

# 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Preached September 3, 2017; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

*Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*

The Christian, as the saying goes, is to live in the world, but not belong to the world. (cf. Jn 17:11, 14)

We must ask, however, what the New Testament means when it speaks of 'the world' or 'this age' because sometimes the reference is simply to the created order as it has come from God, but some times the reference (as in this case) is the human order as it has been deformed by sin. That is what St. John refers to when he writes: *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. Yet, the world and its lusts are passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains forever.* (1 Jn 2:15-17) St. Augustine summed it up by saying the 'world' means 'the lovers of the world'.

Let me make this more concrete and take the workplace as a symbol of 'the world'. Work is necessary and good; by means of our work we sustain our lives and perform actions that, one hopes, contribute to the good of others in some way. The workplace, however, is not merely a place where people work, but involves a certain human environment, a sort of 'micro-culture' that influences the way people think, act, and make choices.

Often the workplace is a place where the 'lust of the flesh' is at work when during their breaks men gather together to look at pornography on their cell phones or speak about women in sexually degrading ways; or women gather together and talk about their romances, their men problems, and even engage in 'husband bashing', or just get into the juicy gossip about who is doing what with whom. Of course the workplace can also be a place where sexual harassment takes place and is tolerated, or where sexual liaisons, outside of marriage, are formed.

The 'the lust of the eyes' refers to greed, the desire to accumulate material goods upon which we can feast our eyes. Often a job is seen purely or primarily as a means of advancing one's material well-being and social standing, rather than a service to one's neighbor. Workplace environments can then become places marked by ambition to get ahead, with the backbiting and intrigue that accompany that ambition. Or it becomes the place where employers or clients are defrauded, or where a poison of corruption penetrates the culture, justified by the famous 'everyone does it' or 'no one will notice'.

The 'pride of life' refers to the self-exaltation of pride. When this enters the workplace, people brag about their exalted position, or out envy tear down those they perceive as 'exalted', or become jealous of perks or prerogatives such as reserved parking places or special office furnishings.

Yet, even in the best workplace environment, gainful employment, as such is ordered to the maintenance and advancement of this present life. That is not bad, but it is limited and always in danger of becoming an 'idol', the be all and end all for which a person lives. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us, *What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world at the price of his own soul?*

The sum of all this is that the ordinary Catholic layman, when he walks out of the doors of the church, is beset by a myriad of temptations that would pull him away from God.

If common workplace environments serve well to symbolize the biblical reality of 'the world' can we find, present in this world, a living symbol, as it were, of the Kingdom of heaven?

The answer is 'yes' – that indeed is the role of the monastery. St. Benedict did not establish monasteries and write his rule in order to help people gain a living. Evidently material sustenance is needed for a monastery, just as it is for a family, but the very existence of a monastery actually makes no sense whatever from the point of view of 'this age'. St. Benedict establishes the monastery as a "school of the Lord's service" "so that as we advance in the religious life and in faith, our hearts expand and we run the way of God's commandments with unspeakable sweetness of love. Thus, never departing from His school, but persevering in the monastery according to His teaching until death, we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Peter 4:13) and deserve to have a share also in His kingdom." (Prologue)

That is why people used to speak of leaving the world to enter a monastery. It is also why the solemn profession of a Benedictine monk involves a symbolic burial. Through his monastic profession he is supposed to die to this world so as to live for God alone. Or, another way we could put it is to say that the 'school of the Lord's service' is an order of life that is meant to lead the monk to break his *conformity to the world* and undergo the process of *transformation by the renewal of the mind*. What mind? St. Paul writes elsewhere, *We have the mind of Christ*. (1 Cor 2:16)

Okay, but that is just the monk, right? Wrong. St. Benedict was addressing monks, establishing an order of life was meant to facilitate an intense living out of the Gospel. St. Paul was writing to all the baptized because the monk and the layman are both called to live according to the same Gospel and seek the same goal of eternal life.

The words of Jesus we have heard today encapsulate the Gospel for everyone, following Jesus through his death to his resurrection; through death to life. *Whoever*

*wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.* Peter, who had just professed his faith in Jesus as *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, when he heard Jesus talking about being killed, reacted in a way that showed he was still very much *conformed to the world*. St. Paul, by urging us not to be *conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our mind* is teaching pretty much the same lesson as Jesus. The process of transformation requires a death to self, so as to live to God.

Okay, but where can the layman find in his life a place that makes present and brings about the work of transformation? Where can the layman go to get out of the world for a moment, to be formed by the mind of Christ?

A retreat at a monastery can help, but there is actually a powerful reality much closer to our daily life, that is supposed to make transformed world present to us, that is supposed to help us break with the conformity to this world and be formed by the mind of Christ. This powerful reality is so important that Church obliges all of us, even the monks, under the pain of mortal sin, to participate on every Sunday and Holy Day of obligation; it is the liturgy of the Mass. From the point of view of the world, the Mass makes no sense and can be nothing but a pure waste of time. From the point of view of eternal life, the Mass is the real presence of heaven on earth.

When we enter this building, especially for the celebration of the Mass, we should be seeking to break the mold the world has imposed upon us in so many ways; when we enter this building, especially for the celebration of the Mass, we should be seeking that transformation by the renewal of our mind, a new outlook on our life and the whole of reality, putting on the mind of Christ.

That means also that the Mass isn't so much about expressing our faith, much less our subjective expression of faith, but about opening ourselves to receive the very objective gift that God wants to communicate.

We must, however, bring something with us: *I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.* We must bring our whole life, lived in the body, and offer it with bread and wine that is brought forward so that through, with, and in Jesus Christ, it might become a sacrifice holy and pleasing to God. In that way we open ourselves so that in holy communion, the Lord might stamp upon our souls the transformed and renewed mind he wants to give.

We should strive to be as the Blessed Virgin Mary, who presented herself to the Lord in faith, saying, *Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word*, and conceived the very Son of God in her womb.

