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Kevin Rafferty C.M.

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# Morality and conversion

*by Kevin Rafferty, C.M.*

## **Introduction**

I have been asked to speak about the moral aspects of conversion, keeping in mind theological, scriptural, pastoral and Vincentian aspects of this theme. In engaging in this reflection, it is possible to take different starting points:

- a) We could begin with reflection on conversion in our own lives. What kind of conversion(s) have we experienced? If we preach to others about conversion and indeed if we seek to help them to be converted, there is no doubt that our own moments of conversion will play a very big part in how we do this.
- b) Or, we could start with one of the great biblical paradigms of conversion - the Parable of the Prodigal Son - and examine what went on in that turning point when the Prodigal Son began to have "second thoughts" about what he had done. Questions about the blinding effect of sin, the gradual turning around, the homecoming etc. are all there to be examined.
- c) Or, we could begin with one or other of the classic examples of conversion in the Christian tradition - Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola, Blaise Pascal, Edith Stein, Paul Claudel, Simone Weil... and why not Vincent de Paul, I can hear you say.

There is no doubt that any of the above starting points could be helpful and useful to us and I am sure that in our reflections today, our own experience, the Gospel paradigm and examples of saints whose example has influenced each one of us will weave in and out of our reflections and discussions.

But just to keep our reflections rooted in our present reality and the present context of parish missions, I want to begin with the experience of conversion of Angela, Tony and Jimmy, three people Paul Roche met with recently on our Parish Missions in Ireland.

## **Angela**

*- a highly spirited mother of four children, the youngest of whom, Caroline, is autistic and attends a special school Monday to Friday. Her husband, Dermot, abandoned her and went to England with another woman. Angela now works, as a cleaner in the local High School. Ten months ago Tommy, who is separated from his wife, moved in with Angela and the children. He loves them and things have looked up a lot ever since. Angela was very upset with the way the Church treated her when Dermot abandoned her, she felt no one cared. She still prays and often goes into the Church to light a candle, but admits she is not very regular at Sunday Mass, as she has been told she can't receive Communion. During Lent last year there was a mission in the parish. Angela got involved with the women's group, making tea for the discussion groups which were held each evening. She felt very much part of things. One evening there was a talk and video about the effect on children of the*

*Chernobyl disaster. Along with five other women, Angela volunteered to take two children from Belarus for a 6-week holiday. Since then she has collected money, attended talks and has become totally committed. "I can now see that my religion is about helping those who are less well off than I am" she says. Once a week she gathers people in her home and they spend an hour sharing the Gospel together. "That mission made all the difference to me - thank God I took part."*

## **Tony**

*- is in his third year in Dublin City University, where he is a student of Business Administration. His parents are tremendously proud of him getting into University. His father, who drives the No. 19 bus, was always determined that all seven children would do better. Tony was his pride and joy. Many of the students in college found Tony rather insufferable. Noisy and pushy, he got in with a crowd who spent most of their time and money drinking. Unlike his hardworking father who never misses Mass and is Vincent de Paul Society President, Tony had no real roots in the faith and quickly drifted away. (Lk 8:13). He dabbled in New Age stuff, but mainly was cynical toward "wets" who went to Church. Tony was on the edge of a group who regularly took drugs. With so many others, he was stunned when first year student, Sandra, died after taking Ecstasy at a student hop. The Church, usually not crowded, was packed for Sandra's funeral. It was no ordinary funeral either. Apart from the Chaplain who said the Mass, Danny spoke. He briefly told his story - he had found Jesus and seemed to radiate joy and peace. He invited students to a weekend experience. From the crowded Church just four went along a month later. Tony was one. It changed him greatly. "I've been a Catholic for 22 years, but have known Jesus only for one." Now he prays a great deal, generally carries a Bible with him, frowns on those who drink and is planning to go to Uganda next summer to preach to young groups there. His father is a little confused... "I thought he was going to become a business man, not a bleedin' monk."*

## **Jimmy**

*- a bit of a character, has lived all his 54 years on Pearse Road. The four children are grown up and married - all have fled the nest, have done well and seldom visit grubby Pearse Road. The past three years Jimmy has been made redundant by the multi-national chemical factory on the industrial estate. Within weeks of losing his job, Jimmy's wife of over 30 years died, leaving him alone with his "lump sum" redundancy payment. Like many around him, Jimmy took to drinking. In his drinking Jimmy became morose; hurts which he had carried for years began to surface. People tired of him and his self-pity. He took less and less care of himself. His clothes, like the house, were dirty and shabby. Religion didn't feature too much in Jimmy's life at this time, though he kept the lamp burning before the Sacred Heart in the kitchen and sometimes had a word with "Himself." The word sometimes became an argument - what really hurt Jimmy was that no one seemed to give a damn for him now that the good woman was gone. He was never too sure how he ended up in the Parochial Hall that night, but Jimmy was there for an Open AA meeting. The stories were routine for most present, but for Jimmy it was*

*magic. "My life is out of control." "I must rely on the Higher Power:" It all made sense to Jimmy. "My name is Jimmy. I'm an alcoholic." Not a single day has passed since that night but Jimmy was at "his meeting." He has remained sober, he gives thanks to God day by day, but mostly in his home, not at Mass.<sup>1</sup>*

## **1. Moral conversion - what is it?**

I think we would all agree that at the center of Angela's, Tony's and Jimmy's conversion experiences is a new kind of awareness of themselves, of their relationships with others and of their relationship with God. We could say that they have arrived at a new kind of insight into their situation. It is a new kind of knowledge or a new kind of consciousness. They see their situations differently.

And what is very important to grasp in all of this is that knowledge in the moral sphere is more than knowledge.

*"I do not see values as I see things.  
I only see those values I am willing to serve."*

Knowledge in the moral sphere is a special kind of knowledge. In the history of moral philosophy, one of the great turning points in Greek Philosophy was the realization that knowledge as such does not equal morality. Because I know what I should do does not mean that I am going to do it.

- Knowledge cannot be equated with virtue.
- Intellectual conversion cannot be equated with Moral Conversion.

And the reason is because in the sphere of moral conversion the whole person is involved, one's intellect, yes, but also one's emotions, one's feelings and above all, one's will.

In evaluating what we should do or not do in the moral sphere we usually ask:

- What does my conscience tell me I should do?
- What do you think of the following description of conscience:

*Conscience - an inner voice that we experience as nagging, hinting, suggesting, as well as vetoing - against the conscious direction of our wills and sometimes in spite of ingenious arguments concocted in our own favour. We must all of us have sometimes experienced that sudden "dawn" of a new consciousness that we have been behaving badly in some respect. In such situations we are confronted against our will with the truth which we at first dimly perceive and then clearly recognize. The thinking may have been going on for some time. All that is needed is a fiat of our wills for the new moral awareness to break through.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Fr. Paul Roche, a member of the Irish Province Parish Mission Team, for these three account of "conversion" experiences.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Dunlop, "Moral Education," lecture to members of the St. Thomas More Society, St. Mary's College of Education, Strawberry Hill, London, March 1982.

At the heart of our preaching and every thing else we do on our parish missions is a desire to lead people to a conversion - a moral conversion - "the slow dawning of a new consciousness, a new awareness of themselves, of others and of God."

I can hear some of you say is all this not obvious. Is it not common sense? Maybe it is, but it is extraordinary how many people today equate conversion with the acquisition of knowledge. I suspect, indeed I am fairly sure of it, that much of the New Age phenomenon which we encounter in so many different contexts today sees moral awareness as just one kind of knowledge amongst others. A special kind of knowledge, yes, but it is more than knowledge. It involves my emotions, my feelings, my will.

I think that a great strength of the Catholic tradition is that we have an awareness of our capacity for self-delusion, for self-deception, the need for moral purification in order to discover what my real values are and indeed to know what is right and what is wrong.

And I often think that the large number of people who still turn out for ashes on Ash Wednesday is an acknowledgement of this. The conversion we are looking for demands effort and takes time, it involves struggle and soul searching if it is a genuine kind of conversion.

## **2. Kerygma precedes catechesis, especially moral catechesis**

Many of you may already be saying to yourselves that it is not moral conversion in any philosophical sense that I should be addressing, but conversion - moral conversion - in a religious context. It is not conversion following the path of the philosopher, Socrates, but conversion following the call of Jesus Christ to "Come Follow Me."

I can only agree with you. Those of us who belong to an older generation studied moral theology when it was separated to a greater or lesser extent from Systematic or Dogmatic Theology. So much has happened in the past 30 years to follow through on re-thinking the basis of moral theology, especially in rooting it in scripture. You will recall what the Vatican II Document on the training of Priests (*Optatam Totius*) said:

*Theological disciplines should be renewed by livelier contact with the Mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Special attention needs to be given to moral theology. Its scientific exposition should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching. It should show the nobility of the Christian vocation.*  
(Par 16).

When one examines the moral teaching of the New Testament writings, one discovers that one never finds moral catechesis in isolation. In the Synoptic Gospels, in the Pauline writings and in the Johannine writings, one discovers that the context of any kind of moral teaching, especially teaching on conversion, is the proclamation of the Kerygma. And of course we find great variation in the presentation of the Kerygma as one goes from one set of New Testament writings to another. Let me give a few examples:

A) *The Kingdom of God is at hand:*

One of the earliest presentations of moral catechesis is found in Mark 1:14 (Parallel Texts Mt 4:12-17, Lk 4:14-15).

"Jesus went into Galilee.  
There he proclaimed the Good News from God.  
'The time has come' he said,  
'and the Kingdom of God is close at hand.  
Repent,  
and believe the Good News."

There is an air of expectation among the people listening to Jesus. Jesus speaks to their hopes and dreams and anxieties and he would have known that there were different expectations among them about the Kingdom he was referring to (as there is today when we proclaim the coming of the Kingdom).

- The Pharisees codified it as if it could have been programmed.
  - The Zealots tried to externalize it politically.
- The Qumranites see the Kingdom as judgment on the gentiles and sinners.
- The apocolyptists see the Kingdom as bringing catastrophe.
  - The Rabbis spiritualize the Kingdom into an interior piety.<sup>3</sup>

For Jesus the Kingdom is different to all these expectations. For Jesus, the Kingdom is a gift - a gift of the Father to be responded to with gratitude and thanksgiving.

I will not go into all the different views we have about the interpretation of "the Kingdom is close at hand" - what we call eschatology. It will suffice to say that Jesus' call for metanoia, for conversion, for repentance is a call to repentance in the context of the 1st and 2nd Coming of Christ. We are living in these "in between times" and if we are to respond to Jesus' call, we undergo a total change of heart and mind and become disciples of Christ. The call is a call to radical discipleship.

The full implications of this call to repentance and to discipleship are spelt out in the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes, the Old Law and the New Law contrasted and the call to almsgiving, interior prayer etc., are requirements on all of us who struggle to belong to the Kingdom. And for all of you who have studied the Sermon on the Mount, you know how far we have moved from any kind of legalism, minimalism or a morality with a pass and honours course. But you know as well as I do that there is always the danger of regressing to any one of these in our time and in every age in our presentation of the Christian ethic.

#### B) *The Paschal Mystery - The Cornerstone of Christian Morality:*

When we move to the Pauline writings we find a different way of presenting the Kerygma and moral catechesis. For example, if you look at Romans 6:1-12, you will find that Paul fuses together three kinds of Death and Resurrection:

- The Death and Resurrection of Christ.
- Our Baptism in the Death and Resurrection of Christ.
- Dying to sin and living in the new life of Christ.

The context of moral catechesis is the Paschal Mystery.

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<sup>3</sup>From Scripture Notes of Fr. Brian M. Nolan, All Hallows College, Dublin.

C) *Love others as I have loved you:*

And when we move to the Johannine writings we find yet another way of presenting the Kerygma and the catechesis:

*"I have given you a new commandment  
You must love others as I have loved you."*

And our efforts to live the moral life are a response to Jesus' love for us. It could not be put more succinctly.

## **Conclusion**

In the New Testament writings, we cannot separate the Kerygma from the moral catechesis. The examples we have given show how closely they are related in some of the key texts in the New Testament writings.

The Christian ethic is a very demanding ethic. It only makes sense when we see the overall context:

- The context of the proclamation of a Kingdom in the Synoptics.
  - The context of the saving death and resurrection in Paul's letter to the Romans.
- The context of agape in the Johannine writings.

When we move to some of the more specific teachings of Jesus about the unity and dissolubility of marriage, about sharing our goods with others, especially the poor, we have to contextualise these teachings or better still, we have to make sure that our hearers realize the context in which Jesus spoke, Paul spoke or wrote, the Johannine writers spoke or wrote. In the context in which many of us proclaim the ethical teaching of Jesus today, it is not that surprising that many people will reject it, or see it as beyond them.

Perhaps it is only in the context of a Christian Community in which the Commandment to love one another is really alive and in the context of a sacramental life in which we are nourished by the Word, by the Eucharist that this ethic makes some sense and people will feel empowered to try and live up to it.

## **3.Kohlberg's stages of moral development**

When St. Vincent de Paul and his companions gave missions in the 17th Century, it would be true to say that what we know as the empirical sciences - psychology, sociology - were non-existent, or certainly at a very embryonic stage of development. So when we engage in this fundamental reflection on "popular missions" today and what form they should take, we cannot leave out of account some of the findings of the empirical sciences.

It would be true to say that our understanding of the nature of guilt has been sharpened and refined by the various theories of Freud and Jung and their followers today. It will be important that we address some of the implications of all this when we reflect on the place of the Sacrament of Penance in the dynamic of conversion.

What I would like to explore with you now are the implications of the findings of an educational psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, in what he has written about Stages of Moral Development. Most of you, I am sure, are familiar with the theory itself. He distinguishes six stages at three levels of development:

- i) The pre-conventional level
- Stage 1: Obedience and punishment orientation.
- Stage 2: Instrumental/relativistic orientation.

Kohlberg claims that the six-stage sequence is universal and he makes this claim in the light of empirical research he has gathered in USA, England, Turkey, Taiwan, etc. He also claims that the six-stage theory is invariant - one must progress through the stages in order. One cannot pass to a higher stage without passing through the stage immediately preceding it. Moral Development takes place according to a predetermined sequence. The task of the moral educator is to lead the person on to the next stage to the one he/she is at right now.<sup>4</sup>

COMMENT:

Various critiques of this six-stage theory have been put forward by other educational psychologists. How universal are the stages? Might there be more than six stages? How invariant is the sequence? and so on. As you will know, contemporary moral theologians have taken the theory quite seriously, despite reservations on one or other point.

Does this theory not point up strengths and weaknesses in the way we present the Christian ethic in a Catholic context?

One of the strengths I believe of the Catholic approach to morality is that we do present a body of moral teaching with authority. One of the great achievements of Pope John Paul II is to have spoken out boldly on the morality of many issues in our day, in biomedical ethics, in social ethics, in sexual ethics etc. The expectation is that people will listen to a moral authority whose credentials can be vouchsafed. Catholics are expected to listen to this authority and be guided by it.

One of the weaknesses of our approach to morality in the Catholic tradition is that we have very often stopped there. We have not gone on to the third level - Stages 5 & 6 - and encouraged Catholics to appropriate moral teachings for themselves and when they do, we find it very difficult to deal with them.

What is at stake here of course is the Primacy of the Individual Conscience and the danger that we just pay lip service to this. Part of our task is to encourage people to appropriate in a personal way the arguments we may put forward for a position and if we are dealing, as we are very often today, with people with full secondary and, more and more, university education, we cannot expect them merely to "conform" to the teaching of the Pope or Bishops or any other moral authority in the Catholic Church.

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Bernard Haring, "Free and Faithful in Christ" in *General Moral Theology*, Vol. 1, 243.

A corollary to the above is to be realistic and not overestimate what people may be capable of. We know, from the results of Kohlberg's findings that not that many people are Stage 5 and Stage 6 people. Many people are looking for an authority they can trust and very often, in their difficulties about resolving a moral problem, they want the ear of someone who will listen to them patiently, someone who will encourage them to search for the true path to follow. There is all the difference in the world between a Laissez faire attitude, "anything goes" attitude, "make up your own mind" attitude and the attitude of encouraging people to engage in a serious and responsible search for the values that are really at stake in whatever moral dilemma may face them.

#### **4. Conversion and fundamental choice**

When we try to analyze and structure our moral experience, it is more than likely that we will invoke the key concepts of freedom, conscience, law and guilt/sin to do so. To do this is to look at the moral act from different standpoints or perspectives. For a few moments I would like to concentrate on our understanding of freedom and the way some of our contemporary moral theologians introduce what they will call The Theory of Fundamental Option or Fundamental Choice to help us have a better understanding of how we exercise our freedom.

It does not require very much knowledge of psychology, sociology, biology etc., to become aware of how many factors bear on the exercise of our freedom, factors which can limit or diminish our freedom. Many of our contemporaries will draw the conclusion that we are completely determined by instinctual forces in all that we do. Consequently, our sense of freedom is an illusion. At the end of the day, however, I believe that there are moments in our lives when we can transcend these pressures and make what moral theologians call "fundamental choices" or "fundamental options." Let me try to explain what they mean:

Through reflection on our own experience, we discover that the exercise of our freedom is more than the sum of the individual choices we make from day to day, from moment to moment. Beyond or deeper than the individual choices we make is an awareness of giving a general ethical orientation to our whole lives. We are responsible, not only for the individual things we do, we are responsible for the kind of people we are. We have the capacity of self-determination. We have the capacity of making fundamental choices.

We call it a *choice* because it is "I" ultimately who must decide what meaning to give to my life. I decide what will be the supreme value for me.

We call it a *fundamental* choice because it bears on the particular choices and decisions we make. A fundamental choice gives an ethical orientation to the whole of our lives - a positive orientation towards what is good and virtuous or a negative orientation towards what is evil and unauthentic.

Moral theologians vary in the way they describe this theory of fundamental choice:

- Josef Fuchs describes fundamental choice in terms of an exercise of a person's BASIC FREEDOM - a freedom that not only enables us to decide freely on particular acts and aims, but also by means of these to determine ourselves totally as persons and not merely in any particular area of behavior.
- Louis Janssens describes fundamental choice in more personalist terms - positively as a choice to be more selfless in one's relationship with others;

negatively as a choice to turn in on oneself - possessing, using and dominating others.

For a Christian of course, a fundamental choice will take on the modality of "opting for the Kingdom" or "following Christ."

It may not be that easy to define at any age of our lives the kind of fundamental choice we have made. There may be a "yes" more profound or more deeper than all our individual "no's" or a "no" more profound than all our individual "yes's." A friend of mine said to me once that she would need a thirty-day retreat with a good spiritual director and a good psychotherapist on hand to really determine the kind of fundamental choice she has made. I am not sure that it would be that difficult, but what is certain is that it would require serious reflection for a period of time for there to be "the dawning of a new consciousness" of what values we are really living for and I presume that this is the kind of reflection we are hoping to initiate in our proclamation of the kingdom in our parish missions.

*Some observations:*

If people are fixated on a distinction between mortal and venial sin and on confessing mortal sins according to their number and species, will they ever engage in the serious moral reflection about what their fundamental choice is? One way of making sure this does not happen is to preach as eloquently as we can about the mercy of God as the backdrop to any examination of conscience - as of course St. Vincent de Paul did.

One of the great merits of this theory of fundamental choice is that we move away from trivialising the moral life into a series of discrete acts unrelated to one another in which we play games about "staying out of mortal sin." Cf. David Lodge's novel, *How Far Can You Go?* Some of the excitement and adventure of living the moral life, especially living the moral life from a Christian perspective can take over.<sup>5</sup>

## **5. Ecclesial conversion - return to what kind of church?**

Some years ago I was visiting a parish in a place called Arlington, on the outskirts of Washington DC. After I had supper with the pastor, who happened to be a Scotsman, I was invited by him to attend a meeting of 20 parishioners which was taking place around 8 o'clock that evening. All the pastor told me was that it would be a meeting between ten active members of the parish and ten "inactive" Catholics who were exploring the idea of returning to active membership in that particular Christian Community. I cannot remember many details of the particular meeting itself, except that the meeting went on for about two hours, with a coffee break in between. What did remain in my mind was the easy informality and the willingness of the "inactive Catholics" to share their reasons for leaving the Church or their reservations about returning to active membership in the Church. The ten active Catholics had invited ten people they knew were alienated from the Church to come to a weekly meeting over 20 weeks to explore together reasons for leaving and reasons for returning. There was time for reconciliation and time for healing, as well as time to deepen their knowledge of Christ, of the Church as a group and on a one-to-one basis. This meeting was in fact the beginning of a movement in the States, known as Remembering Church, which I believe has much to teach us about Ecclesial Conversion, especially in the post Christian societies that many of us in the Western world belong to today.

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<sup>5</sup>David Lodge, *How Far Can You Go?* (Penguin Press, 1980).

When I reflected afterwards about what I had experienced that evening and read some of the literature associated with this Remembering Church Movement, I came to realise the following:

1. For a Catholic to return to the Church today after a prolonged absence cannot be squeezed into a rushed encounter with a priest in a darkened corner of a confessional. This does not do justice to the process itself nor the kind of Church we want to invite people back to.
2. In the light of what I heard that evening and discovered in subsequent discussion with the people running the sessions, I came to realize we need to distinguish carefully between the different kind of "alienation" that people today have to come to terms with if they are to return to active participation.<sup>6</sup>

In broad terms, we could distinguish between three different kinds of alienation:

A) *Alienation of the unawakened:*

*These are people who may have grown up in Catholic homes and may have gone to Catholic schools, but who have not really heard a first proclamation of the Gospel. One can hardly say that they are "estranged" from a God they have not yet discovered. They await a first hearing of the gospel. They may have been carrying a "membership" card in the Church, but have never really discovered what membership entails. It is not so much that many young people have left the Church. They never really belonged to it. And so what they are looking for is true enlightenment of what it means to be an adult Christian.*

B) True alienation:

*This is the alienation of people who once did belong but who deliberately walked away. They are looking for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for peace, for strengthening and for healing.*

C) Prophetic alienation

*This group claims that it is the Church for the local Christian Community that has failed them. Today this alienation may center on disagreement with the Church's teaching especially in the moral sphere, disagreement with the way authority is exercised in the Church, lack of respect for minority groups and so on.*

3. The process of "traveling" with people who want to explore "returning to the Church" is costly - it takes time, it takes great diplomacy, it calls for discernment. And of course, the best travel companions are those who have gone through the journey of return themselves. They are in a better position to understand where people are coming from and the stages of the journey home. I have heard it said that we may have much to learn from AA groups in setting up the process of returning.
4. The model of Church we are working out of, especially the understanding of Church as Community, will obviously play a key part in the kind of "conversion" process we are likely to set up. And of course, all this means that a Parish Mission Team has to

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. James Lopresti, "Penance: A reform. Proposal for the Rite," in *American Essays & Liturgy* 6 (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1987).

have some of the skills that will help ministers - priestly ministers and lay ministers - deepen the quality of Christian community in a local parish. Vincent found in the 17th Century that if there was to be follow through on parish missions in his day he had to engage in the renewal of parish structures and the renewal of men and women serving in these parishes. This is one of the reasons why giving parish missions today is so daunting, especially at a time when the Church is doing so much soul searching about both the nature of priestly ministry and the nature of lay ministry.

5. One thing that is central to setting up any process of "returning home" is an awareness that we are all penitents in need of forgiveness. An awareness on the part of all of what it is to be a sinner and what it is "to be forgiven" is central to our identity as Christians. How to bring a parish community to the point where it will rejoice in being a "reconciled community" and have a passionate desire to communicate this experience to others is somewhere at the heart of ecclesial conversion.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- 1) Give an example of a conversion experience or the "dawning of a new consciousness" that someone has recently shared with you.
- 2) In your preaching/communication on parish missions, what is your favourite scriptural paradigm of conversion?
- 3) In your country are there strengths and weaknesses in the way the Catholic Church communicates its moral teaching to our contemporaries?
- 4) Do you think that the theory of fundamental option has any bearing on the way we preach about conversion in the context of parish missions today?
- 5) Ecclesial conversion: what kind of Church would you like to be inviting people back to?