

Sixth Sunday after Trinity
July 12, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA Mark 6:7-13

My parents would never have played the song for me or even listened to radio stations that had it on their rotation, but I grew up in a steel workers' neighborhood in Bethlehem, right next to a bar that was open nineteen hours a day. Thus, I was at age eight exposed to the song, "Highway to Hell," by the Australian rock band, ACDC. The song terrified me, and I can remember as a boy trying to get away from it and being glad every time it was over. I can tell you from the number of times I heard it that it must have been quite popular.

The freedom that God gives us to love Him means that we are also free to reject His love, and we see this dynamic present in today's Gospel. Jesus sends out the apostles, and He makes it clear that some people will accept what they have to say, even invite them into their homes to hear it, and others will refuse to hear; and the apostles were to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against such people. That song I heard so often in the summer of 1979 was written and performed by a man who was free to refuse to hear, and I'm afraid he didn't listen.

Less than a year after "Highway to Hell" was released, Bon Scott, the lead singer of ACDC, was dead. Just thirty-three years old, he had choked on his own vomit after a night of heavy drinking. His death is a reminder to us that while we are free to refuse to hear the apostles of Jesus Christ, free even to mock the Truth and call hell "the promised land," we will not be free from the consequences of that choice. Indeed, we may suffer greatly and die too young because of our refusal to hear. I'm not terrified by that song any more, but on occasion I still hear it, and it is every time an occasion for great sadness.

What tidings did the apostles bring? What message were their listeners to hear? Our Gospel today tells us that "[t]hey went out and preached that men should repent." So the apostles' first sermon was the same as Jesus', who said at the beginning of His public ministry, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." This focus on repentance was a call to turn away from the wicked ways that lead to death and embrace the Truth that issues in life.

The refusal to hear, then, involves a refusal to repent, a refusal to abandon the sins that lead to death. You see, of course, that the invitation goes out to everyone. Everyone is welcome in the Church. The healing that God desires for all of His children is accessible to each one of us, but we must hear in this invitation the necessity of our repentance. No one is excluded—come as you are; but when you come before the altar of God, you will not find a home here until you are able to say, "Sorry," for the myriad ways you have offended our Lord.

That sorrow for sin necessarily implies a desire for a different way of life. So if we must first come before God's altar and say, "Sorry," we must then conform our lives according to the moral life found articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Repentance really is an about-face, a turning away from sin and then turning towards virtue. To stop sinning is not enough. True repentance means that we begin to love sacrificially, to lay down our lives in service to others as Jesus laid down His life for us.

This result of repentance is reflected in the fruits the disciples saw when people gladly heard them. Our Gospel tells us that “[t]hey cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them”. The banishment of evil is the first result of repentance, but then what flows out of that purification is healing, the restoration of life to people who receive the Word in faith. We see also a prefiguration of the Sacrament of the Sick, the laying-on-of-hands and the anointing with oil that offers to the penitent the forgiveness of sins and the strength and comfort we need as we pass from this life to the next.

I began with the death of someone who refused to heed the Lord’s call to repent and embrace a life of holiness, but I would like to close today with an example to us of one whose sins in his youth did not prevent him from attaining the sainthood to which all of us are called. In fact, we will celebrate his memorial later this week, on July 18.

St. Camillus de Lellis was the son of a soldier who had participated in the sack of Rome in 1527. Born in 1550, he took up his father’s trade as soon as he could, at the age of sixteen. For years they served as mercenaries together in various armies, and during this time Camillus’ dad taught him how to gamble.

When Camillus was nineteen, his dad died a penitent sinner, receiving on his deathbed the Sacrament of the Sick after making his confession. While this event almost led to Camillus’ conversion, he would spend another six years in loose living, gambling, begging, and fighting - before the encouragement of a pious man of wealth led him to begin to make an honest living for the first time in his life. At age twenty-five he finally repented and began to pursue virtue.

Though he was illiterate, he found a tutor who taught him to read, and St. Camillus de Lellis was ordained to the Holy Priesthood in 1584. Having suffered for years from a festering leg wound and having been given a second chance at life working in a hospital, he had a special affection for the sick. He understood that nurses would serve the needy much better if they loved them than if they were fulfilling this work of charity for a mere salary. To this end he funded the Order of Clerks Regular, Ministers to the Sick, better known as the Camillians, whose charism is to care for the sick with affection.

St. Camillus de Lellis, for all the good work he did, continued to do penance for the sins of his youth to his dying day. To those who ministered to him on his deathbed, shortly before he died in 1614, he said, “Pray for me, for I have been a great sinner, a gambler, and a man of bad life.” Whatever time he spent in purgatory, however, he had made reparation within a hundred and fifty years. He was canonized by Pope Benedict XIV in 1746. And though most people don’t know his name, the red cross he designed for the men of his order to wear on their cassocks is found used by another organization all across the globe.

Contrast the good St. Camillus did, despite his dissolute youth, with those who continue to race down the highway to hell. Consider the good Bon Scott could have done with his talents had he used his freedom to choose repentance and love instead of death; and I think you’ll share my sadness should you ever hear the song he’s now best remembered for. Both his example and that of St. Camillus de Lellis can inspire us to follow in the footsteps of the apostles we heard about today. That is, we’re going to run across a lot of Bon Scotts during our time in this valley of tears. Share the Gospel with each of them. However many refuse to hear, the next may be a future saint, and your witness to him may well help save both his life and his soul. You may well help lead someone to repentance who, in being healed, will, like St. Camillus, reach out for the rest of his life to heal others.

VH1 recently ranked Bon Scott the greatest frontman of any band ever. How different the perspective of the Church from that of the world! Is this really what we are supposed to do with the lives

God has given us, burn out and die at age 33? Better rather to follow in the steps of the saints, who chose repentance and life, now and for ever.