

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:

- Conversion is a lifelong process.
- God's grace and our perseverance are needed for spiritual growth.
- Having doubts and questions are normal parts of the faith journey.



## Mountaintops and Valleys

*"The soul of one who serves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in the mood for singing."*

St. John of the Cross

You may be feeling what St. John of the Cross described. You may also be experiencing other feelings:

- "I felt such a spiritual high during the Easter Vigil. But now everything else seems so... ordinary again."
- "I feel like I've 'graduated.' I guess I don't have to keep coming to these RCIA sessions."
- "I feel kind of confused. I spent so much energy preparing for initiation. Now what do I do?"
- "I really love my new faith but I still have questions. The more I learn, the more I realize I still need to learn."

Peak experiences don't last, even for the apostles. Read about Jesus' transfiguration in Matthew 17:1–9. Peter wanted to stay in this mountaintop experience, but they had to come down from the mountain and get back to the daily grind. Witnessing Jesus' suffering and death caused those special feelings to disappear.

Even though we won't remain in a high state of religious experience all the time, God still walks beside us. When we need to be reassured that God is with us, the Church is there. Prayer, God's word, Mass, the sacraments, our faithful friends—these are all reminders of God's daily presence in our lives.

## Conversion: A Lifelong Process

Welcome! You're now a fully initiated member of the Catholic Church.

The Easter Vigil is only the beginning of a commitment to a lifelong discovery and living out of the Christian message. The next stage of the RCIA process is called *mystagogy*, a Greek word meaning "mystery." In the early Church, the community used the fifty days from Easter to Pentecost to explain the mystery of the sacraments celebrated at Easter.

This period is a time for *neophytes* (newly baptized) and those who have come into full communion with the Catholic Church to gain a deeper understanding of God's word, the sacraments, and what your new commitment means for your life. You'll continue to gather for prayer and exploration of Catholic Christianity with a redirected focus—from *learning to living*. You'll be invited to participate more fully in the life of the parish so that your faith may continue to be nourished—and the faith of the community may be enhanced by the witness of its newest members.

- *What feelings do you have now that you're a full member of the Catholic Church?*



## Ongoing Conversion

The key to this next step is ongoing conversion. At its root, *conversion* means “to change or turn around.” Conversion is the ever-present call to grow in faith and to live out that faith. It means deepening our relationship with God and our fellow Christians.

The first step in the conversion process is to turn to Jesus Christ, accept him as our Lord and Savior, and choose to live the life of faith in the community of God’s people. This first step, this first turning toward God, is called *initial conversion*. It may be a moving experience, a dramatic moment, one that jars us to the depths of our souls. Or it may happen gradually over a period of years.

Conversion is an ongoing process that requires perseverance and the gradual and continuous redirecting of our lives toward God. Bit by bit, our lives are steered closer to what God wills for us.

Initial conversion needs time, space, and opportunity to sink roots into the rich soil of our lives. Like any living thing, the life of faith requires the right atmosphere to grow and bear fruit. Even Jesus’ closest friends and followers grew in their understanding of the Messiah.

The two sons of Zebedee, James and John, asked their mother to intercede for them so that they might sit at Christ’s right and left hand in his kingdom:

*“Jesus said in reply, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?’ They said to him, ‘We can.’ He replied, ‘Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”*

*Matthew 20:22, 26–28*

James and John were looking for a warrior king who would rally the people, gather an army, and drive the Romans from their land. Contrary to their expectations, Jesus revealed himself as the “suffering servant” (see Isaiah 53), one who came to serve. As Jesus’ apostles, they were being called to this work, and it wasn’t what they envisioned.

It was better, fuller!

- What were your expectations of Jesus and the Church? Did any of these go through changes?



## Conversion Is Lifelong

In the eighteenth century, St. Alphonsus Liguori, an ambitious young Italian lawyer, lost a complicated case. He had been duped, and his whole world collapsed. He stormed out of the courtroom saying, “World, I know you now.”

A few weeks later, after a dispute with his domineering father, he walked into a church and heard a voice: “Alphonsus, give yourself to me.” He went up the street to the church of Our Lady of Ransom and placed his sword, the symbol of his nobility, on one of the side altars.

This dramatic conversion wasn’t the end. Three years later, Alphonsus was ordained a priest. He was vacationing with four other priests on the Amalfi Coast when a sudden storm forced them ashore. They made their way to a mountain hermitage. Overwhelmed by the poverty of the goat herders nearby, Alphonsus dedicated himself to the poor people of the country district. The death of his mentor, Bishop Falcoia, later led Alphonsus to take on the role of leader.

Conversion is a lifelong process. Saint Alphonsus Liguori shows us that. We will each experience many moments of grace and conversion. We’ll be changed to the degree we respond to God’s grace and our ongoing call to conversion.

- Describe a recent experience that was a moment of conversion for you. How did you respond to this call to conversion?



## All Is Grace

*Saint Paul writes: "God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work."*

2 Corinthians 9:8

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux said, "All is grace." If you belong to Jesus Christ, then it's all good. It's all grace.

Grace comes the day we bury a husband or care for an ailing mother. Grace is there when we're raising our children. Grace shows up when we lift our voices and sing our favorite songs. Grace finds us when we care for someone else's children, teach them, and love them. And grace is there when we meet another car at a blind intersection.

Grace is God working in us, through us, and with us so that we can live the life of Christ always and everywhere. It's not a one-time shot in the arm.

Grace is found in the nitty-gritty daily living of the faithful Christian who doesn't give up. It's a gift that flows from baptismal waters into the deepest roots of our souls. It shows up when we need it and to the degree we need it so we can weather any storm.

Anything that draws us closer to God and helps us live out our calling, anything that keeps us close to God...that's grace.

## I thought I'd have it all figured out by now...

If you thought you'd have it all figured out by now but don't, welcome to the club! It would be virtually impossible for a thinking, active Catholic to sail through life without questions and doubts. It's part of the faith process. Remember, Jesus didn't dump the apostles because they had doubts or because they couldn't understand everything right away.

Faith is faith precisely because we *do not know, yet still believe*. Recall Jesus' words to Thomas after the resurrection:

*"Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."*

John 20:29

Faith thrusts us into a lifelong and ongoing relationship with God. Even people engaged in intimate human relationships wonder at times. But a couple can actually grow closer, their love deeper and more mature, after struggling through their doubts. Our doubts can be catalysts to a deeper relationship and closer union with God.

When we face moments of doubt, there are things we can do to remain faithful:

- Get answers from reading Catholic books or from a spiritual director or faithful Catholic.
- Witness to our faith in spite of doubts.
- Intensify our search for understanding through prayer, reading Scripture, and reception of the sacraments.
- Act on our belief and let time and God take care of our doubts.

We can ignore the grace or respond wholeheartedly. God's initiative and invitation aren't what's lacking. We're chased "down the nights and down the days" as described in Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven*.

*How and how have I felt God's pursuit of me? How have I responded?*





Perseverance is the difference between a passing religious experience and the journey of one who, like St. Paul, finishes the course of life well. God's grace and power must begin it all and will continue to lead and sustain us through it all.

- *How do I experience God's grace and power sustaining me on this journey?*

***Journey of Faith for Adults: Mystagogy, M1 (826283)***

*Imprimi Potest:* Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists.

*Imprimatur:* "In accordance with CIC 827, permission to publish has been granted on June 7, 2016, by the Rev. Msgr. Mark S. Rivituso, Vicar General, Archdiocese of St. Louis. Permission to publish is an indication that nothing contrary to Church teaching is contained in this work. It does not imply any endorsement of the opinions expressed in the publication; nor is any liability assumed by this permission."

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