**THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (YEAR C)**

St. Claudia and her companions, Martyrs; St John Nepomucene, priest and martyr

Ex 3:1-8a,13-15; Ps 103; 1Cor 10:1-6,10-12; Lk 13:1-9

*The Lord is kind and merciful*

**COMMENTARY**

*Called to Conversion*

On this Sunday we are approaching the middle of Lent and therefore also the center of the whole Lenten journey. In this context, the Church’s Liturgy echoes in today’s Gospel Jesus’ urgent call to conversion: “If you do not repent, you will all perish” (Lk 13:3, 5). This phrase is repeated in the Communion Antiphon of the Mass, to underline the importance of the theme on which every Christian is called to reflect seriously, especially now, surrounded as we are with the continuous tragic news of pandemics, wars, and innocent deaths.

In today’s difficult circumstances, the merciful God gives us his Word to reflect upon, in order to reach a true and effective conversion in our lives. In this regard, we are given three urgent messages to consider.

1. *The Fig Tree in His Orchard: A Parable for Reflection*

The parable of the barren fig tree is found only in St. Luke’s Gospel. It is quite catchy, and every listener immediately understands its call for change in the face of imminent danger. However, there are a few things to clarify for a proper understanding and appreciation of this message.

First of all, the account has an open ending, that is, we do not know what the fig tree’s future will be. To bear or not to bear fruit, this is now the question, which resonates with the existential doubt of Shakespeare’s Hamlet in the famous quote “to be or not to be”. This open ending serves to invite each listener to think, rethink, and decide on the fig tree’s future. In other words, the fig tree represents you and me who are listening to the Word of God, proclaimed today to each of us individually. Let us put aside, for a moment, our concern for the salvation of others. Such care for others is holy, praiseworthy, and indeed, very Christian, but completely out of place here, because the Word of God is addressed to each of us personally – and not to our neighbors. Let us rather ponder now upon our own personal conversion, and not on what the others must do, in our opinion! At stake is our future.

Secondly, the parable emphasizes the very special care for the fig tree by *both* protagonists of the harvest, both the vineyard owner and the gardener. Here, we must not be led into thinking of this as a conflict between the impatient “bad guy” who just wants to cut down the “poor” fig tree, and the “good guy” who intercedes for its survival. In this regard, the presence of the fig tree in the vineyard should catch our attention. This remains a somewhat unusual image (even though there were some rare cases of growing other trees in the vineyards in ancient Israel). Such a fact underlines the special attention the vineyard owner had for the fig tree, which normally would have to settle for a less privileged place such as along a road or river. It is he, the vineyard owner, who wanted the fig tree to be in the good soil of “*his* vineyard”, and he must have let the tree “exhaust the soil” given over to his vines, because now it is *his* fig tree, the one he loves.

With this in mind, the expectation of the owner/planter who comes in search of fruit on the fig tree is understandable, as a positive response to the special care he has always had for it. His generous patience of waiting “three years” is admirable, just as comprehensible the end of his patience when he tells the gardener, his collaborator, to “cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?” Here, in the dialogue between these two persons, we can paradoxically glimpse even more of the attention reserved to the fig tree. The planter and the gardener are not against each other. They are in close communion and collaboration from the very beginning, during all three years, and even now, when a further special care is proposed for another year: “I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it.” This is a truly extraordinary decision since usually a fig tree will normally bear fruit in poor soil along the road even without fertilizer, but here it is, in the good soil of the vineyard.

If the fig tree is you or me who are listening to the Word, let us see and notice the special care and concern God has for each of us throughout the years of our lives. We remember all this now, so that we may feel the urgent need to return to the good God. Everything else is just poetry.

2. *YHWH “I-AM”: A Name to Remember*

It is not by chance that the Church’s liturgy for this Sunday of conversion invites us to listen again in the first reading to the revelation of the Name of God. Here we have one of the most important passages of Hebrew Scripture, if not the most important one, because for the first time in history, God revealed his name: “I am who am,” or just “I-AM” which corresponds to the famous Tetragrammaton YHWH (which is unpronounceable out of deep respect for God). In the biblical-Jewish tradition a ‘name’ indicates nature, identity, and mission. In the context of the passage, God revealed himself as the “Eternal-I-AM” who shows Himself full of attention and concrete care for His people: “I have witnessed the affliction (…) and have heard their cry (…) I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them (…) and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land.” In fact, this revelation to Moses of the divine name, at the foot of Mount Horeb, that is Sinai, is made complete by another revelation later. This happened after the exodus from Egypt, on the top of the same mountain, when God, the Eternal-I-AM, at the request of the same Moses, makes explicit his perennial essence in showing his glory and proclaiming: “The LORD (YHWH), the LORD (YHWH), a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and fidelity” (Ex 34:6).

These words are particularly meditated upon and memorized in the Jewish tradition. For example, they are echoed in today’s Psalm: “Merciful and gracious is the LORD, / slow to anger and abounding in kindness.” And what the Psalmist sings with love and gratitude will also be true in the life of each one of us, his faithful: “He pardons all your iniquities, / heals all your ills, / He redeems your life from destruction, / crowns you with kindness and compassion.” Then, we all, too, can say to our souls in these inspired words, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” Let us never forget these words as we strive to return to the One who is Eternal-Love-Mercy.

3. *“Repent, and Believe in the Gospel”: An Urgency to Be Accepted and Relaunched*

The call to return to God becomes more urgent than ever with the coming of Jesus and in his proclamation. Why? It is because his very first words at the beginning of his public activities are, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1:15a), or literally, [God’s kingdom] has dynamically “drawn near” (rather a static “being at hand and passive”). From that moment on, all humanity entered the so-called eschatological time, that of the end-times, the time of final salvation. Therefore, completing the sentence, Jesus exhorted, “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15b). Jesus’ teaching this Sunday must be received precisely in this context of the end-times, which Saint Paul the Apostle understood and reiterated to the first Christians, as we hear in the second reading, “These things [what happened with the People who died in the desert] happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. (…) and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom *the end of the ages has come*.”

Jesus’ heartfelt appeal for conversion at the end of time actually echoes the constant desire of the merciful and compassionate God who never wants the death of the wicked, but rather that they repent and live (cf. Ez 18:23; 33:11). However, it should be clarified that, as we see from the aforementioned first proclamation of Jesus, conversion is intrinsically linked to faith in the Gospel, that is, a total adherence to the good news of salvation offered by God in Jesus. It is not now a matter of the usual human effort to turn away from a morally sinful life, but rather of a courageous going beyond habitual patterns of thought (just as the etymology of the Greek word for conversion “*metanoia*” indicates) to embrace the new life of grace with and in Jesus. Such conversion is now a return, indeed a going beyond, pleasing to God. This was at the heart of Jesus’ mission and of his first disciples, and thus will remain at the center of the mission of his faithful followers who are called to work always for the conversion of all to God, starting from themselves. (Therefore, Blessed Paolo Manna, tireless missionary and founder of the present Pontifical Missionary Union, proclaimed in his days: “All the Churches for the conversion of the whole world” [the sentence quoted also in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* of St. John Paul II]. In the spirit of that motto, we proclaim even now for a reawakening of missionary zeal: “All our strength for the conversion of the whole world”).

“If you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!” What Jesus said to everyone is particularly addressed today to us, his disciples, committed to carrying out his mission of evangelization. As a matter of fact, not just for the fig tree, but for any barren tree, there will be a tragic end: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt 7:19), as Jesus stated on another occasion. He then continued with a terrible warning, which I recall here with fear and trembling, a warning not just addressed his own disciples but to us who try to do “great things” in his name. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?’ Then I will declare to them solemnly, ‘I never knew you. *Depart from me, you evildoers*’” (Mt 7:21-23). The good fruit that God expects above all is not so much accomplished and wonderful actions, but our humble constant conversion to believe and grow more and more in the knowledge of God the Father and Jesus, the One He sent to us.

Finally, today’s exhortation of Jesus to conversion in St. Luke’s Gospel is made immediately after his very harsh rebuke to those who, though capable of foreseeing earthly phenomena, are incapable of spiritual discernment of the signs of the times leading to right actions. “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time? “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” (Lk 12:56-57). Rooted in wisdom, this exhortation to timely conversion is also a heartfelt call to interpret the signs of the times with this same wisdom. Whoever has ears, let them hear! Let them recognize God’s generosity in life and produce the fruit of conversion!

*Useful points to consider*:

**POPE FRANCIS, *Angelus*,** (*Saint Peter’s Square*,*3rd Sunday of Lent, 24 March 2019*):

And this vinedresser’s likeness manifests the mercy of God who leaves us time for conversion. We all need to convert ourselves, to take a step forward; and God’s patience and mercy accompanies us in this. Despite the barrenness that marks our lives at times, God is patient and offers us the possibility to change and make progress on the path towards good. However, the deferment requested and received in expectation of the tree bearing fruit also indicates the urgency of conversion. The vinedresser tells the master: “Let it alone, sir, this year also” (v. 8). The possibility of conversion is not unlimited; thus, it is necessary to seize it immediately; otherwise, it might be lost forever. This Lent, we can consider: what do I have to do to draw nearer to the Lord, to convert myself, to “cut out” those things that are not good? “No, no, I will wait for next Lent”. But will I be alive next Lent? Today, let us each think: what must I do before this mercy of God who awaits me and who always forgives? What must I do? We can have great trust in God’s mercy but without abusing it. We must not justify spiritual laziness, but increase our commitment to respond promptly to this mercy with heartfelt sincerity.

**John Paul II,** Encyclical, ***Redemptoris Missio***

20. The Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the kingdom. This is seen especially in her preaching, which is a call to conversion. Preaching constitutes the Church’s first and fundamental way of serving the coming of the kingdom in individuals and in human society. Eschatological salvation begins even now in newness of life in Christ: “To all who believed in him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12).

46. The proclamation of the Word of God has *Christian conversion* as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith. Conversion is a gift of God, a work of the Blessed Trinity. It is the Spirit who opens people’s hearts so that they can believe in Christ and “confess him’” (cf. 1 Cor 12:3); of those who draw near to him through faith Jesus says: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn 6:44).

From the outset, conversion is expressed in faith which is total and radical, and which neither limits nor hinders God’s gift. At the same time, it gives rise to a dynamic and lifelong process which demands a continual turning away from “life according to the flesh” to “life according to the Spirit” (cf. Rom 8:3-13). Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple.

The Church calls all people to this conversion, following the example of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ by “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1:4), as well as the example of Christ himself, who “after John was arrested,...came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of God and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent* and believe in the Gospel’” (Mk 1:14-15).

Nowadays the call to conversion which missionaries address to non-Christians is put into question or passed over in silence. It is seen as an act of “proselytizing”; it is claimed that it is enough to help people to become more human or more faithful to their own religion, that it is enough to build communities capable of working for justice, freedom, peace and solidarity. What is overlooked is that every person has the right to hear the “Good News” of the God who reveals and gives himself in Christ, so that each one can live out in its fullness his or her proper calling. This lofty reality is expressed in the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman: “If you knew the gift of God,” and in the unconscious but ardent desire of the woman: “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst” (Jn 4:10, 15).

47. The apostles, prompted by the Spirit, invited all to change their lives, to be converted and to be baptized. (…) Conversion to Christ is joined to Baptism not only because of the Church’s practice, but also by the will of Christ himself, who sent the apostles to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them (cf. Mt 28:19). Conversion is also joined to Baptism because of the intrinsic need to receive the fullness of new life in Christ. As Jesus says to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5). In Baptism, in fact, we are born anew to the life of God’s children, united to Jesus Christ and anointed in the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not simply a seal of conversion, and a kind of external sign indicating conversion and attesting to it. Rather, it is the sacrament which signifies and effects rebirth from the Spirit, establishes real and unbreakable bonds with the Blessed Trinity, and makes us members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

All this needs to be said, since not a few people, precisely in those areas involved in the mission *ad gentes*, tend to separate conversion to Christ from Baptism, regarding Baptism as unnecessary. It is true that in some places sociological considerations associated with Baptism obscure its genuine meaning as an act of faith. This is due to a variety of historical and cultural factors which must be removed where they still exist, so that the sacrament of spiritual rebirth can be seen for what it truly is. Local ecclesial communities must devote themselves to this task. It is also true that many profess an interior commitment to Christ and his message yet do not wish to be committed sacramentally, since, owing to prejudice or because of the failings of Christians, they find it difficult to grasp the true nature of the Church as a mystery of faith and love. I wish to encourage such people to be fully open to Christ, and to remind them that, if they feel drawn to Christ, it was he himself who desired that the Church should be the “place” where they would in fact find him. At the same time, I invite the Christian faithful, both individually and as communities, to bear authentic witness to Christ through the new life they have received.

Certainly, every convert is a gift to the Church and represents a serious responsibility for her, not only because converts have to be prepared for Baptism through the catechumenate and then be guided by religious instruction, but also because - especially in the case of adults-such converts bring with them a kind of new energy, an enthusiasm for the faith, and a desire to see the Gospel lived out in the Church. They would be greatly disappointed if, having entered the ecclesial community, they were to find a life lacking fervor and without signs of renewal! We cannot preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted anew every day.