

Continual Conversion: From Secularity to Sanctity

John the Baptist: Joy and Conversion

Just once I want to walk into a meeting at church and say those words: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?” I haven’t done it yet. If you’re in that meeting, know that it’s a very special meeting.

John the Baptist often gets a bad rap in art and in our imagination—as if he were only stern and austere because he fasted, lived in the desert, and spoke hard truths. In fact, I believe John is one of the most joyful people ever to live. The most joyful people are those with undivided hearts—at peace because they are locked in on God and His plans. That’s John. He lived in solitude with the God who loves him, without the world’s distractions.

There’s another reason for John’s joy: he regularly witnessed conversion. Anyone who has worked in the Church knows that watching hearts come to the Lord is one of the most joy-giving experiences there is. Yes, he had stern words for scribes and Pharisees, many of whom weren’t converting when Jesus came on the scene. But many others came with hearts God had already been working on, and seeing lives turn toward God and their eternal destiny is deeply joyful.

John’s warning about “raising up children to Abraham from these stones” corrects a false security. The judgment—wheat and chaff—is not about outward religious observance alone. Outward practices matter, but if we are merely part of the religious elite while our hearts resist conversion, we stand a high chance of being left out. “Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance.” Conversion is usually slow, even for people who are working at it; still, there will be fruits—evidence of God’s grace. We often call them the “twelve gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Joy is one of them. My thesis today is this: the opposite of conversion is not usually a headlong dive into vice. Rather, it is secularity.

The Opposite of Conversion: Secularity

Secularity becomes our default without vigilance. Even if we come to Mass on Sunday and pray regularly, our assumptions can become secular. Consider three facets that mirror true conversion—intellectual, moral, and spiritual—and their secular counterfeits.

Intellectually, the central secular assumption is autonomy or independence. There is a legitimate autonomy: apart from sin (always “no”), the Lord wants us to set trajectories with His blessing; we don’t want Church or state dictating every life choice. But secularity pushes further: “I am independent.” That is the basic assumption.

Morally, the secular move that follows is entitlement—“I am owed certain things.” Whether sinful or not, the stance is entitlement. The Christian counter-move is giftedness: everything essential is received.

Spiritually, secularity insists, “I get to determine who I become.” That is different from setting a course under God’s blessing; it claims mastery over identity and destiny. Life’s limits, vulnerabilities, and sufferings contradict this, and when the claim collides with reality, anger and frustration follow—scapegoating, depression, anxiety, a sense of overwhelm. Does that not describe much of our contemporary discourse?

The Steps of Christian Conversion

By contrast, Christian conversion unfolds in three movements.

Intellectual conversion: God exists. God is good. God loves me. Therefore, I have a destiny with Him. Many people reach this step—some very bright theologians have gotten the facts right—yet stop there.

Moral conversion: my life is called to conform to God’s way. I recognize where I fall short and desire to align with the commandments and the Beatitudes. We call this obedience. Mature Christians know that obedience to the Lord leads to freedom, while disobedience leads to slavery.

Spiritual conversion: for those who have begun the first two steps, it becomes clear we are made in the image and likeness of God. Not only can we know and love Him; by grace, in communion with Him, we can become like Him. In fact, Christ lives in us and through us. This is the move that leads to peace, joy, and encouragement, as St. Paul says.

Be encouraged: Jesus is risen. He loves you. He is gentle. With our cooperation in the process of conversion, He leads us more deeply to Himself.

For reflection this week, simply pray and ask the Lord if there is some part of your life—mind, heart, or spirit—that needs conversion. Ask Him for the light to trust more deeply and to take the step He is calling you to take.

Dear friends in Christ, let us thank the Lord for His goodness and pledge ourselves to continual conversion, so that Christ may live in us and through us and we may be ready for the joyful celebration of the Lord’s Nativity.

Praise be Jesus Christ.