

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

The Moment of Amazing Grace

We are now more than half-way through Lent. Perhaps it is time to remind ourselves once again what Lent is all about — that it is a time of heart-changing, a time to examine the priorities of our lives, to compare them with the priorities of the Gospel and then to take the steps necessary to bridge the gap between the two.



The Gospel of last Sunday — the cure of the man born blind — makes quite clear the awesome possibilities of change in man. A man who was born blind can come to see; men who were born with sight can become blind. For the blind man in the Gospel story Jesus becomes the Light that enables him to see. For the Pharisees Jesus becomes the Light they refuse and they become blind. In the context of these dramatic changes which the Gospel speaks of, we might ask ourselves the question: "Why don't we change for the better? Why don't we undergo the conversion that the Gospel calls us to?" Is it perhaps that we do not really take seriously the need of conversion in our lives? And is it perhaps true that we do not take seriously our need of conversion because the conversion we are called to is not really a spectacular thing? What I mean is that we are not "top-flight" sinners. We are not adulterers or prostitutes, gangsters or embezzlers. Conversion for us is a far cry from rejecting a life of crime or degradation. Our breaking with sin is not the kind that would be written up in the papers.

Indeed, far from being "top-flight" sinners, most of us are rather cautious people: cautious about breaking the law, whether man's law or God's. And, of course, this is fine. The problem is that our caution does not stop here: it extends and extends. It marks



the way we love, the way we commit ourselves, the way we get involved. We love God — cautiously. We love others — cautiously. We commit ourselves to Christ — cautiously. And so, perhaps, it is not great sins, but rather this kind of restraint, this holding back — of love, of commitment, of involvement — that prevents us from being "topflight" Christians.

It may well be that repentance or conversion for us may mean gathering together the forces of our being and determining to do something about our mediocrity and our hesitant responsiveness to God. This kind of conversion may not be sensational, but it is real and important.

Jorges Luis Borges, a poet in Argentina whose writings many people are just beginning to discover, has a story called "Dead Men." In it he says: "Any life, no matter how long or complex it may be, is made up of a single moment — a moment in which a man finds out once and for all who he is."

For us conversion may really begin with this single moment when we come face to face with who we are. For the Christian this single moment is the moment when he finds that he is related to others and to Another. It is the moment when he suddenly sees that Jesus is the light of his life, when he hears Jesus' question addressed to the blind man: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" and answers with the blind man: "I do believe, Lord." Then this single moment becomes the moment when his life is touched, and illumined by the amazing reality of God's grace.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saves a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

It is interesting that this song, which is over a hundred years old, should strike a responsive chord in the hearts of so many people. Does this show perhaps an unconscious longing on our part for that single moment of coming to know who we are and feeling that we are touched by grace? This is repentance, conversion: This is the single moment that can come to each of us, if we open ourselves to its coming. Then, like the man born blind, we see — for the first time.

A Meditation on the Priestly Life

Following are excerpts from the address of Pope Paul VI to the secular and regular clergy of the diocese of Rome.

Venerated Brothers!

Thank you for this presence of yours, which already proves to us your goodwill, your affection, your communion. May the Lord give you credit for it, and give this Lenten meeting the virtue of instilling in your spirits that consolation which your ministry may need, not only for the present liturgical moment, but for habitual awareness of your priestly vocation. For it is about this vocation that we now intend to speak to you simply and briefly, even though we will not be able to say anything new on a subject studied and meditated on so much, and with which we ourselves have dealt on other occasions. But it is a subject that concerns more the spiritual experience of the life of each of us than the books which, in a masterly way, describe it and illuminate it. It is a subject that seems to us to meet both the need of our souls, directed towards the paschal mystery, soon to be celebrated, and towards the necessities of our ministry in general.



Well, we will tell you that we have meditated on the ecclesial and supernatural relationship that unites with you, Brothers of the Roman clergy, our person and the apostolic ministry with which it is entrusted. We have looked for a word that might resound in your hearts, agitated by today's priestly experience and that might be the echo of the voice that Christ, our Master, our Pastor, our Savior, our All, would suggest to us. And this voice seemed to be the paschal one of the resurrection: "Pax vobis;" yes, Peace to you, my Priests, my collaborators in the pastoral office in this blessed and Roman see, my Brothers and my Sons: Peace to you!

We intend in this way to meet a wish that comes from your soul, tormented by the problem of your condition as special persons, destined for worship and

for the religious profession. This problem has fallen like a boulder on priestly conscience today, oppressing it and crushing it, in some confreres, with a question that is as elementary as it is terrible. Who am I?

That is the so-called question of one's identity. The answer to the question was nothing but the new presentation of the question: I am a priest; but what does it mean and what does it involve to be a priest? This question, by the very fact that it is fundamental, creates an interior torment, and is sometimes the prelude to the most doubtful and saddest answers.

We look with anxiety to this state of mind of some priests and would like to comfort them at once with the serene and certain answer that you yourselves, present here, give to your souls, speaking to the Lord: Tuus sum ego!; at once enjoying that sense of intoxication and confidence that characterizes the conscience of the humble, faithful priest.

Today we would like to invite each of you, as a penitential act, or rather as an act of Lenten conversion and almost a prelude to paschal rebirth, to recall the interior moment in which the lamp of priestly or religious vocation was lit in your spirit. What was it like? Let everyone tell it to himself again. It was certainly not an easy moment. Awareness of the sacrifice was not absent in the decisive and prevalent calculation of the supreme choice of the kind of life preferred. It was preferred as a voluntary immolation, victorious with regard to the renunciations it entailed, and strange to say, loved just because of the bitterness with which it filled the heart.

Let us return to the essential outline of ecclesiastical vocation, to the point of convergence of the two voices which echo each other. The interior, which has found its way into the psychology of one's own destiny and which has a strange tone of sweetness and authority: "Come! Be confident! This is the way of your truth!" And the exterior voice, blessed, grave, fatherly, full of suffering and certainty, that of the man of God in his function as spiritual teacher. At the conclusion of so many conversations, urging a tremendous play of freedom, he passes judgement: You can, you must! A voice that is repeated, softly,

always respectful of the judgement of personal freedom, but now strong with an authority that dispels all hesitation, all doubt, and like a sharp sword penetrating the soul concludes "Yes, Son; come, test and you will see."

Why these references? For various reasons. The first: they are beautiful, they are pure, they are characteristic. Each of us can construct again around them the story of his own vocation. Each one has a story of his own in this connection, a drama of his own; it is an autobiographical page, which each of us must remember, reconstruct, revere. It is our Phase, our episode of the passing of God, with the usual comment: Timeo Transeuntem Deum!

In the second place: these memories have a divinatory character, so to speak, which offers the human, personal formation for that which sacramental grace has subsequently constructed upon them — a final character: "sacerdos in aeternum."

An ineffable thing! Another subject for delightful meditations. There exists literature, also secular, on this aspect of priestly ordination: irrevocably imprinted in the depths of our personality, ineffaceable in a terrible way, and sometimes capable of ineffable revival!

And then still more! Who could exhaust the subject of reflection on the mystery of the identification of our poor life with Christ himself? Not in vain can we and must we repeat to ourselves: Sacerdos alter Christus! There would be too many, far too many, things, as we all know, to be said in this connection! We would like to ask you, precisely as a Lenten practice, to return with your whole thought to this aspect of our priestly personality.

So may you have the paradoxical courage to repeat, each one for himself: "Christo confixus sum cruci." So may each one of you feel, and turn into priestly ministry, this sacrifice which makes us like Jesus our model and Savior; and may each one experience within himself the happiness of the paschal mystery which we are living: "superabundo gaudio in