

# The Call to Conversion

By Fr. Russell Becker, OFM

## Dear Friend of the Missions,

*Lent has started, we who are baptized are trying to answer the call to conversion. Those who are preparing for Baptism are in the midst of a 40 day retreat. Please keep them in your prayers, they are our future. The community prays that they are free from the power of sin, and will present them with the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. These they will need to learn for the time when they participate in the entire Mass after Baptism.*

*I would like to invite you to continue the traditional practices of Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The Church has always found these to be very helpful for embracing the spirit of Lent.*

*It is a good time to make sacrifices that will help those who are less fortunate. There are two Solemnities during the month of March: St. Joseph on March 19, and the Annunciation of the Lord on March 25. Let us pray for one another that this Lent will be beneficial to us all!. Your kindness and generosity to our missions is so supportive of the Gospel. Thank you so much. You will all be in our prayers as this season brings us to Easter.*



**E**very Ash Wednesday we hear the words: Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel! This is presented as the call to conversion. Most of us see conversion in black and white terms: serious sinners should repent. Preachers often present this by using examples from the Old and New Testament where there is a complete turn around in the lives of those who hear and answer the call: King David, the woman caught in adultery, Zaccheus, St. Matthew, St. Paul, and many others. While they are striking instances of people who answered the call, they may be too striking for us.

Many of us are just not that bad, and some of us are really good people. Perhaps we should try to understand conversion as something a little more subtle and applicable to us all. All of us should hear the call, for God certainly calls everyone. AND all of us should answer the call, for we are called to life, life in abundance.

**Biblical conversion.** In the Old Testament, the call to conversion is given as a call to walk in a new direction. In the New Testament, the call to conversion is a call to think differently. One of the things that might be interesting is to note that while the call is given to all of us, there is not necessarily a judgment that we are walking in a bad direction or thinking in a bad way. God just offers us a new way to walk (in the way of the Lord) and a new way of thinking (God's way of thinking).

Abraham and Sarah received a call (Leave your homeland... Genesis 12); the people of Israel were called to follow Moses to the desert and on to the Promised Land. Prophets were called to speak God's word (Go to my people.... Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1). God had another way for them to walk.

Most of the disciples were not bad people, they were leading fairly normal and good lives, but Jesus called them simply: follow me! (Mt 4, 18ff, Mk 1, 14ff, Lk 5 and Jn 1, 35ff). Perhaps that is the best way for us to understand the call. Good, bad, indifferent, black, white or grey, sinner, saint or in-between, we are all called to follow Jesus. We are called to walk in God's way, to embrace God's way of thinking. For Christians it means becoming followers of Christ, coming to know him more and more, ultimately to become another Christ and carrying on his mission. More than anything else, we are called to take a chance, to risk our comforts, our possessions, our control, our predictabilities, our good ways of living, or our sinful ways of living. Each of us will experience a different call and be challenged to a different risk. But God calls us all in a special way. This quote from Hildegard of Bingen (12th century) may be a wonderful description of the call:

*The soul is kissed by God in its innermost region.  
With interior yearning, grace and blessing are bestowed.  
It is a yearning to take on God's gentle yoke, it is  
a yearning to give one's self to God's way.*

**Surprise Conversions.** Everyone receives the call to conversion. There are two people who heard the call and answered. They are the best examples of how to respond because they were so good. They are offered to us in Lent by the two solemnities the Church celebrates in Lent: St. Joseph and the Annunciation. Mary and Joseph are the best examples of hearing and responding to the call to conversion. The Bible and the Tradition speak of their holiness, faithfulness, honorableness. They were people of true faith, leading very good lives of true hope and love. They were a young couple betrothed to one another and, more than likely,



looking forward to a wonderful life together. Then an angel appeared to Mary. Through the angel, it is revealed to Mary that she is to conceive by the Holy Spirit and become the mother of the Son of God. What does this mean? If she says yes, all of her hopes and dreams up to that time will be not be realized, and she will have to face her betrothed. But she did say yes. Everything changed then. She took a big risk. She changed the way in which she walked, and she changed the way she thought. She let go even though there was absolutely nothing wrong with her life before. St. Bernardine of Siena (a great Franciscan preacher) often spoke of St. Joseph being a young man with hopes and dreams of a family life with his betrothed. So the news of Mary being pregnant was even more of a shock. Scripture says because he was so honorable, and probably deeply in love with Mary, he decided to deal with the whole issue quietly, so as not to let Mary be embarrassed. Then an angel appears to him. God invites Joseph to a new direction. Scripture does not report his answer in word, but in deed. He lets go of his hopes and dreams and embraces God's. He changed the way he walked and thought, even though there was nothing wrong with his life before. So Lent should be a help to us all. Through our observance of



Lent we can become more sensitive to that call and more willing to respond to it. If we follow, if we take the risk, the promise of Easter is before us. God calls us all, no matter how bad or good we are, and God is faithful to the promises God makes. It is ours to say "yes!" If Abraham and Sarah, David and Jeremiah, the disciples, the woman at the well, Zaccheus and Mary and Joseph can, so can we. Perhaps as we keep Lent, this quote from St. Augustine can give us some courage:



*God our Father, we find it difficult to come to you because our knowledge of you is imperfect. In our ignorance, we have imagined you to be our enemy, we have wrongly thought that you take pleasure in punishing our sins and we have foolishly conceived you to be a tyrant over human life. But since Jesus came among us, he has shown that you are loving, that you are on our side against all that stunts life, and that our resentment against you is groundless. So we come to you, asking you to forgive our past ignorance and wanting to know more and more of you and your forgiving love through Christ our Lord.*

Reflection Questions:

This Festival celebrates a communion which transcends time and space. It is a call to faithfulness in time.

1. Can you hear the call of the Lord to follow him? Have you made efforts to respond?

2. Evaluate the way in which you walk and the way you think? What might God be asking you to risk, to let go of to answer the call?



**Please also pray for our missionaries and  
former missionary friars who are ill:**

Bishop Benedict Coscia, O.F.M. (Brazil)  
Fr. Thomas Fox, O.F.M. (Brazil)  
Fr. Charles Finnegan, O.F.M. (Brazil)  
Fr. Campion Lally, O.F.M. (Japan)  
Fr. Clement Healy, O.F.M. (Jamaica)  
Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)  
Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)  
Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Southern US)  
Fr. Arthur Murray, O.F.M. (Southern US)  
Br. Rosario Vieira, O.F.M. (Brazil)

**May the Lord bless them with health  
and peace!**

**Please remember our Friar Missionaries on their  
birthdays this month:**

March 09: Fr. Donnon Murray, O.F.M. (Japan)  
March 26: Fr. Callistus Sweeney, O.F.M. (Japan)

**May god bless them with peace, energy and  
happiness!**