

HISTORICAL STUDIES I—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Personal Conversion in the History of Christian Thought
Convener: Shawn Colberg, St. John's University/College of St. Benedict
Moderator: Kimberly Baker, St. Meinrad Seminary
Presenters: Richard Penaskovic, Auburn University
June-Ann Greeley, Sacred Heart University

This session focused on the experience of conversion through specific, personal experiences. Richard Penaskovic presented his paper, "Simone Weil (1909-1943): A Reluctant Convert," and June-Ann Greeley, who had to withdraw from the conference, was scheduled to present her paper, "William Congdon and the Passion of Conversion/Conversion by the Passion."

In exploring the personal conversion experience, Dr. Richard Penaskovic focused on "the conversion or spiritual odyssey of Simone Weil." As he explained, Weil is "one of the most religious philosophers of the twentieth century." In his four-part presentation, Penaskovic introduced the audience to Weil, before elucidating terms key to understanding Weil's spiritual journey; he then examined Weil's conversion experience, in part, through her relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, before closing his presentation with four observations.

Penaskovic opened his presentation on Weil by noting that her "conversion and thought simply defy categorization." Raised in an agnostic, secular Jewish home, she explored and became conversant in Eastern as well as Western thought and religions. Consequently "her thought speaks equally to non-believers and atheists as it does to members of world religions." However, the breadth of her work at times makes her ideas difficult to understand.

In part two, Penaskovic gave a short introduction to Weil's highly idiosyncratic "thought-world" through the key terms of "necessity," "obedience," and "decreation." The terms give insight into her conversion to Christianity and reservations about the Roman Catholic Church. Examining Weil's relationship with the Roman Catholic Church in part three, Penaskovic focuses on three life-changing encounters Weil had with Catholicism that she recounts in *Waiting on God*. In 1935, while visiting Portugal, she saw a religious procession made by the wives of fishermen; in 1937 she visited St. Mary of the Angels chapel in Assisi, Italy; and in 1938 she visited the Benedictine monastery of Solesmes in Sarthe, France. Penaskovic briefly explored each of these experiences for its role in her conversion to Christianity before more closely examining her relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, in part, through her relationship with Fr. Perrin, her spiritual adviser. While she felt great gratitude toward Perrin because of his patience and spiritual guidance, she viewed parts of Christianity in a negative light. Among her concerns about Christianity was its exclusive attitude toward salvation and the truth. Viewing the Roman Catholic Church in particular, she had difficulty with its use of the words *anathema sit*, its reserving of the sacraments for Catholics alone, the notion of the "mystical body of Christ," and what she saw as abuses of power.

Penaskovic closed his presentation with four observations. First, he noted that difficulties in understanding Weil's thought arise, in part, from the fact that Weil edited only a few of her works for publication, she did not complete some of her

works, and many of her works were published posthumously and unsystematically. Second, he questioned critical views of the fact that she refused to be baptized until she was dying, pointing out that the Catholic Church teaches that one must follow one's conscience if after careful consideration it leads one away from the teachings of the Catholic Church. Third, Penaskovic shared that he is "not convinced that Weil understood the true meaning of the Church as the mystical body of Christ." Finally, he raised the question, "Should the Catholic Church canonize Simone Weil as a saint?" After discussing different challenges to canonization, he asserted that "Weil should be canonized by the Church" for several reasons, among them the fact that it would demonstrate the Catholic Church's "wholehearted acceptance of those who do not fit the mold and live their lives marching to the beat of a different tune, such as the Dalai Lama and Mahatma Gandhi."

Penaskovic concluded his presentation explaining that Weil's conversion departed from those of St. Paul and John Henry Cardinal Newman. He stated, "Her conversion was one from highly unorthodox Christian to a full-blown mystic, thanks to God's grace and Weil's steeled submission to waiting in God patiently for the right *kairos* before making any major decision in her life."

The unique nature of Weil's work and conversion sparked robust conversation about Simone's Weil's life, work, and her end-of-life baptism. Discussion centered, in part, on the fact that she was baptized by a non-ordained Christian, which highlighted the uniqueness of her spiritual odyssey.

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