

January 3, 2010
The Sunday Before Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The larger decisions in life, especially those that alter its course, are most often complex in both motive and inference; they have about them the qualities of both resolution (whence?) and solution (whither?). However plain and direct they appear at the time, major determinations in life not only burst forth from a confluence of sundry forces, but also carry along with them certain manifold discernments required for life downstream. It hardly needs saying, I suppose, that precious little of its complex structure is obvious when the decision itself takes shape.

Moreover, resolutions of this magnitude, because of their double complexity---in motive and inference---can yield a generous range of meanings, some of which may not come to light until years afterwards, when maturity emerges. Wrapped all together when the decisive step was taken, its meanings may appear surprisingly disparate later on, perhaps even incongruous.

A simple example may illustrate this phenomenon: the "conversion" of Arthur Koestler. In February of 1937, when he was covering the Spanish civil war as a Marxist journalist, Koestler was captured by the Fascists and thrown into prison. Awaiting his expected execution, he had a lot of time to think about things, as they say, and take stock of his life.

First, Koestler reflected on his growing disenchantment with Marxism in recent years. Like many rootless Jews of that period, he had succumbed to the strange secular messianism of the *Manifesto*, but gradually he perceived a deep disparity between Marxist theory and Communist practice. A trip to Russia had recently produced a crisis for his adherence to the Party.

Second, when Koestler was thrown in prison, he was still a Marxist---though in name only---because Fascism, which seemed to be the only alternative at the time, was unbearable to contemplate. Koestler's internal confusion mounted as he awaited death.

Third, Koestler got lucky, when the influence of friends secured his freedom. The opening of his cell door liberated not only his body, but also---somehow---his mind. Koestler was now able to act on the new perspectives that took shape behind bars: "In the condemned cell of a Franco prison my former life was to be resolved and recast in a new shape."

Nonetheless, when Koestler considered that transition---as he did several times---it assumed various meanings, largely determined by the differing circumstances of his new life: In *Spanish Testament* (1937) his emphasis was on the physical conditions attending his decision, whereas in *Dialogue With Death* (1942) he wrote at great length on its psychological aspects. The same subject became a full-blown critique of Communism in his autobiographical essay in *The God That Failed* (1950). Finally, in *The Invisible Writing* (1954) Koestler portrayed the prison experience as the seedbed

of his fully developed philosophy. In short, his growth through the passage of time permitted Koestler to take stock of both the motives and inferences of his earlier decision.

May we say something analogous about the conversion of St. Paul? I believe so, with respect to both motive and inference. It was the resolution, first of all, of a crisis, which is described as kicking against the goads (Acts 26: 14). When Stephen was stoned to death, Paul guarded the garments of those who did it. Listening to Stephen's prayer for his murderers (7: 60), Paul was among those who "saw his face as the face of an angel" (6: 15). Had he not seen that face and heard that voice, we wonder if Paul would have seen the "light [that] shone around him from heaven" or heard the voice that inquired, "why are you persecuting Me?" (9: 3-4) Down broke the dam of Paul's resistance.

Implicit, also, in this revelatory experience---three days long (9: 9)---lay certain major inferences of Pauline theology: the inability of the Law to justify (Galatians 2: 16) and its tendency to augment man's slavery to death (Romans 7: 7-24), salvation by grace (3: 24), the historical dialectic of ecclesiology (11: 13-32), and the identification of Christ with Christians (1 Corinthians 10: 16-17; Galatians 2: 20; Ephesians 5: 30; Colossians 2: 19).

All these teachings were seminally inferred in the experience through which Paul decided for Christ. Indeed, I submit there is a sense in which the entire Pauline corpus is an exegetical expansion of that decision.

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