

## THE HEART OF BEING CATHOLIC

The Gospel for this Sunday, taken from Luke, gives us an account of the first time Jesus reenters his home town of Nazareth and on the Sabbath goes into the Synagogue and is invited to do a reading and then comment on the message. Everyone in the Synagogue is focused on Jesus and one could hear a pin drop in the absolute silence. Jesus begins by saying that the passage he just read from the prophet Isaiah is "now fulfilled in your presence." That was the last thing anyone expected to hear! Immediately everyone began to wonder in their minds just who does Jesus think he is? They all had their own opinions of him; why they had been living with him for many years and there was absolutely nothing he did or ever said to indicate that now he was suddenly an expert on the prophet Isaiah! Very quickly the crowd present turned from a receptive group to a skeptical audience and even began to show signs that they were becoming a bit hostile. "Wasn't this the son of Joseph?", and they made it sound like this was something of a disgrace. Why Joseph was just a simple carpenter and Jesus was his helper and associate in his work; they were simply not people of distinction!

Jesus immediately senses all this and attacks it head on. Quoting scripture in several places, he points out how many a person sent from God was not accepted and even at times was persecuted. This was history repeating itself and of course the crowd immediately reacted with bitterness and hate to such a point that as one they drove Jesus out of the Synagogue and forced him to go to the top of the hill on which Nazareth was built and then they wanted to shove him over the brow of hill to an uncertain disaster. What narrow minded people they were! They were totally unwilling to just hear Jesus out and give him the opportunity to explain his position. Blinded by a narrow vision of life and now by a hatred of one of their own whom they believed was trying to show them that he was better than all of them put together, they lost all reason and simply wanted to do him in. But then Jesus did a miracle which no doubt they would recall later, hopefully with some realization of the fact that they wanted to kill him. He suddenly simply walked through their midst with none of them seeing him and quietly disappeared.

Like it or not, just about every human being has preconceived opinions about almost everything and everyone. This is simply part of being human. Most live with this but try to be as open as they can when dealing with others. The question can be raised about the beliefs that people have about God and Religion. The answer to this question will be as varied as there are those responding. Most often, the understanding of religion, faith, God and Jesus is woefully lacking and is based more on feelings than on reality and facts. And for almost everyone, their ideas as they reach adulthood are based almost entirely on the way they were raised as a kid and later as a teen.

However, there is a bright side to all this. When I was teaching and living with students at the University of San Francisco, I got to know many of the students when they came in as freshmen. Three years later when they were Juniors, I noted a profound change in all of them. It seemed as if they overnight suddenly became adults. Their ideas and their hopes for the future were so much more realistic. But the most profound change I found was that when most of these students came to the school as freshmen, they had freedom for the first time and almost to a person, the first thing they gave up was anything and everything that had to do with faith or religion. But in the Junior year, there was a profound change and over ninety

percent of them all suddenly saw a value in faith and in their religion, and Sundays suddenly became a day to put their faith into practice. What had happened in a very real sense was the fact that suddenly they accepted and ratified what had happened when they were baptized. They now accepted and understood just what that sacrament meant and how important it was to them. As I heard later over the years, most of them went on to get married, settled down, and as their families grew, they were stricter than hell on their children! It was life starting over again.

Just what had happened? Today scientists have proven that the last part of the human body to reach maturity is the Judgment center in the brain, and this happens around twenty years of age. In college, it is in the junior year when most reach their twentieth birthday! For a Catholic who has grown up with a strong Catholic background, something which is becoming more and more rare these days, the acceptance of their Baptism and their faith is a very real experience. But this has to be more than just beginning to once again attend Sunday Mass and occasionally go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, confession. For a true metanoia, the Greek for change, one has to accept Jesus Christ for who he is and what he is, namely God made man, God taking on a human nature. And furthermore, one must then establish a real relationship with Christ so that he is very real in their life and not just a doctrine of faith. To be a true Christian, a true Catholic, one has to have a very personal relationship with their God and savior, Jesus Christ.

Just how is all this accomplished? The simple answer is through prayer. This means taking prayer in its root meaning, namely, communication with the Lord and God. Most people when they think of prayer, think of books of prayer, or prayers that have come down to us over the years composed by various very holy and religious persons. Certainly the Rosary comes immediately to mind. All these are good and praiseworthy. But to take prayer in its most fundamental meaning, prayer is then a communication with the Lord, or better, a conversation with the Lord. The best way to get the idea is to think of one's best friend and to note how easy and totally enjoyable it usually is to chat with them openly and honestly, to be able to share some of the most hidden parts of one's life, one's hopes, one's dreams, on the one side, and one's relationship with others who are very close to them through marriage, through work, and above all in their family life.

For many, this is a new concept of what prayer really should be, an open, honest, conversation with the Lord. Just as one normally does not plan out what and how to talk with their best friend, so too one should not have to plan and figure out how to talk with their Lord and God. Just blurt it all out! Jesus understands perfectly where you are coming from and even more just what you really want to say to him. And also, one must remember that this is an honest conversation which means if one is a bit angry with something or someone, even with the Lord, then it is perfectly all right to put all this out on the table. It takes practice at the beginning, but in time, (usually not a long time) one becomes more and more open not only in relaying one's real feelings, good or bad, but also in listening and finding out that this kind of prayer is never just one-sided! Out of all this comes a growth in trust, in faith, but also what is most important, a real and true joy which should be the hallmark of a follower of Christ. Joy is something one simply cannot hide; it shows in everything one does. And it is through this joy that the Lord begins to touch others. Talk to the Lord! Listen to the Lord! Discover true joy.

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