

Second Sunday of Advent

Readings: BAR 5:1-9 , PHIL 1:4-6, 8-11, Luke 3: 1 – 6.

Theme: Accept divine forgiveness by true repentance

Dennis Alessi was walking along a street in downtown Baltimore. Coming to a busy street corner, he came upon an elderly man who was calling out to passersby, "Return to Jesus! Return to Jesus!" The elderly man's pulpit was a clean metal trash can. On it was a well-worn Bible. The man was bald and wore glasses. He was dressed in a clean white shirt and neatly pressed pants. His plea to the passersby was clearly sincere and deeply dignified. Alessi said there was something about the man that touched him deeply. He couldn't put his finger on what it was. Whatever it was, for some mysterious reason, it motivated him to think about his relationship with Jesus. The upshot of that thinking was that he returned to the Catholic Church after having been separated from it for over seven years.

In retrospect, he saw that the man standing on the busy corner was a kind of modern-day version of John the Baptist. And the man's call, "Return to Jesus," was a kind of modern-day version of John's call:

"Get the road ready for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel!' . Turn away from your sins... and God will forgive your sins." Mark 1:3-4 Finally, Alessi's conversion was a kind of modern-day illustration of how many people in biblical times responded to the call of John the Baptist to turn away from their sins."

Consider yet another modern example of the kind of conversion to which John the Baptist called people.

Charles de Foucauld was born into a wealthy family in France. During his youth, he lived totally for himself and for his own pleasure. Eventually, he enlisted in the army. But in no time he was dismissed because of scandalous conduct. Concerning those years, he wrote: I was so completely selfish, so completely vain, so completely irreligious, and utterly given over to wickedness, that I was only a step away from insanity. In this state of mind, he realized that he needed help. At this point, he began visiting the Church of Saint Augustine in Paris. There he would kneel, repeating over and over, "My God, if you exist, let me come to know you."

One day, during one of these visits, Mass was in progress. At the elevation of the sacred host, he felt the gift of faith enter his heart. "In that single moment," he wrote later, "my heart was touched and I believed:' To make a long story short, he went on to found a religious order, called the Little Brothers of Jesus. It was modeled after Jesus' own life at Nazareth.

It was a life of simply identifying with the poor by living among them, working with them, and praying for them. A line from the constitutions of the Little Brothers of Jesus reads: ***"The whole of our existence, the whole of our lives is to preach the Gospel from the rooftops . not by words but by example"***.

A closer look at the dramatic conversion of Charles de Foucauld reveals that it followed the textbook pattern that so many conversions follow.

It involved three distinct moments: **a zero moment—realizing I need help; a surrender moment asking for help; and a power moment—experiencing help.**

The zero moment for Charles de Foucauld I was recognizing and admitting to himself that his life was totally out of control.

The surrender moment was his decision to go regularly to the Church of Saint Augustine, kneel in the back, and pray for help, saying over and over, "My God, if you exist, let me come to know you."

The power moment came suddenly and by surprise during the elevation of the host at Mass. Faith entered his life and transformed it.

How do we reduce all of this to a practical application to our lives? I think it is the realization that all of us have certain things in our lives that are out of control to some extent. Even the best of us have to admit that there are things that we find hard—if not impossible--to control. Maybe it's a prejudice that we picked up. Maybe it's a judgmental attitude we have. Maybe it's a habit of sin we slipped into. The most difficult thing to do is to admit that we have this problem.

Members of Alcoholics Anonymous testify to this difficulty and to the importance of taking this first step. For Charles de Foucauld, the first step toward regaining control of his life was the admission that through sin, he had lost control of his life. And that brings us to the second moment: the surrender moment. It is the moment when we swallow our pride and reach out for help. For de Foucauld it was the decision to go regularly to the Church of Saint Augustine and pray for help. That was the important second step in regaining control of his life. Finally, there is the power moment. It is the moment when we experience God's help. We may struggle a long time for this moment to come, but if we persevere, it will come. It may come in the form of faith in God, as de Foucauld experienced it. But regardless of how it comes, it will come.

One man said of the power moment: When I felt God's help, I wanted to throw my arms around the whole world and share the experience with everybody. A few minutes before I had no such desire, because I had nothing to share.

That brings us to Advent and this Mass. Both are occasions of special grace. Today's Gospel, therefore, invites us to heed the words of John the Baptist and take to heart his invitation to "get the road ready for the Lord; make straight a path for him to travel!" Today's Gospel is the good news that Jesus wants to help us. He wants to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. All we have to do is to ask and to persevere in asking, as de Foucauld did.