

in the sense that he rams Catholic teaching down everyone's throat, but that he is ready, quietly and confidently, always to give an account of the faith that is in him to those who ask.



## ST AUGUSTINE'S GEOGRAPHY OF CONVERSION

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**I** SUPPOSE the thing that strikes one most forcibly about St Augustine's *Confessions* is the astonishing power of introspection which they reveal. Rarely can there have been a man aware of himself and his experience with such ruthless clarity. The result is that all Augustine's theological thought is an experience-theology. It is never abstract, uncommitted, or impersonal. But this is not to say that his mind remained enclosed in his own personal world. He was not only a person of unusual self-awareness, he was also, if we can so put it, an unusually public person. Because he could look at himself so shrewdly and objectively, he was able to develop his experience into ideas of universal validity. It is with such a development of his experience of conversion that we are here concerned; not with the personal voyage of discovery described in the *Confessions*, but with the geographical charts which came of that voyage, and which he unfolds in his *De Trinitate*.

First of all a word of explanation about why conversion should come into a book on the Trinity. The *De Trinitate* is not a scientific theological treatise on the mystery of the Trinity; it is a quest, an attempt to discover the three divine Persons almost as Columbus discovered America. In the first seven books Augustine investigates the *data* of scripture and tradition for the doctrine; in the last eight he sets out to discover the reality of the Trinity through the image of the Trinity which is man, man *secundum mentem*, in his highest or spiritual part. Simply as an intellectual exercise the effort is doomed to failure, and Augustine explains why in the last book. We may take it that he realized this before he began. It is only in the next life that we will be able to *see* the divine Persons, that faith will give way to the vision of perfect understanding. Before we can fully discover God, we must cross the Atlantic ocean of death. But the point is that for Augustine the effort to

find God through the image of our mind is not simply an intellectual exercise. It is an exercise in realizing the image itself, in unfolding ourselves into a more and more perfect, more vital likeness of the threefold divine exemplar. It is in fact an exercise in progressive and continual conversion. Man is made in the image and likeness of God. The image is distorted and the likeness blurred by sin. In Christ we are provided, so to speak, with the matrix for restoring the likeness and remaking the image.

The background then to Augustine's idea of conversion is his idea of aversion, or sin. In stating it the picture he has in mind is always of the architypal sin, the fall, and superimposed on it, re-enacting it, his own experience as described in the *Confessions*. Here are two passages in which the picture is vividly drawn. In the first he is discussing the meaning of the maxim 'Know thyself', which is an exercise that plays a crucial part in the realization of the divine image.

*De Trinitate X, 7.*

Why is the mind commanded to know itself? In my opinion it means that it should think about itself, and live according to its nature; that is, it should want to be set in its natural place and order, *under* him it ought to be subject to, and *over* things it ought to be in charge of; *under* him it should be governed by and *over* things it should be governing. In fact, however, its desires are bent and twisted, and so it does many things, as though it had forgotten its true self, as follows. It sees certain inward beauties of that more sublime nature which is God; and while it ought to stand still and enjoy them, it wants to attribute them to itself. It wants to be independently what he is, and is not content with being dependently like him, and so it turns away from him and starts shifting and slipping away into less and less which it imagines to be more and more. It is, after all, not sufficient for itself, nor does anything else suffice it once it departs from him who alone can suffice it. And so in its poverty and distress it becomes excessively intent on its own actions and the unquiet pleasures it gets through them; in this way it becomes greedy to acquire experiences from things outside itself, the sort of things it loves when it gets to know them, and which it realizes it may lose unless it takes anxious care to hold on to them. The result is that it loses its sense of security, and

takes ever less trouble to think about itself the more assured it is that it cannot lose itself. That it does not think about itself does not mean, of course, that it ceases to know itself . . .; and yet such is the power of love, that when it has spent a long time thinking lovingly about these exterior things and has glued itself on to them with its anxious care, it draws them back with it even when it is returning in some way or other to thinking about itself. And because the things outside, which it has fallen in love with through the senses and wrapped itself up in by long familiarity, are material bodies and cannot therefore be brought into the region, so to say, of its own immaterial nature, it rolls itself up in their images, and clutches on to what it has made out of itself inside itself.

In this passage Augustine is chiefly concerned with what might be called an intellectual fall into ignorance, but he makes it clear that it all starts in a morally vicious intellectual pride. The following extract also occurs in a long discussion of *scientia* (which is systematically contrasted with *sapientia*, wisdom, and might be translated, perhaps, as *savoir-faire*, a quality which unlike wisdom can be used well or ill). But the moral obliquity and the shameful consequences of the proud grasping at this sort of knowledge are more vehemently stressed.

*De Trinitate* XII, 14 & 16.

The soul, loving its own power, slides away from the whole which is common to all into the part which is its own private property. By following God's directions and being perfectly governed by his laws, it could enjoy the whole universe of creation; but by the apostasy of pride, which is called the beginning of sin (Eccli. x, 15), it strives to grab something more than the whole and to govern it by its own laws; and because there is nothing more than the whole, it is thrust back into anxiety over a part, and so by being greedy for more it gets less. That is why greed is called the root of all evils (1 Tim. vi, 10). Thus all that it tries to do on its own against the laws of the universe, it does by its own body, which is the only part it has a part-ownership in. And so it finds delight in bodily shapes and movements, and because it cannot take them inside, it wraps itself in their images which it has fixed in the memory. In this way it defiles itself foully with a fanciful sort of fornication;

prostituting the imagination by referring all its activities to one or more of three ends; curiosity, searching for material and temporal experience through the senses; swollen conceit, affecting to be above other souls which are given over to their senses; or carnal pleasures, plunging itself in that muddy whirlpool. . . .

But it would not slide down to such ugly and wretched prostitution straight away from the beginning. For just as a serpent does not walk with open strides, but wriggles along by the tiny little movements of its scales; so the careless glide little by little along the slippery path of failure, and beginning from a distorted appetite for being like God, they end up by becoming like beasts. So it is that stripped naked of their first robe,<sup>1</sup> they earned the skin garments of mortality (cf. Gen. iii, 7, 21). For man's true honour is God's image and likeness in him, but this can only be preserved when directed towards him from whom its impression is received. And so the less love he has for what is his very own, the more tightly he will be able to stick to God. But out of greed to know his own power by experience he tumbled down, by some sort of downward drag of his own, into himself as though down to the middle level. And then, while he wants to be, like God, under nobody, he is thrust down as a punishment from his own half-way level to the bottom, down to the material things in which the beasts find their pleasure. And so since his honour consists in being like God and his disgrace in being like a beast, the 48th psalm says, 'Man, established in honour, did not understand; he was matched with senseless animals, and became like them'.

How could he travel this long way from the heights to the depths, except through the half-way level of self? If you neglect to hold dear in charity the wisdom which always remains the same, and hanker after knowledge (*savoir-faire*) through experience of changeable, temporal things, this knowledge swells you out instead of building you up (cf. 1 Cor. viii, 1). In this way the mind is overweighted with a sort of self-heaviness, and is therefore heaved out of the state of happiness, and by that experience of its half-way-ness it learns to its punishment what a difference there is between the good it has forsaken and the

<sup>1</sup> The robe of grace, the *stola prima* in which the prodigal was clothed on his return to his father.

evil it has committed; nor can it go back up again, having squandered and lost its strength, except by the grace of its Maker calling it to repentance and forgiving it its sins. For who will ever free his hapless soul from the body of this death, except by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord (cf. Rom. vii, 24)?

The picture of the effect of sin presented by these passages is of the collapse of an original harmonious order. Order, for Augustine, is not the static pattern which the word tends to suggest in English, but a rhythmical balance, or direction, of energies. In the original order of creation the mind controlled the lower forces of the material world in virtue of its own subordination to and direction towards the divine control. Pride rejects this subordination, the mind wants to be directed only on itself, to set itself at the top and the centre of the whole system. But the effect produced by this *aversion* away from God to self is the exact opposite to that intended; instead of rising *higher* and concentrating its forces more deeply *inwards*, the mind falls *downwards*, and collapses, scatters its forces, *outwards*. I underline the spatial words, because they provide the imaginative framework for Augustine's idea. The master sins involved are pride and greed. They have succeeded, one might say, in turning the image inside out and upside down.

Such being the chaotic deployment or explosion of forces active in and produced by aversion, we can see that the re-organizing, re-ordering work of conversion must proceed in the opposite direction; instead of pride and greed gliding downwards and outwards, we must have humility and charity working inwards and upwards; inwards away from things to self, and upwards through self to God. But this work of conversion, of re-integrating the image, is impossible without the grace of the mediator. It is essentially a divine work, the work of justification and sanctification.

Augustine's insistence on this absolute priority of grace is perhaps the most Augustinian thing about him. But we are entitled to ask why it should be so, in the framework of his own description of sin and the fall. When the sinner has realized that he has taken a wrong turning, and hard experience will soon teach him this, why cannot he simply turn round and retrace his steps? If you put your shirt on inside out, all you have to do is take

it off and put it on again the right way. The first reason why such a course is impossible in this case is what we might call the self-generating nature of pride. The mind can start off by itself on the return journey, it can proceed, if it is of sufficient calibre, on the first stage inwards from things to self, even on the second stage, as a purely intellectual exercise, from self to God. But this is an achievement calculated of its very nature to puff up the mind with pride, to give it an inescapable feeling of its own superiority. This is the classic way of pagan philosophy, and even if the philosophers have philosophized correctly, as Augustine held (at least at the beginning of his Christian career) that a man like Plotinus had, their occupational vice is pride. In this context he is constantly quoting Romans i, 18-23.<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of fact Augustine became increasingly sceptical about the ability of even the best philosophers to discover anything like the fulness of divine truth. In any case the task of tracing a route back to God through the ruins of ignorance caused by the fall would be impossible for the majority, unless that route were illuminated by the divine light of faith. The following passage concludes a long discussion of men's universal desire for happiness, in which he has argued that from any point of view, whatever you may think true happiness consists in, life cannot be truly happy unless it is everlasting.

*De Trinitate* XIII, 12.

Whether human nature is capable of this everlasting life, which it nonetheless admits to be so desirable, is no small question. But if the faith possessed by those to whom Jesus gave the power of becoming sons of God is at hand, there is no question at all. Extremely few who have tried to solve the matter by human arguments, though endowed with every advantage, have been able to reach any conclusion about even the soul's immortality. [And their ideas about immortality and happiness or beatitude have been highly uncertain, not to say contradictory. They are fully discussed in the twelfth book of the *City of God*.] But faith promises on the strength of divine authority, not of human argument, that the whole man, consisting of course both of soul and body, is going to be immortal and therefore truly happy. And so after the gospel

<sup>2</sup> See below, p. 99f.

had said that Jesus gave 'those who received him the power of becoming sons of God', and had explained what receiving him meant by saying 'those who believe in his name', and how they become the sons of God by adding 'who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God'; after this, in case the human weakness which we see and carry around with us should make us despair of attaining such eminence, he goes on directly, 'and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John i, 12-14). The purpose was to convince us of what might seem unbelievable by showing us its opposite. For surely, if the Son of God by nature became the son of man by mercy for the sake of the sons of men—that is the meaning of 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us men'; how much easier is it to believe that the sons of man by nature become the sons of God by God's grace, and dwell in God in whom alone and from whom alone they can enjoy happiness by sharing his immortality? It was to convince us of this that the Son of God came to share in our mortality.

This passage will have suggested a much more fundamental reason why the sinner cannot simply convert himself, or the mind restore itself to the pristine perfection of its imaging God. It is that the order which has been disrupted by the fall is an order of personal relationships. It is only in virtue of a personal bond between him and his Maker that man can be said to be in the image of God. It is a personal friendship that sin has broken, and while it may perhaps be questioned whether it takes two to make a quarrel, it undoubtedly takes two to make a quarrel up. In the following passage Augustine concludes a long exposition of the congruity and fittingness of the reconciliation offered us by God in Christ. The divine initiative in making up the quarrel has taken the form of a condescension, in the true and inoffensive meaning of that word. The Son of God came down, or was sent out to where we had fallen down and been scattered out, in order to guide us back on the conversion route of inwards and upwards from the senses and imagination, through *scientia* or *savoir-faire* to the contemplation of divine and eternal things which is wisdom. And so faith in the incarnation and redemption, which were events occurring in the world of space and time, belong to the practical side of the mind, to its *savoir-faire*, and their objects are presented to it imaginatively in the gospel, in order to redirect

all these lower functions of the mind to its sublimest function of wisdom or the contemplation of divine things, and thus turn the image the right way up again.

*De Trinitate* XIII, 21 & 24.

And so why, after all, should Christ not have died? Why indeed should the Almighty not have set aside all the other countless ways in which he could have delivered us, and chosen this way above all, in which his divinity suffered no change or diminution, and the humanity he took upon himself conferred such an immense benefit upon men? The eternal Son of God being also the son of man paid the debt he did not owe of temporal death, to deliver them from the debt they did owe of eternal death. The devil was holding on to our sins, and using them to keep us fixed deservedly in death. He who had none of his own let us off our sins, and was brought by the devil undeservedly to death. Such has been the power and value of that blood, that he who exacted from Christ even for that short time a death he did not owe, thereby lost the right to hold any who had put on Christ in the eternal death they did owe. So 'God commends his charity to us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Much more then, being justified now in his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath through him' (Rom. v, 8ff). Justified, he says, in his blood; justified, clearly, in being delivered from all our sins; and delivered from all our sins, because the Son of God, who had none, was slain for us. And so we shall be saved from the wrath through him—from God's wrath, of course, which is nothing else but justly inflicted punishment. If then justly inflicted divine punishment has been given such a name as wrath, what else can reconciliation with God mean but the end of this wrath? Indeed we were only God's enemies in the sense that sins are the enemies of justice, and so when the sins are forgiven hostilities come to an end, and those whom the Just One justifies are reconciled to him. But of course he loved them even as enemies, seeing that 'he did not spare his own Son, but surrendered him for us all' (Rom. viii, 32), when we were still enemies. So the apostle continues, quite logically, 'For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son'—by which the forgiveness of our sins was achieved—'much more surely,



now that we have been reconciled, shall we be saved in his life' (ib., v, 10). Safe in life, because reconciled by death. Who could doubt that he is going to give his life to his friends, for whom he gave his death while they were enemies? . . .

All these things that the Word become flesh did and endured for us in space and time, belong, according to the distinction I have been trying to establish, to knowledge (*savoir-faire*) and not to wisdom. But that the Word is, outside time and beyond place, that he is co-eternal with the Father and present everywhere, if any one manages to speak at all about that, it will be 'the utterance of wisdom (1 Cor. xii, 8). Thus the Word become flesh, which is what Christ Jesus is, has treasures both of wisdom and knowledge, as St Paul says when writing to the Colossians (Col. ii, 3) . . . I take the difference between these two to be this, that wisdom concerns divine things, knowledge human things, and every believer will be with me in acknowledging each of them in Christ. And when I read that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, in the Word I understand the true Son of God, and in the flesh I recognize the true son of man, both of them joined together by an unimaginable profusion of grace into one person of God and man. So it goes on, 'And we saw his glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, the fulness of grace and truth' (John i, 14). I think we can refer grace to knowledge and truth to wisdom, without any inconsistency. Among things that have arisen in time, the joining of a man to God in one person is the supreme grace; and among eternal things the supreme truth is rightly attributed to the Word of God. It is by faith in what he did for us in space and time that we are purified in order to be able to contemplate him reliably in his eternal realities. The greatest pagan philosophers were able to gaze upon the invisible things of God, which they divined through the things that have been made; but because they philosophized without a mediator, that is without the man Christ Jesus, neither believing the prophets who said he would come, nor the apostles who said he had, 'they held down the truth', as is said of them, 'in iniquity' (Rom. i, 18). Here they were on this lowest, material, level of creation; they were bound to look for some middle stage, something to mediate their transfer to those highest, spiritual things they had understood. And so they fell into the deceitful toils of demons,

who induced them to change the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the image of corruptible man, and birds, and animals, and reptiles (ibid. 23). Such were the forms of the idols they set up and worshipped. But our knowledge [that is our means of transferring from the lowest to the highest] is Christ, and our wisdom also is the same Christ. It is he who sows in us faith about temporal things, and he who shows us the truth about eternal things. Through him we go to him, through knowledge we wend our way to wisdom. But in this process we never depart from one and the same Christ, 'in whom all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden'.

The incarnation of the Word, and the death of the Word become flesh, provide for Augustine the classic example of humility. So by accepting Christ on this lowest material level of creation in which he came to us, and clinging to him as our guide back inwards and upwards to God, we are saved from the self-stultifying, vicious circle of pride. For a man of Augustine's intellectual power there can be few things so humbling as having to make an act of faith, to take on trust what you cannot see or understand. It is by faith alone that we can grasp the mediator, the guide back to vision and understanding, the Word incarnate. The first step of aversion was a sin of intellectual pride; the first step of conversion must be one of intellectual humility, which is faith.

But it is only the first step. The image is not restored to its ultimate degree of perfection in the twinkling of an eye. By faith we remember, in some strange way, the God we had forgotten; we remember him when we meet him in Christ. That encounter may take place in a moment; at least there must always be a definitive moment when God is acknowledged as recognized and remembered. This moment is, so to speak, caught sacramentally in baptism. But then we have to get to know God better and better in Christ; faith has to strive towards understanding, memory has to give birth slowly to comprehension, the whole process being powered by charity; faith working through love. So conversion is a lifelong process; a growing, Augustine would say, through knowledge into wisdom. It is indeed an adventure which calls for the continual play of intelligence, but it is not a purely intellectual pursuit, because the object of our knowledge and our wisdom is a person. What we are being invited to is an

ever closer intimacy with God through Jesus Christ, which cannot be undertaken without constant readiness of will and liveliness of mind. On this subject let Augustine have the last word.

*De Trinitate* XIV, 22 & 23.

Those who have remembered and turn to the Lord (Ps. xxi, 28) from the deformity which had conformed them by worldly lusts to this world, pay attention to the apostle, who says, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be reformed in the newness of your minds' (Rom. xii, 2); and thus the image begins to be reformed by him who formed it in the first place. It cannot reform itself, as it was able to deform itself. Elsewhere he says, 'Be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new man, who was created according to God in justice and the holiness of truth' (Eph. iv, 23). 'Created according to God' means the same as 'in the image of God'. But by sinning he lost justice and the holiness of truth, and thus this image became deformed and shabby; he gets those qualities back again when he is reformed and renovated. . . .

Certainly this renovation does not happen in one moment of conversion, as the baptismal renovation by the forgiveness of all sins happens in a moment, so that not even one tiny sin remains unforgiven. But it is one thing to throw off a fever, another to recover from the weakness which the fever leaves behind it; it is one thing to remove a bullet from the body, another to heal the wound it made with a complete cure. The first stage of the cure is to remove the cause of debility, and this is done by pardoning all sins; the second stage is curing the debility itself, and this is done gradually by making steady progress in the renovation of the image. These two stages are referred to in the psalm, which says, 'He is gracious to all your iniquities'—which happens in baptism—'and heals all your infirmities' (Ps. cii, 3)—which happens by daily advances, in which the image is renewed. About this the apostle speaks quite explicitly: 'Even if our outer man is being corrupted, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day' (2 Cor. iv, 16). So then the man who is being renewed in justice and the holiness of truth, making progress day by day, is transferring his love from temporal things to eternal, from visible to intelligible, from carnal to spiritual things; he is practising himself in

checking and lessening his greed for the one sort, and in binding himself with charity to the other. In this his success depends on divine help; it is God who declares, 'Without me you can do nothing' (John xv, 5). When the last day of his life overtakes someone, who has kept faith in the mediator, making this sort of progress, he will be received by the holy angels to be presented to the God he has worshipped and to be perfected by him, and so to receive his body again incorruptible at the end of the world. For only when it comes to the perfect vision of God will this image bear God's perfect likeness.



## THE CONVERSION OF CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

JEAN-FR SIX

**I**N a jotting he made in 1821 J. H. Newman wrote: 'I speak of conversion with great diffidence, being obliged to adopt the language of books. For my feelings, as far as I remember, were so different from any account I have ever read, that I dare not go by what may be an individual case.'

The abbé Huvelin, who was to be God's principal instrument in the conversion of Charles de Foucauld, felt the same difficulty. 'The story of a conversion', he wrote, 'even of one's own, is something that can never be fully understood. You can see the stages that have led up to it, but that is all. Our Lord acts in such a variety of ways.' In this article we will sketch the story of such stages, and investigate as delicately as possible their convergence on the focal-point which constitutes de Foucauld's conversion.

In February 1886 Charles de Foucauld was living in a flat in Paris not far from St Augustine's. He was twenty-eight years old, a man at the height of his powers, and had just completed an exploration of Morocco, which he had conducted with outstanding insight and perseverance. This proud and stoical feat of will-power restored him to the good opinion of his family, which had hitherto looked with decided disapproval on the gay and disreputable life he had been leading.

In Morocco Charles de Foucauld had come across Islam. What struck him most forcibly about it was its profound and characteristic sense of God's greatness. It was this that summoned him to