

“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven
is at Hand!” (Mt 3:1 and 4:17):
Conversion in the Gospel and
the Christian Life

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CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY SEEKS TO answer the question of how one can live a good life, and it draws its answer from a long theological, moral, and spiritual tradition. In this tradition, conversion is often understood as the way by which one begins the journey that is the Christian life. On the one hand, conversion is then something fundamental, the total change of one’s life from non-belief to Christianity. It is a point in time, with a distinct difference between what came before and what came after. On the other hand, the Christian life itself has many moments where a person can change their ways. The slack believer decides to adopt an order that carves out time for prayer, a repentant sinner goes to confession, and after hearing a homily by the Pope a person decides to finally talk to the homeless person on their block. This too is conversion. In order to speak fruitfully and helpfully about the moral life we therefore need a way to speak about the topic of conversion that includes these smaller conversions. We need to understand conversion in all its complexity. People can change their ways because their hearts have been touched, as in the case of the one who speaks to the homeless person. On another occasion, conversion is the outcome of an intellectual process, such as when reading a reflection on the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is an impulse to give structure to one’s personal prayer.

The aim of this contribution is to understand conversion as part of the Christian life, and to do so in light of Scripture and its interpretation in the Catholic theological tradition. We will begin and end with sections engaging the question of conversion as an everyday event and draw from Scripture in the middle sections for guidance as to what it means to ‘convert.’ Together, these sections help us to appreciate conversion as a radical transformation that touches upon all of the domains of one’s life. In the first section, we will address the different aspects of the question of conversion. We will draw in particular from the work of Bernard Lonergan for this task. This brings us to section two, where we study the call to conversion, or *metanoia*, in the Gospel

of Matthew. Both John the Baptist and Jesus call the people into the kingdom of God with the same words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:1, 4:17). For both, it marks the beginning of their public ministry, indicating how fundamental conversion is when we want to heed the call to the kingdom. We will study these passages considering recent New Testament scholarship, paying particular attention to the meaning of the word *metanoia* which is often translated as “repent.” This study of the Gospel raises several questions on the process of conversion and its actors. We will take these up in section three where we bring the biblical commentaries of Thomas Aquinas into the discussion. In the fourth and final section, we will bring all these insights together and consider their bearing on moral theology.

EXPLORING THE QUESTION OF CONVERSION

A number of questions and intuitions guide our exploration of conversion in Scripture. When conversion is understood as something that pertains to all of the Christian life—and not just to its initial phase—we need to begin by distinguishing between conversion *into* that life and conversion *within* that life. This immediately raises the question of agency. Against Pelagian trends, Catholic theology has always maintained that God is the primary actor in the process of conversion and that any human response is contingent on the divine initiative. This emphasizes that each moment of conversion is a moment of grace, be it conversion into or within the faith. But the events that we call conversion are highly complex. It can indeed be experienced as a powerful instant of divine intervention, similar to the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. For many, however, conversion is a process that speaks to different aspects of one’s life, and it can be excruciatingly slow. Augustine may have been intellectually prepared to live a life of virtue but still felt unwilling, as attested in the famous “give me chastity and continence, but not yet” (*Conf.* 8.7.17). Although different in intensity, in both these types of conversion the subject enters a new life and undergoes a radical transformation. In both instances, conversion is understood as a fundamental change, and it is this type of conversion that many people think of when they hear the word. It is also how a typical theological dictionary defines the term. The *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, for example, takes conversion as a prototype of ‘objective’ religious experience that is often the result of a psychological crisis.¹ Others give precise definitions, following Aquinas in describing conversion as “turning towards God through

¹ Herbert Wahl, “Bekehrung: Psychologisch,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* vol. 2, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany: Herder-Verlag, 2009), 166–167.

a process of cognitive assent upwards from creatures to divine reality.”² Although precise, such a definition does not acknowledge the human reality of conversion.

Examples and dictionary definitions may allow for different types of conversion into Christianity, yet there still remains the question of how conversion takes place within the Christian life, and how we can acknowledge these conversions as fully human experiences while at the same time acknowledging that it is God who brings us back to him so “that we may return” (Lamentations 5:21). Often, different levels of one’s being are involved in the conversion experience. The example of Augustine showed that the intellect can seemingly arrive at a place where the will is not yet. And what to think of Christians who adopt the creed but fail to act accordingly? They seem to have converted only partially, professing truths with their tongue that their heart and hands are unable to live out. This speaks of the complexity of the process of conversion both for those becoming Christians and for those trying to live as Christians.

Bernard Lonergan has made an important contribution to a theological appraisal of conversion. He wrote:

Fundamental to religious living is conversion. It is a topic little studied in traditional theology since there remains very little of it when one reaches the universal, the abstract, the static. For conversion occurs in the lives of individuals. It is not merely a change or even a development; rather, it is a radical transformation on which follows, on all levels of living, an interlocked series of changes and developments. What hitherto was unnoticed becomes vivid and present. What had been of no concern becomes a matter of high import. So great a change in one’s apprehensions and one’s values accompanies no less a change in oneself, in one’s relations to other persons, and in one’s relations to God.³

We can say that to Lonergan conversion denotes an upheaval of values and a deeply personal experience.

The experience described by Lonergan is akin to the one Augustine reflects on in his *Confessions*: “You were within, but I outside, seeking there for you; and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong, I, misshapen. You were with me, but I was not with you. They held me back far from you, those things which would have no being were they not in you.” Augustine describes how everything changes, and how he himself values creation differently. Yet, this

² Patrick Quinn, “St. Thomas Aquinas’s Theory of Conversion,” in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, ed. Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 270.

³ Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection: Papers* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1974), 65–66.

change began with grace, and it was God who called, shouted, flared, blazed: “You touched me, and I burned for your peace” (*Conf.* 10.27.38). Conversion is radical. Lonergan understood the complexity of the conversion process which he described as “a transformation of the subject and his world.”⁴ This transformation takes place on different levels.

Lonergan calls these levels the three types of conversion: intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. Intellectual conversion marks a “radical clarification, and consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge.”⁵ Moral conversion denotes a change in “the criterion of one’s decisions and choices from satisfactions to values.” Where intellectual conversion is preoccupied with the value of truth, moral conversion is interested in values in general, and for Lonergan this means that it goes beyond intellectual conversion.⁶ “Similarly, religious conversion goes beyond moral” since it “transforms the existential subject into a subject in love, a subject held, grasped, possessed, owned through a total and so an other-worldly love. Then there is a new basis for all valuing and doing good.”⁷ The three types of conversion are connected but “still each is a different type of event and has to be considered in itself before being related to the others.”⁸ These types help us to see the profundity of conversion, specifying just how ‘radical’ it is, because it goes to the roots of what one thinks, does and believes.

The work of Lonergan thus provides us with helpful distinctions in our discussion of conversion. Very often conversion is taken solely as religious conversion, a change in what we believe and how we relate or begin to relate to God. But this includes intellectual and moral conversion, a change in how we think and act. Religious conversion can entail a change of thought and action, whereas sometimes an intellectual process leads to a change of actions and religious belief. To Lonergan, “there is no fixed rule of antecedence and consequence, no necessity of simultaneity, no prescribed magnitude of change.”⁹ This broad understanding of conversion provides us with the vocabulary to further explore the topic, and it gives us the questions we can take into our reading of Scripture. What change does conversion effect in its subject? Who is or are the actor(s) in the process of conversion? And is the formal distinction between three types of conversion at all helpful to understand the biblical narrative? With these questions in mind, we try to heed the call to conversion as it comes to us in the Gospel.

⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 130.

⁵ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 238.

⁶ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240–242.

⁷ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 242.

⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 238.

⁹ Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 66.

METANOIA FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

In the first section, we sought to grasp the issue at hand and raised questions about it. Now we move to listen to Scripture in order to address them. How can we do so fruitfully, learning from Scripture rather than imposing our own presuppositions on the holy words? Servais Pinckaers gave a number of suggestions to this end in *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. He calls on theologians “to give honest priority to a direct reading of Scripture over any type of commentary, exegetical, theological, or whatever it may be.”¹⁰ This reading requires an exact translation and a basic understanding of the background of the text. Commentaries “will refine, expand, and improve it, so as to facilitate a richer and more penetrating re-reading. The commentary is at the service of the immediate reading.”¹¹ Pinckaers is adamant about the necessity to first read Scripture for ourselves so that we can be touched personally by the words rather than have the commentary serve as a substitute for personal reading. Theological commentary does enrich this personal reading: “The person who has received, through faith, the spark of an interior understanding of Scripture will all the better appreciate the authentic findings of modern exegesis and profit from them, using the necessary critical discernment and a right critical ordering of things.”¹²

An interior understanding of Scripture calls for careful discernment, and it will be difficult to convey this type of understanding in a written contribution. What we can do is first present our chosen texts and try to let them speak to us before we subject them to further scrutiny. Our chosen texts to study the subject of conversion are taken from the Gospel of Matthew, which for the church fathers held pride of place as the first gospel.¹³ Both John the Baptist and Jesus call for conversion at the beginning of this Gospel, and they do so in the exact same words. The Evangelist introduces John by immediately presenting his preaching:

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea saying “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: “A voice is crying out in the desert, ‘prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths’” (Mt 3:1–3).

When we pause to prayerfully reflect on these lines, there are a number of words that can speak to the heart. ‘Preaching’ may evoke urgency.

¹⁰ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 318.

¹¹ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 319.

¹² Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 321.

¹³ See, for example, Jerome’s preface to his commentary on Matthew.

The word ‘desert’ can suggest solitude, desolation, spiritually arid times. The words of John call, invite, and urge. They call to repent; according to the circumstances of our lives the word ‘repent’ will speak to us differently. The invocation of the kingdom of heaven invites us to reflect on what that means, and to be a part of it. By adding ‘at hand,’ urgency is added to this call. These are but a few reflections on what the words of the Gospel may evoke; they will speak to each of us according to how we pray with them and to how the Holy Spirit speaks to our heart through them.

When we move on to the next chapter of the Gospel, the call to repentance reappears but now on the lips of Jesus. After his temptation in the desert and after John is arrested, Jesus begins to preach. As he did with John’s ministry, Matthew presents this preaching as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah:

He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen.” From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:13–17).

The attentive and prayerful reader may be triggered by several things in this Gospel passage. Jesus moves to Capernaum, and the prophecy speaks of the land of the Gentiles: the preaching moves out in to the open and rings out to everyone who will listen. Darkness is pitted against light. If you feel that there are parts in your life that are dark and dead, the double mention of ‘light’ may strike a chord of hope. Even a word like ‘fulfillment’ may speak to a longing of your soul. Again, these are but a few reflections on how the Gospel might speak to us in an initial prayerful reading. Although it is difficult to incorporate this step into a theoretical discussion, we should at the very least acknowledge it, following the encouragement of Servais Pinckaers. Where this is fitting, we will touch upon elements of this reflection later.

Our discussion will focus on the meaning of the word ‘repentance’ in these chapters of Matthew. This means we will have to forgo more extensive discussions on what the kingdom of heaven entails, and on the theme of fulfillment of prophecy in the first Gospel. We do, however, need to explore the topic of conversion or repentance in the *Umwelt* of the New Testament and in the structure of the Gospel of Matthew. Therefore, we will first look closer at the word for repentance, the Greek *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), and then make some observations about its function in the Gospel.

Metanoia appears as both a noun and part of a verb in the synoptic Gospels; of particular interest to us are Matthew 3:2, 3:6, 3:8, 4:17, Mark 1:4, 1:15, and Luke 3:3. It is often translated as ‘repentance/repent’ and can as such refer to the movement of the heart that we interpret as conversion. In ancient Greek it is often paired with *καιρός* (*kairos*), which means ‘time’ in the sense of ‘the right time,’ with connotations of urgency. These two words appear together in Mark 1, 14–15: “After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ‘This is the time (*kairos*) of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent (*metanoiēte*), and believe in the gospel.’”¹⁴ Already in Greek mythology these terms were related and used together. *Kairos* was personified as the Greek god of opportunity, who is followed by *Metanoia* who represents all the missed opportunities. In Greek *metanoia* literally means afterthought, and so the word has strong connotations of regret.¹⁵ We may recall here the ‘death’ and ‘darkness’ in which the call to conversion rings in the Gospel. Regret is a motivation for change and these “elements and repentance become strongly amplified when *metanoia* takes on biblical significance,” with one significant change: “whereas the Greek interpretation involves a return to a thought or experience, the New Testament *metanoia* calls for a turning (or returning) of the soul to God.”¹⁶ In this interpretation to convert is to seize the opportunity when it presents itself. The preaching of both John and Jesus then are a sign of the *kairos*, meaning that is the right time for conversion.

What is the place of the call to *metanoia* in the larger scheme of the Gospel of Matthew? The work of a few Biblical scholars will help us to shed light on this issue. Jonathan Pennington contends that the call to repentance by Jesus in Matthew 4:17 inaugurates the first of five discourse-narrative blocks, and this first one runs all the way through to Matthew 9:38. The unit is marked by the similar endings of chapters four and nine, which both summarize Jesus’s ministry in Galilee.¹⁷ Between these chapters stands the Sermon on the Mount which, according to Pennington, is closely related to the call to repentance in

¹⁴ See Ulrich Luz, *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament I/1: Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 1–7)* (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1985), 173.

¹⁵ Kelly A. Myers, “*Metanoia* and the Transformation of Opportunity,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2011): 1–8. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), lemma *μετάνοια*. They offer as possible translations of the term: change of mind or heart, repentance, regret. Lipsett argues in favor of interpretations that describe *metanoia* as “life enhancing and liberating,” which I believe can be interpreted as following upon the aspect of penance: B. Diane Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12.

¹⁶ Myers, “*Metanoia* and the Transformation of Opportunity,” 8–9.

¹⁷ Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 101.

Matthew 4:17. He claims that “The sermon in many ways is an unpacking of what this call to repentance looks like ... Repentance is about the whole person turning back to God and devotedness to him.”¹⁸ This repentance does not merely mean changing one’s ways, but it requires the alignment of one’s heart with God.¹⁹ This is the radical transformation that we encountered in Lonergan, albeit without further specification.

Other scholars agree with this interpretation. Daniel Harrington describes repentance as something that “involves a willingness to turn one’s life around in the sense of a complete reorientation,” in this case done for reason of the nearness of God’s kingdom.²⁰ Even more extensive is the discussion of Joachim Gnilka, who reflects on “the fruits of repentance” that John calls for (Mt 3:8). He translates *metanoia* with the German *Umkehr*, turning around, and defines it as “the radical acknowledgment of God, because He is rightfully angered, an entirely new orientation.”²¹ This is a helpful translation for two reasons: it includes the penitential aspect, and it makes clear that *metanoia* is an all-encompassing movement of one’s life. By connecting the call to conversion to the wrath of God preached by John, Gnilka makes clear that the call is urgent and that its object is God. There is not simply a turn-around, but a turning toward God who is ready to judge the world. Pennington, reflecting on Jesus’s preaching, calls this a meta-theme of the Gospel of Matthew: “God is revealing himself in Christ and... this revelation results in or creates two groups, those inside and those outside, based on faith-response to Jesus.”²²

The newness of Jesus’s preaching is that the proclamation of the kingdom derives its strength from nothing but himself. He embodies the kingdom he proclaims, whereas John and later Jesus’s disciples depend on Jesus for the power and veracity of their preaching. One indication of this is that the baptism of conversion that John offered is presented in the Gospel as ordered toward the baptism with fire and the Spirit of Jesus (Matthew 3:11).²³ *Metanoia* is then primarily a turning to the kingdom of Christ, it is “the vantage point from which the existence of the disciple, the Christian life begins.”²⁴ What one turns away from, the Gospels of Mark and Luke make clear, is sin. Hence the reference to John’s ministry as “preaching a baptism of repentance

¹⁸ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 144, see 101.

¹⁹ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 153, 224.

²⁰ Daniel J. Harrington, ed., *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), 51.

²¹ Joachim Gnilka, *Heders Theologische Kommentar zum Neuen Testament: Das Matthäusevangelium 1,1–13,58* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany: Herder, Sonderausgabe, 2000), 69.

²² Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 98.

²³ See Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, 70, 100–101.

²⁴ Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, 101.

for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3). What we can take away from this is that conversion is a response to an urgent call. The call is to God and away from sin. It is this latter connotation that becomes the overtone when *metanoia* is translated as ‘penance.’

Returning to our questions at the end of the first section, we can see that Scripture helps us to formulate answers to a few of them. Although there is no formal distinction between intellectual, moral, and religious conversion, the term *metanoia* also denotes a transformation that is radical, touching upon all the domains of one’s life. The primary actor in this process is God, who through his call moves the human person to conversion. By associating *metanoia* with regret, we venture into the domain of moral choices, and of moral conversion. These are but some preliminary observations that stand in need of further study and development.

Conversion is fundamental to the Christian life. It demands the full and complete reorientation of one’s life to the kingdom of heaven and everything this includes. It is clearly seen as a transformative event, the beginning of something new. This new beginning is all-encompassing, so we can say that this includes the intellectual, moral, and religious levels of living. If *metanoia* is to be complete it needs to be radical, involving all capacities of the human existence. Perhaps it is best understood as a search for meaning or truth that sets everything else in motion. This brings with it the question of what happens after these beginnings and how we can speak of growth in the Christian life. These are the questions that are relevant when we wish to make the notion of conversion fruitful for moral theology, from a Scriptural perspective. Much of this section has been the study of the word *metanoia*, but its aim is to stand at the service of moral theology which pertains to our concrete actions and choices. When we distinguish between different types of conversion we can better guide moral deliberation. In light of the ecological crisis for example, perhaps what is called for first is an intellectual conversion vis-à-vis a sentimental approach that is primarily interested in maintaining the current lifestyle. When one begins to consider this matter differently, a different pattern of consumption is more likely to follow. This is the sort of radical change that speaks not just to the instant of becoming a believer but to the everyday conversions that form the life of the believer.

By studying Scripture and reflecting on human experience we can learn to discern what the good is we should pursue in our efforts to be followers of Jesus Christ. For now, we note that it involves turning all capacities toward discipleship and away from that which is darkness and death. In brief, *metanoia* is turning one’s being from the domain of sin to the domain which we call the kingdom of God. But this requires more than an act of our own will, as we will see in the next section.

THOMAS AQUINAS'S COMMENTARY ON THE CALL TO CONVERSION IN MATTHEW

To further explore the call to *metanoia* in the Gospel of Matthew we turn to the biblical commentary of Thomas Aquinas. In the commentary we encounter Aquinas in his task of reading Scripture, which was foundational to his teaching office. He performed this task by drawing from the wisdom of the church fathers, paying close attention to the letter of the text.²⁵ The biblical commentaries of Aquinas give us his most immediate engagement with the texts that are of interest to us. We turn to his works in particular not because we *must* at all times go to him but rather because, as Otto Hermann Pesch said, he is a teacher who “*may* be quoted, with the underlying thought, ‘What a joy to read that a theologian who lived, thought and worked hundreds of years before our time had something to say... that can still help us today.’”²⁶ Aquinas’s interpretation of Scripture is a valuable source for several reasons. His academic career takes place at the crossroads of history: Aristotle is reintroduced into the west, Christians engage in discussions with Muslim scholars, and biblical interpretation has evolved from a monastic practice into an academic exercise.²⁷ As in our days, the church in the thirteenth century faced the need for renewal. The Franciscans and Dominicans contributed to this renewal by returning to the Gospel, in practice and in preaching.²⁸ Aquinas could draw from the wellspring of inspired authors before him. He had a vast knowledge of Greek and Latin church fathers, whose works he collected in his *Catena Aurea* and then incorporated in his own commentaries. We will see that this brings him to valuable insights that contribute to our understanding of conversion.

Reading a Biblical commentary of Aquinas is helpful, but it is also a daunting task for those unfamiliar with this type of text. Naturally, he follows the order of the book he is commenting upon, and the text of a commentary is therefore not a systematic exposition on a given topic but rather a reflection on the letter of Scripture and the questions it evokes. Therefore, we should pay attention to the structure of the commentary itself. We should also note that Aquinas read the Bible in

²⁵ See A.M. ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes: Reading Matthew, Disputing Grace and Virtue, Preaching Happiness* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2018), 1–29.

²⁶ Otto H. Pesch, “Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology,” in *Aquinas as Authority*, ed. Paul van Geest, Harm Goris, and Carlo Leget (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2002), 143.

²⁷ Gilbert Dahan, *L’Exégèse Chrétienne de la Bible en Occident Médiéval: XIIIe–XIVe siècle* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 75ff.

²⁸ Carolyn Muessig, “Preaching the Beatitudes in the Late Middle Ages: Some Mendicant Examples,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 2 (2009): 136–150; Margherita M. Rossi, “(L’)Attenzione a Tommaso d’Aquino Esegeta,” *Angelicum* 76 (1999), 78–79.

the Latin Vulgate translation. The preaching of John and Jesus is translated as “*Paenitentiam agite, appropinquavit enim regnum caelorum*” (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). The single word *metanoiete* is translated as “do penance,” which evokes sin and regret in the same way that the common English translation “repent” does.

Chapters three and four of the Gospel of Matthew have a particular place in Aquinas’s *divisio textus* of the Gospel. Basing himself loosely on John Chrysostom, he divides the Gospel into three large sections: the entrance of Christ in the world, his passing through it, and his exit from it, respectively *ingressus*, *processus*, and *exitus*. The first two chapters on the genealogy, annunciation, and the birth of Christ are part of the *ingressus*. In the second section, the *processus* is dealt with “according to the progress of his teaching, because for this he came” (John 18:37).²⁹ The teaching proper is set down from chapter five on, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. Both chapter three and four are part of the preparation for the teaching of Christ in the *divisio* of Aquinas. This preparation consists of the preaching of John, the baptism and temptation of Christ, and the initial preaching of Christ and the calling of the first disciples. John is presented as the herald; just as the Father was announced by prophets, so Christ is announced by John (see Luke 1:76) (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 243).

Aquinas’s commentary on the preaching of John addresses some of the questions raised earlier. When he reflects on why John preached in the desert, Aquinas notes that this “fit with his preaching, since he preached penance. Now a place of penance ought to be that way, either bodily or mentally” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 246). He dwells on what repentance and penance entail. With his call to penance, John “announces a certain new life, as Augustine says in the book *On Penance*: ‘No one who is established as the judge of his own will can begin a new life, unless he repents of the old life’” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 248). To repent, the Latin *paenitere*, is to weep over one’s sins, “and one should know that the whole thing is referred to the intention in his mind, namely that he be dedicated, and not commit such deeds worthy of tears, i.e., intend not to commit such deeds; for penance requires this.” To do penance, *paenitentiam agere*, is “to satisfy for sins” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 248).

The recognition of sin is the first incitement to penance; the second is fear of divine judgment (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 265). Aquinas argues that John and Jesus do not merely call on those who listen to stop sinning but ask that they indeed satisfy for their sins. To the medieval student, whom Aquinas is addressing, this may seem

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Jeremy Holmes and Beth Mortensen (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), c. 3 l.1, n. 241.

strange because John foretells the baptism of Christ, and in this baptism, all sins are forgiven. He responds to the objection by distinguishing between penance before baptism, which requires remorse over sins, and penance after baptism, when there is remorse over mortal and venial sins.³⁰ We should note that this means that, to Aquinas, penance or *metanoia* plays a role both before and after baptism. Following the text, he then moves on to discuss what the kingdom of heaven is. He offers four interpretations and gives as the first that the kingdom is “Christ himself dwelling in us through grace... because the road of the heavenly kingdom is begun by grace dwelling in us” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 250). This interpretation is particularly important to this inquiry because Aquinas stresses that our turning toward the kingdom begins with grace.³¹

Aquinas has a number of things in common with present-day interpreters. He believes that the call to repentance is somehow linked to the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Doing penance is about the regret of past faults and it implies the beginning of something new, all of this in light of impending divine judgment. But when he reflects on the actors in the process of doing penance, he adds new tones to our palette of interpretations. He presents the kingdom that is proclaimed as a work of grace, as we already noted. Even when John preaches, it is Christ to whom penance leads since Christ “was speaking in John” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 253). In the preaching of John, we are not just called to turn to God; it is God himself who moves in our direction, as Aquinas beautifully comments: “One should know that we were so weak that we would not have been able to approach the Lord unless he came to us. And this is why John said above, ‘the kingdom of heaven is at hand’; and this is, ‘prepare’” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 3 l. 1 n. 254). In his commentary, Aquinas thus broadens the narrative from human *Umkehr* or turning-around to a divine inclination, namely God’s turning to us first.

After John’s arrest Christ begins to preach publicly. Aquinas assumes he preached privately to Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathaniel but “at first he did not wish to preach publicly, so as to give place to John’s preaching; otherwise, it would have done no good, just as the light of a star is obscured by the light of the sun” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 4 l. 2 n. 360). Once Jesus begins to preach, he uses the same words as John so that “no one would scornfully refuse to preach words said by another,” and “because John is the voice, but he is the

³⁰ In this edition of the commentary, John’s preaching is said to pertain to penance *after* baptism. Both the context of the commentary and a reference to Acts 2:38 suggest this is a flaw in the manuscript tradition and that it should be taken to refer to penance *before* baptism.

³¹ The three other interpretations of the kingdom are of less interest at this point. They are, respectively, Sacred Scripture, the present church militant, and the heavenly court.

Word. Now, the same thing is signified by the word and the voice because the word is expressive of the voice” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 4 l. 2 n. 360). This is a more theological elaboration of the earlier claim that Jesus speaks through John, inspired by the church fathers. Aquinas is relatively brief on the content of Christ’s call to repentance, probably because he discussed the content of this call at length in relation to John. What is new is a distinction within the call to “do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” First, Christ urges to do penance because, despite previous admonitions “through the law of nature and the Scriptures,” humans have transgressed (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 4 l. 2 n. 361). Second, he makes a promise, namely that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In discussing the kingdom, he again emphasizes that God approaches us while calling us to conversion to Him. After the transgressions of the past, Christ inaugurates a new pact between us and God, “and so he says, ‘the kingdom of heaven is at hand,’ namely eternal beatitude. And he says, ‘is at hand,’ because the one who was giving descended to us, since we were not able to ascend to God” (*Commentary on Matthew*, c. 4 l. 2 n. 362). Aquinas thus reminds us that conversion is not an end in itself but that it is ordered to the kingdom, which he interprets here as eternal happiness. The nearness of the kingdom in Christ is proclaimed at the beginning, and it becomes more visible throughout his ministry. Wherever the disciples of Christ preach, they urge their listeners to repentance with an eye to the promise of happiness and its fulfillment in Christ.³²

We read the commentary to see what Aquinas brings to our understanding of *metanoia*. Initially, the translation *paenitentia* might seem to restrict its meaning and interpretation but we have seen that he adds a number of facets to the discussion. Aquinas takes up repentance with its connotations of regret but states more clearly that the regret is not just about missed opportunities in general but about transgressions toward God. The aim of conversion is to turn toward the kingdom of God, which is understood at least in part as the presence of God in the believer by grace. Ultimately, the call to repentance is Christ calling us to eternal happiness, something Aquinas repeats throughout his career in his teaching and preaching. In the *Summa theologiae*, he is most explicit about this, as Eric Luijten aptly summarized. Penance is aroused in the believer and this

...gives an idea of how [Aquinas] understands the cause of the reorientation of the will. Not by force, nor by some form of magic, but by

³² See ST III q. 85 a. 5 arg. 2; *Commentary on Matthew* c. 10 l. 1 n. 817, c. 16 l. 2 n. 1371, c. 24 l. 1 n. 1921, c. 26 l. 1 n. 2118; *Sermo XX Beata gens*, prothema, lines 11–15.

confronting the human soul with an act of love, which, in itself, is capable of re-directing the will, and igniting the fire of love.³³

Key to understanding Aquinas is that he identifies the call to conversion itself as an instant of grace. The preaching indicates that God first comes to us before we turn to Him. Conversion therefore begins with the divine initiative, and we can understand the subsequent *Umkehr* as being contingent on this first movement of grace. This is why Aquinas can claim that repentance is a virtue because it springs forth from the grace of the Holy Spirit who moves the heart of the repentant sinner.³⁴ A full and total *metanoia* which excludes no domain of life and no part of one's being indeed requires the action of the Spirit.

CONVERSION AND GROWTH IN GRACE

From Lonergan we learned an appreciation for the complexity of the process of conversion. It is this appreciation for both the complexity, and of conversion as an ongoing process, that helped focus our reading of the New Testament and its interpretation by Thomas Aquinas. Looking at the Greek, we saw that *metanoia* means that one seizes an opportunity where it has been missed before. New Testament exegesis tells us that the connotations of regret are emphasized in Scripture, and that the *Umkehr* that John and Jesus call to is radical and complete. Thomas Aquinas adds an emphasis on grace as the principle of conversion and he reminds us of its finality: happiness. With these insights at hand, what can we say about their bearing on moral theology? We take this discipline here as Servais Pinckaers described it, namely as “the branch of theology that studies human acts so as to direct them to a loving vision of God seen as our true, complete happiness and our final end. This vision is attained by means of grace, the virtues, and the gifts, in the light of revelation and reason.”³⁵

We brought together considerations from Scripture, and with Lonergan briefly reflected on the human process of conversion. In the light of revelation and reason we thus considered conversion in general terms as a human act. But most of all we focused on how *metanoia* is directed to God. It is an invitation to turn or return to Him. The ultimate object of this turn is our true, complete happiness. What we could refine with regard to Pinckaers's definition is that this turn in itself takes place by means of grace. Already the virtuous movement of repentance is a result of God's turning to us first. We have used the terms *metanoia*, repentance, *Umkehr*, and conversion interchangeably to refer to that good action which signifies our response to God's call to a

³³ Eric Luijten, *Sacramental Forgiveness as a Gift of God: Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrament of Penance* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2003), 183.

³⁴ See ST III q. 85 a. 1 s.c.


³⁵ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 8.

reorientation of our entire existence toward Him. Rather than fear of punishment or regret, its true motivation lies in the promise of true happiness.

Although our sources still tend to treat conversion as an initial movement of faith with which everything else begins, it is possible to broaden this understanding to include those forms of conversion of which Lonergan spoke. The first moment of *metanoia* is a moment of grace; God turns to us and invites us to turn to Him. We can think here of a passage of Scripture that Aquinas repeatedly quotes to explain conversion, which in the Vulgate version reads “Convert us, Lord, to you, and we shall be converted; renew our days as from the beginning” (Lamentations 5:21).³⁶ *Metanoia* is this dual conversion, in which God’s turn to us is the principle of everything else. Conversion puts our life on the right track, namely toward the end for which we were made. Can anything else come after this initial grace? Aquinas can help us here because in the questions on merit at the end of the *prima secundae*, he posits the possibility of a growth in grace, following Augustine (ST I-II q. 114 a. 8 s.c.). In a similar vein, we could also speak of an ever-growing intensity of the human person’s *Umkehr* or turning toward God. The New Testament scholarship in particular stressed that this is a full and total reorientation of life. This already implies that one cannot suffice with simply changing a few actions or switching to a limited number of beliefs. Lonergan’s types of conversion help us to speak about how conversion can indeed touch on all that we choose to do, how we think and what we believe. Moving to this type of speech helps us to break down the all-encompassing call to *metanoia* and to make it practical. All of these domains need attention in our continuous process of conversion to God, and the more they are transformed by grace the more a person attains the wholeness for which he or she was made.

Theologically speaking, conversion stands at the beginning of everything. I would suggest that we reserve the term *initium fidei* to designate this fascinating yet mysterious prime moment of faith. This *metanoia* or conversion entails the reorientation of values toward the kingdom of God. This reorientation unfolds in moral, intellectual, and religious conversion. For some, this will follow the typical learning curve from slow beginning to steep acceleration and from there to an eventual plateau. For others it is a process of repeated fallbacks and renewed reorientation. A reflection of St. Francis de Sales offers a glimpse of what such a life of continual conversion might resemble: “when your heart wanders or suffers, carefully bring it back and place

³⁶ For a discussion see Michael A. Abril, “Lamentations 5:21 within the Development of Thomas Aquinas’ Theology of the Grace of Conversion,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no.3 (2014): 251–272.

it gently in the presence of God. And even when you have done nothing in your life but bringing back your heart and placing it in the presence of God—even though it always ran off again—then you have lived your life well.”³⁷ Conversion is thus much more than how we enter into the Christian life. A proper understanding of the term helps us to speak of how we can grow in that life, and how the grace of the Holy Spirit continually helps us turn to God so that we may eventually live with Him who is our true and complete happiness. 

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³⁷ Cited in German in Hildegard Aepli and Thomas Ruckstuhl, *Leben im Haus der Kirche: Zum 100-jährigen Bestehen des Salesianums* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Paulus Verlag, 2007), 100.