

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time: Do not Conform, Be Transformed!

Today's second reading is from St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. After having presented a deep look at the mysteries of the gospel, Paul begins the teaching on the way the Christian should live with these two verses:

*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.*

The Gospel demands that we give ourselves up to God as a living sacrifice. We are to follow Christ who gave Himself up as a living sacrifice to the Father.

So many of you do exactly that as your lifestyle. How often I hear about people whose lives revolve around caring for others in their families, at their workplaces, in their neighborhoods. All of this takes sacrifice. I just spoke to a young mother whose life has gone from caring for one after another of her parents, in-laws, and grandparents. She still has to care for her husband and children. There is little to no time for herself. She does not regret this. This is her lifestyle. Her life is a living sacrifice to God. I remember an elderly man, a widower, who married an elderly widow. They were both in their 80's. After just a few years of marriage, she was stricken with cancer in her face. It was horrible. It took part of her nose, her jaw, her cheek. Well, that man cared for her, and protected her dignity by limiting those who saw her. When his wife passed on, I said to him that he had been a wonderful husband. He looked at me as though I was clueless and said, "Well, I took vows, didn't I?" He took vows to live the Christian way. He gave up his life, his own pleasures, for his wife. He became a living sacrifice not just for her but to God who bound him to her.

In so many ways, I have the greatest life there is because I get to witness the lives of so many great Christians, you all.

Paul warns us not to conform to this world but be transformed by the renewal of our mind so we might discern what the will of God is, what is good, pleasing and perfect.

It is easy to conform to the world. It is easy to just go along with what everyone is doing without even considering how our actions are devastating our spiritual life. Our spiritual radar should go up when we hear someone say, "It's a new world now. Things have changed. Everyone is doing this or that." We need to ask ourselves, "Am I willing to sacrifice my spiritual life to join what people say everyone is doing?" That is what sin is, isn't it? Sin is pushing God aside for the sake of conforming to the world. In Jesus' prayer to His Father in *John 17:16* he prays for us and says, "They

are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” When we conform to that which is not the Christian way of life, we are going against our very being, our spiritual essence. Sin leaves us disjointed, at war with ourselves. It steals our identity from us. In *Jeremiah 2* the prophet warns the people, and us, that when we seek that which is worthless, we become worthless. It is so very correct when we say, “I cannot do that. I am so much better than that.”

We do not have to conform. We can be transformed by the renewal of our mind, our soul.” Our evangelical protestant brothers and sisters will often talk about being born again. We Catholics do not believe in a second baptism. We believe that our lives are a progression of coming to a fuller understanding of whom we are as sons and daughters of God. This understanding gives us a new determination to live the Christian life in its fullness. For us conversion is a process that begins with baptism and concludes with our final breath.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “If you live for the next world, you will get this one in the deal. But if you live only for this one, you will lose them both.”

Recently I have been reading an old biography of St. Francis of Assisi. It was written by the wonderful British Catholic author and scholar G. K. Chesterton. G.K. Chesterton’s style is elegant, flowery, even poetic. He points out that St. Francis freed himself not just of possessions, but of his attachment to the world around him. As a result, he appreciated God’s gifts more than any man of his time. He had nothing, but he owned everything. He was overwhelmed with the beauties of God’s creation. He saw people as the greatest beauty of creation. He would call out to Brother Sun, Sister Moon, birds, other animals, hills and streams and lakes, and particularly other people not in a pantheistic way, but as gifts of God, reflecting the Presence of the Almighty Creator. Francis gave up everything to live for God, and he possessed everything. The poor man of Assisi was the richest man in the world. He lived for the next world and received the great gifts of this world. He was transformed by his refusal to conform.

“You duped me Lord, and I allowed myself to be duped.” Jeremiah cried out in the first reading. Commitment to the Lord carries the cost of rejecting those elements of the world where He is not present. Like Jeremiah, we want God in our lives, but we will not fully understand 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.

“The problem with you is that you are thinking like the world does, not like God does,” Jesus told that 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, “Get behind me, Satan.” 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)