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The translator wants to acknowledge the copyediting assistance provided by Ms. Karen W Burton.

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Turning Toward God

"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

John 3:8 NKJV

I chose our Bible verse we just read from Chapter 3 of the Gospel of John, a chapter many of you know well. This is about the meeting with Nicodemus. Before I begin my interpretation, I ought to say a few words about Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, a teacher of the Jewish nation. One night he went to Jesus under the cover of darkness. As a member of the Pharisees, the people knowledgeable about the "matters of God", he enjoyed the respect and appreciation afforded to teachers. The conversation with Jesus had such a profound effect on him that, after the crucifixion of Jesus when Joseph of Arimathea offered his tomb for the body of Jesus, he, Nicodemus, gave incredibly valuable myrrh and aloes to embalm the body of Jesus. Therefore, this Pharisee was present, together with Joseph of Arimathea, at the burial of Jesus.

In the third Chapter of the Gospel of John, this Pharisee goes to talk with Jesus under the cover of darkness. Our first question likely would be: *Why did he have to get on the road at night; why did he have to choose to travel in darkness?* Jesus didn't hide from people - quite the opposite. He was open for dialogue, and there was no need to ask a go-between to make it possible to meet Jesus, no need to have someone open the door to the "Office of Jesus." The master from Galilee was always ready for a conversation, including even public spaces, such as on a street, in the temple, in the synagogue, and any other place where people were drawn while conducting their lives. He even sat down at the table of sinners. Yet, it seems that this Pharisee was concerned about something. In the Book of John, Chapter 3, verses 2-10, we find the record of the conversation between the two teachers.

On television and in newspapers every day, we may see, read, or hear experts on a particular topic meet, and carry on a roundtable discussion, and exchange ideas. On occasion such an exchange of ideas, and the debate over questions such as *What do we do next?* and *What are the issues we need to address?*, may determine the future

course for a nation, a country, the national economy, or an entire scientific discipline. This is why the academic societies, professional international discussion panels, and annual conferences came into existence. In these rounds of discussions, experts from different cultures, religions, and national origins, who hold different world views, and speak different languages may gather and debate the most significant issues of human societies. The way I interpret it, the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus was of similar importance, because we are talking about a conversation between two people of high intellect. In their days, intellectual achievement was not rewarded in a spectacularly visible way, as there were no doctoral degrees, nonetheless, these two people can still be considered history-making individuals who influenced not only the fate of their generation, but also the fate of generations to come. We can picture the Pharisees as well-respected religious leaders and teachers. People turned to them with questions about religious ethics as well as about science. They guarded the wholesome nature of Jewish religious life. They interpreted the laws, defined the rights and responsibilities, and enforced them. Therefore, they had a tremendous influence on Jewish society. Thus, it is likely that Nicodemus was a respected person under the circumstances of his era. Now, when such a person takes pains to visit the “person from Galilee” in the hours of the late night or early dawn, we can immediately appreciate the enormous importance, influence, and impact of Jesus.

The fact that the visit took place at night indicates that other Pharisees may not have acknowledged the authority or the wisdom of Jesus. They didn't accept him; moreover, it was them, the Pharisees, who encouraged the ignorant mob that shouted, “Crucify him”, to bring about the demise of Jesus. The night visit also indicates that they were watching this man, watching and, perhaps, fearing him. They must have sensed he was teaching things that were new in this era, and could be a prelude to the start of a new movement. It is very likely they envied him, and wanted to prevent him from building a movement around his teachings that could dismantle those religious traditions they maintained in meticulous detail, and, thus, could deal a blow to the authority of the Pharisees. Jesus had to be “pushed out of the playing field” in order to prevent the breaking apart of the ordered structure of the Jewish religion that had been passed down for thousands of years. Although Jesus clearly stated: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” However, that was the same law whose professional interpretation was the official role of the Pharisees. Jesus also said: “And whosoever compel thee to go one mile, go with him twain,” because no one demands that second mile. This may be translated for our age that: *Good intentions have no price tag, and they cannot be demanded or presumed.* “Did you fulfil your obligation?” one would ask. “Yes, I did.” came the answer. “Did you fulfil the Law?” “Yes, I did.” “Then you are a true man.” maintained the Jews, as would many people even today. But Jesus would then ask this: “And what did you do out of good will? What did you do better than the letter of the law? What did you do because you felt it would enhance your humanity, not just fulfil your obligation? What did you do because you felt you could move past your obligation without much additional effort? Not avoiding your obligations, but fulfilling them, and then exceeding them.” Only those

who are generous are able to go that second mile. What the laws request must be fulfilled. The bill needs to be paid. There is no negotiating or finding alternatives to the law. The fulfillment of obligations is a must if one is to act responsibly. What about doing more? What can you do over and above the fulfillment of the law? This is the point where the religion of Jesus, Christian ethics, begins. Are you generous enough to go that second mile with that person, to offer your good intentions without any ulterior motive? That was the gist of the debate between Jesus and Nicodemus that night.

Their debate culminated in a very simple topic: conversion. Jesus was attempting to explain the conversion, the turning toward God, to the Pharisee who had grown up with and been held captive by the knowledge of the law, and lived in the shackles of those laws, but who now came to realize that there is more to the world than what may be imagined and comprehended by the human mind. Nicodemus realized that the world is more than what we see, hear, think or experience. In other words, the essence of human life is more than what we understand. This is why he visited Jesus. As stated by our Bible verse: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." What an incredible freedom is represented by the symbolism of the wind and the Spirit! What a contrast to the idea of being tied down! This Pharisee wished to be free to fly, he just didn't know how. As Jesus saw precisely what is ailing the Pharisee, he began to talk about the conversion.

In Greek the word for conversion is *metanoia*. *Meta* means beyond something or transcending; *nomos* means identity. Conversion, therefore, means that I transcend myself and turn toward something. Let us not be frightened by the words of Jesus about the hand on the plow and looking back. We are not talking about that sort of turning. We are talking about the ability to go beyond yourself. A simplified metaphor for that the world records in various sport events. We may believe that people cannot achieve anything better, yet it is rare that new world records aren't set at large international sporting events. In the spiritual sense these records are similar to the ability of an individual to go beyond his/her capability, even if it is very difficult to make it happen. When people reach the spiritual level where they can go beyond their own capabilities, completely on their own, is an unmistakable evidence and proof of their shared existence with God. Such a conversion, turning to God, is a once in a lifetime event, according to some philosophers. Only one such decision is imaginable. If two are possible, so are ten. In such a case a man could be making decisions about his fate all the time, including decisions where he has no experience. That is not acceptable. Being

born anew is like being born. That thought was difficult to understand for the Pharisee; he was middle-aged, so how could he possibly go back to the womb to be born anew?

If we were to listen to a roundtable debate between two learned people of our age, and parse the essence of their words, what would we deem worthy to keep? Nowadays we discuss very little of importance, whereas one of the truly essential matters would be the topic of conversion.

We ought to accompany people through their life journey, and help them grow their awareness of their ability to go beyond their obligations. It's a relatively simple matter to alter the face of the Earth. It seems that even borders of countries can easily be redrawn. The color of a house or the appearance of an entire village may be changed at ease with money and the right attitude. However, no one can make the decision for you to go beyond your obligations. Only you can bring about such change.

My wish is that our church, our prayers, and our fellowship will help us grow into better and more true individuals. If only we would begin saving the world by starting with ourselves. To enable ourselves so we can humbly state: "I pray to you, God, to grant me the ability to begin the work on myself so I can find out what I might achieve."

With faith and by staying close to God we may be able to go beyond our obligations. We may be able to make the decision, that ultimate decision: *Am I going to be the person of obligations, or a person who soars like the wind, like a person born of the Spirit?* Amen.