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Conversion can be a lifelong journey

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

As Lent draws near, I would like to offer some helpful thoughts on our path of conversion as individuals and as a community. Here in the first sentence of his Lenten message, Pope Francis gives us a needed reminder that we are called to walk on the path of conversion.

But conversion is not a once and for all done deal. It is a lifelong journey. We must remember that we are a work in progress. We need to keep in mind and heart the challenge put before us on Ash Wednesday: Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.

As individuals, church and nation, we are called by God to turn away from all evil. Sins like pride, greed, lust, indifference, nationalism, consumerism, secularism, anger, abortion, violence and war must give way to the central Gospel virtue of love — love for all, including our enemies. And our love must have a preferential concern for the vulnerable and poor.

Charity, love writes the pope, is sharing with the one we love in all things. Love makes us similar, it creates equality, it breaks down walls and eliminates distances. God did this with us.

The Holy Father teaches that The logic of the incarnation and the cross is God's logic, the logic of love.

The pope writes, It is striking that the Apostle [Paul] states that we were set free, not by Christ's riches but by his poverty.

What gives us true freedom, true salvation and true happiness is the compassion, tenderness and solidarity of his love. Christ's poverty which enriches us is his taking flesh and bearing our weaknesses

and sins as an expression of God's infinite mercy to us.?

?In imitation of our Master,? writes Pope Francis, ?we Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it. Destitution is not the same as poverty: destitution is poverty without faith, without support, without hope.?

The pope teaches that there are three types of destitution. The first type is Material Destitution ? normally called poverty ? affects ?those living in conditions opposed to human dignity.?

Pope Francis warns against making power, luxury and money our idols. He urges us not to let these idols take priority over the need to have everyone benefit from a fair distribution of wealth.

But sadly, fair distribution of wealth is not the case in the U.S. or throughout most of the world.

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The pope challenges our consciences to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing.

?No less a concern is moral destitution, which consists in slavery to vice and sin,? adds the pope.

Finally, there is spiritual destitution which occurs when we turn away from God.

The Holy Father writes, ?If we think we don't need God who reaches out to us through Christ, because we believe we can make do on our own, we are headed for a fall. God alone can truly save and free us. ?

?Lent is a fitting time for self-denial; we would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our own poverty,? writes Pope Francis.

?Let us not forget that real poverty hurts: no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance. I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt.?

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