

“...tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ...before you!”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, there was a fellow by the name of Thomas, Thomas Merton. He was orphaned at 16, a Communist at 20, a Christian at 23, and a New York Times reporter at 24. At the ripe, old age of 26, he put all his possessions in a duffle bag, went to Kentucky, and became a Trappist monk!

In his best-selling, spiritual autobiography, called *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton describes the first step in his conversion process. In his own words, he says:

“I had just graduated from high school, was traveling alone in Europe, and was living a rather ‘fleshy’ existence. One night, in my hotel room, I was struck with an awareness of my sinfulness. The whole thing passed in a flash.... I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul.... I was filled with horror at what I saw...and my soul desired escape...from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known before.”

Merton goes on to say that, for the first time in his life, he prayed—really prayed.

“I prayed to the God I had never known ...to reach down from heaven and free me from the evil power that held my body and soul in slavery.”

The reason I share the story of Thomas Merton with you is that it illustrates the kind of **change of heart** the first son had in today’s Gospel, which I just read to you from St. Matthew. It also happens to illustrate the kind of conversion Ezekiel refers to in today’s 1st Reading.

A very germane question you might ask at this point is:

‘What causes a person to undergo a **change of heart, as the younger son did in today’s Gospel, as Ezekiel speaks of in today’s 1st Reading, as Thomas Merton did in my opening story?’ you ask.**

Well, I am glad you asked that question!

You see, a political theorist once outlined the steps required to bring about a **revolution** in a country.

The 1st step is to create a **psychology of radical discontent** among the citizenry. People will consider change ...**only** if they are **extremely discontent** with their present situation.

The very same thing is true with individuals. They will consider changing their personal life ...**only** if they are extremely discontent with it. We certainly see this in the case of Thomas Merton. He was extremely discontent with his life. Deep down in his heart, he desired to do better.

The 2nd step in the process is what I call a **‘trigger-event.’** It’s **the spark that lights the fire** under us to do something about our situation.

The **‘trigger-event’** in Merton’s life was his hotel-room experience. In the language of theology, it was a ‘moment of grace’ from God.

The 3rd step is making the **first, concrete move** in the direction of a new life.

Again, we see this in the life of Thomas Merton. The morning after his hotel-room experience, he walked out into the morning sunlight. His soul was broken ...with sorrow and contrition. **BUT**... & there’s that proverbial **‘BUT’** in life, it was a good feeling, like having a boil lanced by a doctor!

Although he was not yet Catholic, Merton says:

“I went to a church, knelt down, and prayed the Lord’s Prayer slowly, with all the faith I had. After this prayer, I walked outside into the sunlight again. I felt reborn. I found a low, stone wall, sat down on it, & rejoiced in my new found peace of soul, an interior peace I’d never known.”

Merton still had a long way to go before his conversion would be complete. **BUT** (again!)—he made that all-important **1st step** in the direction of change and a new life!

I think it is extremely important to realize that all of us are still journeying towards a **full** conversion, purging ourselves of any bit of selfishness, pride, or isolation, i.e., separation from the Body of Christ.

For example, some of us are still struggling to make the transition from being an ordinary Christian, to being a **good** one.

For example, others among us are struggling to move up from being a good Christian to being an **excellent** one.

For example, and still others are trying to change from being an excellent Christian to being an **exemplary** one.

You see, a Christian’s journey to **full** conversion is endless, for there is no such thing as **being** a Christian; there is only **becoming** a Christian. In the final analysis, conversion is a process. It is an ongoing journey that will end...only when we die.

Today’s readings invite us to take inventory of our lives:

1. Are we dissatisfied with our relationship with God?
2. Do we desire a deeper, personal relationship with Christ? (At SBA-Jan.-?)
3. Do we want to love our family & neighbor more, as Jesus loves them?

If our answer to any of these 3 questions is ‘yes,’ then today’s readings could be the **“trigger-event”** or ‘spark’ we need to **do** something about these things.

Maybe the all-important first step in the direction of a new life is to present ourselves for healing in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Maybe it is to spend more time in prayer.

Maybe it is to take some family problem and ask Jesus to help us **do** something immediate and concrete about overcoming it.

This is the faith invitation God is making to each of us here through today’s readings.

I will close with this prayer:

Voice of Jesus, call to us when we stray or roam too far from you.

Eyes of Jesus, smile upon us when we need encouragement.

Hands of Jesus, anoint us when we grow weak and weary.

Arms of Jesus, lift us up when we stumble and fall.

Heart of Jesus, help us love one another... as you have loved us.

May Almighty God, our Abba, who sees all and knows all, bless you...
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.