

Feast of the Epiphany, January 4, 2025

Since the middle of the 20th century, the Church has really seen the explosion of programs for youth, not only Sunday school programs, but specifically programs that are targeted at teenagers and college age Catholics. We see diocesan youth conferences, and we see Search conference, Teens Encounter Christ, more lately, it's been the Steubenville conferences. Actually, I think right now, there is a huge conference of college age Catholics going on in Columbus and Denver and Fort Worth. These SEEK Conferences are being attended by thousands, thousands, and thousands of young people gathered together to learn about their faith and to renew their love of God. And very often, these different programs, whether you are at conferences or retreats, involve some sort of a pinnacle experience.

Maybe it's the Saturday evening adoration or really encouraging the young people to go to Confession, or sometimes there are letters from love ones and families that arrive unexpectedly, and, you know, they read these touching notes and things like that - to the point that some people look at these different retreats kind of cynically and say, "Well, they're just trying to get these kids to cry, right? Like if you get them to cry, you have achieved your goal." I think that is overly cynical. I think that is not really a true and authentic way of looking at the situation. True, there are very often tears involved. But it is not that the tears are the goal. Tears are a visible sign that a person who has entered into a place of vulnerability where the Lord can reach them more effectively. The tears somehow signify that some barriers are coming down, some walls that were put up to keep the Lord out or keep Him at a distance have been brought down. Now the Lord is really working in the hearts of these people, these young people.

My own experience was a powerful one. I went on a Search retreat when I was a senior in high school in February 1997 and I didn't at all feel that it was some contrived, emotional experience. It was a very emotional experience, and they were copious tears. And it was a profound experience of the love of God. And I still, to this day, almost thirty years later, I look back to that as the first really major turning point in my life, in my journey with God, in my relationship with the Lord. And there was a level of vulnerability that was reached so God could really more powerfully and effectively work in my heart.

Another word for these experiences is conversion. Conversion. Not necessarily converting from not believing to believing but going from having something of a relationship with God to having a stronger relationship with God. Going from loving God somewhat to loving God more. From belonging to God to some degree to belonging more completely to God and living life for God. It is the experience of the conversion and it is not all at once – a one and done kind of thing. This is actually the dynamic that God wants to be at work in our lives all the time.

I was listening to and re-listening and re-listening to an interview with Father Mathias Thelen. He is one of the founders of Encounter Ministries and he told the story of a priest asking the question, “When did the love of Jesus come alive in you?” That is a good question for all of us. When did the love of Jesus come alive in you? I would say it was on that Search retreat for me when the love of Jesus began to come alive. But again, not just one and done. This is the whole, the heart of conversion, the love of Jesus coming alive in us. And maybe some ask themselves the question and they are not sure that the love of Jesus has come alive in them. Others have an extreme experience or a profound moment, confession, wherever.

When did the love of Jesus come alive in you? We can always ask the Lord that the love of Him would come alive in our hearts. He will give you the grace, but it requires some more. We have got to be in a place where we can receive that grace and allow it to start a good fire in our hearts.

What does all of this have to do with the Solemnity of the Epiphany, three kings, etcetera? Well, it seems to me that the same dynamic of conversion is unfolding in the Christmas story. From the moment of the Annunciation, when the child Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary - in this almost invisible way, certainly invisible to the naked eye - from that moment, the life of Christ began to grow. Mary knew, soon Joseph knew. Then the news was brought to Elizabeth and John. Jesus is born in Bethlehem. The news reaches the shepherds. And now the Magi come from the east. And so, the word is getting out as this life of Christ is growing and becoming more and more madness. This started so very, very small. Invisible.

So, it is with the life of conversion. Maybe that gift you were given at Baptism wasn't even felt at all. So, maybe if you were baptized as a baby, you didn't go home from your Baptism, praying in tongues, and singing the praises of the Lord. It is a gift that's given in very, very small form and then it grows, it grows with the grace of Confirmation and Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist, especially. Just ongoing growth in the life of faith. Keeping Christ in us becomes more manifest, more visible.

I shared this at a recent weekday Mass. A few weeks ago, I had kind of image of it in prayer. It was in Advent where we say, "Come Lord Jesus, Come Lord Jesus." When we pray that we might think of Jesus as out there somewhere, and we are asking Him to come close - God, afar, coming near. But the image was that the Lord is already at

the very, very deepest place of our being. And so, when we're asking Him to come, what we're asking is that His presence in there expand and encompass our whole being. So, we invite the Lord into our memory, our will, our desires. We would invite Our Lord into those places of woundedness, places of self-reliance, places of sin, places of joy, where in every aspect of our life, so in ongoing conversion, we get to the point where there's no part of us that doesn't belong to Him. We are holding nothing back from Him whatsoever. We have invited Him and welcomed Him to every place in our life so that nothing is out of bounds, nothing is off limits for Him. There is no place where we say, "No, Lord, you can't come in there." This is conversion. This is the love of Jesus coming alive in us.

The whole story of Christmas is characterized by humility and vulnerability. Think of the vulnerability of Mary. And of Joseph. Think of the vulnerability of the Christ child. Even the shepherds coming along. And even the Magi – *"When they come into the place where the child and Mary and Joseph are, they prostrated themselves and give him homage."* Lying prostrate on the floor -there is a position of vulnerability. You can't defend yourself very well when you're laying on the floor, right? Vulnerability. And undoubtedly, even though the Scriptures don't tell us this, there had to have been tears, many tears. All these different places. Not tears of sadness but those tears that come when a person is vulnerable and the Lord comes to visit them.

When did the love of Jesus come alive in you? If we are to go out and share the Gospel with others, we have to be able to share that story of a love of God coming alive in us. We can share about the experiences we have, the infancy of God, His forgiveness, His mercy. His unconditional love for us.

We also need to continue to ask God for the grace to allow the love of Jesus to come alive, more, and more and more especially in the gift of the Eucharist - a Sacrament of humility, a Sacrament of vulnerability. When we approach the Sacrament perhaps our bowed head can be the prostration of our soul. We are not physically prostrating on the floor here when we come for Holy Communion, but in our hearts that can be our posture. Bowing down in worship, in adoration, in vulnerability asking the Lord to come and set our hearts on fire with love for Him so that the love of Jesus that does burn in our hearts becomes more and more manifest in our life.