And the goal of nurturing one another's goodness is ultimately or teleologically rooted in the love of God.

While we might agree that people are intended to become friends with God through a charity-driven life, we might still wonder how people are to acquire this virtue (let alone the other virtues). Aristotle suggests that people acquire virtues through striving toward excellence or *arete.* The key to achieving excellence in virtues lies in the striving toward it. In other words, the process of becoming virtuous is key to virtue itself. All virtues, according to Aristotle, are acquired by repetition and habituation. A person is not virtuous by being generous one time. Rather one develops a character of generosity by consistently practicing generosity. Over time, it can be said of a person that he or she has a generous character, but no such statement can be made of a person on account of one odd moment of generosity in a lifetime of stinginess. Likewise, a person who consistently acts lazy or irritable demonstrates a lazy or irritable character, while a person who is consistently prompt, studious, and gentle may be said to have a character reflecting these virtues.

According to Aristotle, no character traits are acquired that are not possible or in some sense natural to us. And all character traits are habitual, both virtuous and unvirtuous alike. The key to Aristotle's genius here, and the reason he is important to us in this discussion, is his emphasis on character development as a matter of habitual choice. We choose every time whether we wish to be generous or stingy. When we have a habit of being generous, it becomes consistently easier to be generous. So also when we debase our characters by negative behaviors, we make it easier to scar ourselves and others repeatedly. Habitual practice is how we develop characters, whether for good or bad. We are, as a result, not bound by any behaviors by necessity, yet past performance creates in us predispositions to behave as we have in the past.

From a Christian point of view, this understanding of the acquisition of virtue holds true. Although we have argued at some length that sin interrupts perfect achievement of the characters people might wish to develop, we have also argued that the effects of Jesus' life are liberating in that they bring about a release from bondage to selfishness. The point of synthesis between this ancient Greek notion of character and the Christian notion of conversion is that they are both achieved *diachronically*, or over time. The converted charitable character is, to borrow the term, the *arete* or the excellence of the

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[5] For a clear introduction to Aristotle's virtue ethics, see Anna Lannstrom, *Loving the Fine: Virtue and Happiness in Aristotle's Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). For Aristotle's discussion of friendship, see *Nichomachean Ethics* in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 927–1112. Also pertinent here is Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II 23.

[6] Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 294.

Christian life. It is a turning around within oneself that is always in process of becoming what it intends to be. Even while it is in process, it is realizing the virtues of charity, faith, hope, and the other virtues toward which it strives.

Application to Family and Marriage Today

Charity is considered the highest expression of virtue because it has a teleological orientation toward God. Striving toward charity, however, is not authentic if it is conceived as a singular relationship between God and an individual. This is because no individual exists alone in the world. Indeed all human beings exist in varying levels of community with others, from members of one's family to the human community at large. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Christian character has far-reaching social implications because Christians express their love of God by loving their neighbors, their brothers, their spouses, and their children. The virtues of a properly converted Christian character can be seen in their full significance in the family, because the family both challenges and demands its members to live out communally an active love of God.[7]

In service to one's family, individuals must ultimately decide to instill consistently and habitually within themselves patterns of behavior that are modeled after Christ's example of charity and service. The goal is the development of a character that finds self-giving as natural as breathing. This process, which begins with conversion of heart, is sustained through the intentional development of character. Through this character at the individual level, Christians cultivate a social character that reflects the core values by which they understand and make sense of their lives as individuals and the purpose of their marriage.

Because it is so easy to take advantage of those closest to us, it becomes crucial for spouses to bring converted characters to their relationships within family life. This means that spouses must, first and foremost, recognize the potential for disfiguring self-interest that persists in their lives and must regard themselves with humility. A humble character is open and conciliatory, forgiving and accepting, patient, gentle, and kind. It is a character modeled after the characteristics of love described in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Such qualities are not mere platitudes but directives for the character that persons should bring to those whom they claim to love.

When two people having converted characters cooperate to form an open spirit of dialogue and mutual self-giving, the possibility of a new character of the marriage emerges. Like a person, a marriage has a personality and character of its own, and it reflects the habitual and repetitious behaviors of its spouses. If two people consistently build each other up through self-gift, patience, and cooperation, the marriage that results will have an admirable character. It will be enduring and kind within itself, and consequently, it will shine as an example of excellence to others. If, on the other hand, the marriage is afflicted with habitual arguing, name-calling, and selfish refusal to concede, the marriage will find itself thin, worn, and disfigured.

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[7] The social implications of Christian virtue ethics and especially the role that the Christian family plays in both demonstrating and shaping the moral life of society is the subject of Stanley Hauerwas' *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Part 3 (pp. 155–74) on the moral value of the family and ethical reflections on the family is particularly useful here.

Marriage ultimately is about choice. People choose whether they will view—and live out—marriage as a sacrament or not. They choose whether to seek to instill within their marriage the character of covenant or not. They choose whether to act in charity through the service of self or not. They choose whether to regard one another with dignity or not. They make choices that become habits that either strengthen or weaken them as individuals and their marriage as a union.

Our choices express the genuineness of personal conversion. Those with whom we share intimate and daily life will feel our choices most keenly. Although we may at times feel trapped by bad patterns or destructive actions, Christianity teaches that people can at any time allow for the grace of conversion to operate within their lives. Although we may have established patterns of behavior that are negative, we can choose to habituate different patterns that over time transform the character of the marriage toward one of true charity. The reality of sin reminds us that our efforts will remain flawed, but the greater reality of redemption reminds us that we are free to strive toward holiness.