

Some people believe that Christian faith is just about following prescriptions, rules, and membership requirements. Some of our good Catholics in America have made an idol of U.S. civil law. We often listen more carefully to the laws of our country and to the laws of our Church than to the ways of Christ. Sadly, and ironically, obedience to laws is one of the safest places to avoid God, to avoid conversion, to avoid the spontaneous movements of the Holy Spirit.

Civil Law often opposes the gospel. Some examples: Slavery was legal; segregation was legal, abortion is legal, refusal to welcome the alien and immigrant is legal. Jesus Himself was killed by 'good' law-abiding people from both the state and the institutional religion. Jesus truly appreciated many things about the Pharisees: Jesus respected civil law and some religious prescriptions. But He never accepted what He considered secondary issues, like Sabbath requirements, ritual laws, purity codes, and membership requirements, because all these human commandments had taken the place of love.

In all the Gospels, Jesus constantly calls his disciples to understand that love is more important than laws, and, that compassion is more important than institutional religious practices and commitments. The core of Jesus' mission and message is transformation. But honestly, not many believers, not many of us, are open to healing and loving transformation. Why are so many of us stuck in immature and unhealthy religion? These are some answers to the question. Tradition is more comfortable than changing. Following rigorous rules makes people feel safer. A nostalgic return to old practices makes some people feel they are better committed Christians. But there is another answer that can touch most of us. There is a deep, unhealed brokenness within us that blocks our inner growth. It can be expressed through fear, anger, grieving, loneliness, attachments, hate and bitterness. And this open wound makes us resistant to trust openness, and love.

If we really want to experience an authentic conversion, we have to learn how to listen to our inner pain. When Jesus calls us to conversion, he invites us to pay attention to our negative side: our tendency to worry, our attachment to a specific sin, excessive

anger and bitterness, compulsive over-control, inertia and procrastination, judgmentalism, legalism, manipulating others, and constant broken relationships.

Too often we have been told to see our faults, confess them, and then use our willpower to become holy. But it doesn't really work. Why? Because only if we recognize our faults, and seriously meditate on where they come from, they can teach us a lot about our pain, and needs and desires, and how they mislead us from the path to holiness. Our wounds are not healed by confession of sins, resolutions and will power only. They need prayer, Quiet, open to God prayer. And some of our wounds actually need a good therapist or a good spiritual director. Some people don't get it, when I say to them in confession, "If you really want to experience true and mature conversion, If you really want to be free from your tendencies to this or that sin, you need professional help. You need therapy, counseling, or spiritual direction."

Dear brothers and sisters, God's love always surrounds us. Our unreconciled and our light-filled areas also surround us. But God's healing seems to wait for our longing and consent. The transformation that Jesus calls us to experience, comes from love. Love of God for us, love of others for us, love of us for others, and deep and compassionate self-love. We are made in the image and likeness of God. And this means, we ARE beautiful. Even with all of our sins, failings, and shortcomings.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks to believers for whom rules are more important than love and compassion. Sometimes we get too concerned about external forms, because we don't want to touch our inner needs. Some good and pious religious people use their faith and the Bible to justify sinful silences, or distances, or indifference. Some others use their pious practices, to avoid conversion, transformation, the call to love God, themselves and others. If Christian faith is not expressed through love, it is empty and meaningless.

We are invited today to check the nature of our faith, not from our political or religious positions, but from love. This Wednesday, we will begin the Season of Lent, with a deep and challenging invitation, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." May we all begin our Lenten Journey, being open to experience true, inner, healing and loving transformation.

The Universal Prayer
Sunday, 15th February 2026
Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Celebrant:

Sisters and brothers, the demands placed upon us as Christians are very serious, but the grace of the Spirit enables us to be faithful.

1. That we may join Pope Leo in his intention for February and pray for children who live with incurable diseases, that God will sustain them, their families and those who care for them.

We pray to the Lord.

2. That our local Church will not neglect the poor and oppressed across the world, but be united in charity to support those so burdened.

We pray to the Lord.

3. That we will lift up to God in prayer the oppressed people of Nigeria, those suffering in Ukraine, the hungry of Sudan, and the impoverished people of Palestine.

We pray to the Lord.

4. That we will learn from Jesus how to have minds and hearts of integrity, respecting the life and dignity of everyone and never wishing harm upon any person.

We pray to the Lord.

5. That we may experience an increase of vocations to the Priesthood in the Diocese of Raleigh and to religious life in the Daughters of St. Mary of Guadalupe.

We pray to the Lord.

6. That we will entrust to God all who have died so that they can be freed of their sins.

We pray to the Lord.

Celebrant:

Loving God, give us the grace to do your will, to obey your word, to observe your law, and to keep it within our hearts. Through Christ our Lord.