"Now I see it…" – Being converted

What we want to talk about with you today will focus on the people with whom we work in Argentina, but I believe it has as much to do with you and me, as it does with the Toba people. I want to talk about conversion, or transformation, both because its something I need, and because it's an urgent matter for the people of God today.

Some months ago I came across a statement in an essay by John Stoner (a Mennonite writer), an affirmation that will not strike you as original or unusual, but it is profoundly true. And it's fundamental to the Gospel we proclaim:

> **The emotional power of Christian conversion in diverse cultures is the very human experience of coming to see and to believe that one is loved, forgiven, embraced as one is: imperfect, conflicted, hostile, whatever --at the center of the universe, the bottom of everything, we are loved as we are. Every child likes that experience. When adults rediscover it, it is a big discovery! Put in terms of theology, if God thinks of us that way, we can think of ourselves that way! And when we think of ourselves that way, something very big can change within us…, and it is indeed a "conversion." It is first a whole new way of seeing one's self, and it becomes a whole new way of seeing others.**

You will notice here the emphasis on experience more than theology. Personally, I keep running into this accent, this stress. I come across words like "embrace", "awakening", "discovery", even in theological essays, and I often feel touched and called by such words, to some deeper conversion myself.

In light of this personal sensibility, you will understand why I was especially pleased when a Toba pastor shared his thoughts on this matter of conversion. We had asked him to give a Biblical reflection on the church and culture in a little course we facilitated over the last nine months. I would like you to hear at some length what Rafael Mansilla said on this theme, on a Saturday morning some 4 months ago in a small church in a Toba barrio, on the edge of the city of Clorinda in northern Argentina.

He began by quoting Rom. 8:39: *"Neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Then he added, "*Nor will the **dominant surrounding culture** separate us from the love of God---nor even **western theology**, from Europe (or N. America)!"* He said, "*We have thought that theology has to be from Europe for it to be true; if it's not, we've assumed, it's just foolishness."* Now listen to his further reflections:

Let's look together at a text from Acts 10:34-35: "Peter began to speak: 'I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Whoever fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what race he belongs to.'"

I have heard many preachers call this chapter, "the conversion of Cornelius". It would be better to call it "the conversion of Peter". It represents the conversion of Peter because he says, "I now realize…that God treats everyone on the same basis…now, that is only now, finally, I see it!" Peter is being converted here.

In chapter 10, verse 2, it says that Cornelius "was a pious man", and that's still before he was baptized. Furthermore, it says "he and his whole family". And furthermore it says, "they worshipped God". And furthermore it says, "he did much to help the Jewish poor people". And yet more, it says, "he was constantly praying to God". With all that, how can we call this the "conversion of Cornelius"?

But for Peter, yes, it's a conversion: he says, "Now I realize that God makes no distinction…" Peter is being converted into a true preacher, an evangelist of Jesus Christ.

I believe that a truly prepared missionary or preacher can never enter another country or culture saying, "Repent! Stop doing what you're doing. Believe in Jesus!"—without a great deal of prudence. Why? Because within this new culture there are many good things that God has already given and done.

One could make the same mistake as Peter. Peter was praying because he didn't know what to do with Gentiles. He was anxious about whether God would accept them or not, whether he should baptize them or instruct them in the Jewish laws. Then God showed him a vision, the sheet full of animals, and spoke to him, "what God calls clean, you have to call clean". This was Peter's preoccupation when the messengers of Cornelius arrived and asked for him.

After the vision, Peter said, "God has shown me that I must not call anyone impure or unclean. Now I realize that God treats everyone on the same basis." Before, Peter didn't know what to say. It was only afterward that he understood.

And this ought to be the posture for evangelization. Every preacher who comes from outside the indigenous culture must learn to say, "Now I realize…now I understand."

That's part of the reflection Rafael shared. I would like to note how what he shared illustrates his own conversion. Rafael identifies with Cornelius, the pious pagan who was being evangelized by Peter. But he sees that it was Peter, the missionary evangelizer, who was being converted, and that's what, in Rafael's opinion, needs to happen—missionaries are often the ones most in need of conversion.

There would have been a time when Rafael agreed that the story is about Cornelius' conversion: he was the pagan needing to be instructed in the gospel, needing to be baptized, needing to be authenticated by a true believer, i.e. by a "foreign missionary" who had superior theological and spiritual knowledge. In spite of what the story says about Peter, Rafael would have read the story as basically an account of the evangelization of a pagan family by a Christian missionary.

But not anymore. It is a mark of his own conversion that Rafael sees so clearly that Cornelius already had experienced the saving, unconditional love of God, along with his family; his behavior and character showed this, even without being baptized! And it's the missionary, Peter, who still lacked a deep experiential trust in God's indiscriminate, unbounded love.

Perhaps one of many conversions, it came to Peter as a discovery in a specific, human context of crisis: there he saw the truth, rather than through logical or theological reasoning. I think that's how Rafael also has been and is being converted.

Rafael's conversion has moved him to believe that God created and loves his Toba people, culture and identity. Once a mark of inferiority, being Toba now is a source of courage--courage to speak fearlessly to non-indigenous authorities and to preach forcefully to his own people. Like Cornelius, he has no need to be ashamed of who he is, nor to be insecure.

And his conversion continues; he recently resigned his pastorate, trusting a sense of calling to a role that has no particular definition in his context, a kind of animator, Bible teacher and "prophet" of ethnic sustainability, without title or salary.

Along with Rafael, many in the Toba indigenous community are trying to find their way as "exiles" in their own land. They are a minority people not wanting to give up their identity, language, and way of being, tired of being seen as "dirty Indians" or some kind of cultural curiosity.

Conversion, then, means

- not being intimidated by the surrounding culture, and not being conformed to the surrounding society's definition of them as dirty, lazy, stupid, inferior "indios", or as an exotic human species.
- Conversion means being transformed, being renewed, to live boldly their God-given dignity as Tobas, confident in the experience of having been sought, loved, healed and saved by God. (A favorite text of our friend, Toba pastor Joel Jara, is Rom.10:20: "I (God) was found by those not looking for me; I appeared to those who were not asking for me."—he means the Tobas.)
- And finally, conversion means offering to the wider society their particular gifts and resources, like traditional wisdom and stories, their spirituality and view of the world, their practical skills and relationship with the natural environment---even if these precious gifts are sometimes despised.

I want to conclude by proposing that many of us, followers of Jesus living in N. America, are called to a similar kind of conversion. Are we, perhaps, not also called to live as "exiles" in our own culture?

Most of us don't start from the same place or with the same mind-set as the Tobas; we are not self-consciously a minority people, despised and intimidated by the surrounding dominant culture. No, for the most part we are the dominant culture. Consequently, our conversion has a different focus and content than that of Tobas.

- It means detaching from the prevailing culture, not being conformed to its myth of justified violence, to its mind-dominated, anti-spiritual arrogance, to its sexism, its racism and religious patriotism, its addiction to comfort, consumption, satiated senses--and petroleum.
- It means being transformed by the experience of God's loving embrace to live boldly, joyfully, and simply as a confessing people, a minority people covenanted to each other and to God---but not as an exclusive, "gated community".
- It means offering the embrace of Jesus to all those around us, as servants ready to suffer if need be, offering our gifts and our presence, the wisdom of our saints, and the indiscriminate mercy of God.

I count it a great privilege to know persons that are already converted in these ways, far more than I am. Knowing them helps to transform me.

Our conversion will undoubtedly be different from that of native peoples in Argentina. Nonetheless, we may all be called toward much the same end: —to live resiliently as small, vulnerable, open communities of grace and faith and radical hope, in the world that we believe God loves. We are able to do that because we ourselves have experienced God's mercy and God's embrace.