

A Final Testimony and Testament

Review of
*How to Become a Christian
 Even If You Already Are One*
 By William H. Shannon
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On April 12 of this year a reception to celebrate the publication of William Shannon’s new book was scheduled, but it had to be cancelled because on the previous day the author became ill and took to his bed, never to leave it before his death almost three weeks later. Thus the appearance of this last work coincided with his last days on earth, underlining its role as a kind of final testimony and testament, a legacy left to his readers. Part memoir, part history, part meditation, part exhortation, *How to Become a Christian* in its four chapters relates Bill Shannon’s four conversions – to a new way of reading and living scripture; to a new, more contemplative way of praying; to a commitment to peace and non-violence; to a new way of understanding and being Church. Looking back on his own life, he also looks forward to a Christian and human community transformed in and by the risen Christ.

Bill had evidently realized that he would have neither the energy nor the time to move the book through the usual commercial publication process, so it was privately printed, leaving the final product in a less than finished state. In addition to rather erratic punctuation – hyphens for dashes, misplaced commas, missing periods etc. – there are occasional gaffes that make it clear that the author never read through the proofs himself, and whoever did so was less than careful. For example, Merton’s correspondent Dr. Walter Weiskopf has become “a Dr. Weis Kopf” (66); a reference to discussion of the connection between contemplation and peacemaking occurring “[l]ater in this chapter” (93) comes from a stage in the book’s gestation before material on non-violence had been given its own chapter and the original three conversions had become four; two paragraphs on an egalitarian Church toward the end of the book (170-71) are followed by a blank half-page, then recur almost word-for-word after a new subheading at the top of the following page – evidence of the editing process imperfectly completed. But what in other circumstances would be irksome and annoying has here a kind of poignancy, as the reader is witness to a process that, because of the circumstances, hasn’t quite cohered into a final product. Yet what is important to note is that this applies only to the form, not at all to the content. The wisdom of Bill Shannon’s more than nine decades of life is fully in evidence here, with no diminishment of insightful commentary on or incisive critique of the Church he loved so deeply and served so faithfully. This is vintage Shannon, and it is well worth while accompanying him on his journey of faith even if it requires navigating around some typographical and editorial bumpiness.

The book's four chapters follow a brief introduction providing an initial overview, beginning with a delightful anecdote about the author's encounter with an evangelical Christian in Louisville's Hawley-Cooke bookstore (a wonderful shop, for Mertoniana at least, that was taken over some years ago by Borders, and has since disappeared altogether with that chain's demise). When asked by his companion if he had been born again, Bill writes, "With some enthusiasm I replied, 'Indeed I have been born again and again and again and again'" (3), at which point the "born-again Christian" looked puzzled and walked away without another word. Bill's answer is his version of Cardinal Newman's famous description of spiritual development, quoted on the following page – "to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often" (4) – and prepares for his description of the major changes, the conversions, he will discuss in the rest of the book.

The opening chapter describes the Catholic "rediscovery" of the Bible in the mid-twentieth century after almost 400 years of fears that personal engagement with the scriptures might result in erroneous and idiosyncratic "private interpretation" characteristic of the Reformation. Bill relates both the historic renewal of biblical study sparked by Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the "magna carta" of Catholic scripture scholarship, and his own appropriation of these new insights through frequent attendance at biblical conferences from the late 1950s onward. (He recalls chatting at one such gathering with the great scripture scholar Raymond Brown, who recognized him from previous conferences and "asked me, laughingly: 'Do you go to all these institutes throughout the country?'" [16].) After this historical and autobiographical background, the rest of the chapter shares some of what he learned and taught through the years, and why it mattered to him and should matter to us. He includes a homily on the raising of Lazarus that contrasts his temporary resuscitation not only with the definitive resurrection to come but with presence of eternal life here and now through contact with the risen Jesus. He discusses in detail the change in understanding of the meaning of resurrection from an apologetic proof of Christ's divinity to the completion of the paschal journey to the new life of Trinitarian love in which we are all invited to participate. The chapter also features brief but substantial consideration of the different perspectives provided by each Gospel (particularly the distinction between the more structured, hierarchical approach of Matthew and the more egalitarian, communitarian perspective of John, which will be explored further in the final chapter); the function of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke; and brief instruction on the fourfold process of praying the scriptures – from reading through meditation and prayer, leading to contemplation – a summary of the process described in great detail in his earlier work *Seeking the Face of God*.

Bringing this chapter to a close with a focus on contemplation leads directly into the second chapter and second conversion, to contemplative prayer, inspired by his encounter with the work of Thomas Merton, which has of course been so central to his personal and professional life. Much of this material will be familiar to those who have read the author's other books, both those on Merton and those on prayer (two categories that of course interpenetrate one another). After describing his initial encounter with Merton's work, his first course on Merton in the summer of 1974, his early visits to the Abbey of Gethsemani and to the Merton Center in Louisville and the friendships with Brother Patrick Hart and Robert Daggy that developed as a result, he characterizes his second conversion as the transformation, through Merton's influence, of a devotional spirituality into a contemplative spirituality. He writes of his discovery of prayer as an awareness of and participation

in the divine presence beyond the dualism of subject and object, an experience of being rather than, or deeper than, an activity of doing, but which in fact provides action with its true direction and dynamism. “Time spent in ‘just being’ will give us a new sense of who we are. It will strengthen us to do better whatever it is we have to do. For we will really be there in the doing” (84-85). Drawing on passages from Merton’s “Rain and the Rhinoceros” and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, on incidents from his own life as spiritual director and as gift-giver (of a “Hug a Planet” stuffed toy to a toddler friend), on the Gospels, the liturgy of the hours (the “*Benedicite*”) and Native American wisdom, he shows how contemplation is intrinsically linked to a sense of responsibility for all creation and for the rest of the human community. He concludes the chapter with a lovely passage from Merton’s *The New Man* describing contemplation as “the experience of God’s life and presence within ourselves not as an object but as the transcendent source of our own subjectivity,” in which we “lose ourselves (and thus find our true selves) in Him” (103).

For Shannon as for Merton, the third conversion, to peacemaking and non-violence, flows from the second. He discusses the momentous “Year of the Cold War Letters” (October 1961-October 1962) during which Merton commits himself to speaking out against war as “an outgrowth of his prayer and contemplation” (105), because in encountering God in his solitude he finds all those made in God’s image in that same solitude, and through compassionate identification with their hopes, fears and needs is called to warn against the threats of nuclear warfare and other forms of institutionalized violence, at a time when few Catholics and almost no priests were yet willing to do so. The now familiar story of Merton’s lonely witness, his silencing and his continued ministry for peace is personalized in its influence on Bill Shannon himself, who voices his “gratitude to Merton for pointing me in this direction” (130).

The fourth conversion, to a new understanding of Church, is actually not the final one chronologically, since it is rooted in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965, but it is rightfully presented last because it points toward the future in a powerful and challenging



way. Along with vignettes of his own experiences with a couples’ group, the liturgical movement, Catholic action and other influences gradually moving him beyond his early understanding of the Church as identified almost exclusively with the hierarchy and clergy, he provides an extensive overview of the Council’s four sessions and of its key documents. He describes and analyzes the transformation of the Church’s own self-understanding from a primarily juridical to a more pastoral model, a transformation the he sees as compromised and threatened by the reaction of the institution in the decades since the Council, but which he is confident will ultimately prevail. “Today the steps being taken to recentralize the church have taken a lot of the joy out of the church for those who really love the church and

believe it is their church. And it feels almost as if it is being taken away from them. Still we are God’s people on pilgrimage toward the fullness of the kingdom. . . . The future belongs to us – God’s pilgrim people. We must build that future. We must have the courage to hope” (155). He calls for the

integration and balance of the ecclesiological insights of Matthew and of John, for the recognition of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in all the baptized, for a more egalitarian understanding of the people of God that does not reject hierarchical authority but that recognizes that God speaks to and through ordinary Christians as well as the ordained, and needs to be heard in both. The way in which this is to be done is presented as “the most important ecclesiological question that must be faced in the Third Millennium” (161), which he foresees will be the millennium of the baptized as the first millennium was that of the bishops and the second millennium that of the monarchical papacy (159). Despite his awareness of discouraging trends in the contemporary Church, Bill gifts his readers with a prophetic vision of a renewed, revitalized Christian community, the Church to which he dedicated his life. The closing words of the book are the opening words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: “*Gaudium et Spes*” – “Joy and Hope” – words that characterize his own life and his own vocation and that present his final legacy and instruction for ours. For both the gift and the challenge we can offer heartfelt thanks and a fervent “Amen” – “So be it!”

This book can be purchased through the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester gift shop. The price is \$18.65 including shipping and handling. Orders can be placed by phone: 585-641-8137 (between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday and Friday) or by mail: Gift Shop, SSJ Motherhouse, 150 French Road, Rochester, NY 14618.