

Putting on the Heart of Christ

By Stephen Gabriel

Today's Gospel reading (Mt 21:28-32) is a wake-up call for those of us who are just a little too comfortable about being "practicing Catholics." Our Lord presents the parable of the two sons. One son refuses to work in the vineyard as directed by his father, but later regrets it and ultimately does what he is told. The other son tells his father that he will work in the vineyard, but doesn't. The first son is likened to the repentant tax collectors and prostitutes who are saved. What we need to be concerned about are those times in our lives when we look more like the second son. Too often we give Our Lord lip service. We'll talk the talk, but we won't walk the walk.

The first son's change of heart to obey his father is evidence of a conversion he experienced after his initial act of disobedience. We, too, are in need of conversion – a conversion of heart that must take place after every fall or act of indifference to God's will.

This need for conversion applies to all of us because our vocation as Christians is such a demanding one. We are called to be saints! We please God to the extent that we resemble His Son. Clearly, we all fall short of this goal. But the mandate remains.

What does this mean for the ordinary Catholic sitting in the pew each Sunday? It means being prepared to struggle to grow in the virtues, beginning over and over again after each failure. It means taking advantage of the means that Our Lord has given us to grow in holiness – that is, to avail ourselves of the Sacrament of Penance frequently and to nourish ourselves at the holy Mass as often as possible.

At the end of our lives, God will not take a tally of the pious things we did during our lifetime. He will simply look at our hearts. If he sees some semblance of the heart of Christ, we will join Him in paradise. The prophet Ezekiel suggests this in the first reading (Ez 18:25-28) when he says, "When a virtuous man turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die. But if a wicked man, turning from the wickedness he has committed, does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life."

We must all consider to what extent we are holding back our love for God. Do I approach the practice of my faith in a calculating way? Or do I do just what I have to do to avoid mortal sin? Of course, we must all struggle to avoid mortal sin. But, to do just enough to avoid mortal sin does not suggest a generous heart – certainly not the heart of Christ – and it may well be a perfect recipe for a very nasty stay in purgatory. And purgatory is the best-case scenario for such a calculating soul. The risk is that we become like the second son in today's Gospel or Ezekiel's virtuous man who goes bad.

"Struggle" is the key word in the spiritual life of the ordinary layman. Where there is struggle, there is interior life. Our willingness to overcome obstacles, to accept our weakness and rely more and more on the gift of grace, is all that God asks of us. Our

perseverance is a sign of our love. A soul in love sees no limits to giving to the beloved. He has the heart of Christ.

Let us resolve to examine ourselves each day as to how we express our love for God. Do we seek Him daily in our prayer and in the sacraments? Do we show our love for God in the way we deal with our family, friends and colleagues? Do we see Him in those in need?

Indeed, it is no small task to love God the way He wants to be loved. But we must be convinced that He has given us all that we need to succeed. We need only ask.

And each conversion we make will configure our poor hearts to resemble more and more the heart of Jesus – the only heart God will recognize in His heavenly kingdom.

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