

journey of faith for Teens

M1, Mystagogy • Conversion: A Lifelong Process



The soul of one who serves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in the mood for singing.

SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS



Now that I'm a full member of the Church I don't understand why I still have to come to meetings with my group. I like the group but I have other things to do.

The Easter Vigil does not mark the end of your formation as a Catholic Christian. Rather, it marks the beginning of a commitment to a lifelong discovery and living out of the Christian message. We commit ourselves to further growth in our faith and in our ability to live as Christ wishes us to live. The Easter Vigil does not end our journey of faith, but rather marks a highlight of that journey. We continue on!

The fifty days from Easter to **Pentecost** is called the period of **mystagogy**, a Greek word meaning *mystery*. In the early Church, the community used this time to explain the mystery of the sacraments the catechumens had just experienced. The liturgical season of Easter (the weeks following Easter continuing until Pentecost) serves as a time for the **neophytes** (those who have just become Catholics) to have a deeper understanding of God's Word, the sacraments, and the meaning of their new commitment for their lives. The neophytes continue to gather to pray and to explore ways to better live their new faith.

During the period of mystagogy, our focus changes from *learning* about the faith to *living* the faith. New Catholics are invited to participate fully in the life of their parish.



You may be feeling what Saint John of the Cross described. You may also be experiencing other feelings:

"I felt such a spiritual high during the Easter Vigil. But now everything else seems so...ordinary."

"I feel like I've graduated. I guess I don't have to keep coming to these meetings."

"I feel kind of confused. I spent so much energy preparing for initiation into the Church. Now what do I do?"

"My friends are not nearly as excited as I am about my new faith. Sometimes that really gets me down."

"I really love my new faith, but I still have questions. Maybe I should have waited."

Whether you are still on a spiritual high or have mixed feelings, know that it is normal and natural to experience doubt and to have questions about your decision. Most lifelong Catholics also have questions about their faith from time to time. In fact, healthy questioning is very important to the development of a real and lasting faith—it begins the process of growth and understanding. The key to continuing on your journey of faith is *conversion*.

What is conversion?

The word **convert** has several layers of meaning. At its root, it means to *change* or to *turn around*. Most often, it is used to describe the process of changing religions.

While this is true, the meaning of *conversion* should not be limited to a change in religions. Conversion is the ever-present call of the *already committed* Christian to grow both in the faith and in the living of the faith. It includes a deepening of our relationship with God and with the people in our lives. More than a change of religions, true conversion involves a change of *heart*.

The first step in the conversion process is to turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as Lord and Savior, and choosing to live the life of faith in the community of God's people—the Church. This first turning is called *initial conversion*. It may be a moving experience or a dramatic moment that turns a person completely about-face. But for most of us, initial conversion is our true *acceptance* of something we have been

told all our lives—that Jesus loves us deeply and unconditionally.

But initial conversion is just the beginning. Conversion is a *process*. The initial conversion may happen quickly, but a life of faith will take lots of time and the right atmosphere to develop.



The apostles of Jesus provide an excellent example of initial conversion followed by the need to change and grow. When the apostles first converted and began to follow Jesus, their ideas of who he was were terribly misguided. They expected a different kind of Messiah than Jesus grew to be. The apostles imagined a warrior king, such as David, who would rally the people, gather an army, and drive the hated Romans from their land. Rejection, suffering, and particularly death on the cross were not part of their plan. But contrary to all their expectations, Jesus was the suffering servant, the one who came "not to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). He would wash their feet and tell them to do the same.

In other words, despite their initial conversion, the apostles of Jesus would have to go through dramatic changes if they were to remain faithful disciples. As they became close friends and daily companions of Jesus, they began to discover who he really was. He was so much more than they ever imagined! But this discovery—this deeper conversion—took *time*.

We make a big mistake when we look at conversion only as a once-

in-a-lifetime turning from sin to holiness. Conversion also requires perseverance, commitment, and the gradual and continual work of nourishing our faith. It is like fine-tuning a television picture that is already good but could be better. Ongoing conversion means steering our lives, bit by bit, closer to God.



How will continuing conversion affect my life?

Let's begin to answer this question by using an example.

In the eighteenth century, Alphonsus Liguori, an ambitious young lawyer, was handling a complicated case between two Italian dukes. When Alphonsus lost the case because of his own oversight, his whole world collapsed. He stormed out of the courtroom angrily.



A few weeks later, after an argument with his domineering father, he walked into a church and heard a voice saying, "Alphonsus, give yourself to me." He went up the street to the church of Our Lady of Ransom and placed his sword, the symbol of his nobility, on one of the side altars—symbolizing his decision to turn his life over to God.

Alphonsus' dramatic *initial conversion* happened in 1723, but this marked only the beginning of his conversion process.

Three years later, the young man was ordained a priest, the next step in his journey of faith. Then, while vacationing with four other priests on the Amalfi Coast, a sudden storm forced them to shore, and they took refuge in a hermitage called Saint Mary's of the Mountain. Alphonsus was overwhelmed with the poverty of the simple goatherders nearby. They knew little of the faith, and their moral life was in chaos. His conversion process continued when he dedicated himself to serving the poor of the country district.

But Saint Alphonsus was not yet done with conversion. The death of his friend and teacher, Bishop Falcoia, found him needing to take on the role of leader. His experience hearing the confessions of the rural poor made him a compassionate and humble leader.

The process of conversion was a lifelong process for this great man. And so it with us. While God may not call us to be missionaries and priests, God does call us to use our gifts and talents to bring love and truth to our world.

Our initial conversions have taken place. We have traveled some time now on our journeys of faith.



We have accepted Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but now the lifelong process of true conversion continues.

For our faith to take root and grow, we must nourish it on a *daily* basis.

This means that we take time out of each and every day for prayer. Prayer includes prayer within the faith community at Mass as well as personal prayer. Sometimes prayer involves no more than making time for solitude and quiet so that we can hear the voice of God and become more open to God's presence in our lives.

We also nourish our faith when we become involved in the work of the faith community to which we belong. We serve the people of God when we become active in parish choirs or music ensembles, when we become ministers of the Word or ministers of hospitality.

Some of us may have unique talents or gifts that allow us to serve in very special areas. Those of who excel in sports might become coaches



who share the faith through teaching the values of respect, good sportsmanship, and commitment to the young people under their care. Those who love to teach might become after-school tutors. Those who wish to serve the greater community might work one day a month in a soup kitchen or a day-care facility that assists unwed mothers or families living in poverty.

The process of conversion continues through the most ordinary circumstances of daily living. We grow as disciples of Christ when we kindly tolerate a frustrated sibling, when we respect the guidance of our parents, when we include a shunned classmate, and when we take time to comfort a friend who is sad. The roots of our faith grow when we say "No" to doing things that will harm our bodies or our minds and when we struggle to protect the minds and bodies of others. Conversion continues every time we make the decision to act in ways that are loving, truthful, and Christ-centered.



Ordinary experiences can be turning, or re-turning, points in our lives. We will all stumble and fall at times. Like Saint Peter, there will be times when, out of fear or stress, we deny Christ. But this does not mean that our conversion was insincere. Christ willingly and lovingly forgives us—and then asks that we

I was on such a spiritual high after the Easter Vigil. I felt such an overwhelming sense of God's presence and of belonging to the Church. But that feeling is gone now. I just plug along day after day, without any special feelings that I am close to God or God is close to me. What's wrong with me?



continue the journey. Often this requires that we make changes, and *we will be changed to the degree that we respond to our call to conversion.* We can ignore the call or we can respond totally.

True commitment and persever-

ance make the difference between a fleeting religious experience and a true turning point in life. God's power and grace begin the process of our conversion. Our commitment and perseverance allow it to continue. Call upon God's help.

Look at your life. The grace of conversion has touched you and will call you even further. As it is for all Christians, your life in God is one of continued conversion. Respond with all your heart.

Journal Starters

If you can, describe your doubts and unanswered questions as precisely as possible. (Remember, your doubts about matters of faith are not bad. It is far more harmful to ignore doubts and feelings of uneasiness.)

After describing or listing your unanswered questions, take action! Ask questions of and look for answers from mature individuals whom you respect and trust. Read. Search. Pray. Make sure you have a little quiet time each day. Be open to the mystery of faith. You may not always be able to explain everything you believe. Trust in God. Be patient with yourself. You may not always realize it, but the process of your conversion will continue!

The Good Words

Pentecost

mystagogy

neophytes

convert

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M2, Mystagogy • The Laity: Called to Build God's Kingdom



The members of a parish liturgy planning committee were choosing songs for the upcoming Sunday Masses. After deciding on a few traditional hymns, one of the liturgists remarked that a few contemporary songs should also be sung. "After all," she said, "it is important that young people enjoy the music that we sing at Mass, for they are the future of the Church."

A young priest sitting at the table then spoke up. "I beg to differ," he said, "but young people are *not* the future of the Church. They are the Church."

What do you think the young priest meant by his comment?

Did you know that, as young people, *you* are tremendously important to God's plan for the world? Did you know that you are a member of the priesthood of the faithful? Did you know that you are called to build God's reign on earth?

These gifts and responsibilities come with the graces received at baptism. God marks all Christians as children of God empowered to act in Christ's name as priests, prophets, and kings. In the words of Saint Peter,

*You are a chosen race,
a royal priesthood, a
holy nation, God's own
people, in order that
you may proclaim the
mighty acts of him who
called you out of
darkness into his
marvelous light.*

1 PETER 2:9



As *priests*, you are asked to offer worship to God, especially by participating in the eucharistic liturgy.

As *prophets*, you speak the Word of God and witness to the life, teachings, and saving actions of Christ in your everyday life.

As *kings*, you are given the power of God to continue Christ's ministry of service and love to all people. (Remember, Christ was a servant-king.) Furthermore, you are an heir to the reign of God.

What does being a lay person mean?

Members of the Church who are not ordained clergy and not members of a religious order are called *lay persons* or members of the *laity*. Unfortunately, the term *lay person* has often had the negative connotation of *amateur* or *person of less importance*. But the word actually describes God's high calling to faith and to service.



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M3, Mystagogy • Your Special Gifts

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11



You can't picture yourself as a prophet or performing mighty deeds? You're not a straight-A student or the leading home-run hitter on your baseball team, so you don't think you have any special gifts? You think the Holy Spirit just passed right over you?

The Holy Spirit didn't leave you out. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are far more important to human happiness than grades or athletic ability. This handout will help you recognize the special gifts the Holy Spirit has given you.

The Expression of Wisdom

One afternoon Mother was bustling around the church getting ready for a banquet. Damp strands of hair clung to her forehead as she poked flowers into vases and carried trays of plates.

An ancient Chinese grandmother sat serenely on the sidelines observing the bustle. Seeing her, Mother stopped and greeted the old woman. "Oh, my, what a busy day this is, Mrs. Lew. There's so much to do."

Mrs. Lew nodded and agreed. With an encouraging little smile, she patted Mother's hand. "Don't worry," she said, "someday you be old too."

PAT KING

It is said that wisdom comes with age. Mrs. Lew looked at the world through wise eyes. She realized that old age is not a tragedy but a time when one could sit back and enjoy life a bit more. She saw the meaning of life not in arranging things but in being at peace.

Though wisdom usually comes with age and experience, this is not automatic. Wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is attained through having an open mind, learning from experience, understanding human nature, and knowing that God is alive and active at the heart of our world.

We use the gift of expression of wisdom when we

- Listen to others and then express our honest and heartfelt feelings and opinions
- Discourage harmful or destructive behavior in our friends
- Participate in small faith groups or Bible study groups

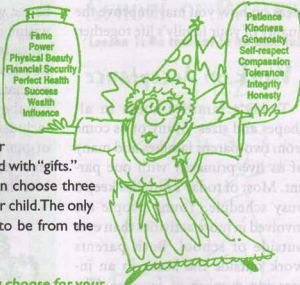


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M4, Mystagogy • Family Life

I imagine your life many years in the future. You have been married for a few years and your spouse and you have been blessed with your first child. Now this child has a remarkable fairy godmother who shows you two jars filled with "gifts."

She tells you that you can choose three gifts from the jars to give your child. The only catch is that all three have to be from the same jar.



Which three gifts would you choose for your child? Why? Remember, all three must be from the same jar.

There are many considerations parents might keep in mind in choosing their gifts.

Mr. and Mrs. Worldly might say, "We've chosen from the *first* jar—perfect health, wealth, and influence. We want our daughter to be successful, and they're the things we think she'll need most."

Mr. and Mrs. Christian-Values might look at it like this: "We've chosen from the *second* jar because the contents are more likely to bring a person happiness than anything in the first

jar. So we've chosen kindness, self-respect, and integrity."

Then, there's Mr. and Mrs. We'd-Like-to-Have-It-All who say, "We've chosen from the *first* jar—

physical beauty, financial security, and perfect health.

And here's why: we don't think you need a fairy godmother to provide the things in the second jar. *It's our job as parents to give these gifts to our children.*

No matter which set of parents you agree with, Mr. and Mrs. We'd-Like-to-Have-It-All certainly have made a good point. Parents, by their

But the things in the first jar are outside anyone's control, so we might as well take advantage of the fairy godmother.



love, care, influence, and example, can lay the foundations that will encourage a child to develop the kinds of gifts contained in the second jar. In other words, most of the gifts in the second jar are *learned*, not given.

This is why the Catholic Church puts so much emphasis on the importance of family life. A happy and stable family provides the kind of atmosphere in which a child learns to relate to others—to care, to share, to love, to forgive.

The family is...the domestic Church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first teachers of the faith to their children.

VATICAN COUNCIL II

CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, #11

You probably already know from your own life experience that the family is where a child first learns that he or she is loved and accepted. This learning begins the moment the newborn baby is placed in his or her mother's arms. For the infant who is loved, there is an immediate feeling of comfort, warmth, security, and acceptance. This forms the basis of the child's image of self.

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M5, Mystagogy • Your Prayer Life

My friend's eyes opened wide with shock. I had just said to her that I didn't like to pray.

Did that mean I did not love God? No, but it did mean that my love was immature. I did not know how to pray so as to allow God to nourish my spirit directly.



Prayer Wisdom for the Young or Old

Let's be honest. Sometimes we don't like to pray. Sometimes we are less interested in prayer than in everything else we do. There may be times in our life when we love to pray, but just as often, we may avoid it or minimize the time we spend.

How do you feel about your prayer life?

SCHOOL OF PRAYER

Lesson 1: Be content to be human.



We may not feel thrilled every time we pray because feelings are as changeable as the weather. Prayer is precious because God touches our heart when we pray.

Since the quality of our prayer experience will not always be the same—its flavor will range from dry toast to the richest cream sauce—how can we make our prayer life come alive? (Please note that these are not rules for prayer but possibilities for exploring new ways to pray.)

Give More, Not Less!

When something bores us, we tend to put less and less time and energy into it. As we withdraw our participation, it becomes even less interesting. We've probably all

experienced this at school with a subject we don't particularly like.

One way to help prayer become more interesting is to throw ourselves into it anew, devoting more energy to it than before.

We may speak to God more intimately and tell God straight out what we are thinking and feeling. We might try including prayer in all our activities—mowing the lawn, walking to school, preparing for tests, getting dressed for soccer games, and practicing for the school musical. This will draw God and us together.

We may discuss prayer with others, sharing our experience and hearing theirs. We may even pray with others.

SCHOOL OF PRAYER

Lesson 2: You can pray anywhere, anytime.



Pray Only When You Want To!

It is true that discipline and duty have their place. But when we are

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M6, Mystagogy • Discernment

"Should I continue to spend time with Mark and Matt even though they constantly want me to do things I know my parents wouldn't approve of me doing?"

"Should I accept an after-school job at the grocery store even though I know the hours will be late and I will have less time to dedicate to my school work?"

"Should I write a pro-life editorial for our school newspaper even though I know many of my friends will disagree with me and possibly even laugh at me?"

Decisions, decisions, decisions.... Life is full of them, big and small, and sometimes it seems so difficult to know exactly what God is asking of us. When it comes to

decision making, many of us would like very much to dial heaven and say:

"Hi, Lord, this is your friend Mary. I am faced with this particular decision, and I was wondering which way I ought to go. Could you please let me know as soon as possible? Thanks."



How do you usually make big decisions? Do you tend to follow your head and carefully weigh out all the possibilities? Or do you most often follow your heart and go with how you feel at the time?

Even though no such direct line to God exists, God's guidance is still available to us. As Christians we believe that because the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts (see 1 Corinthians 6:19), we can indeed come to a good sense of God's truth for our lives. Before he left this world to return to his Father, Jesus promised us the gift of his Spirit. He told his disciples, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever...the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16-17).

One important role of the Holy Spirit is to lead us to truth by helping us to discover and walk God's path for our lives. But because the Holy

Spirit is not the only voice that seeks to guide us in life, we Christians need help when it comes to decision making. Besides the voice of God, there are many other voices that call out to us, seeking to attract us and influence us to walk in a particular direction.

What other voices besides God's influence your decision making? In other words, to whom do you turn when you need help with a decision?

The process of making a well-informed, thoughtful decision is called **discernment**. Honest discernment can be rather complicated because of our lack of self-knowledge and our desire for God to say yes to what *we ourselves* want. Sometimes it truly is difficult to discern God's will for us.



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M7, Mystagogy • Holiness

John was a gifted athlete. Running, kicking, throwing, batting, and shooting hoops all came naturally to him. But not so for his younger brother, Tommy. Tommy was usually the last one picked when it was time to choose teams. Too often coaches left him sitting on the bench while more talented players were sent onto the field.

When Tommy came home from an especially humiliating morning on the soccer field, John's heart ached for him. He knew Tommy wanted nothing more than to feel like he was an important part of the team. John decided that he wasn't going to let his brother give up on something he wanted so much. He offered himself to Tommy as his

personal trainer. Tommy eyes brightened at the thought.

The brothers went to work. They set up a regular backyard practice schedule. John worked diligently with Tommy, helping him improve his skills and instilling in him an I-can-do-it attitude. Months passed and everyone began noticing a new kid on the soccer field. Tommy had confidence. He had someone who believed in him. And he was finally in the game.

How would you define holiness?

How were John's actions towards his brother holy?

have only to *desire* it. But we must desire it *as a starving person desires food*.



Like John in the story above, we must involve ourselves in becoming like Christ. We must *act*. We must dedicate our hearts and our time to wanting holiness. Holiness is not just for the saints and the heroes. Holiness can be part of our everyday lives. John was not conscious of his decision to be holy, but he wished to share the goodness of God with his little brother. His *desire* became *action*. And holiness was his.

What do you want most in all your experience and dreams? Think about that carefully for a few minutes. It's the old question: if you had one wish, what would you ask for? Is it something material? Is it related to other people? Is it hard to express—like happiness or peace or holiness?

And this one wish—how much do you want it? How much time, effort, energy, thought, caring, and practice goes into it? There is only one reason human beings do not achieve greatness: they don't want it enough!



Do You Want to Be Holy?

Jesus told us that those who hunger and thirst for holiness will be filled. He offers no instant course in holiness. He offers no snap response to our half-hearted wishing to be holy. Above all, he does not make us holy when all we feel is a little guilt because we are not already holy—which is perhaps how most of us feel. Jesus assures us that holiness can be ours. We

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M8, Mystagogy • Evangelization

Describe a person who helped introduce you to the Catholic Church.

"About a year after my mother passed away, my dad began to date a woman who was Catholic. Because my family was unfamiliar with the Catholic Church, I thought statements like 'Catholics worship the pope' and 'Catholics think Mary is more important than Jesus' were true. I couldn't believe my dad was dating a Catholic!

"As time went on, my dad's friend—her name was Judy—taught me a lot about Catholicism through her actions. I saw that her faith was part of her everyday living. She often asked the question, 'What would Jesus do?' when faced with tough decisions. Prayers before and after meals were very important to her. So was going to Mass on Sunday. Judy always said that the Sunday Eucharist was her weekly feast with the People of God and that she wouldn't miss it for anything.

"I was attracted to Judy's church because she was such a faith-filled, peaceful person. She never forced her beliefs on my dad or me, but she answered many questions (and laughed at many of our false beliefs about the Catholic Church). One day, she invited us to join her for Mass. And that was the beginning...."

Too often when we hear the word **evangelization** we imagine TV preachers pounding on their podiums or fundamentalists asking us if we wish to be saved. Seldom do we associate the word **evangelization** with the Catholic Church.

But evangelization has been important to the Church since its beginnings. Christ's last words to us before ascending into heaven were about evangelizing:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

MATTHEW 28:19-20



The Catholics you and other converts encountered were **evangelizing**, whether they or you recognized it at the time. Somehow they were expressing to you the Good News about Jesus.

