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Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for January 22, 2012 for Cycle B:
Jon 3:1-5, 10; Ps 25; 1 Cor 7:29 31; Mk 1:14 20

REPENTANCE AND SELF-DISCIPLINE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

In recent years we in New Jersey have welcomed several Catholics from the People's Republic of China. As with the Catholics from Vietnam we sense that we are in the presence of martyrs. They and their families have witnessed to the Faith courageously and have much to teach us. Those from China have no idea about the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. They remember the Ember days, the rigors of fast and abstinence during Advent and Lent... Has the Church in western nations perhaps gone soft? Or have we allowed ourselves to neglect aspects of her message?

Certainly there is a strong insistence in the Council documents that conversion and penance are an integral part of the Christian message. “The Church announces the good tidings of salvation to those who do not believe, so that all may know the true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, and may repent and mend their ways. To believers also the Church must ever preach faith and repentance” (Constitution on the Liturgy #9). There is a great value in the common practices such as Friday abstinence; however, adults should practice penance relating to areas of personal faults, bad habits and poor attitudes. It is not enough merely to take ordinary practices of Church discipline if we desire to repent and mend our ways. With the guidance of one's confessor, the universal call of the Gospel to repent must be applied to the particular circumstances of our lives.

How can a person stand for the truth of the Gospel in adverse situations if no effort has been made to prepare for such challenges?

No, the Church has not catered to the whims of indulgent Christians. However, perhaps the message has not be proclaimed effectively in our society. The liturgical readings for this Sunday reiterate the themes of Advent and anticipate those of Lent. There is no room for complacency in the Christian life!

The story of Jonah depicts a prophet - missionary who deliberately shirks his duty. The second time he is called by God, he does journey to Nineveh. His message is grim, without the conditional nature of the threat being clear. Yet the people believed in God and proclaimed a fast to manifest their repentance. The Israelite readers of the Book of Jonah marveled in God's mercy to their enemies and to this day the Jewish liturgy proclaims this text on the Day of Atonement each year. We, too, need to be reminded that God's election of a people has the purpose of extending his forgiveness and love to all humanity. Secondly, we should realize that others put us to shame by the depth and generosity of their response to God's call.

"Repent and believe the Good News!" This should be the Christian response to the knowledge that "the Kingdom of God is close at hand.” The authority of God has been manifested in the
coming of Jesus; those who believe should set aside all that is in conflict with the call to be learners or disciples.

The Christian vocation is to be an acolyte, a follower of Christ. As we hear about Simon and Andrew, James and John in the Gospel, we should ask: "What have I done to become an active disciple?" Indeed, I appreciate the gifts of Baptism, Confirmation and other sacraments. But do I allow the common pursuits of "the American way of life" to absorb my attention day after day, without examining critically whether all of these are consistent with the Gospel?

The passage from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians puts the challenge so bluntly that it is disconcerting. He certainly does not mean to imply that the human activities of marriage and business have no place in the Christian life. His point is that all aspects of life must be imbued with a love that places God first -- and only in the service of his Kingdom does anything else have lasting meaning.