

Language, Grace, and Conversion

By Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, PhD
Endow 2006 Catholic Women's Forum
Colorado Springs, Colorado
September 8, 2006

It is a great joy to be with the Endow Catholic Women's Forum to consider from the philosophical point of view "Living a Grace-filled Life."¹ Language is one of God's greatest gifts, for **without** language we would not have the Eucharist. It is through the Words of Consecration that the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Inversely, **with** the gift of language we can come to know and to love Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word made flesh; and **with** language we can answer His call to conversion through faith.

Conversion

One of the opportunities that life offers us is the possibility for conversion, for movement on the spot.² Our Catholic literature is full of personal examples of great conversions. We will dwell upon three. First, let us recall St. Augustine's moment in the garden. When he heard the words of a child singing, "Take it and read it," he remembered the story of St. Anthony who had heard Scripture being read in a Church and applied the words directly to himself. St. Anthony was thereby converted and sold all he had to follow Christ.

Augustine, following this example, then turned to Scripture, and read a portion of the letter of St. Paul to the Romans, and he applied the words to himself. He later wrote:

"...as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."³

Second, we have St. Teresa of Avila's account in her convent when, after twenty years of half-heartedly living religious life, she read Saint Augustine. Teresa wrote:

As I began to read the *Confessions*, it seemed to me I saw myself in them...When I came to the passage where he speaks about his conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it only seemed to me, according to what I felt in my heart, that it was I the Lord called.⁴

Third, we have the incident of Saint Edith Stein's evening alone in a friend's home when she randomly picked up and read the *Life* of Teresa of Avila. According to the account of Hedwig Conrad-Martius, whose home Edith was in, "[o]nce she began reading it, she found it impossible to put the book down and stayed up reading the entire night. When she finally finished it the next morning, she said to herself, "This is the truth." She was baptised a Catholic within a few months.⁵

Each conversion took place in a different place, (Northern Africa, Spain, and Germany) at a different moment in time (the fifth century, the sixteenth century, and the twentieth century), and through the medium of a different language (Latin, Spanish, and German). Yet it is Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today, and forever, that each one met in the conversion experience.⁶ This mystery of similarity of conversions and yet different circumstances of conversion is the mystery of the Eternal Word, who is outside of space and time, and who also penetrates into the space-time continuum into the hearts of persons through ordinary human words. The meaning conveyed in the conversion experience is something significant about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church.

What exactly happens in conversion, and what role does language play in this activity of movement on the spot? How can words that one person speaks help another person turn towards Christ in a unique and very personal way? St. Anthony's conversion led him to accept a vocation to poverty. St. Augustine's conversion led him to accept a vocation to celibacy; St. Teresa's conversion impelled her to live her religious life more authentically. Saint Edith Stein's conversion led her to request Baptism. Your words as an ENDOW facilitator, or the words of a member of one of your study groups, can lead another woman to discover her nature and dignity according to the teachings of the Catholic Church. The words of a wife can lead her husband to a new insight, and the words of a mother can lead her son or daughter to a deeper grasp of the truth of our faith. Each experience of conversion leads to a particular, yet different action on the part of each convert.

The Canadian philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan describes conversion as an “about-face and a new beginning.”⁷ In *Method in Theology* he elaborates how conversion changes the subject who converts:

By conversion is understood a transformation of the subject and his world. Normally it is a prolonged process though its explicit acknowledgment may be concentrated in a few momentous judgments and decisions. Still it is not just a development or even a series of developments. Rather it is a resultant change of course and direction. It is as if one's eyes were open and one's former world faded and fell away. There emerges something new that fructifies in inter-locking, cumulative sequences of developments on all levels and in all departments of human living.⁸

Lonergan distinguishes between **three** different kinds of conversion which he calls **religious** conversion (conversion of the heart), **moral** conversion (conversion of the will), and **intellectual** conversion (conversion of the mind).⁹ For members of ENDOW study groups, usually a person will begin with an intellectual conversion in discovering

that the Church has actually taught something about woman that she did not know. She will become “conscious that the truth does not impose itself [on her] except ‘by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.’”¹⁰ Later on, she may have a conversion of will, to try to live by this truth she has discovered, and then after living it for a while, she may come to love it with her whole heart. Other women may love the church teaching, but not fully understand it, and so on. Certainly the fullness of any Christian conversion demands all three: conversion of intellect, will, and heart. However, we often find ourselves in a state of only partial conversion. We may think something is true, but we hold back from saying that this truth is a good that I want to choose for myself; or we may choose something as a value, but grit our teeth in doing so, rather than experience this choice as freeing and full of the experience of love.

One key factor in the dynamics of all three kinds of conversion is the place that human emotions play in either aiding or blocking the intellect, will, or heart in this “movement at the spot,” this “about face,” and this “new beginning” Emotion is conveyed through voice tone, facial expression, posture, and other so called “pragmatics” of human communication.¹¹ Facilitators need to become attentive to these movements in the faces of the women in their study group.

St. Augustine is very transparent in his description of the place of emotions in his conversion:

This was the nature of my sickness. I was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I twisted and turned in my chain....I stood on the brink of resolution, waiting to take fresh breath... My lower instincts, which had taken firm hold of me, were stronger than the higher, which were untried. And the closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me, the more I shrank from it in horror...

I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears... For I felt that I was still the captive of my sins, and in my misery I kept crying ‘How long shall I go on saying “tomorrow, tomorrow”’ Why not now?... I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the singing voice of a child in a nearby house.¹²

Carlo Cardinal Martini describes the way in which Jesus, speaking with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-55), had to cut through an emotional turmoil of sorrow after the trauma of the crucifixion. The intensity of their emotions inhibited their possibility of even an intellectual conversion about the risen Christ, until Jesus himself drew near to them, cut through their emotion by the sharp phrase “You fools!,” explained salvation history to them, and finally revealed himself in the breaking of the bread.¹³

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2653) describes Christianity as a religion mediated through dialogue. As we all know, dialogue can only take place through the medium of language. Or, as philosophers express it, language is a necessary condition for dialogue. In dialogue there is one who speaks, and one who listens. Sometimes it is the same person who is both speaker and listener, as when Saint Augustine questions himself in his *Confessions*. At other times, one person speaks, and another listens, as when Augustine’s words spoke to Teresa, when Teresa’s words spoke to Edith Stein, or when one of the members of your study group speaks to another member. Yet we glimpse another participant in the dialogue, a third person who is present, Jesus Christ the Eternal Word, who enters into the human words which are being spoken or written, and heard or read through the action of the Holy Spirit. This is the moment of grace.

Grace

The crucified and risen Lord comes to meet us, and invites us to follow Him through conversion of mind, will, and heart. St. Teresa of Avila's account of her conversion emphasizes just this point. After describing her experience of recognizing herself in the words of Augustine's *Confessions* she continues:

I remained for a long time totally dissolved in tears and feeling within myself utter distress and weariness. Oh, how a soul suffers, God help me, by losing the freedom it should have in being itself; and what torments it undergoes! I marvel now at how I could have lived in such great affliction. May God be praised who gave me the life to rise up from a death so deadly.¹⁴

How is it possible for us to us to experience and respond to these gifts of grace? Thomas Aquinas's *Treatise on Grace* in his *Summa Theologica* provides a framework to help us answer this question.

St. Thomas begins by describing: "Grace [as] a certain beauty of soul, which wins the Divine love." God's grace enters into the essence, but not directly into the operation, of a human soul.¹⁵ It is "the participation of the Divine Goodness, which is grace" (Q. 110, a. 2, rpl. obj. 2). So when Jesus Christ enters into our soul, He elevates us so that we participate in the very life and love of the Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity. This is why it is important for facilitators to pray for the women in your study group. You can beg God to flood the essence of their souls with His loving presence, to flood their intellect with Truth, and to inspire their heart to love the whole Truth. This experience of grace always leaves the woman's will free to choose or not to choose what may now seem to be a truly good act to do.¹⁶ God only invites, and never forces.

St. Thomas distinguishes between two kinds of grace. Firstly, there is *sanctifying grace*, which we receive at our Baptism in order to **lead us individually** to union with

God. Secondly, there is *gratuitous grace*, which is given to us in a particular situation so that **we can lead someone else** to God by what we say or do. As a facilitator, we may receive gratuitous grace, which would prompt us to say something that might touch the heart and mind of a woman in our group. This grace is given to us, not for our own sanctification, but instead for the sanctification of another (Q. 111, a. 2).

Dialogue: Words and Propositions

Let us consider how dialogue and the structure of language can help us facilitate an ENDOW study group. Think back on our experience of listening to Pope John Paul II, or now Pope Benedict XVI, proclaiming that “Christ is Risen” when he moves from a language we do not know to one we do understand. If we do not understand the words in the sentences, then we will not grasp the meaning of the words in the proposition. Yet, the arbitrary differences in the letters of the **words and sentences** of different languages do not imply the arbitrariness of the one truth that is being conveyed about Christ through the **propositions**.¹⁷ We struggle to be attentive to what is being said.

Jesus himself often used prescriptive sentences (i.e., sentences which suggest something someone ought to do) to accentuate this point: “Anyone who has ears to hear ought to hear.” (Mk. 4:23) and further, “Take care what you hear.” (Mk. 4:24).¹⁸ The listener in a dialogue has to make an act of will to be attentive to the propositions contained within the sentences. A conversion of the **intellect** could be expressed by someone who says: “I believe it is true that Jesus Christ is Risen.” A conversion of the **will** could occur in someone who would then say something like: “I accept this Risen Jesus Christ as good for me, and I choose to follow Him.” A conversion of the **heart** in

someone who could say something like: “I love this Risen Jesus Christ and I love being called to be His disciple.”

Dialogue: Questions

Pope Paul VI said, and Pope John Paul II often repeated, that “Dialogue is the new name for charity.”¹⁹ How we converse with others becomes a way of loving them. Asking a question is one of the most dramatic grammatical forms that Jesus Himself used to invite people to conversion. Consider His famous question to St. Peter: “But who do you say I am?” And the answer Peter gave: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Mt. 16:15-16) We could say that the linguistic form of the question creates a time and space for the hearer's thinking to cooperate with the infusion of grace. There is a pause which invites a response. The question echoes through the centuries and continents, so that today, here and now, we can hear the same question: “Who do you say Jesus is?” calling for an answer from us.

The extraordinary form of the question is a fundamental gift for the invitation to conversion because it allows us to transcend ourselves, to transcend our present situation or understanding, and to turn around, to discover something new. Consider some of the questions Jesus addressed specifically to women. At the end of Gospel of *John*, he asked Mary Magdalene: “Whom are you looking for?” (Jn. 20:15). He said to Martha: “I am the Resurrection. Do you believe this?” (Jn. 11:26). In the annunciation dialogue, Mary asks the angel: “how can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” (Lk. 1:34). The answer of the angel leads to a clarification for Mary. We could say, that her question, in the midst of her fear, allowed her the time and space for an intellectual adjustment and

conversion to the truth that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit. She then made an act of the will as she said: “May it be done to me according to your word.”(Lk. 1:38). In fact, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II describes it this way: “...through her response of faith, Mary exercises her free will and thus shares with her personal and feminine I in the event of the incarnation.”²⁰ Of course, Mary did not need a conversion of heart, for being born without sin, she was always in love with God, and full of grace. However, being human, she may have needed to adjust to the Divine initiative with the question: How can this be...?. It was the dialogue, with question and response, that gave her that opportunity to then offer her *Fiat!*²¹

As ENDOW facilitators, by asking straightforward and direct questions of the participants in your study groups, such as “Why do you think that?” or “What leads you to come to that particular conclusion?” or “Where did you first hear that particular view point?” or “How do you reconcile two seemingly conflicting things you have said?”, you can create a time and space for one of the members of your group to come to a new clarity. These questions follow the pattern of Jesus when He asked: “Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?” (Mt. 8:26); and “Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’”(Mt. 9:5). Here Jesus’ questions are posed in a manner that invites the listener to discover that he or she is caught in a contradiction. His question initiates a new question in the listener: How can I be reasonable if I hold two contradictory things at the same time? The moment of conversion, of repentance, or faith, or healing, comes when the listener chooses to resolve the contradiction.

Those of you who are mothers or care takers of young children know that the question “Why?” is one of the first that a child asks, and from which others follow. In

English, these are called the “wh-” questions, of who, whose, what, where, when, why, and how. Through them the intellect seeks something missing.²² When the capacity for questioning is intelligently exercised, human beings can move through intellectual conversion concerning a truth about reality, a moral conversion in which one's decisions shift from satisfactions towards choosing what truly has value, and a religious conversion in which one falls in love with God.²³ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “[t]he search for God demands every effort of intellect, a sound will, ‘an upright heart,’ as well as the witness of others who teach him to seek God.”²⁴ ENDOW facilitators can consider how their words help women in their groups in a dynamic of reorientation, or about face, when the truth is not fully grasped.

Dialogue: Imperative Sentences

A basic grammar text informs us that: “An *imperative sentence* expresses a request, an entreaty, or a command.”²⁵ Many times in Scripture Jesus uses the imperative structure. In the Gospel of Matthew he says: “Repent...” (4:17), “Come after me...” (4:19), “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (5:44), “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect” (5:48), “Stop judging” (7:1), “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.” (8:22)

The imperative form of language addresses itself directly to a conversion of the **will**, while a question usually addresses itself as an invitation, calling for conversion of **intellect**. While the question asks for something to be thought about, the imperative sentence prescribes something to be done. Jesus’ prescriptions are often said in such a

way that allows little time for thinking. It is almost as if he says, the time for thinking is over, if you want to follow me, then come and do it immediately.

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we find many references to conversion of the will.²⁶ In the section on the Ten Commandments, the imperatives contained within each commandment are elaborated in such a way as to strengthen the will and to enable Catholics to live personally good lives. In the introduction it states: "The Catechism...is oriented towards the maturing of ...faith, its putting down roots in personal life and its shining forth in personal conduct."²⁷ This taking root involves conversion of the will through learning self-possession, self-governance, and self-gift to others.

Many contemporary encyclicals follow a similar pattern in delineating the Christian imperatives in human work, in social justice, in woman's identity, in promoting a gospel of life while living in a culture of death, and in drawing out the appropriate moral actions flowing from a recognition of the splendor of truth. In all these teachings there is the fundamental claim that persons become more free, the more their actions are grounded in truth. Thus, as ENDOW facilitators, in sharing what the Church truly teaches about women's nature and dignity, you are enabling the women in your group to become more free.

Dialogue: Hypothetical Syllogisms

Another kind of example of a specific use of language concerns the **hypothetical structure** buried in a sentence. When men were about to throw stones at the woman caught in adultery, Jesus said: "Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."(Jn. 8:7). Put in its hypothetical form, the sentence says: "If and only if you

have not sinned, then you may throw the first stone.” The hypothetical syllogism, along with Jesus' action of drawing in the sand, once more provided a space and time for his invitation to conversion. The result was a conversion of intellect and will on the part of everyone who left without throwing a stone. It also led to a conversion of intellect, will, and heart in the woman herself who was forgiven and saved by Jesus' speech and actions.

The Gospels abound in hypothetical statements. Another example aimed especially towards conversion of heart is: "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love." (Jn. 15:10). Once again, we can add that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* frequently reflects on the need for conversion of heart. It states: "From the Sermon on the Mount onwards, Jesus insists on *conversion of heart*..."²⁸

Dialogue: Analogies

In a conversation, Jesus suggests an analogy that catapults Nicodemus into perplexity and he formulated a question in response: "How can a man be born again? Can he return to his mother's womb?" Jesus then clarifies that he is speaking of a kind of spiritual birth, analogous to biological birth, and he invites Nicodemus to become "born from above." A similar dynamic occurs between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. He introduces an analogy between physical water in a well and the eternal spiritual waters, both of which are living, jumping, or springing up. Misunderstanding is often presented in the Gospel of John as a device which throws a listener into perplexity, and if the listener is willing to engage in dialogue with Jesus, through questioning, then conversion

may take place. Analogies provide a special medium for the infusion of grace, because of their structure.

If we use the concept of analogy as a generic concept, with metaphors, similes, and parables as kinds of analogies, we can say that in all forms of analogy there must be two things that are simultaneously the same and different. This simultaneous double structure (of sameness and difference) is true all forms of analogies, and it is precisely the linguistic structure which makes conversion possible.

A horizontal analogy has components of the same level of being, as it were. These are common in mathematics 2 is to 4 as 3 is to ? or Miller analogy tests, or dogs are to puppies as cats are to? A human being can, by the simple powers of reason, supply the missing word represented by the question mark.

A transcendental or spiritual analogy, the kind that Jesus used in his public ministry, must be distinguished from the horizontal analogy, because here the missing analogate is supplied, not by reason, but by faith.²⁹ So a woman can not think herself through the analogy as she can in the examples previously looked at, but must instead receive the analogical connection of simultaneous sameness and difference "from above."³⁰ The same is true for men.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes this operative dynamic of faith in the understanding of analogies very clear to his disciples. He had just spoken to them the parable of the sower, and ended with the words "Whoever has ears ought to hear." The disciples then approached him (with a question), and said: "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He said to them in reply, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted." (Mt.

13:9-12) When pressed further, Jesus identifies a refusal of conversion in those who do not hear or see or “understand with their hearts and be converted.” (Mt. 13:15)

Jesus uses many analogies to refer directly to himself. He says: “ I am the bread of life that came down from Heaven.”(Jn. 6:35), “I am the living bread- this bread is my flesh.”(Jn. 6:54). He also clarifies that the hearer is converted to an understanding of the truth of these analogies only if he or she receives the illumination from above. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him.” (Jn. 6:44). The Gospel of Matthew then presents a multitude of parables: the kingdom of heaven is like yeast, like a mustard seed, like a treasure buried in a field, like a merchant searching for fine pearls, and like a net thrown into the sea. He also uses analogies to refer to his listeners: “You are the salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13) and “You are the light of the world (Mt. 5:14)”.

These transcendental or spiritual analogies- similes and metaphors- work because one word or phrase has two different meanings, one that is common to the sense experience of the hearer, and the other which is revealed by God through faith. This latter part is the hidden part, the new part which is a non-material reality, and yet which, because of some likeness, can be linked to something in the material world through language. Those who have ears to hear can grasp the simultaneous sameness and difference, and they can be converted in intellect by questioning and coming to understand what the kingdom of heaven is like, then in the will by choosing the kingdom of heaven as a value for them personally, and finally in heart by loving this kingdom of heaven to which they have been called to become a member.

Wounded Language, Grace, and Conversion

Now that some of the treasury of language has been opened up for your consideration as facilitators, I will briefly mention some wounded areas of dialogue in the Church, which may be healed by careful attention to language and the infusion of grace.

Names and Descriptions of God the Father

The first example concerns the pattern so often heard in parishes these days, of people changing the words of the “Our Father” to say: “Our Mother who art in Heaven.” When we hear the word "Father" it may conjure up different concepts depending upon whether we are a woman or a man, on what kind of person our own father was, and on other emotion laden memories which underlie the content of our thought. They may find the image of a loving father they know, or an abusive father, or a creative father of their imagination, or a destructive father exercising power. They may decide that the term "Father," when applied is only a description, put together by a culture, patriarchal in its structure, and that the term "Mother" is more kind, healing, etc. Thus they may decide to "go beyond God the Father" and substitute "Mother" for all their aspirations as is the case with many contemporary feminist authors who may be familiar to you.³¹

When we examine some of the arguments of these persons who refuse to call God Father, we often find a confusion between understanding Father as a **name** or understanding Father as a **description**. We must be clear that when the word "Father" is applied to God, it is applied as His name, and not as a description. Jesus Christ revealed this fact to us. He revealed that God is His Father first of all.³² Thus, when we encounter someone who refuses to call God Father because of a confusion in thinking that Father is

a descriptive name, applied by analogy from experience of human fathers, and that Mother would do just as well, it may be helpful to point out that to call God Father is simply to call Him by name. While God may act like human fathers, and act like human mothers in his generative and supportive activities, the name of the First Divine Person is God, the Father.³³

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2779) calls us to conversion of mind and heart with respect to this mystery of God the Father:

The *purification* of our hearts has to do with paternal or maternal images, stemming from our personal and cultural history, and influencing our relationship with God. God our Father transcends the categories of the created world. To impose our own ideas in this area “upon him” would be to fabricate idols to adore or pull down. To pray to the Father is to enter into his mystery as he is and as the Son has revealed him to us.³⁴

Learning the difference between a name and a description may help persons respond to this call to conversion. By being attentive we can penetrate through the words and sentences to the deeper reality that is being conveyed through language. We can come to understand what it means to say that God is Father, Father is His name. If, through grace, we come to believe in God the Father, we experience conversion of will, and if we come to love God the Father, we experience conversion of heart.

Possessive Pronouns and Adoption as Sons

Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father, and yet, he invites us into His relation with His Father through Baptism in a spiritual regeneration through which we become adopted sons. Thus by divine adoption, the Father of Jesus becomes Our Father in a new way. We are able to apply the possessive pronoun ‘our’ to God the Father. We

also become co-heirs with Christ and receive the double inheritance of eternal life (#1 and #2009) and holiness (#1709).³⁵

A particular challenge for women is to consider themselves as **adopted sons** of God through the grace of our Baptism. While it is true that the *Catechism* also refers to adopted daughters³⁶ as well as sons, and to adopted children,³⁷ and filial adoption,³⁸ there is a certain priority both in number of references and in conceptual structure to the phased “adopted sons.” In fact, the *Catechism* most frequently uses phrases such as “adopt them as sons” (#52), “receive adoption as sons” (#422), “adoptive sonship” (#441), “God's sons” or “sons of God” (#549, 782, 1213, 1270, 1487, 2021, 2798). In all these passages we have the central theme well expressed in the following statement: “Through Baptism the Christian... [becomes] the Father's beloved son in the Son” (#537).

It is here that we run into a catechetical challenge for women, for it is a different experience of conversion for a woman to become an adopted son that it is for a man to become an adopted son. St. Thomas Aquinas refers in the *Summa Theologiae* to the principle that things are received according to the mode of the receiver.³⁹ The use of the expression ‘adopted sons’ poses to the female hearer a certain dilemma. A woman's question: How can I become an adopted son in the Son?, poses a slightly different challenge for her than it does for a man. She has to make one extra step in thinking, as it were, to come to the conclusion, with the help of faith, that she can be regenerated as a son of God because in her regeneration she becomes conformed to the Son of God.

To be more specific; when a man asks himself how can he be an adopted son through Baptism, he needs only to make a transcendental analogy between a son adopted by a human father and the regeneration in the spirit of adoption by God the Father. When

a woman asks herself how can she be an adopted son through Baptism, she needs to make two analogies, a horizontal analogy between being an adopted daughter and an adopted son by a human Father, and then a transcendental analogy for adoption by God the Father. Given the structure of the English language, women need to exercise a greater flexibility in this two-step process than do men. We could say that there is a special invitation to a woman here to die to her generated identity as female in order to be reborn in her regenerated identity as an adopted son in Jesus Christ.

Analogy (Metaphor) and Perfection as Brides

Just as the acceptance of a call into adoption through Baptism is the beginning of a new Christian life, so the acceptance of a nuptial call into spousal love can be understood as the completion of Christian life. Christ is not only the Beloved Son of the Father, He is also the Bridegroom sent into the world to redeem it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is explicit about this spousal call of Christ:

The theme of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church was prepared for by the prophets and announced by John the Baptist. The Lord referred to himself as the “bridegroom” (Mk. 2:19). The Apostle speaks of the whole Church and each of the faithful, members of his Body, as a bride ‘betrothed’ to Christ the Lord as to become but one spirit with him,” (Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13; 1 Cor 6:15-17).⁴⁰

The crucial phrase in this passage is “each of the faithful” is called to be a bride, in one spirit with Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom.

To become a bride of Christ presents a certain dilemma for men which it does not pose for women. When I spoke about the relation of gender language to faith at the Mile High Conference on the *Catechism* in Denver in 1995, a man, who was sympathetic to my presentation, approached me afterwards and asked: “How am I going to explain to my

high school football team that they are called to be brides?” He understood the dilemma perfectly. It takes a certain maturity to be able to see the analogy that the Catholic faith has held central to its identity for centuries. Simply put, we begin our Christian lives as adopted sons through baptism and we end our Christian lives as brides in holiness. The *Catechism* states it thus: “...holiness is measured according to the ‘great mystery’ in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom.”⁴¹

In *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II explicitly states:

Christ has entered this history and remains in it as the Bridegroom who “has given himself.” “To give” means “to become a sincere gift” in the most complete and radical way: “Greater love has no man that this” (Jn. 15:13). According to this conception, *all human beings- both women and men- are called through the Church, to be the “Bride” of Christ, the Redeemer of the world.*⁴²

Again, as St. Thomas reminds us, we receive according to the mode of the receiver. Men must enter into a two-step process of conversion, while women need only a one step process of conversion. A man has to die to himself a little by drawing a horizontal analogy with himself and a bride in order to be raised up again in a transcendental analogy as a spiritual bride of Christ, the Bridegroom.

John Paul II explains that this is possible for men because “bride” here is a collective subject: “According to the Letter to the Ephesians, the bride *is the Church*, just as for the Prophets the bride was Israel. She is therefore *a collective subject* and not *an individual person*. The collective subject is the People of God, a community made up of many persons, both women and men.”⁴³ In order to emphasize the fact that men need to consider themselves included analogically in the Bride, John Paul II repeats: “From a linguistic viewpoint we can say that the analogy of spousal love found in the Letter to the

Ephesians links what is ‘masculine’ to what is ‘feminine,’ since, as members of the Church, men too are included in the concept of ‘Bride.’”⁴⁴

In contrast, during the celebration of the Eucharist the Bridegroom Jesus Christ, is **individual** and not collective. John Paul II states explicitly in *Mulieris Dignitatem* that: “As **the** Redeemer of the world, Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church. *The Eucharist is the Sacrament of our Redemption. It is the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride.* This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts ‘*in persona Christi,*’ is performed by a man.”⁴⁵ Notice that the Eucharist is the only Sacrament that Christ was actually doing when he instituted it. He told his disciples to go Baptise or to forgive sins, but he was not Baptizing or forgiving sins at the moment he pronounced these words.

Careful attention to the words spoken by the priest during the prayers of consecration will bring this mystery more fully alive.⁴⁶ The priest switches from the **first person plural** (representing the collective Bride of men and women), when he offers “**our** thanks, praise, and petition” to God the Father on behalf of the congregation, and **the third person singular** when he describes Jesus' actions at the last supper- “The day before he suffered **he** took bread in his sacred hands,” to the **first person singular** (representing the individual Bridegroom Jesus Christ) when he says at the actual moment of consecration: “This is **my** body...This is the cup of **my** blood.”⁴⁷ This switch from the third person pronoun to the first person pronoun marks a sacred moment when the words the priest says are no longer his words, but Christ's words at the last supper. Something happens in the Eucharistic prayer that the grammar reveals and grace fulfils. Jesus Christ uses the mouth, the words, and the hands of the individual male priest to reenact his

redemptive sacrifice as the Bridegroom for the salvation of his collective Bride of men and women.⁴⁸ In the moment of the Eucharistic prayer, the unique way in which the priest acts *in persona Christi* is revealed through language and grace; and it invites us to conversion in a remarkable way.

Conclusion

We began our analysis with stories of conversion, and we pondered how men and women so far divided by space/time could meet in different languages the same Jesus Christ, Eternal Word made flesh. While human beings make up a language, using arbitrary signs and symbols, the Spirit breathes life into it for those who have faith. Jesus Christ, who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever, comes to meet us in and through these words, propositions, sentences, analogies through the outpouring of grace. He met St. Anthony, St. Augustine, St. Teresa, and Saint Edith Stein. He meets us daily in the celebration of the Eucharist. This is why we in ENDOW need to be so grateful to God for the gifts of language, grace, and conversion. It is also why we are so energized to share the source of this gratitude with others.

Endnotes

¹ Major sections of this lecture are adapted from “Language and the Invitation to Conversion,” Proceedings from the Nineteenth Convention of The Fellowship of Catholic Scholars,” Rev. Anthony J. Mastroeni, ed., *Language and Faith* (St. Louis, Missouri: 1997), 93-128; “Sex, Gender, and the Theology of Communion,” Denver Mile High Congress, (March 30, 1995); and “Foundations of Christian Complementarity,” Convention 2000: Christ Calls His People, Washington DC (January 16, 1988).

² See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (London: Penguin, 1985), and *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* (New York: Harper, 1962).

³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961) Book VIII, #12, 177.

⁴ St. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, in *The Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1976), chapter 9, #7-8, 72-3.

⁵ Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), 64 based on Hedwig Conrad-Martinius *Edith Stein, Briefe an Hedwig Conrad-Martius* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1960), 65 and 72.. See also, Dr. L. Gelber, and Romaeus Leuven, OCD, eds. Chronology, in *Life in a Jewish Family*, in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Discalced Carmelite*, Vol. 1 (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1986), 420-21.

⁶ The words "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever," are used in the lighting of the Easter Candle in the Holy Saturday liturgy. They express a fundamental truth of our faith.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1962), 237-244.

⁸ Lonergan, *Method*, 130.

⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, 238-241. Religious conversion is a kind of falling in love, or being grasped by an ultimate concern Moral conversion occurs when the person makes decisions based on a new value. Intellectual conversion occurs when the person has a radical clarification that knowing involves four activities of experiencing, understanding, judging and believing.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), #3. referring back to the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, #1.

¹¹ See Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, Don Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W.W. Norton, and Company, 1967).

¹² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, #11-12, 172-7.

¹³ Carlo Cardinal M. Martini, *Ministers of the Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), especially 9-40.

¹⁴ St. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, chapt. 9, #8, 73.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1948), 5 vols., IaIIae, Q110, art 2, sed. contra.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Q. 10, art 2 In answer to the question: "Concerning whether the will is moved of necessity by the exterior mover which is God?", Thomas argues that God moves the intellect but not the will, which is always left free to choose the particular means to the end.

¹⁷ The theme that there is a universal inner language where thought dwells, deeper than spoke language, is a theme developed by philosophers of language. See the work of Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968), *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1975) and *Rules and Representations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and the work of Jerry A. Fodor, *The Psychology of Language* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974) and *The Language of Thought* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1975).

¹⁸ *The New American Bible: New Testament Revised Edition* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1986). Saint Joseph Pocket Edition.

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964). See also, John Paul II referring back to Paul VI AAS 56 (1965), 639, in *Vita Consecrata*: “The experience of recent years widely confirms that ‘dialogue is the new name of charity,’ especially within the Church.” #74.

²⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1988), #4.

²¹ See Pope John Paul II's analysis of this dialogue in *Mulieris Dignitatem* #4-5 and in his Angelus address on Mary as the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, April 1990, as recorded in *L'Osservatore Romano*.

²² Robert Brown, *A First Language: The Early States* (New York: Norton Press, 1988), 14-15.

²³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 237-44.

²⁴ See particularly, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #30, 5, 25, 30, 31, 33-35, 75, 89, 90, 93, 106-8, 143, 153-5, 158, 176, 286, 341, 1711, 1731, 1776- 1802, 1889, 1951, 1954, 2071, 2500.

²⁵ George S. Wykoff and Harry Shaw, *The Harper Handbook of College Composition* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Pbs., 1957), 491.

²⁶ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #16, 23, 25, 30, 75, 93, 143, 153-5, 176, 341, 1637, 1662, 1771, 1730, 1888, 1916, 1968, 1970, 2339, 2343, 2346, 2554, 1959.

²⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #23.

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2608, 25, 27, 30, 54, 89, 143, 153, 368, 1098, 1589, 1762-1766, 1848, 1856ff, 1963, 1984-5, 1989, 1993, 2000, 2010, 2019, 2027, 2517, 2518, 2562, 2563, 2581, 2611, 2708ff. 2795, 2848.

²⁹ For the more detailed aspects of metaphysical and theological discussions of metaphor see William Norris Charke, S.J., "The Metaphysical Ascent to God Through Participation and the Analogical Structure of our Language About God," *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University, 1979), pp. 33-65; Janet Martin Soskice, Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); and the discussion of these texts by Francis Martin, "Analogy, Images, Metaphors, and Theology," in *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), chapt. 8, pp. 221-264.

³⁰ See Shannon-Elizabeth Farrell, "Seeing the Father: Part I: From Non-Seeing to Relational Seeing," *Science et Esprit*, XLIV/1 (1992): 1-24 for an in depth analysis of how in relational seeing disciples are drawn to see Jesus as God because the Father draws them. See especially, pp. 16-23.

³¹ See for example, Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977) or Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

³² The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is clear that this name of God is the name of a being who is totally Spirit, and whose essence as Father is as first principle or origin of Jesus Christ the Son: "The expression God the Father had never been revealed to anyone. When Moses himself asked God who he was, he heard another name. The Father's name

has been revealed to us in the Son, for the name "Son" implies the new name "Father.", #2779, quoting Tertullian, *De. Orat.* 3: Pl 1, 1155.

³³ As Bishop John Sheets, S.J. expressed it: "He *is* Father. For it is this name which shows forth His absolute transcendence." See "Sexist Language: The Problem Behind the Problem," in *The Politics of Prayer*, 55. For a good scriptural account of the way God was revealed as Father see Francis Martin, "The God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ," in *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), chapt. 9, 265-292.

³⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2779.

³⁵ As coheirs with Christ we can then pray: "Our Father who art in Heaven, Holy is your name." Roland Mushat Frye further develops this point well in her article: "On Praying 'Our Father' The Challenge of Radical Feminist Language for God," when she says that "[i]t is only through the words and actions of the Son that we can fully know his Father as our Father.", in *The Politics of Prayer*, ed., Helen Hull Hitchcock (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 223.

³⁶ Some people may even try to escape this dilemma by introducing a horizontal analogy and simply exchanging adopted son for adopted daughter for the female baptised. A woman can be an adopted daughter in a horizontal analogy with a man who is an adopted son when we speak of human families and adoptions. However, this use of analogical thinking is rarely used in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as, for example, in the phrase: "... in every human person, [we see] a son or daughter of the One who wants to be called 'our Father'" (#2212).

³⁷ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does allow for this expression as for example in the very first paragraph when it states that God sent His Son to invite us to become "his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life" (#1). It also occurs in at least four other places. See #689, 1243, 2212, and 2782.

³⁸ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* frequently speaks of filial adoption: #654, 1110, 1709, 1727, 2009, 2026, 1303, 1316, 2599, 2605, 2608, and 2609. This term has application to son- *filius* and daughter- *filia*, so it is more inclusive at first glance. However, the priority goes to the Divine Filiation of Jesus Christ and thus to our adoptive filiation through him.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. 1, Q. 84.

⁴⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #773.

⁴¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #773. The passage continues by identifying Mary as the perfect bride who goes before us.

⁴² John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, #25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, #26. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further claims that..."the bishop or priest acting in the person of Christ the head (*In persona Christi capitis*) presides over the assembly, speaks after the readings, receives the offerings and says the Eucharistic Prayer. #1348.

⁴⁶ See Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993).

⁴⁷ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 14. I am also using the Order of Mass from the Canadian *Living with Christ* (Montreal: *Novalis*, September 1996).

⁴⁸ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 15.