

Conversations with Camus

by Howard Mumma

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During several summers in the 1950s, Howard Mumma, a Methodist pastor, served as guest minister at the American Church in Paris. After Sunday service one day, he noticed a man in a dark suit surrounded by admirers. Albert Camus had been coming to church, first to hear Marcel Dupré playing the organ, and later to hear Mumma's sermons.

Mumma became friends with the existentialist Camus who by then was famous for his novels The Plague and The Stranger and for essays such as The Myth of Sisyphus. The two men met to discuss questions of religious belief that Camus raised. Mumma, now 92, kept the conversations confidential for over 40 years before deciding to share them.

Soon after the following conversation on baptism, Mumma returned to the U.S. In January 3, 1960 Camus was killed in a car accident.

One day toward the end of my summer in Paris, the concierge's wife prepared supper for Camus and me. We had planned to take a ride that afternoon, but after we finished our meal, we could not bring ourselves to leave. We chose instead to sit and enjoy the view of the river. We were both relaxed and enjoying the weather when Camus broke the silence: "Howard, do you perform baptisms?"

For a moment I thought I was going to fall off my chair. "Yes, Albert, I do," I answered with some tension and surprise.

"What is the significance of this rite?"

I had become accustomed to his questions and by now we had developed a kind of routine. Still, there was something different about this question. He seemed more than merely curious, rather contemplative, as if this question was more personal to him.

"Baptism is not necessarily a supernatural experience," I began. "The important thing is not the heavens opening up or the dove or the voice. Those are the externals, oriental imagery. Baptism is a symbolic commitment to God, and there is a longstanding tradition and history involved.

"Yes, I remember some of it from my readings."

"First of all, let me say a word about why the average adult seeks baptism. I think, Albert, that you are a good example. You have said to me again and again that you are dissatisfied with the whole philosophy of existentialism and that you are privately seeking something that you do not have."

"Yes, you are exactly right, Howard. The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage -- seeking something to fill the void that I am experiencing -- and no one else knows. Certainly the public and the readers of my novels, while they see that void, are not finding the answers in what they are reading. But deep down you are right -- I am searching for something that the world is not giving me."

"Albert, I congratulate you for this. I encourage you to keep searching for a meaning and something that will fill the void and transform your life. Then you will arrive in living waters where you will find meaning and purpose."

"Well, Howard, you have to agree that in a sense we are all products of a mundane world, a world without spirit. The world in which we live and the lives which we live are decidedly empty."

"It does often seem that way," I conceded.

"Since I have been coming to church, I have been thinking a great deal about the idea of a transcendent, something that is other than this world. It is something that you do not hear much about today but I am finding it. I am hearing about it here, in Paris, within the walls of the American Church."

"After all, one of the basic teachings that I learned from Sartre is that man is alone. We are solitary centers of the universe. Perhaps we ourselves are the only ones who have ever asked the great questions of life. Perhaps, since Nazism, we are also the ones who have loved and lost and who are, therefore, fearful of life. That is what led us to sense that there is something -- I don't know if it is personal or if it is a great idea or powerful influence -- but there is something that can bring meaning to my life. I certainly don't have it, but it is there. On Sunday mornings, I hear that the answer is God."

"You have made it very clear to me, Howard, that we are not the only ones in this world. There is something that is invisible. We may not hear the voice, but there is some way in which we can become aware that we are not the only ones in the world and that there is help for all of us."

Camus leaned forward until his elbows rested on his knees and said, "In the Bible, I have read about people who were not at all self-confident. Men who did not feel as if they had the world by its tail or that they had all the answers. Fact is, one of the things that I have noted in the Bible is that many of its chief characters were confused -- just like the rest of us. We are on a pilgrimage. We are all seeking something, whether it is confidence or knowledge or something else entirely. I've read the Old Testament at least three times and I have made many notes on it. In its pages I have found some people who were absolutely confused about life and what they should do and what God wanted them to do."

"There is Jonah, a guy who stood up and refused God. He didn't want to go to Nineveh! He didn't understand what it was all about. He felt that there was no chance for the Ninevites to be redeemed and that God was mistaken. Then there was Moses. God wanted him to go to Egypt to free his people but Moses complained that he stuttered. He couldn't speak well and therefore no one would believe him. And then there was Isaiah. I have read Isaiah a number of times. When God wanted him -- in the sixth chapter, I think -- to go and work for him, Isaiah said, 'You have the wrong man! I am not worthy, I'm a man of unclean lips!' So even these great men were confused."

Then Camus said, "And I don't understand it to this day -- this man Nicodemus!" I was very pleased when he brought up Nicodemus. I got out the Bible and turned to the third chapter of the Gospel of John and we reread it. We discussed it. He said to me, "Now here is a wise man of Israel!"

He is seeking something that he does not have. I feel right at home with Nicodemus, because I too am uncertain about this whole matter of Christianity. I don't understand what Jesus said to Nicodemus, 'You must be born again.'"

I said, "Albert, let's think about this expression 'to be born again,' because we are moving back to the significance of baptism. What was Jesus' reply?"

Immediately Camus said, "Well, you know what it was! He simply said that you must be born again! I know the exact words: 'except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God,' whatever that is. And he said, 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' . . . I simply marvel at it -- that you must be born again."

"To me," I said, "to be born again is to enter anew or afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to receive forgiveness. It is to receive forgiveness because you have asked God to forgive you of all past sins, so that the guilt, the concerns, the worries, and the mistakes that we have made in the past are forgiven and the slate is truly wiped clean."

"I don't know what the French term would be for a bond or an encumbrance, but the person who accepts forgiveness now believes that there is no mortgage, no encumbrance on him. The slate is clear, your conscience is clear. You are ready to move ahead and commit yourself to a new life, a new spiritual pilgrimage. You are seeking the presence of God himself." I was nervous and intense.

Albert looked me with tears in his eyes and said, "Howard, I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to."

Of course, I rejoiced and thanked God privately that he had come to this. I had a difficult time maintaining my composure. The man had been questioning me now for several years about Christianity and had attended services. He had heard my sermons on many occasions and had studied the Bible. Perhaps I should not have been shocked, but it did give me a sense of wonder and amazement that he would be considering taking this kind of step toward Christianity. Yet for some reason, I was unable to commit myself fully to the idea. "But Albert," I said, "haven't you already been baptized?"

"Yes" said Camus, "when I was a child . . . but it meant nothing to me. It was something done to me, no more meaningful than a handshake."

"Well, the baptism of a child is not performed because the child has faith in God or in Christ, which a baby clearly does not have. It is given because God loves the child and welcomes him into the family of God. The baptism begins a process in which you begin to grow, even as an infant, into a new life, the gift which has been given to you."

"But it seems right that I should be baptized now that I have spent these months reading and discussing the Bible with you -- I had to interrupt, though I could not express my full thoughts. Christian doctrine holds that one baptism suffices; there is no reason for rebaptism. Only if there is some doubt that person has been given a valid baptism do we rebaptize, and we call it a "conditional baptism." So on one hand, I wanted to deny his request for baptism on the grounds that it wasn't necessary. On the other hand, I sensed that Albert needed the experience. My compromise was to bring up the matter of joining a church and experiencing the rule of confirmation. That proved to be a mistake."

Right away, he jumped on me and said, "Howard, I am not ready to be a member of a church! I have difficulty in attending church! I have to fight people all the time after a service, even at your

church. When I come to your church, when you are preaching, I leave before the service is over to get away from them all."

I understood that, but I had to stand my ground. "The time will come when you can get away from people who are seeking your autograph or wanting to hold conversations with you about your writings. Perhaps they will simply accept you into the community of men and women. This community will remind you constantly that you are not alone and that you are a member of a communion, a company of both the living and the dead all of whom are in the presence of a living God. In any event, are you aware of everything that baptism entails?" I asked, trying to give a little.

Camus shrugged, "My experience is limited to my early church training and the little bit that you have told me," he said, recalling that baptism is a religious rite performed by a priest or minister on a baby. "He puts water on the head of the child and blesses it. . . . It is a religious miracle of sorts, so that if the child should die, it would not go to hell." He said that beyond that, he knew very little.

"Yes," I said. The baptism is an outward and visible sign that an infant has been initiated into the fellowship of Christ's church. The child not only becomes a participant, but also becomes an heir to eternal life. That is to say, physical death will not end the gift which is given through baptism.

I went into more detail. "In the case of an adult, he may approach alone. The person then stands before the priest or minister as he addresses not only him but the entire congregation. . .

I noticed a frown appear on Camus's face, but I continued. "The minister says that baptism is an outward and visible sign of a gift, the gift of the Spirit of God brought into the body and mind of the person being baptized."

I noticed Camus cringing again. He must have seen the questioning look on my face because he explained: "For me, baptism and confirmation would be a more personal thing, something between me and God."

"But baptism and confirmation are both a private and a public commitment to a life with Christ. They are a welcoming into the family of God, which is the church here on earth, both visible and invisible. At the end of the baptism, the minister confirms you as a full and responsible member not only of the family of God, which is personal, but also of the church, which is a community."

Camus shook his head, leaning back in his chair, obviously disappointed. "I cannot belong to any church," he said. "Is this not something that you could do? Something just between us?"

I cannot say that I blamed him for his hesitation. Camus was one of the most famous Frenchmen alive. His writings touched the disaffection the people of France were feeling after the war. Display of this sort would have all of France abuzz, and many of his fans would feel betrayed. But his trepidation was more than that.

By his very nature, Camus was a man who could never belong to an organized church. He was truly an independent thinker, and no matter how modified his feelings toward Christianity had become, he could never be an active member of any church.

"Perhaps you are not quite ready," I said. As pleased as I was, I could not fully commit myself to the idea. I would be leaving in a few more days and he would have time to contemplate what he really wanted. This was a major decision for both of us, and I wanted to be sure that there were no doubts about his next step. With a few more months, we could both be certain that this was the right decision. I laid my hand on his and said, "Let's wait while you continue your studies."