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## Turn, Turn, Turn: Considering Conversion in the Theology Classroom

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## **“Turn, Turn, Turn”**

### Considering Conversion in the Theology Classroom

*Katherine G. Schmidt*

I am currently a doctoral student in theology in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Dayton, a Catholic university operated by the Society of Mary, or Marianists. I have the pleasure of teaching the mandatory introductory course for the department, which can be a complicated task on its own, given that the course is intended to introduce students to both religious studies and theology. I will, however, largely bypass this particular complication in this essay and focus instead on the challenges of what it means to hand on the faith in the college classroom. In thinking about this theme, I considered not only my experiences as a young teacher of theology, but also the way I've gone about narrating them. I have, on several occasions, found myself on an airplane explaining my vocation to a veritable stranger. There is almost always something I include when discussing my teaching life, something that I've chosen to focus on for my reflection here. I must confess that after trying to describe what I teach, I tell my conversation partner, "But I don't try to convert my students. That's not my goal." I refer to this comment and the feelings behind it as the "conversion caveat." Though I don't say it, you could almost add a "so don't worry" to this very loaded statement, as I try to anticipate and then assuage the probably nonexistent concerns of the poor soul who ended up next to a graduate student on her flight.

I want people to know that my primary focus is not to proselytize, especially since my classroom audience is most assuredly captive. I usually describe the desired outcome of my course as something like religious literacy. I want my students to be able

to hold their own in religious conversations, specifically ones about Catholicism or Christianity in general. As such, this does not seem to require any personal commitment or confession on their parts. Likewise, my class does not require any conversion or recommitment to the faith of Jesus Christ for my students to do well. I say as much in the first moments of the course, and in emails to non-Catholic students who are concerned that their lack or disparity of faith will adversely affect their chances for success.

It may be helpful to say more about why I feel the need to convince people that I'm not out to convert my students. Luckily, I have the eloquence of Thomas Merton for help. I recently wandered into an old bookstore in Bardstown, Kentucky, which had the biggest Merton book section I'll probably ever see, given that the store was only about twelve miles from Merton's hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani. There I found an out of print collection of Merton's essays on violence in the twentieth century. One of the essays is entitled "Apologies to an Unbeliever," and is an apology in the more conventional sense of the word. Quite simply, Merton is apologizing to a person who does not share his faith in God. He writes, "So I am apologizing to you for the inadequacy and impertinence of so much that has been inflicted on you in the name of religion, not only because it has embarrassed me, and others like me, but because it seems to me to be a falsification of religious truth."<sup>1</sup> My "conversion caveat" is a kind of mini-apology à la Merton, my small attempt to exempt myself from the inflictions of religion that dominate our political and cultural discourse at present. I want to represent the academic study of religion and make perfectly clear that I have little interest in being another cultural warrior. But I latched on to Merton's essay because he is able to write such an apology from within his religious vocation and not in spite of it. So, too, would be my goal as a teacher of theology.

The problem is that I actually see what I'm doing in the classroom as part of my own baptism, as my vocation, as my participation in the life of the Church and in the mystery of Revelation. As genuine as I am when I assure worried students that the course is not really about personal faith, I myself am teaching it as a very extension of my own. "Handing on the faith" sounds like such a simple idea, but the more I reflect on it, the more problems I

encounter within myself: I am being honest in my conviction about my vocation to present the faith of the Church in a way that is creative and accurate and ultimately does not do harm to the faith lives of my students, as well as when I am careful to describe the aims of my course as only incidentally concerned with the state of my students' souls. For that reason, I want to reflect on my experiences at the University of Dayton in the context of the tension within my own life as a person of faith who teaches theology, and as someone who insists to strangers, friends, and herself that she is not out to convert her students.

As I mentioned, the University of Dayton is run by the Marianists, a small order of brothers, sisters, and priests who do not share the notoriety of their Jesuit brothers in the realm of Catholic academia, but nonetheless have a robust understanding of their charism with regard to the education of young people. Admittedly, the Marianist character of the university is one of the details I leave out when narrating my experiences to people outside of theology, yet I do consider it to be an important factor when I prepare courses for University of Dayton students. The founder of the Marianists, Fr. William Joseph Chaminade, presents the first challenge to my "conversion caveat." In a letter to retreat masters from 1839, Fr. Chaminade pens the following rather convicting lines: "It is for you to impress on the teachers what a great mistake they would be making if they were to limit their endeavors to instruction in human learning, if they were to put all their care and pride into making scholars and not into making Christians, or into gaining a worldly reputation."<sup>2</sup> It seems Fr. Chaminade wants me, an instructor at a Marianist institution, to make Christians, but this appears among no course or student learning objectives. Indeed, if my "conversation caveat" shows us anything, it's probably that I would be rather uncomfortable if it was. But I do have my students read Chaminade's words, mostly to get us all thinking about what exactly it means to be at a Marianist institution. Each time I have read his letter with students, it has caused me to reflect on my own role in Chaminade's vision, as well as the deep sympathies I have with his desire for students to be successful in more than just school and work. And yet, the "conversion caveat" looms.

Teaching at a Catholic university appears to have a very

specific meaning in the teaching of the Church. I find no less challenging words than Chaminade's in Pope John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. He offers four "essential characteristics" of the Catholic university:

1. a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
2. a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
3. fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;
4. an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to the tension I've described above, the Pope writes: "By its very nature, each Catholic University makes an important contribution to the church's work of evangelization. It is a living institutional witness to Christ and his message, so vitally important in cultures marked by secularism, or where Christ and his message are still virtually unknown."<sup>4</sup> Thus he challenges me in no uncertain terms that part of my job is to evangelize, to spread the Gospel, or as we might prefer to express it here, to "hand on the faith." And yet the Pope is also clear that the Catholic university as a university "is an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities."<sup>5</sup> "Rigorous" and "critical" are specific and important adjectives for theology as an academic discipline, and in a nutshell, this is really what my introductory course is introducing. I want my students to discover that one can think about God in a way that is rigorous and critical. But I also want them to know that such rigor and critique need not mean that one eschews faith. Indeed, I want them to see that the best theology is often done from within the tradition itself, in a posture of persistent unease with quick answers and simplistic explanations of the divine mystery. Indeed, I want to introduce them, in admit-

tedly indirect ways, to what the world looks like through the eyes of the saints and to people who are trying to get there.

And so we have come to my second confession: I actually might want to convert my students after all. Here I've found Bernard Lonergan's preoccupation with conversion to be somewhat helpful. Without the philosophical chops to take Lonergan on in a comprehensive way, I only want to reflect on one of his categories, one that I've found helpful in sorting out this question of handing on the faith in the classroom. Lonergan writes that conversion is really a change in horizons. By horizon he means "the boundary of one's field of vision...what lies beyond one's horizon is simply outside the range of one's interests and knowledge: one knows nothing about it and one cares less. And what lies within one's horizon is in some measure, great or small, an object of interest and of knowledge."<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that simply learning more about a subject in which one already has some level of interest does not mark a conversion, but simply an expansion of one's horizon. For Lonergan, conversion is marked by being in love: "It is a state reached through the exercise of vertical liberty, the liberty that chooses, not among objects within a horizon but between different horizons, different mentalities, different outlooks."<sup>7</sup>

Any teacher knows that students come into the classroom with what we could describe as different horizons, to use Lonergan's preferred category. It seems to me that there are three important horizons that one must consider when teaching theology: a horizon that does not include interest in religion or faith at all, a horizon that includes at least a preliminary interest in religion or faith, and lastly, a horizon that is marked by the otherworldly love Lonergan says is the horizon of the person of faith. It is tempting to rank these three horizons in ascending order as I've presented them, especially for people of faith who see the third as the horizon of ultimate truth. However, out of respect for my students and colleagues who do not share my faith, it may be more appropriate to imagine them side by side. This will also prove helpful as I extend the analogy into teaching.

I propose that teaching theology is like sailing a boat into many horizons at once. To be an effective teacher, I have to be sensitive to the various horizons that make up my classroom, as well as the horizon that inflects the pedagogy and content of my course.

Admittedly, I cannot help but teach as a person whose horizon is the third, as a person of faith who has committed herself to the rigorous and critical study of theology. But I cannot and should not assume that my students are sailing with that same horizon in view. In fact, I would venture to guess that most of my students have different horizons from mine. For some, religion is simply not within the bounds of their fields of vision, although I imagine that this is actually a very small portion of students. For those for whom religion may be within the bounds of their fields of vision, there is much diversity to consider here as well. Some are interested because of their childhoods; others in a defensive or aggressive way; some are interested because of purely academic reasons; and some for very personal reasons. It is within this plurality of horizons that any instructor teaches day in and day out.

Let us finally return to the primary question: what does it mean to "hand on the faith" when I teach? And for me personally, to what extent am I concerned with bringing my students into the third horizon? As a Christian, I am of course committed to the truth and beauty of my horizon, a commitment that inevitably stirs a desire for all to know God through the Incarnation. As a teacher, I am given the difficult and invigorating *task* of teaching people with different horizons all at once. Ultimately, I do want my students to shift horizons. I want them to be interested in religion, but I also want them to turn themselves toward rigorous and critical thinking about religious ideas. At the very least, I want students in the first horizon to shift to the second, and students in the second to expand their knowledge and nuance their questions. I want all of my students to think more critically, write more clearly, speak more articulately, and act more compassionately. But how I envision the success of my course with these goals is inherently tied to my own horizon, to my own theology, to my own picture of God. As a teacher of theology, I must affirm for my students and for others that the thoughtful questioning, clear writing, eloquent speech, and charitable behavior that are the true goals of my course are genuine ways of participating in the divine. If I actually believe this, then I have to admit that such successes are small but integral steps on the way to conversion for students who are yet to turn to God. I also have to admit that my courses may actually find ways for students who do have faith in Christ

to delve ever deeper into their faith in new and critical ways.

I noted earlier that I want to introduce my students to what the world looks like to the saints and to people trying to get there. The whole idea of the communion of saints is to have witnesses, a sort of cache of people who model what God calls us all to be. Helping my students shift to or expand that second horizon requires something very specific, something that I think is demanded by my own horizon. It is my job to model rigorous, critical, and faithful engagement with theological ideas for my students, a job which I do better on some days than others. But it is also crucially important to perform that fourth goal, acting with charity and compassion. In the end, I should focus on this above all else, for if I do it as well as I am able by grace, I have faith that it will give my students the space to "turn."

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 205-206.

<sup>2</sup>William Joseph Chaminade, "Letter to the Retreat Masters of 1839," trans. Lawrence J. Cada, SM (Dayton: Cincinnati Province of the Society of Mary, 1989), 10.

<sup>3</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, August 15, 1990, paragraph 13.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, paragraph 49.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, paragraph 12.

<sup>6</sup>Bernard Lonergan, "Horizons," *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 10-11.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.