



Apostles for Today

Reflection and Prayer - March 2008

Fundamental Rule 28 - Conversion of Sinners

“Our Lord Jesus Christ promised paradise to the good thief who asked him to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Therefore out of love for our Lord Jesus Christ, and with confidence in his infinite mercy, we must work for the conversion of poor sinners even if they had been obstinate throughout their lives and remained obstinate even when in danger of death. In such cases we should increase our prayers, our humility, our trust and all spiritual efforts in accordance with the spirit of the Congregation.”

(OCCC III, p. 57)

Reflection

This month we are moving towards Easter. During Holy Week we will relive the passion of Jesus and together with him, we will celebrate the victory of his resurrection and new life. In this time of preparation we listen to words of Pallotti in which he refers to the encounter on the Cross of Jesus and the criminal crucified beside him. When we allow these words of Pallotti to speak to us, which images come to our minds? What ideas do we form? Perhaps there are images of preachers and missionaries, standing in front of others, telling them what they have to do and what they may not do, how they have to live. Ideas that involve a higher and lower order, an above and a below, a better and a worse

However, Vincent Pallotti presents an image completely different to us. His basic concern is that in visualizing the image of Jesus that we, looking at him, our example and model, may be transformed and become similar to him. In giving us the *Daily Practical Memorandum* he urges us to make this our basic concern too. He unfolds this basic concern in his fundamental rule of the *33 Points*: we look at Jesus so that his image, his likeness, may be more and more impressed in us and that we might act according to his example.

This is the image of Jesus that Pallotti refers to in this point: Jesus is hanging on the cross, between the two criminals who were crucified with him. He is not standing in front of them or above them, he does not indoctrinate them, nor does he tell them what they have to do. He is hanging beside them and grants this promise to the one who asks him: 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Lk 23, 43). In this manner he continues his path of saying 'Yes' to the Father's will, enduring his own powerlessness, and listening to and accepting the confession and the plea of the criminal beside him. The sinner does not convert because Jesus is preaching to him, but because he experiences the example of Jesus. Let us listen to the biblical account: "Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." ... And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ... One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him..." (Lk 23, 32-40). All that Jesus does for this person is to assure him that he will be with him in paradise.

Thus the example of Jesus tells us in which way we also can and shall 'convert sinners':

- by affirming again and again the will of God in and for our lives
- by accepting and using what God has given to us: life, gifts, talents ...
- by accepting the stones put in our path, the cross laid on our shoulders
- by enduring injustices and by forgiving
- by orienting ourselves towards God and saying 'Yes, Father' when we experience the fullness of life and when we experience our powerlessness
- by being attentive to the confession and the pleas of others
- by feeling their desire and by assuring them, in God's name, of life and salvation

- by, in the words of Vincent Pallotti, multiplying our prayer, increasing our humility, our trust and all spiritual efforts.

In the midst of all of this we should not forget that we ourselves are the first sinners to be converted. Therefore Vincent Pallotti prompts us again and again to care for our own and our neighbour's eternal salvation.

In this way Holy Friday changes and becomes Easter. In this way, in the midst of the powerlessness of love, life can break through with all its power, but without violence.

Meditation

In his first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas est* Pope Benedict reminds us of this powerless love of God: 'Hosea above all shows us that ... God's love for man goes far beyond the aspect of gratuity. Israel has committed "adultery" and has broken the covenant; God should judge and repudiate her. It is precisely at this point that God is revealed to be God and not man. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim! ... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender."(*Hos* 11:8-9) God's passionate love for his people – for humanity – is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice. Here Christians can see a dim prefigurement of the mystery of the Cross: so great is God's love for man that by becoming man he follows him even into death, and so reconciles justice and love ... This divine activity now takes on dramatic form when, in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the "stray sheep", a suffering and lost humanity. When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form.' (*Deus Caritas est*, 10.12)

This is the way God uses to convert us. This way we shall learn from him – for the path of our own conversion and for our encountering others.

Biblical Texts for Further Reflection

There are also many other episodes in which we encounter Jesus as the one who meets and invites people by loving, asking and in humility. Let us take some time to deepen within ourselves this image of Jesus.

‘Jesus ... said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”’ (Lk 19, 5-6.9-10).

‘Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’ (Mt 11, 28 – 30).

Prayer

- L Lord, you have given us your love.
You open for us the road to life.
- A Lead us ever deeper into the mystery of your love.
- L You came so that people may have life
and have it to the full (*Jn. 10,10*).
- A You ask us to give your love to others
And thus help all to enjoy this abundance of life.
- L You said: I came to cast fire upon the earth. (*Lk. 12,49*).
- A Do not let us rest until this fire has inflamed us all.
- L Our holy founder Vincent Pallotti was impelled by your love.
- A Lord, we sincerely ask you:
fill us with the fire of your love, with the power of your truth,
with your divine life,
until we too are impelled to bear witness to you
to the ends of the earth. Amen.

(Pallottine Community Prayer, Tuesday Midday Prayer)