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Conversion

**Fr. Eugene King, O.M.I.
Vicar General**

Three spiritualities of conversion: biblical, Oblate and Hindu

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Conversion: A new heart – a new Spirit – a new Mission

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The Pre-capitular Commission has asked a number of Oblates to write a reflection on some aspect of the theme chosen for the 35th General Chapter. Over the next few months, *OMI Documentation* will be publishing those reflections. They can be found under the **General Chapter** link of www.omiworld.org as well as under the **Documentation** link on the same page.

They are meant for the personal and communal reflection of Oblates and their Lay Associates. A General Chapter is not an event that involves only the elected and “ex officio” capitulars. It involves everyone who shares the charism of Saint Eugene de Mazenod.

**Centered on the person of Jesus Christ, the source of our mission,
we commit ourselves to a profound personal and communal
conversion.**

Conversion

Fr. Eugene King, O.M.I.
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Introduction:

The theme of conversion for the Chapter 2010 came to the fore in the discussions of the Central Government and Provincials during the Inter-Chapter of 2007 in South Africa. I don't trust my memory of how the conversation went. But I recall an inspiring intervention by the then Provincial of Jaffna Province, Selvaratnam Saminathar, in which he focused on deep personal conversion as the indispensable ingredient in any programme or process of personal and communal renewal that might be undertaken by the Congregation.

This seemed to ring true to the experience of the participants, and put words on an intuition that was seeking and needing expression. There is something more important than a tempest of renewal activities. Nearly everyone present had years, if not decades of experience working on restructuring, being party to renewal efforts in their local churches, searching for mentors or programmes that might spark enthusiasm and hope during a winter season of (numerical) decline in many units of the Congregation. The theme eventually was spelled out in a longer phrase, giving hints of what needed addressing, in preparation for the Chapter. The Chapter theme was born. It reads:

Centered on the person of Jesus Christ, the source of our mission, we commit ourselves to a profound personal and communal conversion.

Broken down into its elements the theme seems commonplace. Obviously it should be Christian, personal, communal, profound, and the source from which our mission flows - mission grounded in baptism and Oblate charism. Commonplace, but going to the heart of the matter.

Learning from Experience:

One might expect that Oblates would be very familiar with the experience of conversion, indeed might claim to be experts in conversion. We still encounter in the Preface to our Constitutions and Rules the inspiration that moved St. Eugene to respond to the Church's appeal to her ministers *to do all in their power, by word and example to re-ignite the flame of faith that has all but died in the hearts of so many of her children.* St. Eugene's strategy was to gather and train companions whom he describes thus: *in a word, apostolic men deeply conscious of the need to reform themselves, who would labour with all the resources at their command to convert others.* The word "convert" occurs.

Not everyone in the Oblate family is comfortable with the word "convert". In various contexts around the world, certain Oblates or their partners in mission find the term "convert" downright dangerous, when not dangerous somewhat embarrassing; and if not dangerous and embarrassing unhelpful to the point of dropping it from use.

My purpose is not, in this reflection, to promote a debate around the appropriateness of the "term" or the theological idea, which is a different and necessary conversation for another time. Rather my intention is to focus on the experience of Christian conversion, in the hope that it may help someone in preparation for the Chapter, and enable the decisions that the Chapter must take on leadership, governance, life and mission in our time and world.

Telling the Story of Conversion:

I start from the premise that all Oblates have experienced some measure of Christian

conversion. Somehow or other a local church has accompanied us all through the sacraments of initiation. And I presume that our attraction to be part of Oblate life and mission has roots in our Christian conversion. Furthermore I presume that conversion means change, for the good, in some measure observable by the person himself or companions. I prefer to think of conversion, not just in moral terms, but as the lure of the pearl of great price, the priceless treasure discovered, the awaited dawn, the hope that makes news good!

It is easier to discuss the doctrines that define Christian conversion, to enter into the theological understanding of such doctrines, than to put words on the experience of conversion. Partly because we have been trained to discuss and reason, rather than share experience. Partly because some cultures emphasize that conversion is a very intimate affair, no one else's business. And yet, we are called to ever deepening communion.

But the most obvious and fundamental reason is our human difficulty to put words on any area of experience. We need help from the wordsmiths of our culture, in the classic stories of human culture that transcend borders. We find help in recognizing our own experience and putting words on it in the works of playwrights, poets, artists, and in the classics, folkloric and other, of our family and local cultures. My simple definition of a classic is those expressions of the human spirit that stand the test of time, and continue to help people express themselves, as universally useful as the words of Shakespeare or particular as family traditions that we evoke at defining moments -- births, deaths, and marriages, among others.

People to heed:

Within the limits of this short reflection, I want to point to some classics that can deepen awareness of our personal experience of conversion, and then to another source to recognize how communal/common our Christian experience is. It is good to know what is happening to us. Many Oblates continue to find in the writings of St. Eugene elements of their own conversion experience, or

they can easily match elements of St. Eugene's story with the lives of people they encounter in mission. The Chapter commission has made available a core text from St. Eugene's 1814 retreat notes that reveals the realm of his intimate relationship with Christ. (Cf. Saint Eugene de Mazenod. *Spiritual Writings, 1812 - 1856*, p. 81)

Like many of us in our day, St. Eugene was a cradle Catholic, of old Catholic stock, a practicing Catholic by the standards of his day, and as a young adult thoroughly bored and cynical about the ironies of history. In his late twenties he found himself with a broken family, no great fortune, and two failed engagements towards marriage. Then on a certain Good Friday, before the image of the crucified Christ, it dawns on him just how loved he is by his saving God. Something happened to him. It was a beginning of seeing reality with new eyes -- the eyes of God. And it was just a beginning; it will take years for him to reap the fruits of the embryonic conversion experience of that Good Friday. The notes that we have from his instruction series in the church of the Madeleine in 1813 should be a companion piece to his retreat notes which speaks of his conversion. The Madeleine instruction reveals the extent of his changed world from which emerged his call to priesthood, and eventually the assembling of a band of companions, the first Missionaries of Provence, future Oblates. (Cf. Saint Eugene de Mazenod. *Spiritual Writings, 1812-1856*, p.35ff.)

There are even more renowned classics of Christian conversion experience in adult life that retain a perennial value, such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, and St. Teresa of Avila. And in modern times, and maybe more accessible are the stories of such moderns as C.S. Lewis (*Surprised by Joy*), Dag Hammarskjold (*Markings*) Thomas Merton (*The Seven Storey Mountain*). Such episodes merit repeated attention and pondering like visits to see the works of great artists. Other cultures have their own classics.

It is possible from reading conversion stories of individuals and dwelling only on the key moment or event, if there is one, to end up with the mistaken idea that conversion experience is

very private, and nobody's business but that of the individual. But in fact, it is a life-long project, needing nurturing through every phase of life. Just as all other dimensions of life thrive within the organism of culture, society, community, and sharing, so also for Christian conversion experience. Humans typically grow and mature through the give-and-take of family, local community and society.

Communal Rites of Conversion:

In great measure, the communal experience of Christian conversion was largely forgotten in the west or older Latin churches. The adult catechumenate and an adult rite of initiation had fallen into disuse (adults were baptized with the rite for children). The experience of first conversion among adults was mostly privatized. All of that changed with the Second Vatican Council, which among many other reforms restored the adult catechumenate (1972). The rediscovery of the rite for adults was a surprise for many. Far from being the retrieval of something quite esoteric, the restored rite in its fullness revealed the full-bodied process of a Christian community incorporating new adult members, and accompanying them on their journey of conversion. The discovery revealed that the best accompaniment was provided by a Christian community that was intentional and serious about its own ongoing conversion. Hence I direct attention to the practice and experience of parishes where a full-bodied practice of adult initiation is restored, to grasp the dynamics and best conditions of fostering communal conversion.

This is not the place to summarize the process of initiation, lay out its dynamics, explain its stages and rites. Suffice it to say that the restored rite was built from the rich experience of the early centuries of Christian faith, and the missionary practice of the young churches of recent centuries. One strand in the process can be very helpful for the purposes of Oblates concerned with their personal and communal conversion -- the place and role of the biblical word of God - proclaimed, listened to, chewed upon, and shared in the liturgy of the Word.

Those drawn to the Christian communion are catechized by participating with an active Christian community in what it does with the Word of God when it gathers for the Liturgy of the Word on the day of the Lord. What does the community do? (This is the only ingredient in communal conversion that I want to highlight here). It retells the biblical story(ies) into the heart of whatever makes up its current life and experience, allowing God's grace and love to show themselves. The connection between the biblical story told and life is built typically through the homily - that is a primary purpose of the homily. This purpose of the homily can be achieved, fostered and complemented in other activities -- personal or group practice of *lectio divina*, individual meditation the word of God, sharing of the word in small groups with the express purpose of connecting it with experience.

I have practiced this latter process for years with parish groups, and I have witnessed the miracles of God's word at work in people's lives -- people who had never opened a bible, had no formal study of matters biblical, didn't know whether King David preceded or followed Moses in history, but they had a thirsty faith, open hearts, and the common sense capacity to listen to others. Time and again I came away from such sharing evangelized -- at times by the rich, at times by the poor. It is humbling to hear a person say, Psalm 139, for example, was written with their experience in mind, and then to hear their story. *Oh Lord, you have searched me and know me, you know when I sit and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.* (Ps 139: 1-2 NRSV). I don't have a monopoly on the experience of God!

Such experiences have led me to the conviction that it would be hard to exaggerate the importance we should give to the ministry of the Word as integral to Oblate charism and mission. If in former days this might have been closely associated with priests and mission preaching (in whatever measure it was biblical), in our time preaching the word is the mission of every Christian, every Oblate partner in mission, every Oblate Brother, out of the uniqueness of their personal experience and gifts of communication.

Conclusion:

Conversion is what happens when the word of God takes root, even ever so delicately, in the soil of our experience. We don't have to know the word "conversion", understand it, or use it. Offer our hearts as soil to the Spirit in the word, broad cast the seed with abandon, and God will provide the growth. Witness St Paul's experience in I Cor 3: 5-9. (*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth v.6.*)

In preparation for the Chapter, I would make one recommendation and formulate a dream.

The recommendation. That everyone revisit, by reading listening to or viewing in film, their favorite story of someone's conversion. Revisit and listen, not with the critical mind of an adversary or scholar, but with the waiting eye of the farmer when he looks out over his field or garden after planting. Then note what is mirrored or touched in one's own experience. And wait

for God to give the growth. What is God saying today?

My dream is this. That every Oblate parish in the world, and I said every, restore the adult catechumenate as an integral part of its mission. That every Oblate parish be known in its local church (diocese) for its practice of the catechumenate. That every Oblate parish be known in its local church (diocese) for what its members, lay, religious and ordained do with the word of God. Oblates are about what happens with the word of God in the soil of common experience. And what is the Oblate secret? The soil of the poor knows no disadvantage when the business partner is the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is no ministry, however, which is foreign to us, provided we never lose sight of the Congregation's primary purpose: to evangelize the most abandoned. R 7b.

Three spiritualities of conversion: biblical, Oblate and Hindu

Swami Joseph A. Samarakone, OMI

A preparatory paper for the 35th General Chapter 2010 of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

Introduction

The forthcoming 35th General Chapter of our Congregation announced the following theme: **Conversion: A New Heart; A New Spirit; A New Mission.** This paper is an attempt to hark back to the conversion of our Founder St Eugene de Mazenod, and recapture his conversion experience in the light of both the biblical as well as the Indian spiritual tradition and interiorize the experience. In the biblical tradition the word that strikes us most is "*Metanoia*" – Change of heart, Repentance (cf Mt 3:2; Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3) God speaks to us through Prophet Ezekiel and

tells us that he will do four things to bring about total conversion:

- "I will gather you together" The same mission of Jesus: "to gather into one the scattered people". The scattering takes place within oneself...hence the need to gather together – "the Kingdom of God is within you" proclaims Jesus. At the time of heresies and schisms in the early Church, the litmus test between the work of the true and the false evangelizers in the name of Jesus was that the true Spirit invariably brings about "*Unity of heart and mind*" "*of peoples of*

all languages and cultures” (Acts 2:37-38; 44-45)

- “I will sprinkle clean water upon you
- I will take away your heart of stone.... and give you a new heart.... a heart of flesh.
- “I will put a new spirit, my own Spirit (in Indian terms *Atman*) within you” (cf Ez 36:24-28).

God assures us through Prophet Jeremiah: “I will make a *New Covenant* with you I will put my Law within, and write it on your hearts; and I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (cf Jer 31:31-33). A state of *perfect freedom* when a person’s **consciousness** participates in the **Consciousness of the Divine**, in Indian terms *turiya*, the *fourth state of consciousness*) i.e., when one’s will becomes identical with God’s will and he/she becomes *totally free* (cf Jn 8: 28-32). The great theologian Karl Rahner says, when one’s will becomes identical with the will of God, he/she attains *perfect Freedom*.

Conversion of our Founder – His Good Friday Experience

The Good Friday Experience of our Founder completely transformed his life. He turned away from everything opposed to the Divine Will and *turned towards* (= **con** + **vertere** – **conversion**) Jesus and through Jesus to God – the Divine Mystery. In biblical terms, Jesus turned away from *mammon*, which denotes not only wealth but all the disintegrating factors and turned to **ABBA – the Father – our true centre – our Home** (cf Mt. 6.24).

Reflecting on the life of our Founder, one could delineate the events that led to his Conversion:

The young Eugene returns to France from exile from Palermo, Italy. Quickly a marriage is being arranged to a rich young woman. Here comes a turning point in the life of young Eugene: his fiancée passes away suddenly! This event definitely shattered completely all that young Eugene had planned for his life. The sequence of events is very tragic: a long period in exile, running from one city to another which in itself was a very unsettled and unsettling experience. He returns to his home with plans of settling

down and restoring the honour of his family. At this juncture his fiancée suddenly passes away – a soul-shattering event, which plunges young Eugene into great pain and deep frustration.

One could say that it was at this time (*kairos*) that the Lord sought him and found him. When everything around him was utter darkness, suddenly **light appears from the crucified Jesus on the cross on that eventful Good Friday: Eugene has a *darshan* of Jesus**. The word *darshan* / *darshana*, which belongs to the Indian spiritual tradition, best describes the state of Eugene at that time. We have a similar example within our Christian tradition – the conversion of St. Paul.... “Saul still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (Acts 9.1)...”, since he perceived the Christians as harming the cause of what he considered the best and the highest in the world, namely, “the Jewish religion and culture”. Saul had a *darshan* of the Risen Lord! *Darshan* means that the functioning of the physical faculties are temporarily suspended and the person sees and hears with his/her “**inner faculties**”. This is real and not a phantom of the imagination, but the others around him/her see or hear nothing.¹ In English we use the word ‘**vision**’ or ‘**appearance**’.

In the Tamil Saivite tradition, we have the word *Thaduthadkolluthal*, meaning, a person is taken unawares, or more literarily, a person is stopped in his tracks and taken total possession of by the Divine and God himself guides and acts through him, as St. Paul says after his encounter of the Risen Lord, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2.20). The ‘end-result’, both in the Christian tradition as well as in the Hindu-Saivite tradition, is exactly the same: experience of the transforming encounter of the Divine. Another point to note here is the person so transformed has no inclination to anything else other than **the ONE he has seen** (the *contemplata*). St. Paul says, “I consider all

¹cf Acts.9.7: “the men **heard the voice** but **saw no one**; Acts. 22.9: “those with me **saw the light** but **did not hear the voice**”. Both verses are written by the same ‘incorrigibly systematic’ Luke himself in contrary terms. It is the same with the resurrection appearances. The Risen Lord does not come under the perception of the senses; the Lord is seen, heard, and touched by the inner faculties of those who receive the *dharshan*.

these (especially his religion and culture) as filth (rubbish) in order to gain Christ (cf Phil 3.7-11, especially v.8).

Soon after his conversion, St. Paul “did not confer with any human being.... but went away at once into Arabia (Gal 1.16-17), where he had his “**desert experience**” for a long period before beginning his active ministry. In the same way Jesus, soon after his baptism, “was led by the Spirit in the desert for forty days and forty nights...” (cfr Lk 4. 1-13). “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee” (Lk 4.14).

In the Indian spiritual tradition, we have many of our sages going into the forest in total silence and lighting the “*tapas*” (the fire of sacrifice, within their heart rather than outside). Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore would say that this was a great turning point, not only in the history of India but the whole world when an external religion becomes interiorized and the forest becomes their cathedrals where they encountered the Divine. Some of our Sacred Scriptures like the *Aranyakas* (forest writings) and *Upanishads* like the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* were born in the forest. The heart of the sages became the repositories of God’s Word which was heard (*Sruti*) and people from all walks of life came to hear the Word of God and be transformed.

In the life of young Eugene, his conversion, as we mentioned above, is a soul-shattering event which brings about a sudden and total break from the past – a firm and determined turning away from *Mammon* and turning towards *Abba*. These two irreconcilable opposites can never be reconciled in the life of a person who has experienced the grace of conversion in the depths of his heart. After his Good Friday Experience, Our Founder exclaims, “I looked for happiness outside of God, and outside of him found only affliction and misfortune... What more glorious occupation than, in all and for all, to act only for God, to love him above all, to love him all the more because I have come to love him so late.” St. Augustine, soon after his conversion has the same experience: “**Too late have I known Thee! Our hearts are made for Thee, O Lord, and**

they shall not rest until they rest in Thee.” To understand the depth of our Founder’s conversion, it is important for us to reflect on the “Conversion of Jesus” which is described in the synoptic Gospels as the Temptation of Jesus.

The Temptation of Jesus

The Synoptic Gospels (Mathew 4.1-11; Lk 4.1-13; Mk 1.12-13) present Jesus as “driven by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted.” The temptations are but the life-long struggle of Jesus against the *mammon*. The evangelists record this, not merely for the sake of recalling the past event. The Messianic people of the Old Testament, faced with a similar temptation in the desert, lost confidence in Yahweh and turned towards a “golden calf” -- real idolatry, “yearning for the flesh pots of Egypt”. The new Messianic people of the New Testament, who are already facing similar temptation, are being warned against succumbing to this temptation. Jesus is tempted “to use his messianic power and turn stones into bread”. The new Messiah did not succumb to this but showed there is something greater than food: the “Word coming from the mouth of God which can nourish our deepest hunger and thirst.” (cf Mt 4:4). “The Sanskrit root *sru* (**to hear**) from which is derived *sruti* (**Revelation**) and *sravaka* (disciple, hearer of the Word) is a key concept in the classical Indic religions”². Karl Rahner says, “**hearing of the Word**” is a constitutive part of revelation. Jesus did not seek his “economic security” in material things but found his ultimate security in the Father.

Secondly, Jesus is tempted to seek recognition by the people as a Messiah – **a person coming to centre stage**. Jesus rejects this subtle temptation and asserts the supremacy of the Father: trust in the divine “do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And finally Jesus is tempted to capture power. The firm and resolute response of Jesus was: “Get away from me, Satan! Worship the Lord your God and Him alone you shall serve.” Peter received the same rebuke when he tried to make Jesus the Messiah King. (cfr Mk 8:33)

² cf Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *God’s Reign for God’s Poor*, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, 1998, 16, foot note 17

Every disciple of Jesus is sure to get the same reprimand from Jesus when he/she tries to capture power, “even for the sake of the of the glory of God”! Jesus found the **ultimate ground of his being in God, the ABBA - Father.**

Psychologists like Abraham Maslow and others speak about man/woman seeking first to fulfill the lower needs -- **survival needs**, like food, clothing and shelter, and slowly going up the ladder, thirsting for **love** and then **recognition** and finally **power/domination**. This is the usual path to *self-fulfillment* which everyone is longing for. But there are great integrated, self-sacrificing people like Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa and others who have shown us another way: **they transcended the “self”** – their lower ego self, and surrendered themselves to the Other/others and found their fulfillment in the Other or others. Philosopher Hegel says: “The essence of a person is to **surrender oneself to the other** and find **fulfillment precisely in the other.**” The call of Jesus to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up the cross **and** follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16.24-25). Jesus is inviting his disciples **to follow in his transformative Way of the Cross.**

Jesus himself surrendered his lower ego self to the Father and found his real *Self-fulfillment* precisely in the Father: “**The Father and I are ONE**” (Jn 10.30). In Indian terms this is the *Advaitic* (non-dualistic) experience of the Son and the Father. Swami Abhishiktananda, the French Benedictine monk, Dom Henri Le Saux, OSB, who came to India and plunged headlong into the *Advaitic tradition* says, “It is the mystery of the *Saccidananda, non-duality or advaita* of the Son and the Father at the depth of which is the *Ananda – the Bliss* or the Sprit, and this mystery of *Advaita or non-duality* is **the root and paradigm of all that is real.**”³ Jesus is now inviting all of us to the same experience: “On that day you will know that I am in my Father

³Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled foundations*, University of Madras, Madras 1993, 56

and you in me and I in you” (Jn 14.20). This is the Trinitarian Communion to which all of us are invited which the Fathers of the Church called the *theosis* and the mystics speak about this in different ways. St. John of the Cross says, “What God is by nature we become by participation.” St. Augustine during his Christmas homily tells his people, “**Deus homo factus est, ut homo fieret Deus.**” -- God became man/woman so that man/woman may become God. **This is the final goal of Conversion.**

In the vocabulary of St. Ignatius of Loyola, “the surrender of one’s wealth to the poor and the surrender of one’s will to God” appear as “actual poverty” and “spiritual poverty” respectively (Exercises, 98, 146, 147). “If taken in the dynamic sense of the spiritual struggle ... **poverty** is by far the most comprehensive term to describe the ethos of the **Jesus event...** to understand this is to know Jesus; to practise this is to follow him”.⁴

Conversion as seen through the Prism of the Indian Spiritual Tradition

Composition of the Human Person

A human person is composed of both the transient reality and the eternal reality. The transient reality is called the *Pancha-Kosas* or five sheaths and the eternal reality is the **Atman** – the indwelling presence of the Divine. The Atman dwells in the cave of the heart or at the centre, enveloped by the *Pancha-Kosas*. These are called sheaths or kosas, because they successfully hide the true nature of the human being which is the Atman. The goal of every human being is to realize the Atman – **Atman-Realisation**. In the diagram below, the Atman is represented by the mystic symbol

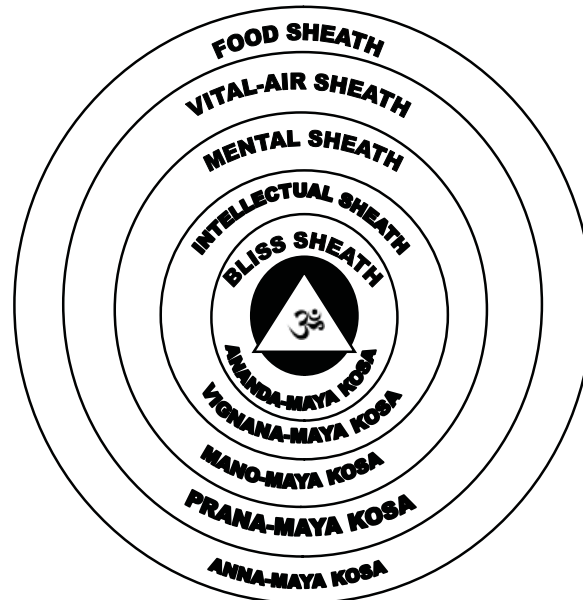


(pronounced OM) and the Triangle representing the Trinity. The five concentric circles around the symbols represent the five layers of matter. The five sheaths or *pancha-kosas* are:

⁴Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines, 1988, 16

1. *Anna-maya kosa* (Food sheath)
2. *Prana-maya kosa* (Vital-Air sheath)
3. *Mano-maya kosa* (Mental sheath)
4. *Vignana-maya kosa* (Intellectual sheath)
5. *Ananda-maya kosa* (Bliss sheath)

and vitality to every single part of the body. Vital-Air sheath is subtler than food sheath. It controls the food sheath. When your pranas function properly your physical body remains healthy and strong.



= **ATMAN/TRINITY AND FIVE SHEATHS - PANCHA-KOSAS**

These five *kosas* taken together are called *Ahamkar* (literally “**I-maker**”) = **the false ego sense**. These are called *maya*, i.e., they are transitory in character or illusory.

1. **Food sheath:** This is the physical body. The five organs of perception and the five organs of actions are a part of it. It is called food sheath because it is caused by food, maintained by food and finally ends up as food.
2. **Vital-Air sheath:** This is the energy system in a person and it is fivefold: these are the five faculties functioning within a person. They correspond to the five physiological functions. They are called the five *Pranas*. They are given this name because they are related directly to the air one breathes.

There are 72,000 *Nadis* (or subtle channels) through which pranas flow, bringing life

3. **Mental sheath:** This is the Mind. The Mind consists of passions and emotions, feelings and impulses. It is full of likes and dislikes. This is the psychic part of the human being. The Mental sheath controls the Vital-air and Food sheaths. For instance when the mind is disturbed, the physiological functions (pranas) and the physical body are affected.
4. **Intellectual sheath:** This is the intellect. It functions as thinking, reflecting, reasoning, discriminating, judging etc. it analyses and distinguishes between pairs of opposites. It investigates and tries to understand the unknown, grasps new ideas and comes up with new thoughts. It controls the above three sheaths.

The mind and the intellect function so much in unison, that these two sheaths together are called the “*mind-intellect complex*”.

5. **Bliss sheath:** This Bliss sheath should never

be confused with the “**Absolute Bliss**” which is the final goal of *Atman-Realisation* or *Self-Realisation*. When a person during meditation moves in concentric circles from one sheath to the other he/she is calming each of these sheaths, namely, body, breath, mind and intellect. This brings about a certain feeling of “peace”. Because the restless agitation, especially in the mind-intellect complex ceases this person who is in the Bliss sheath experiences “peace”, a sort of “*blissful ignorance*”. But it is *maya* – an illusory peace. The moment an external stimulus, like the sound of a person who is hostile towards him, whom he has really not forgiven from the depths, is heard, his/her whole being is agitated and this person finds himself/herself in “pieces”! This phenomena which causes agitation is called *vasanas* and *vasanas* reside in this *Anandamaya kosa* or Bliss sheath⁵.

What then are *Vasanas*?

Vasanas are the innate tendencies or inclinations which are caused by past actions or experiences and which propel the mind-intellect complex to function in the way it does in the present. They are the unmanifest in a person but responsible for the manifest behaviour. When we say past actions it need not be that of the person himself. It could be caused by others, e.g., a person born out of rape carries violence in himself/herself and suddenly he/she begins to act violently, like shooting people indiscriminately. Psychologists say that these *vasanas* could be as old as 700 to 800 years. Western psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and others call these phenomena the “**Collective Sub-conscious or Unconscious**”. This is what St Paul speaks of in Rom 7: 14-25: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want. . . . it is no longer I that do but **sin that dwells in me. . . .**” St Paul calls *Vasanas* as “**sin that dwells in me!**”

⁵ A. Parthasarathy, *Vedanta Treaties*, Bombay, 1989, 141-144; Sr. Corona Mary, OSM, *Towards God-Consciousness*, Jegamatha Ashram, Thirucharapalli, 1990, 6-12

Western psychologists have developed many ways of healing a person of *vasanas*. But the sages of the East have a time-tested potent instrument through which a person could be rid of all *vasanas*. Hence the pride of place given to “***Dhyanam***” or **Meditation** in the spiritual traditions of the East, especially in the Hindu/Buddhist Traditions.

During Meditation one goes in concentric circles, and easily crosses the four sheaths but when one comes to this *Anandamaya kosa*, one finds it impossible to cross. As Lord Buddha says, “It is easy to move from the other stages, but when one comes to the last stage, one faces an impregnable wall! But one must persevere until the wall is cracked.” Your sustained efforts and God’s unconditional grace meet and the wall is cracked, and the miracle of transformation/harmony takes place. All “*vasanas*” (in St. Paul’s words, “sin that dwells in me”) simply vanish and now one enters the final stage of **Absolute Bliss** or *Atman-Realization* or *Atmabodha* – **awakening to the Atman** or in the words of Jesus: “**The Father and I are One**” (Jn 10:30).

As a person goes through life, he/she could be found in any one of the five sheaths or *kosas*. Here the person stands in his false ego centre – a disintegrating centre and feels quite happy. When the moment of grace comes he/she realizes that he/she is in his/her false ego centre. Then he/she turns towards *Abba* and away from *Mammon*. This is the moment of **Conversion**. The person relentlessly moves towards the true Centre – God or *Abba* -- and realizes the Divine or, in our Indian terms, attains *Atmabodha*. So the Holy Pilgrimage of one’s life – *Tirtha Yatra* -- is a life-long journey of Conversion, **from Ahamkar(ego) to Atmabodha**. Once a person reaches this stage he/she doesn’t stay there; his “**third-eye**” (*Divyam Cakshuh* or *Divine Eye*) is opened and he/she now sees everything and everyone through God’s eye, as our Constitution says, “**we see the world through the eyes of the crucified Saviour**”, (cf CRR 4) and begin to **serve everyone without the least trace of self-seeking, with total self-abnegation**. He/she is thus gifted with the “**Broader Vision of Reality**” – *Vishva Rupa Darshana Yoga*. This is

integral spirituality. In Srimad Bhagavad Gita, the Bhagavan speaking about the spiritual state of such a person says: “He/She sees the *Atman* (the *Divine Self*) in the heart of all beings and sees all beings in the *Atman*.... then I never leave him/her and he/she never leaves me. He/she who in this oneness of love, loves me in whatever he/she sees, wherever this person may live, in truth this person lives in me. And he/she is the greatest *Yogi*... when the pleasure and pain of others is his/her own pleasure and pain” (6 / 29 - 32). As St. Paul says, “It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Summing up we could say:

- All are broken people living with various compulsions arising from our false ego.
- It is in the “desert” that we are healed of our brokenness – our compulsions, and we are transformed. Hence the need for all to enter the *desert*.
- It is from this transformed self real ministry flows.

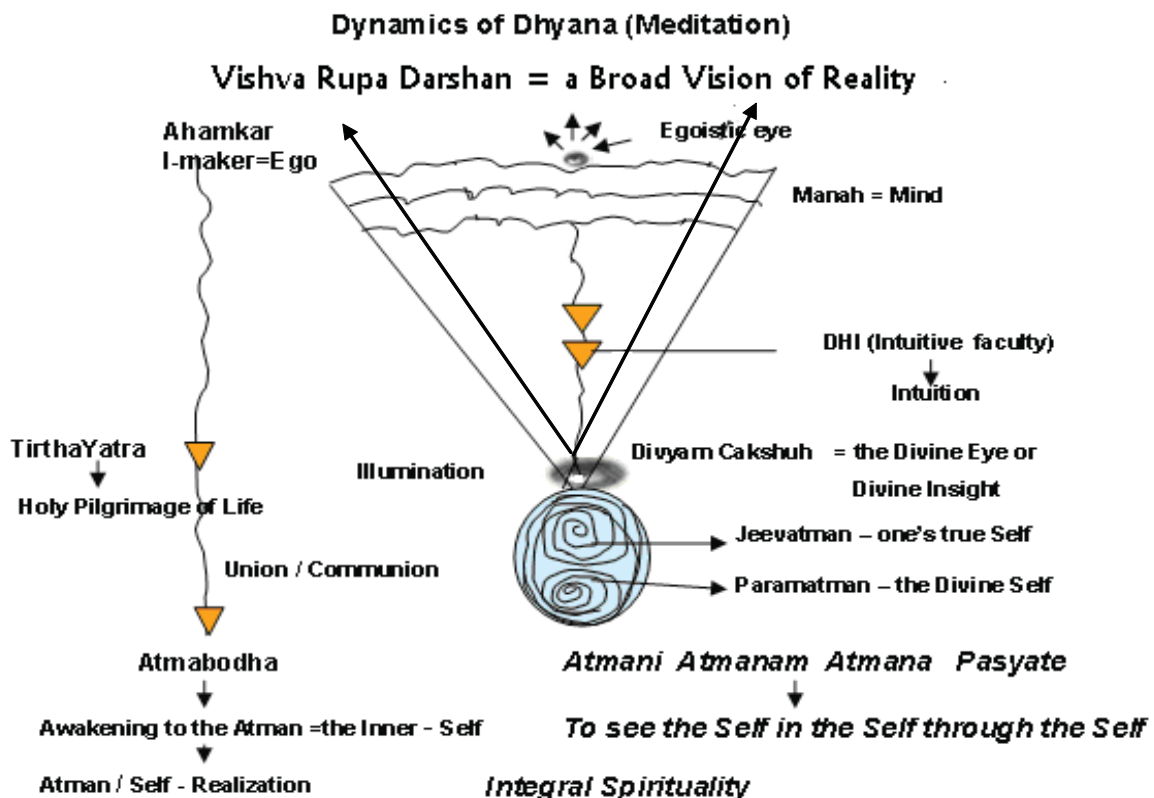
Indian Hermeneutics

This is a classical form of Scriptural interpretation, when one allows the text of the Gospel, in this instance the Temptation Narratives (Mt 4: 1-11 and the parallels), into the spiritual and liberative streams of the Land and sit at the “*Sangamam*” – the point of confluence, and interpret the text and “**drink deep from the enriched Word of God**”.

We now allow the text of the Temptation of Jesus to flow into the Pancha Kosas (the five sheaths) Matrix with the Divine at the Centre:

The first Temptation Jesus faced is at the level of “Body-Prana” sheaths – **the need for food**, a very basic need. The second is at the mind-intellect complex – **the need for recognition** -- and the third at a deeper level – *anandamaya kosa* with all the **vasanas in it, to capture power/ to domineer over others and become the Supreme Ruler** – the temptation of Lucifer! In

Vishva Rupa Darshanam – A Broad Vision of Reality



all these temptations, Jesus surrendered himself to the Father and found his “true Self” in the Father. The self-identity created at the level of the “kosas” or “basic instincts” is in direct opposition to the identity that Jesus creates in relation to His Father. The Gospel of Mathew describes the state of Jesus’ intimate union with the Father as “**angels came and waited on him**” (Mt 4: 11).

Now Jesus admonishes his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). Only in **Self-transcendence** does one discover **his true Self - God**. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore says, “Only when a person rids himself/herself of his/her *ahamkar*, – the sense of ego, does he/she come into his/her true inheritance.” It is from this transformed self, Jesus “filled with the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14) began proclaiming the “**Kingdom**” – the one word that sums up the whole ministry of Jesus.

In the most popular Hindu Scripture, Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Arjunan, the disciple, asks Bhagavan Krishna, “What power is it, Krishna, that drives man to act sinfully, even unwillingly, as if powerlessly?” (3:36), the same question St. Paul raises. Bhagavan/Lord replies, “It is greedy desire and wrath, born of passion the great evil, sum of destruction: this is the enemy of the soul” (BG 3:37). Henry Nouwen comes to the same conclusion: in his “*Desert Spirituality*” quoting Thomas Merton, he says, “**Greed and Anger** are the brother and sister of a false self (ego) fabricated by the social compulsions of an unredeemed world.”

Having given this diagnosis that **greed** and **anger** is the great enemy of the soul, Bhagavan/Lord Krishna goes on to give the prognosis: “... though the power of the senses (in the Body sheath is great, greater than the senses is the Mind. Greater than the mind is Buddhi, reason; and greater than reason is He – the Spirit (Atman) in man/woman and in all. **Know Him** therefore who is above reason and let his peace give thee peace” (BG 3:41-43). St. Paul comes to the same conclusion: “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Through Christ, God will

rescue me” (Rom 7:24-25). Here “**know him**” is in the Biblical sense: an experiential knowledge of the Divine achieved through meditation or contemplation which brings a person to his real **home**, as Jesus says in the symbol of the vine and the branches, “**Make your home in me just as I make my home in you**” (Jn 15:4).

The Vision of our Founder St Eugene de Mazenod

Having experienced the power of the Divine surging from deep within him during his soul-shattering **Conversion**, which can very well be termed his “**Desert Experience**”, he was convinced that this is the only way to becoming an integral person – a fully transformed person, a person “who leaves everything behind to become a disciple of Jesus Christ” (cf CC RR 2). The “**Preface**” our Founder himself wrote flows from this **conversion experience**. His daring and total commitment can be gauged by the phrase “*Nil linquendum inausum...*”. No wonder the Founder brings the contemplative dimension into the very heart of the life of an Oblate. I still remember when I was a novice at the age of 17, listening to our Constitutions being read out during breakfast. This particular sentence struck me: “Oblates shall spend six months in a year in **contemplation/meditation** and six months in active ministry.” The order should not be reversed! For our active ministry must be an outflow of our experience of the Divine in the cave of our heart.

Pope John Paul II, of Happy Memory, underscores this imperative in his encyclical letter “*Redemptoris Missio*”: “..... the missionary must be a contemplative in action Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God.....” (RM 91). Hence the experience of the Lord is at the heart of our mission. Contemplation itself is an integral part of our mission. St Thomas Aquinas, speaking about our Apostolate says, “*Apostolatus est contemplare et aliis tradere.*” “To contemplate the Divine and hand down the experience of the Divine to others.” A reflective reading of the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul, clearly

brings out that the word “**Apostle**” is applied to a person **who had had an experience of the Risen Lord**. The Apostle communicates his experience to others and a new Church community is born with the Apostle as the nucleus of the community.

St. Ignatius of Loyola made a beautiful synthesis of both Contemplation and Action. “He subjected both prayer and action to the acid test of authenticity, namely *self-abnegation*, which is the positive proof of authentic love.... All genuine spirituality flows from the spirit of the *Crucified* (and exalted) *Christ*.... Seek God in total *self-abnegation* you will touch the depths of the human, your own and that of others. Conversely, commit yourself to human liberation *without any self seeking*, and you have already experienced God. Without self-abnegation, both prayer and action are delusion, with self-centered introversion parading as **interiority** and restless extroversion parading as **political commitment**.”⁶ St. Paul sees action expressing one’s love for one’s neighbour as the sum and substance of God’s one single commandment (cf Gal 5:14)⁷. The dichotomy between Contemplation and Action or Faith and Justice in mission paradigms is integrated, as expressed by the modern theological jargon, *the monk in the marketplace*.

No wonder then our Founder took the same motto for our Congregation as that of Jesus Himself: “He has sent me to proclaim the *Good News to the poor*” (cf Lk 4:18-19). This has been the watchword of our Congregation and down the ages, Oblates have been wedded to the poor, serving the “*poor with their many faces*” (CCR.5). To be with the poor effectively, our Founder wanted his sons to be transformed into God, who manifested Himself in Jesus as the pact between Him and the poor. Our Founder wrote to his first followers: “If I had wanted intellectuals and eloquent preachers I would have looked for them elsewhere, perhaps in Universities. But I want you to be **Saints** in the first place – men

filled with Holiness.” As the Hindu Scriptures repeatedly say, “**The one who sees God becomes God**”. A very good example of this is St Anthony of the Desert. He enters the desert at the age of eighteen; after ten years of intense struggle in the desert in silence, he returns to his people, a very healthy man in body, mind and spirit, as his biographer St. Athanasius says. People flocked to touch him because in him they saw the **Divine radiating; he has become for them the sacrament of the Risen Lord**. He welcomed them all into the **desert of his heart** and healed them all.

Conclusion

Jesus had a unique *Atmabodha - Abba Experience*. This theme runs through the whole Gospel of John, “The Father and I are **One**” (10: 30). He is now inviting us to the same experience: **he is the Way**. He uses beautiful symbols (all feminine symbols) to explain to us his **Abba Experience**, e.g., the symbol of the vine and the branches. The Father is the unseen **root**: the Son emerges from the root as the **stem**; and the Holy Spirit is the **sap** that flows from the root into the stem and into the branches. We are invited to abide in the stem as branches participating fully in the one life of the Divine. No two branches are identical; it is the branches that bear fruit. The whole tree is taken together and called **One Tree**. This is the *Advaitic (non-dual)* experience of our life in the **Trinitarian Communion**. Jesus considered this as the “**One thing necessary**” (cf Lk 10: 38- 42) which alone will empower us “**to wash one another’s - feet**” (cf Jn 13: 12- 15). Thus Christian Spirituality is the contemplative participation in the unique *Atmabodha* or **Abba-Consciousness of Jesus**.

The Katha Upanishad says, “God cannot be taught by one who has not reached him; and he cannot be reached by much thinking. The way to him is through a **Guru (a Teacher) who has seen him**; He is higher than the highest thoughts, in truth above all thought” (II,8). Within the Christian tradition the Gospel of John asserts : “**No one has ever seen God . It is the only Son who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known**”. (Jn: 1: 18)

⁶ cf Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, op. cit., 8-9

⁷ cf Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *God’s Reign for God’s Poor*, op. cit., 17

The Oblate Family, from its very inception, down through the ages has been treasuring the *Preface of our Founder* as the priceless Patrimony that our Founder has bequeathed to us. It is “the Preface where our Founder invested the greatest part of himself and of his Charism, and handed this down to his followers”⁸. I would unhesitatingly add that it was first and foremost **his experience of Conversion** that he wanted to hand down to every Missionary Oblate, with the hope that he in turn **experience this conversion in its depths and live it to the full.**

⁸ cfr Fabio Ciardi, OMI, (ed), *Dictionary of Oblate Values*, Rome, 2000, “Daring”, 217

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