

salvation of which the incarnation is the key. Every conversion to God finds its truth and fulness in the Church of Jesus Christ. In this question especially, apologetics must avoid superficial haste and the spirit of triumph. It does not have to prove more than theology affirms.

Should we desire to make converts? The answer is evident. Who can blame a man for trying to bring others to share in a truth he holds, or a Catholic for trying to attract to the Church the greatest possible number, of Christians and non-Christians alike? Yet this does not imply that any means whatsoever can be adopted to secure adherence. The apostolate is not a form of propaganda like any other, it is not out for sale promotion, it is not a recruiting campaign, a search for clients. It stems from supernatural faith and charity, and therefore respects and safeguards liberty, sincerity, candour. Its purpose is to help men to fulfil themselves in God and with God, according to the plan of salvation willed by God in Christ and his Church. 'I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly' (John x, 10).

In entering this communion a person is asked to renounce no truth he previously held or good he lived by, but to restore them and integrate them in a richer life. Conversion is a fulfilment. The term *profession of faith* is more correct and comprehensive and less offensive than *abjuration*, and the Holy Office has preferred the positive to the negative in recently approved formulas. In this light conversions to the Church can be considered without the sharpness of polemics and confessional rivalries.



AMERICAN CONVERT WORK

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EACH year in the United States 150,000 converts enter the Catholic Church. Considered by itself, this is a rather impressive figure. But when we consider that ours is a nation of some 170 million people (well over 100 million of them still outside the Church) and when we remember that there are some 40 million potential Catholic apostles, these convert statistics leave us little cause for complacency. The trial balance is

even less encouraging when we recall that a considerable number of Catholics lapse from the Church every year. 'But as far as conversions are concerned', says Fr Sheerin in *The Catholic World*, 'Catholicism and Protestantism in America are like two great forces that have reached a stalemate in competing for the minds of Americans. Neither side is making any great gains.'

But the prospect of a nation's conversion must go beyond mere statistics. The mysterious workings of God's grace must be taken into account. There are moral forces at work, which elude the calculations of the actuary, that can accelerate the growth or the decline of the Church in any land. And many Catholics see two such moral forces that may, if our zeal is equal to our God-given opportunities, win increasing numbers of converts in the years ahead.

First, there is the current 'return to religion' in the United States. Americans have never been an irreligious people. Militant atheists have never been more than a negligible minority. Nor have our sceptical professors or writers achieved decisive influence. But if religion did not suffer greatly from all-out attack, it suffered severely from sheer neglect. A creeping erosion set in which progressively weakened the spiritual vitality of American Protestantism. Church-going declined and Bible-reading ceased to be a daily practice for many. The sturdy conviction of God's majesty and justice, which had been so firmly ingrained in the 250 Protestant sects of our nation, lost much of its influence in daily life. Catholic and Protestant leaders agreed that secularism (as the American hierarchy in their annual statement a decade ago put it) 'was doing more than anything else to blight our heritage of Christian culture'.

Numerous forces contributed to cause this spiritual anaemia. But there is little doubt that a high standard of living, labour-saving devices, multiplied creature comforts and innumerable means of amusement induced a forgetfulness of the things that matter. God and the future life seemed less and less relevant. To a people who had become increasingly self-sufficient, religion had lost something of its former urgency. In such a spiritual climate it is understandable that enquirers were fewer than we might have wished.

In recent years, however, this trend has been reversed. Many forces of religion, which a generation ago seemed to be slowly

collapsing by default, are now reorganized, revitalized, and constitute a fighting body achieving notable victories. Not only is church membership on the rise but church attendance has vastly improved. The increase in church construction is obvious for all to see. Press, television, radio and movies—all reflect this trend by increased attention to religion. Politics, too, contributes its evidence. 'A professed unbeliever', notes one observer 'would be anathema to either political party. It is a rare campaigner who does not mention God in each of his talks. Some of the speeches of public officials sound almost like sermons. Church attendance is expected of men in high political office.'

It should be acknowledged that the impelling motives of some people and the quality of the religion to which many are returning are severely criticized. Most of us who are actively engaged in convert work, however, believe that these critics overlook numerous sound elements in the revival. Religion is debated on the college campus; St Thomas has returned to many universities; scientists are more conscious of the limitations of their special disciplines; and educators endeavour to restore religious instruction to young Americans. Nor are penance, humble worship and dependence on God absent from the religious practice of throngs of people.

We are not blind to the selfishness, superficiality and unconscious irreverence that often accompanies the return to religion. But we recall that the first steps in conversion are frequently awkward and often unpromising. There were stages in the journey of Augustine and Newman—not to mention that of the prodigal son—when their ultimate conversion might have seemed highly unlikely. Those who are in daily contact with non-Catholic inquirers are more inclined to agree with Bishop Sheen who believes that 'ten million Americans are ripe for conversion' and that 'the age of indifference to religion is passed'. Insecurity, frustration and fear in an age which sits on a global powder-keg has restored respect for religion. And a huge proportion of this interest is directed towards the Catholic Church. Once our main obstacle was apathy; today we must multiply means of communicating with those whose concern with religion has been revived.

The second favourable element is the changed status of the Catholic in America and his growing awareness of his apostolic

obligations. A great English churchman, a few years ago, described the new situation of the Church in England in the phrase 'out of the catacombs'. A similar situation in America is often characterized as 'out of the ghetto'.

In slightly over 150 years, Catholics in America have advanced numerically from 25 thousand to about 40 million. This unprecedented growth was largely the result of immigration. Heroic efforts were made to form this body, without unnecessary delay, into an indigenous church and to capitalize on the good will that has never been wanting among a certain number of non-Catholics. But providence decreed that it take longer than was expected by the optimistic. The urgent problems that confronted the American hierarchy were mountain high. There was the need for priests, churches and schools to care for the unending streams of newcomers; they had to contend with the poverty and lack of education of the immigrants; a constant trial was the bigotry, dislike and discrimination from which Catholics suffered. It is not surprising that for long decades many Catholics adopted an attitude of minority defensiveness and that many withdrew to a sort of ghetto. One can understand why many were inclined to say, 'Why be concerned with conversions? We have enough to do to take care of our own.'

This relative isolation and spirit of defensiveness, while it has not ceased entirely, is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The Church has become solidly established; Catholics have advanced socially, economically and culturally; and they have become a part of the main stream of our national life. Cardinal Newman once noted that 'the Church must be prepared for converts, as well as converts prepared for the Church'. And there is massive evidence to show that the Catholic in America has taken many giant strides towards this necessary preparation. A symbol of this changed status could be recognized when the National Council of Catholic Men recently held their biennial national convention in Detroit. Hundreds of Catholic men, from every corner of the nation, participated in workshops and study groups on practically every aspect of the lay apostolate. Twenty-five years ago, these Catholic men would have been content with a mammoth parade to exhibit Catholic numerical strength. Today they search for means of applying their Christian knowledge, influence and example in every area of our national life.

The late Fr James Martin Gillis, in one of his last articles, summed up the significance of all this as follows: 'Here in the United States we have made great progress since our grandfathers' day. The advance has been not only in numbers, wealth, social position, but—much better—in the interest and the esteem that our fellow citizens feel in us, our Church and our religion.'

It is impossible in a brief summary to do more than allude to some of the means employed to help win converts in America. These instruments—while not as numerous or effective as they might be—do constitute a vigorous apostolate. And it is constantly attracting an increasing number of apostles among priests and lay people.

'Long before we have made it fashionable to be Catholic we may have made it fashionable to sympathize with Catholicism', Hilaire Belloc once remarked. Before large-scale conversions are won in America an ancient wall of division between Catholics and our separated brethren must be breached. The prevailing view of the Church held by the generality of people needs to be improved as a necessary preparation for faith. And an enormous effort is being made to make fruitful contact with non-Catholics, to dispel their ignorance of the Church and to help them understand her aims, teachings and practices.

Considerable credit is due to numerous Catholic scholars who have won respect and a hearing in intellectual circles. They do not attempt to win converts directly. But they bring the wisdom of Catholicism to bear on the huge problems that beset our nation. In their efforts to work for the common good and throw light on the role of religion in our pluralist society, they have earned the confidence of non-Catholic scholars. And they are winning understanding—if not always acceptance—for the philosophical and theological principles of Catholicism and their relevance to the complex problems of our time.

There is no medium of communication which Catholics do not employ. Press, radio, television—locally or on a national scale—bring into millions of homes Catholic doctrinal or moral teachings, or programmes designed to acquaint non-Catholics with some aspect of Catholic life. Catholic information centres, correspondence or home study courses by mail, study clubs, parochial libraries, pamphlet racks in railway stations—these are some of the many means that are employed to attract attention to

the Church, convey information and instruction and improve the good will of our neighbours. Highly significant, and of great promise, is the fact that the tone of Catholic apologetics tends to be more eirenic. Whereas in former days many were apt to stress polemic tactics and defence of the Church, there is a more widespread attempt today to employ the 'friendly approach'.

Two fairly recent developments, one on the level of the diocese and the other at the parochial level, have proved to be especially effective. The first is the establishment of a bureau of information attached to the chancery in 60 of the 138 archdioceses and dioceses of the country. In 1956 the audit of the American Institute of Management attracted world-wide attention by its critical judgment on the manner in which the Catholic Church handled its 'public relations'. 'Nor does the Church handle its affairs particularly well on the public-information or publicity front', the report noted. 'First in the use of the word "propaganda", the Holy See has failed to utilize the best talent in the field. Time and again it put its worst vestment forward, when the best side could easily be shown.' For long decades, except for notable exceptions, this criticism might equally have been directed at American Catholics.

The Catholic Church with her institutions and personnel looms large in American life. Newsworthy events of all sorts are happening daily, and the news agencies are eager to report these Catholic activities fully and accurately. Too often, they are thwarted by the reluctance of Catholics to provide them with the facts. In order to get our full measure of favourable attention, the priest in charge of the diocesan bureau of information remains in constant contact with the news agencies. And he can always be reached by them whenever they wish information concerning the Church or her activities. And many of these directors hold institutes for the clergy, religious and laity of the diocese to coach them in the art of public relations.

An attempt to create better understanding of Catholicism among our more immediate neighbours is a plan called the 'Open House'. On a designated Sunday afternoon, non-Catholics within a parish are all invited to visit the local Catholic church. Lay guides are on hand to welcome them and conduct them on a guided tour of the house of prayer. Every detail of the church and its appointments—and their significance in the religious life of Catholics—is explained. From the holy water font to altar,

tabernacle, and sacristy, non-Catholics have an opportunity to learn and to ask questions. As groups complete the tour they are escorted to a place where refreshments are served and where they can meet the pastor and curates and the teaching sisters. Towards the end of the afternoon a sermon is preached and the day closes with benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

The 'Open House' idea has proved to be so effective that all the parishes of an entire diocese have sometimes sponsored such an event simultaneously. One of the most ambitious exemplifications of this plan was recently tried by all the Negro parishes of a section of New York City. The reaction of a Negro reporter on the staff of the daily paper *New York Journal American* is typical. 'To a Protestant reporter', he writes, 'the warmth and friendliness of the Catholic priests, nuns and laymen were immediately evident and gratifying. Persons outside the Catholic faith too seldom have an opportunity to talk informally with priests and nuns . . . there were no high-pressure propagandists. But, throughout it all, you could not escape the obvious peace and serenity which the devout Catholic seems to find in his religious life.'

Those whose favourable attention has been won are ultimately invited to attend an enquiry class or information class at one of the parishes or information centres. Many American priests were once inclined to prefer individual instruction to group instruction of converts. But with the increase in the number of enquirers and greater experience in the time-honoured, manifold advantages of group instruction, classes for converts have greatly multiplied. These classes usually meet twice a week and extend over a period of three months. And each enquirer has private meetings with the priest-instructor in so far as these are helpful or necessary.

Priests who conduct these courses usually arrange three series each year. On four Sundays preceding the opening of each course, an announcement is made at all the masses concerning the nature and purpose of the course and the need of fervent prayer for its success. Each parishioner is urged to invite non-Catholic relatives, friends or neighbours who have manifested any degree of goodwill, curiosity or interest in the Church. Since our Catholic laity are intimately acquainted with the most likely prospects and are in the best position to extend a warm personal invitation, it is easily seen why we find this the best means of recruiting well-attended classes.

Next, the parish census cards are examined and a list is made of all the non-Catholics who are married to Catholics. The pastor addresses a cordial personal letter to each of them, acquainting them with the details of the course, the advantages of attending it, and inviting them to come for one or all the lessons. Many priests find this letter to the non-Catholics in a mixed marriage second only to the zeal of the laity in winning the attendance of non-Catholic enquirers.

Since it is an established principle of good publicity to try to attract favourable attention in as many ways as possible, priests normally employ additional means of publicizing the class. Placards are usually placed in the vestibule of the parish church, and in the principal shops of the vicinity; leaflets are given to the laity as they leave the church after mass; leaflets are sometimes placed in all the mailboxes of the homes in the vicinity; and, in some places, lay people make a personal call on all the people within the parish. Some priests advertise in the daily or diocesan newspaper; place notices in trains and buses; and procure time on radio or television. Each locality has its own obstacles and opportunities in achieving effective publicity; and experience is the best test of what means are to be employed.

The course is usually advertised as an opportunity for all types of enquirers who seek accurate information regarding the Church. They are invited to attend one or all the lessons and are assured that no previous decision to become a Catholic is required. They are told that our main purpose is to provide an objective presentation of Catholic doctrines and practices and that any final step must be a matter of personal conviction and co-operation with God's grace. Questions are invited on the lesson for the evening or on topics previously discussed. Other questions may be addressed to the priest who is available before and after every class. A catechism is given each enquirer, and a supply of leaflets, pamphlets and books are at his disposal. The priest-instructor encourages private interviews with each enquirer, and tactfully seeks out those who are reticent. No catechumen is baptized who has not had a certain number of private conversations with the priest who conducts the class. Many priests, three or four times during the series, provide mimeographed tests which are answered in writing by the enquirers. These tests are usually extremely simple, but they enable the priest to gauge the progress of his catechumens.

This general plan offers to a non-Catholic a proposal that is obviously cordial and sincere, one that appeals to his sense of fairness and one that reduces to a minimum the difficulties of undertaking a comprehensive course in Catholic teaching. It also presents our Catholic laity with a practical programme for their zeal in the personal apostolate to Christ's 'other sheep'. And it enables any priest to meet non-Catholics half way, regardless of their original motive or degree of interest, and provides him with a means for facilitating their instruction.

Of course, some non-Catholics who come have already decided to enter the Church. Others approach merely out of curiosity and attend only a few lectures. But for those who complete the course, a familiar pattern can be recognized. Prejudices dissolve, obscurity or ignorance give way to understanding, and motives undergo a gradual purification. The Church is fully recognized as the true spiritual home of all mankind. Enquirers come to recognize that she offers the only means of fulfilling our best and noblest aspirations and is the only teacher who really answers the deepest questions of the soul. The accumulative effect of elucidating each of the mysteries of faith and their inner connection—along with an ever deepening appreciation of the means of grace—beget conviction. Meanwhile, the campaign for prayer and sacrifice—among the school children, nuns, the sick, the daily memento at mass of the priest, and the devotions of the parishioners—have won rich graces. When the course is about two thirds completed, approximately seventy-five per cent of the catechumens will have decided to become Catholics.

Within the last decade especially, there have been numerous developments in the manner of conducting these classes. In some parishes, instead of one priest undertaking the entire burden, all the priests participate. Sometimes two or three priests alternate in giving the lectures. In other parishes, one priest gives a ten-minute review of the matter previously covered, a second gives the lecture of the evening, and a third answers the questions. And there are numerous variations on these methods. Their principal merit is to engage all the local clergy in the parish campaign for converts and to benefit by the special individual quality that each can bring.

There is a growing tendency to enlist the full talents of the laity in conducting these classes. I know a priest who has selected and trained 100 lay people and has organized them in five praesidia

of the Legion of Mary. These legionaries enroll newcomers to the course; take charge of the films, slides and charts used as visual aids; distribute the tests and correct the answers when returned; and are responsible for the rather extensive clerical work in a programme that wins 250 converts each year. These legionaries also participate in the actual instruction of converts. When an enquirer indicates that his interest is more than casual, a lay person—chosen according to similarity in age, education and background—is assigned to assist him. This legionary takes him for a tour of the church; coaches him in the use of missal, rosary, manner of participating at mass and in receiving the sacraments. He gives advice to the enquirer regarding suitable pamphlets and books. And he instructs the catechumen on those lessons which the latter is sometimes obliged to miss.

The ideals and principles of the new catechetical movement are having an even deeper influence on American convert work. The revival in catechetics brings new insights to our aims and methods in the field of religious education. Just a year ago, two Chicago priests who are noted for their devotion to the lay apostolate and to convert work, published a new catechism for adults. *Life in Christ* by James Killgallon and Gerard Weber (which Sheed and Ward is publishing in England under another title) is a major event in American catechetics and in the apostolate to non-Catholics. Within twelve months, the demand for this new catechism was so great that three editions totalling 250,000 copies have been sold. And translations are being prepared in Japanese, Chinese, Malayan, and one for South India. This text represents a middle ground between the older manuals and the strictly kerygmatic approach in catechetics.

Older catechisms for converts were apt to be severely logical in their approach, concerned with proofs and answers to Protestant objections, deficient in the use of scripture and liturgy, and sought to give information rather than to form souls. *Life in Christ* certainly does not neglect logic, or omit proofs; there is no fundamental doctrine in the traditional texts which it omits. But it aims not only to teach a doctrine but to proclaim the 'good news' of Christ. It seeks to instruct while forming disciples. In addition to a concern with theology and philosophy, it takes into account the psychology of learning, uncovers the riches of scripture and initiates the catechumen into the treasures of the liturgy. Awaken-

ing doctrinal convictions are accompanied by some specific Catholic practice—and practical suggestions to this end conclude each chapter. It is impossible, in this brief reference, to do full justice to this new catechism or to convey any real measure of its significance. Many of us are convinced, however, that it is actually a return to an earlier and more salutary method of forming new Christians to the image of Christ.

A brief word should be said here of our increasing concern with the need for after-care of converts. 'Don't merely make converts: keep them!' is the slogan of Mgr Leonard B. Nienaber, who has distinguished himself in this phase of our apostolate. Twenty-five years ago, when a convert was received, comparatively little was done in many parishes to assure his adjustment or assist his growth to full Christian maturity. A convert was often left to shift for himself. Priests who have studied this matter tell us that as a consequence of our unconscious neglect, sixteen per cent of our converts lapse from the faith.

Today we expend greater efforts to ease the period of transition, deepen the convert's inner appreciation of the faith and his growth in holiness, and to enlist his talents for winning other converts. The Guilds of St Paul constitute a national organization, founded by Mgr Nienaber; to provide this indispensable assistance. These guilds welcome the newly baptized, along with their relatives and friends, and arrange social, educational and spiritual activities. As converts become Catholics 'to the manner born' it is expected that they join other societies in the parish and cease to think of themselves as latecomers to the Church. Other convert centres have less formal organization, but encourage new converts to attend more advanced courses, to make retreats, to seek spiritual direction, and to avail themselves of library facilities.

We certainly are not converting our country rapidly, nor is our potential zeal being fully utilized. There is, however, a devoted, enterprising apostolate to American non-Catholics underway. And it is supported by many who pray for more labourers and for the supernatural graces without which all labour for souls must remain sterile.