Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Gospel text (*Lk* 15:1-32): Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So to them he addressed this parable. “What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.

“Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.’ In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Then he said, “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.”’ So he got up and went back to his

father.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began.

Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, ‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, ‘Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns, who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.’ He said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’”

“There will be… joy in heaven over one sinner who repents”

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Today, we are to consider one of the most celebrated parables of the Gospel: the parable of the prodigal son, who, while realizing the gravity of his offense to his father, goes back to him and is received with immense joy.

To see the circumstances driving Jesus Christ to disclose this parable, we can move to the beginning of this Gospel. According to the Scripture, “Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus” (Lk 15:1), and this made Pharisees and scribes frown and mutter: “This man welcomes sinners and

eats with them” (Lk 15:2). They thought the Lord was not to share his time and his friendship with persons of such dubious lives. They could not care less about those who, far from God, needed to be converted.

But, while this parable proves that nobody is meant to be lost to God, and encourages sinners by fostering their self-assurance and by showing them his goodness, it also includes a very important lesson for those who, apparently, do not feel the need of a spiritual rebirth: so, let us not decide that someone is “wicked” or do away with anyone; rather, let us always behave generously as a father accepting his lost son. The elder son's distrust, pointed out at the end of the parable, and coincides with the initial malicious gossip of the Pharisees.

In this parable, not only is he invited who most certainly needs conversion, but also he who thinks he does not need it. Its beneficiaries are not only publicans and sinners, but also the Pharisees and scribes; not only those who decidedly live by turning their back to God, but, maybe, all of us, who, having been blessed by Him, in spite of everything, conform ourselves to what little we give Him in exchange, and skimp our generosity either with Him or with our fellow men. At Vatican Council II we are told that by being presented into the mystery of God's love, we have been called to establish a personal relationship with Him, to set out on a spiritual path that will change us from the old man we are into the new perfect man after Christ.

The conversion we may need could perhaps be less noisy, but more radical and deep, and more constant and preserved: God is asking us to convert ourselves to love.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “For a Christian, joy is a treasure. Only by offending God do we lose it, because sin is the fruit of selfishness, and selfishness is the root of sadness. If we purify ourselves in the holy sacrament of penance, God comes out to meet and forgive us.” (Saint Josemaría)

- “He is the God of mercy: he never tires of forgiving. It is us who get tired of asking for forgiveness, but He does not get tired; He wins in love” (Francis)

- “When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son... The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1465)