

Sunday homily (August 14, 2016) on Luke 12:49-53

When I went for my home vacation I met a Muslim convert Mario Joseph. Mario Joseph grew up in India in a Muslim family. His mother dedicated him to God when he was a baby. She had rejected doctors' advice to abort him when she had an infected womb during pregnancy. Enrolled at a young age in a Muslim Arabic college in the southern Indian state of Kerala, he studied philosophy and theology for 10 years. He became an imam (Muslim Priest) before he reached the age of 18.

He says Quran converted him to Christianity. After someone asked him **about who Jesus was**, Mario Joseph began to investigate Christianity. Studying the Quran, **114 chapters and 6666 verses**, he noticed that the **name of Jesus was mentioned 25 times and the name of prophet Mohammed only in 4 places. Mary, known in Arabic as Mariam, was the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran. In Islam, Mary is recognized as a perpetual virgin who was conceived without sin. The entire chapter 3 of quran is about the family of Jesus. Chapter 50 speaks about the Assumption of Mary.**

The Quran describes Jesus as the **"Word of God" and the "Spirit of God."** It says Jesus healed the sick and brought the dead to life and went to heaven alive. It does not depict the Prophet Mohammed doing any of this, he explained. In addition, Mario Joseph came to understand God as a father, something also taught by Christianity. **"Whenever I think that the creator of the universe is my dad, I have a kind of joy which I cannot express,"** With this motivation, he explained, "I decided to accept Jesus."

However, this conversion to Christianity triggered a violent reaction from family members. His father found him at a Catholic retreat center and beat him badly, to the point that he lost consciousness. When he awoke, he found himself naked in a small room at his family's home. His arms and legs were bound and hot chili had been placed in his mouth and his wounds. His father was obeying the law of the Quran, which punishes those who leave Islam.

He said that he was deprived of food and water for several days and that his brother forced him to drink urine as a punishment. The lack of food and water affected him severely, he recalled, adding that after as many as 20 days, his father entered his cell, choked him and threatened him with a knife unless he renounced Jesus. "I knew my dad well that he would kill me," Mario Joseph said. "When I knew that it was my last moment... I thought, 'Jesus died, but He came back. If I believe in Jesus and die, I too may get my life'." He said at this point he felt energized, pulled his father's hand down, and cried out Jesus' name. His father then fell down and was cut severely by his own knife, causing him to foam at the mouth, Mario Joseph said. When family members took his father to the hospital, they forgot to lock the room.

The young man then ran out and caught a taxi. The driver was a Christian and helped get him food and drink. "That day, really I understood, my Jesus is alive even now. When I called him for my need, he saved me." Mario Joseph is now staying at a Catholic retreat center in India, where he gives talks in various languages. He took the name "Mario," a male version of Mary in Italian. He also took the name Joseph for Mary's spouse.

Mario Joseph said he did not expect that he would still be alive 18 years after his conversion. He said people are still trying to kill him, and his parents held a mock funeral ceremony for him to signify that he was an outcast. On the mock grave, they marked as his death date the date of his baptism."

This is what Jesus says in today's Gospel Reading from St. Luke - **“Do you think that I have come to establish peace on earth? No, I tell you , but rather division. ... a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, ... a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”** Christ comes to us as a challenge. Everyone who follows Christ and keeps his eyes focused on Jesus and the truth of his message in all its integrity, everyone who lives it to the full, will find the world opposes him. Christ himself suffered, as did all the prophets, and we must follow in his footsteps.

Scholars tell us that Jesus is speaking here not about **the purpose of his coming but about the inevitable consequence of his coming.** Jesus came to reveal the true sons and daughters of God who listen to God’s word, and the children of this world who oppose God design. This divides all humankind into two camps, the camp of the godly and the camp of the ungodly. There is perpetual conflict, a state of war, between these two groups as one group strives to raise the world up to God and the other to pull it down to hell. These two groups do not live in two different parts of the world, they live side by side in the same neighborhood, they live together under the same roof, and in fact the forces of good and evil often exist together in the same person.

The challenge which Christ calls us, therefore, is not a battle against people of certain nationalities or cultures, creeds or ideologies, but a war in which we first have to identify the forces for evil in our own persons and in the persons of those who are dear to us (father, son, mother, daughter, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law) and then declare an uncompromising war against these forces.

What are some of these evil forces that we are asked to war against? Well, why don’t we start with **the Seven Deadly Sins: Pride** (superiority complex), **Covetousness** (greed, seeking material prosperity at the expense of one’s soul), **Lust** (sexual abuse of minors, pornography, treating women as objects of pleasure), **Anger** (bitterness, hate, bearing grudges), **Gluttony** (excessive eating and drinking), **Envy** (self hate, rivalry), **Sloth** (seeking success without working for it). To these we can add the mother of all evils, **injustice**. If we declare war against these then we are accepting the call of Jesus.

If we battle against these, then we should be prepared for some roughness. The enemy is also fighting against us and we may have to suffer some harm or hardship. Jeremiah in the first reading was fighting a against the false prophets who prophesied only what the king and his officials wanted to hear. But Jeremiah stuck to the truth. And where did he end up? In a well of mud. But God sent a foreigner, an Ethiopian to come and save him. God never abandons His people. God send the taxi driver to save Mario Joseph to be a witness to this generation. He will do it to us too.

Let us conclude with a prayer:

Lord, give us the courage to follow you, even though it causes us to struggle, as Paul notes in today’s second reading. Lord, give us the courage to follow you, even though it causes us to be persecuted, as Jeremiah was in today’s first reading. Lord, give us the courage to follow you, even though, sometimes, it sets us in opposition to our family, as Jesus warns in today’s gospel.

Youtube link of Mario Joseph conversion story
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjUXd4qW9mg>