

HOMILY for 26th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

Today's Gospel talks about being the first or the last in Heaven. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

Three men went to their seats at the football game & there were a couple of nuns sitting ahead of them. The men wanted to drink beer & swear at the referees & not be scolded by the nuns; so they decided to badger the nuns & get them to move. One guy said, "I think I'm going to move to Utah, there are only 100 Catholics there..." The second said, "I want to go to Montana, there are only 50 Catholics there..." The third guy said, "I want to go to Idaho, there are only 25 Catholics living there..."

One of the nuns turned around & said, "Why don't you go to Hell? There aren't any Catholics there."

Anyway, people often think the Bible to be a good collection of nice stories throughout the human history. It begins with a story that tries to explain how the world was created & ends with a story that explains why the people of God would need a Messiah/Savior. People have been mesmerized by the Bible stories & their life lessons. I recall how I used to love reading the Bible stories in my childhood years & never got tired of it. But, people do not realize that first & foremost the Bible is a collection of conversion stories. In the Old Testament, we have seen how Abraham tried to negotiate with God for the sinful cities of Sodom & Gomorrah. But, they turned out to be unsuccessful because he could not find even 10 righteous people in those cities to save them. Moses had to face similar disappointment as the people of God kept turning to other foreign gods including the Golden Calf. The most effective story of conversion in the Old Testament was the story of King David who was chosen to lead the people of God. Later, he was tempted to commit adultery as well as murder to cover up his first sin. Thankfully, he soon realized his sins with the help of a prophet & turned back to the Lord by begging for mercy & forgiveness.

Meanwhile, in the New Testament, we have had all sorts of conversion stories. First, we have heard the conversion story of the Magi, who saw a strange star in the sky & went in search for it. On their way, they ran into evil King Herod who refused to convert from his awful past, & they decided to return home from their visit to the Holy Family by another way. Another noticeable conversion story in the Gospels was about Zacchaeus, who was a tax collector & so much desiring to meet Jesus that he even climbed a tree along the road to get His attention. Jesus agreed to have a meal at his home as Zacchaeus promised to repay everyone that he wronged & turned his life back to the Lord. In fact, Jesus' entire ministry was about trying to convert the world back to God the Father. That is why every time Jesus healed someone or did a miracle, He often said, "Your sins are forgiven. Go & sin no more." That is why the Parable of the Prodigal Son was so powerful & right at the center of His ministry. Like a merciful & forgiving Father, God has been waiting for us night & day to welcome His sinful children home. That is why He has reminded us in today's Gospel about the two sons as the elder son promised to work in the vineyard for his father while the younger son refused to do it. But, after some further reflection, the younger son regretted & decided to go to the vineyard to help his father while the elder son did not follow through with his promise. Jesus then concluded, "Let me make it clear that tax collectors & prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before you [the chief priests & religious leaders]. When John came preaching a way of holiness, you put no faith in him; but tax collectors & prostitutes did believe in him. Yet, even when you saw that, you did not repent & believe in him."

As you can see, for Jesus it is all about repentance & conversion. He did not judge a person whether he/she was a tax collector, a prostitute, a chief priest, or a religious leader. Unfortunately, religious leaders kept condemning sinners & mistakenly assumed that they were better than the rest of humanity. They often gave Jesus a hard time for being near tax collectors & prostitutes. In fact, once they brought a woman who was caught in an act of adultery & wanted Jesus to condemn & stone her to death as prescribed in the Mosaic Law. But, Jesus told them, "Let anyone who is without sin throw the

first stone at her.” In the end, they left the sinful woman all alone with Jesus. He then said, “I do not condemn you either. God & sin no more.” Once again, Jesus’ mission to earth & ministry on earth was about calling the world back to God the Father. It does not matter if someone is a big sinner or a small violator of God’s Commandments.

Unfortunately, like religious leaders in Jesus’ time, people of our time have behaved the same way. They think that they do not need to convert & change their ways of life. They assume that Jesus’ call for conversion applies to sinners such as people who commit abortion, follow a life of pornography & sexual promiscuity, get addicted to drinking & drugs, cheat & hurt others, or do other horrible sins. They feel that they are morally superior compared to other people around them. Some have even claimed to be conservative to make them look better than the rest of humanity; but that does not mean that they do not need to convert & change their lives in the eyes of Jesus. Worst yet, we have seen blind Christian/Catholic leaders telling people that if they do certain Novenas, or kneel to receive Communion, or switch back to Latin Mass, they would be better Catholics. My friends, true religious conversion is about a total change of life & commitment to follow a life of virtues, not just doing a few superficial religious acts mentioned above. Haven’t they seen how Jesus pointed out & despised the superficial religious acts of the religious leaders while their hearts were far away from God? What has really kept some Christian/Catholic leaders & their followers from preaching & committing their hearts & souls to a religious conversion as Jesus would want them to do?

I believe that deep down most Christian/Catholic leaders & their followers know that they would need a personal conversion & should follow a life of virtues as Jesus would wish them to do. But, they are afraid to make that admission & commit themselves to it. In case we have any doubt about that important change, let me underline & repeat that wish of Jesus for all Christians with the help of today’s readings. In the First Reading, we are told, “...When a virtuous man turns away from virtue to commit iniquity & dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die.” As you can see, we are reminded to follow a life of virtues, not a conservative life or doing some superficial religious acts as some blind Christian/Catholic leaders have told us. If you are still not convinced about that, let’s listen to Paul’s admonition to us in today’s Second Reading, “...I beg you: make my joy complete by your unanimity, possessing the one love, united in spirit & ideals. Never act out of rivalry or conceit; rather, let all parties think humbly of others as superior to themselves, each of you looking to others’ interest rather than his own. Your attitude must be Christ’s.” In other words, Paul wants us to be loving, caring, humble, selfless, & generous like Christ. Lastly, I’m sure you have heard Jesus once said, “The last shall be first; & the first shall be last in the Kingdom of Heaven.” Most people have no idea what that means. As someone who majored in Math & studied logic, that does not make any sense to me until I have read today’s Gospel. What Jesus meant was that we might assume that we are morally superior by being a cradle Catholic or Christian/Catholic leader, doing a superficial religious act, or claiming other crazy reasons like being conservative; & hence we would be able to enter Heaven first. But, if we do not truly convert our lives over to the Lord & follow a life of virtues like a sinful person would, we would be the last to enter Heaven while a converted sinner would be the first to come in there.

My dear brothers & sisters, I take my job as your spiritual leader seriously. I’m here with you every Sunday & Holy Day not to entertain you or sugarcoat my preaching to make you feel good like some preachers do. I’m here to tell you the truth & challenge you to live up to Jesus’ Commandments & expectations. I would fail you & feel ashamed of myself if I’m not able to get you through the Gate of Heaven. So, let’s try to convert our lives over to Jesus every day & follow a life of virtues as Jesus would want us to do. That is how we can come closer to Heaven & be the first to come in there.