

## 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Oct. 1, 2017

By Fr. Christian Bui

Intro: The great spiritual writer, recently beatified, Cardinal John Henry Newman once said that “to live is to change and to change often is to grow in maturity”.

We see the truth of Newman’s statement in the conversion process of Thomas Merton. He was orphaned at 16. He became a Communist at 20. He found Christ at 23. At 24, he became a teacher at a Catholic College. At 26, he put all his possessions in a duffel bag, went to Kentucky and became a Trappist Monk and went on to become one of the most influential Catholic spiritual writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Merton’s autobiography, called *The Seven Storey Mountain*, describes the steps in his process of change: first he became aware of his sinfulness, and dissatisfaction with his fleshy, selfish way of life; he then prayed to God to free him from the evil power that held his body and soul in slavery. This resulted in a spiritual experience of the presence of God who filled his soul with peace and led him to a new way of life.

In the first reading the prophet Ezekiel is especially eloquent in speaking of change. He presents it as a matter of life and death. Without the willingness and the ability to change, repentance and conversion would be impossible. It is in the gospel that his teaching comes to life. This point is made in the parable of the two sons which Jesus introduces with these words, “What is your opinion? The first says “no” – he means no – he doesn’t lie but he decides to disobey. The second son says “Yes” but doesn’t mean it - he lies and he decides to disobey. The first son, in contrast to the second, changes his mind and does obey – and because of his willingness to change his mind and do the right thing this son is proposed to us as a model to imitate.

Today’s Gospel is another example of change in the behavior of the younger son who represents the tax collectors and prostitutes whose lives had been a “No” to God, but who then changed in saying “Yes” to him. In contrast, the elder son symbolizes the Jewish leaders who professed to be religious, but who did not respond to John the Baptist’s call to change and repentance.

I think we all find it difficult to change our behavior.

But today's parable challenges us to examine our lives in the more critical areas where we need to repent and change the way we act. On the one hand, the elder son "knows the right answers", but his response is hollow. On the other hand, the younger son is more sincere: "He repents and proves it by action."

It's said that some people pray on Sunday, then on their neighbors the rest of the week. Other Sunday Catholics may work dishonestly Monday through Fridays. The Lord challenges such individuals to change their behavior. Some married couples may pledge their love at the marriage ceremony, then pursue their own selfish ways the rest of their lives. The Lord will help these people repent of this behavior and change for the better, if they're open to change. Many people are caught up in addictions to alcohol or to pornographic material on the internet. The Lord's grace is there for the asking to help free people from their addictive behavior thru prayer, the Sacraments, and perhaps by participating in one of the 12 step programs.

But besides warning us to change our behavior, the parable gives us hope. We may be or have been slaves to some sin or addiction in the past, but we can free ourselves from its hold with the help of God's grace.

Let's recall again the words of Blessed John Newman: "To live is to change and to change often is to grow in maturity". Let's close with the prayer that underlines the need to change.

I invite those who know the Serenity Prayer to pray it along with me:

"Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference". Amen.