

Most everyone knows the saying “don’t judge a book by it’s cover” but the reality is we can do it all the time. Thankfully, we have a God who tends not to think in the short term, but looks at the big picture and the possibility that is within us all for change, conversion, and growth.

In our first reading from Acts, we meet Paul, perhaps the most famous conversion story of all time. But like Paul, there are many other people who go from one extreme to another.

One such man who later took a new name was Muhammad Moussaoui, who converted from Islam to Catholicism. He’s the author of “The Price to Pay” a book that details his conversion. And in his case, the title sheds light on the reality of conversion in that each conversion entails a price. After his conversion, he took the name Joseph Fadelle.

Fadelle belonged to one of Iraq’s most important Shiite Muslim families, the Moussaoui clan. As head of the clan, his father was a kind of judge and solved disputes between clan members. He also had great wealth and prestige.

In 1987 Fadelle was drafted into the Iraqi army, then under the rule of Saddam Hussein, right in the middle of the war with neighboring Iran. By this time he was 23 years old and single.

Sent to a garrison on the border with Iran, he was housed in a room with a Christian. He became indignant on learning he was going to be lodging with a Christian, an insult to a born Muslim whose family also descended from the Islam’s founder Muhammad.

However, the Christian, called Massoud, was older than him and welcomed him with kindness, so that little by little his prejudices began to fade. Fadelle conceived a plan to convert him to Islam. One day, when Massoud was absent, seeing among his books one titled “The Miracles of Jesus,” he became curious and began reading it. He had no idea who it was, because in the Koran Jesus is called Isa; but he was delighted to read about miracles such as the one during the Wedding at Cana, and was attracted by the figure of Jesus.

Still intending to convert Massoud to Islam, he asked him if Christians also had a sacred book like the Koran. After being told that Christians had the Bible, he asked to see it, thinking it would be easy to refute.

To his surprise, Massoud refused to show him the Christian book and asked an even more surprising question: if he had read the Koran. This question was offensive to one who had been brought up in Islam, but he simply replied he had. Then came a new and rather embarrassing question: “Did you understand the meaning of each word, each verse?”

The future Christian recounts that this question pierced his mind like a fiery dart, since according to Islam what matters is not to understand the Koran, but just to read it. Seeing his embarrassment, his roommate proposed that he read the Koran again, but this time try to understand each sentence; and then Massoud would lend him the book of Christians.

Muhammad accepted the proposal that completely changed his life. Indeed, as he tried to understand the meaning of what was written in the Koran, he realized that much of it he just could not grasp. A consultation with an iman failed to solve his doubts and he became increasingly disenchanted with the book of Islam. Having finished this keen, meditative reading, he came to the conclusion that this book could not be of divine origin.

It was then a mystical episode took place, which prepared his conversion. He dreamed he was in a meadow on the edge of a creek and saw on the other side a very imposing, extremely attractive man. He tried to jump to the other side, but remained still in the air until the mysterious person took him by the hand and said to him: "In order to cross the creek, you need to eat the bread of life." Then he woke up.

No longer thinking about the dream, he got Massoud to loan him the Holy Gospels. He happened to open the book on the Gospel of Saint John. He was totally absorbed reading it and felt a great well-being. At one point, he was deeply moved to find the mysterious words of his dream: "the bread of life." The words of Jesus in the Gospel were clear: "I am the bread of life: he that comes to me shall not hunger" (John 6:35). He remembers feeling incredible peace.

He wanted Massoud to help him become a Christian, but was met with resistance fearing possible death for both, as some kill converts and those who assist in their conversion. At any rate, Massoud taught him to pray and the two spent their free time reading the Gospels and praying.

Massoud was released from the army while Muhammad was on leave and he did not find him on his return. Shortly after he too was discharged and returned to his parents' house.

For Fadelle, that was the beginning of a great ordeal that would last for years, requiring unparalleled loyalty.

As Massoud had recommended, he sought to conceal his conversion from his family, while avoiding, under various pretexts, to participate in their common Muslim prayers. At the same time he tried to approach the Christians, but they were afraid to accept him in their churches since they did not know him and were fearful due of the climate of persecution in which they lived (much like Paul in our first reading).

Fadelle's consolation was to read, covertly, the Bible he had received from Massoud, meditating especially on the Gospels. Finally he succeeded, through a Christian with

whom he had made friends, to attend a church; but the eagerly awaited baptism had still not happened.

Time went by and in 1992 his father told him he had arranged a bride for him and that he should get married. It was a girl from the same social environment, and naturally a Muslim, called Anwar.

After his marriage and the birth of a son, Fabelle, who continued to attend church secretly, met a foreign missionary in Iraq who agreed to prepare him for baptism. But then something unexpected happened. One day, when he returned from Mass, his wife, who did not understand where he went every Sunday, asked if he had been going to see another woman. Caught by surprise and without thinking about what to say, Fabelle replied that he was a Christian and went to Mass every Sunday.

His wife was totally shocked by the news that she was married to a Christian. Discombobulated, she locked herself in her room. Later, in the absence of her husband, she took their son and went to her mother's house.

Fabelle then realized he was in danger. She would tell her family that he was a Christian and he would be sentenced to death. However, miraculously, his wife said nothing to her folks and agreed to go back to her own home. Even more, she asked Fabelle to explain what Christianity was. He employed the same method that Massoud had used with him. He asked her to reread the Koran trying to pay attention to the meaning of its words and the doctrine it expressed. As had happened with him, she was shocked, especially with the way the Koran deals with Muslim women.

After reading the Gospels, Anwar secretly began attending Church with her husband and taking religion classes with the missionary.

In 1997 his family finally realized he had taken a distance from Islam and became suspicious that something was afoot. When the couple went to church, his brothers searched his home and found the copy of the Bible. And when they questioned his young son, he crossed himself as he had learned from his parents.

The next day, at dawn, Muhammad was taken to his parent's house on an urgent pretext. As he entered the main room, he was immediately beaten by his brothers and uncles in the presence of his father. The latter, furious with indignation, accused him of being a Christian. His own mother shouted, "Kill him and cast his body in the sewer!"

Although he was not killed on that occasion, Fabelle was taken by a cousin to one of Saddam Hussein's political prisons to be tortured in order to reveal the name of the Christians who had "corrupted" him. For three months he was severely tortured, lost almost half his weight, and then was released. The family pretended it had all been a mistake, but put one of his sisters in his house to watch him.

Finally, in April 2000, after many trials, the couple and their two children managed to escape to Jordan, where he realized his longed-for dream of being baptized, along with his wife. He took the name John (but became known as Joseph) and she, Maryam.

However, they were still unable to practice Catholicism in peace. When his family realized he had fled, they started looking for him and eventually found him in Jordan. In December of that year, four siblings and an uncle managed to lure him to a deserted place where, after a brief argument, they demanded that he apostatize from Christianity and attempted to execute the fatwa that condemns a person to death for leaving Islam. Miraculously, despite being shot at point-blank range, the bullets narrowly missed him and he heard an inner voice telling him to run. Already some distance away, a bullet hit his ankle and he fell in the mud, fainting. His attackers thought he was dead and fled. Fadelle was taken by a stranger to a hospital and later treated by Christian doctors in his home, but Church authorities ordered him to leave Jordan in order not to endanger the Christian community. He took refuge in France, where he lives to this day.

Some people convert like Moussaoui. Some “re-vert” and re-discover the faith. Others are raised in the faith and have a faith that waxes and wanes over their journey. But while there are many stories of faith, where they intersect is that a true conversion, reversion, or lifelong growth in holiness entails some key components. And that’s because becoming a successful Christian - namely a future saint - requires these things on the journey.

As I prepare for homilies, I typically go over the readings, think about them, look at written commentary from different sources, read several homilies, and also listen to one online each week given by Bishop Robert Barron, the auxiliary bishop of LA, and a major figure in Catholic media known for his apologetic work. And as I listened to his homily this week, I was inspired because he points out that Paul’s growth as a Christian that we see a glimpse of in the first reading entails four key phases, and I’d just like to add my own spin on them, because he’s quite right. It goes to show you being a Christian is not just saying “I accept Jesus” (unlike in Islam when really all one needs to do is say “there is no God but Allah and Mohammad is his prophet” and believe it, or even among fundamentalist Christians who might simply say all you need to do is be born again and accept Jesus Christ as your own personal savior.”). There is a lot more to it than that indeed.

The first is patience with ourselves and other people. Note at the start of the reading people know who Paul is. And they are skeptical. This guy? Saul? He was the one who is persecuting us. Maybe they think he’s not sincere in his conversion; or just sneaking his way into the Christian community to report back to the Jewish officials about what they are up to. But God saw past the young man who was filled with anger and to the saint waiting to emerge. How about us? When we make mistakes, or if we battle sins of habit, or have done some really stupid things in our past, can we forgive ourselves? Are you patient when you have a relapse, and make use of the sacraments of confession and Holy Communion? Do you believe that Jesus truly died for your sins? And this goes for others too. How tough it is when we see people just not getting it. It’s not easy to be

like Saint Monica, waiting years and years patiently while praying and setting a good example for her son Augustine. But with a bit of patience, which most every parent has to learn as they raise children, the Holy Spirit working in conjunction with people who love that person who is seemingly so far away from sainthood can do amazing things.

Secondly, there's another Christian in story here, Barnabus. Bishop Baron points out that it's a nickname meaning son of encouragement. And Barney is the bridge here. We are told as everyone is having their doubts, Barn takes Paul and brings him to the people. I think of the scene from "Hoosiers" where all the town men who are self-proclaimed experts on basketball want to fire the new coach (Gene Hackman) when his start is rocky, but then the star player of the team who hadn't been playing yet says he'll only play if coach stays. Barnabas is that highly respected person who speaks up and makes others appreciate Paul. The takeaway here according to Bishop Baron is that one is never on the spiritual journey alone. For Mohammad who became Joseph, it was the Christian soldier he initially looked down upon who was his bridge to the faith. And that's so important. It's something I stress at every wedding Mass - you are there to help one another grow in holiness. But for all of us, it's so important to seek counsel. When we do not, we can become prone to stubbornness and spiritual stagnation. It's important to surround yourself with people who will tell you what you need to hear, not necessarily what you want to hear. It's important to ask for help. And it's important to also never think that just because you may have experience, or done something one way for a long time, that you are not in need of further growth. There are many things a person can do good, but we don't want to just do something pretty good or halfway decent, especially being a Christian. To be great, we need others to will be there to help us out.

Third, note how we hear in that first reading that Barnabas says Paul "had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus" and debated with the Hellenists who "tried to kill him." Paul is not afraid to tell people about what has happened and what he believes. That's because he is so on fire with the Holy Spirit. Well what about us? Now of course one has to also have prudence. For Joseph, being a public convert to Christianity in Hussein's Iraq would not be a good idea. But in the years that followed, he's hardly been silent about his faith. He's written a book, put his name out there, and he could certainly be open to some fanatics doing him harm. The point is that our faith should be the most important thing to us ideally, so why do we keep it secret so often? Why are we afraid of arguing with people (note not yelling at them, but arguing and discussing?). We should not be afraid to speak about the sanctity of human life in the womb and in the world and articulate what our Church teaches on abortion and capital punishment. We should not be afraid to be labeled intolerant for speaking of traditional marriage or there being man and woman and not none of the above for gender identity. We should not be afraid to look for ways to evangelize because the Church's main interest is salvation of souls. So what is our desire? Not to offend or bruise someone ego, or to avoid an unpleasant conversation, or is it to truly help someone become a saint? Maybe we need to speak out too more about our faith, again balancing it with prudence so we know the right times and situations to do so, but not fearing proclaiming as Paul did Jesus Christ to the ends of the world.

The last point made by Bishop Baron that is so very important is patience. He cites the end of the story, where we are told that after Barnabas has given his speech and people accept him or are at least willing to give him a fair chance, But notice he does not get back out and evangelize. The Christian leaders are willing to give him a shot, but not yet. We are told “they took him down to Caesarea and sent him back on his way to Tarsus.” This was about ten years. How tough that must have been for Paul. He’s had this big conversion, he’s a young man ready to get out there and then the Church says “that’s great Paul, but don’t call us, we’ll call you.” And they of course do, along with the Holy Spirit. But patience is a really big thing for the Christian too. As I said we have to be patient with ourselves and others, but we also have to trust the Church and the Holy Spirit. In seminary we call this formation. You enter having a college degree, great. You may have done a lot of parish work or been a catechist, great. You’ve gown up Catholic and know so much, wonderful. But you have to wait. And wait. And wait. Seminary forces you to look at yourself, to pray, to discern, and of course to learn the faith. And sometimes even through all this, the Holy Spirit guides you elsewhere, or those in charge of your formation may say “you’ve a good man, but we have discerned that you have a vocation but it’s just not to the priesthood.” Well thats true for all of us, not just priests or seminarians. What we have to have is that attitude of the servant, and someone who will be willing to take instruction from the Church who leads us. Paul benefited a lot from this lost decade. He’s not writing or preaching, but he’s growing in holiness and as a human being. It gives him time to get clarity on his vocation. For us, we have to ask ourselves too can we be open to guidance. No matter what our title may be; priest/spiritual father; parent; teacher; supervisor, CEO, etc., remember again - we are always still growing. Sometimes God will say no, or we may have plans but they take time to develop. I know as I look back as a kid, I could not wait to be out of school, especially come May; I could not wait to be older; or at one moment I was certain that yep, this is the girl I love and I just want to be in a relationship; or this my career and I want it now. But then God says, nope, I’ve got other ideas. These take time to sort out, so we should trust that God has our best interest in mind, as does the Church, and our mission in life always takes place within the context of God and His Church. So let them guide you.

As we go through life, we can be like the children who keep asking “are we there yet” from the back seat on the road trip. We’ll get to heaven, but along the way, just like on a road trip, we may have to go by a different route, we’ll have to ask for directions because we occasionally get lost, we’ll have to make some unanticipated stops, and we’ll also have to be patient on the journey while having confidence that our GPS or step by step directions from AAA are in fact trustworthy because while in most every case they are when we journey to new places, when they come from the Holy Spirit and the Church, they always are. Paul went on to do great things for the Church and change the world. We will too, so let’s trust in God and the Church by listening and submitting to them, being patient, and proclaiming our faith to the world. For when we do these things, like Paul we will look back from heaven one day with wonder and amazement at how we got there via the road we traveled, and also look around and see people who are there because of what we did to get them to their final destination.