

Commentary to the Twenty-second Sunday



Commentary to the Twenty-second Sunday:
Conform or Be Transformed?

"Times have changed, Father. I'm only doing what is perfectly acceptable by our society." And with these words, the elderly lady explained away her present living condition. And with the same words, the young man justified his "wild" lifestyle, and with the same words the substance abuser justified his actions. And on and on and on. Add in whatever immoral behavior you can think of, and someone will say, "I'm only doing what is perfectly acceptable by society."

But what society is that? To what society is this acceptable? It is acceptable by the society that finds nothing wrong with hedonism, putting one's pleasure before every other good in life, including respect for others, respect for country, respect for life. What is the society that so many claim for themselves? It is the society that is at best amoral, but which is mostly immoral. It is the society that is at best pagan, but mostly atheistic. When a person hides his or her immoral behavior behind the "acceptable by our society," argument, that person is invoking the society that St. Paul calls "this age," or, according to some translations, "the pattern of the world." This is the world that Jesus Christ came to save. It is the world of selfishness, a world of pride, a world where God is neither wanted nor present. It is a world of darkness. It is a world to which we Christians cannot belong.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

We were joined to a new world when we were baptized. Each of us is a key part of the new world, the Kingdom of God. There are hundred, perhaps thousands of people in each of our lives who look to us to illuminate their darkness with the Light of Christ. The problem is that we are enticed by all that is around us to reject all that is within us. And so we often straddle major issues in life.

We become like my friend Charlie Miller. It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon at Don Bosco College

and Seminary in Newton, New Jersey, as Charlie, myself and a small group of our friends walked by the little lake, more of a pond really. We had an hour to kill between Sunday Mass and dinner, not enough time to change out of our suits, but perhaps too much time for Charlie to spend walking around the property. When we came upon the little dock with the row boats always available for our use, Charlie said, "I'm going to take a boat out. Anyone want to come?" None of us wanted to mess up our suits so we said, "No," and watched Charlie go out onto the dock, untie a boat, and put one foot in the boat while keeping his other foot on the dock. (Like the rest of us, Charlie didn't know a whole lot about boats.) Slowly the boat drifted from the dock, on which Charlie still had one foot planted. At least, he thought it was planted. As the boat drifted further and further from the dock, Charlie was stretched out until he lost his balance and fell into the lake. We applauded. (I never said we were nice guys.) Then we fished him out. Charlie got into his predicament because he refused to commit. He had one foot on the dock and one in the boat. And as a result he fell into the drink.

We often do this ourselves. We have one foot that we are convinced is safely planted in God's world, but then we stretch out our other foot to another world, the world of pagan society. And we also fall.

Even though we recognize our dignity as sons and daughters of God, we often let ourselves get involved in actions that are far less than holy. We think that we are OK, because we are firmly planted on the Lord's dock, but the forces the other foot has stepped into draws us away from the dock, and we end up in the drink. We ask ourselves, "How did I get involved in something like that?" Then, responding to God's grace, we not only seek forgiveness, but we give up the actions that we thought would not be all that dangerous for our spiritual lives.

We Christians are called upon to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. That means that we sacrifice the pagan aspects of life in order to live for the Lord.

"I didn't know Christianity would be this difficult," the young couple who are doing their best to have a wholesome relationship complains.

"Wait, you mean that commitment to Christ demands that I stay sober. Everyone I know gets drunk on Friday nights," the senior in high school argues.

"Two can live cheaper than one doesn't apply when both are getting social security, Father. Are you telling me that I am not living my Catholic faith because we won't get married? If that's so, then the faith is demanding too much," the retiree rationalizes.

"You duped me Lord, and I allowed myself to be duped." Jeremiah responds in the first reading. Commitment to the Lord carries the cost of rejecting the world where He is not present. So, like Jeremiah, we want God in our lives, but we don't We appreciate the cost of Christianity until that cost becomes personal. Yet, like Jeremiah, we live for the fire burning within our bones, the fire of God's love. We allow ourselves to be duped. We want God.

A few years ago I attended a number of talks given by a wonderful devoted Catholic man, Joe Farris. Joe is a big, tall, Catholic husband and father from North Carolina. He led one of the Cove Crest Retreat weeks that I helped out. Over and over again Joe would say, "You have destroyed my life, Lord." Joe is right. Having God in our lives destroys all other possibilities in life. The decision we have

to make is whose life do we want, our lives or His Life. If we want His Life, then He will destroy those parts of our lives where He is not present. "The problem with you is that you are thinking like the world does, not like God does," Jesus tells the disciple he had just called his rock. Peter wanted to prevent Jesus from dying. Jesus said that the devil would want to prevent God's plan from taking place. He actually called Peter a devil. Jesus was more upset with Peter for this comment, then he was when Peter denied him three times. Why? What did Peter do that was so wrong? He allowed himself to be drawn from the Kingdom of God. He was conforming to the world.

We cannot allow this to happen. A world that is in darkness needs us to be its light. People are looking for hope. People are searching for a reason for living. We can give them that hope. We can give them that reason for life. We can be the Light of Christ for others. We do not have to conform to a world of darkness. We can be transformed by God.

Then we will experience all that is good and pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

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