



a Kendall Hunt Company

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session, read all the readings.

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 18:15-20

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Is there a particular reading that appeals to you? Is there a word or image that engages you?

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Read the following **Word in Liturgy** and **Catholic Doctrine** sections. Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need.

The Word In Liturgy

The prophet Ezekiel was active at the time of the Babylonian captivity. Scholars date this oracle to the period after he had been exiled to Babylon but before the final destruction of Jerusalem. The preaching of Ezekiel underwent a perceptible evolution as he grappled with the refusal of the nation to repent of its infidelities and its pending destruction. His focus increasingly was on individual responsibility—his own responsibility as a “watchman” charged with announcing the disaster he foresaw, as well as the responsibility to repent which belonged to every individual who heard his words of warning. His thought shows a clear

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development over earlier notions of corporate responsibility which consistently overlooked—the individual's status before God in favor of the fate of the nation as a whole. Ezekiel's appeal was to the conversion of the individual. Behind such an appeal was the conviction that God would respond favorably to all who did indeed return to him in faithfulness to the covenant.

In chapter 18 of Matthew we have Jesus' discourse on the Church. This discourse follows a longer narrative section (cc. 14–17) on discipleship. It is easy to see in today's pericope traces of the struggle of Matthew's community (and of every subsequent Christian community) to live out in harmony the Lord's command of mutual love. The focus of Matthew's concern here is how best to deal with the frictions of communal living, where members inevitably offend and sin against one another. Jesus' words reflect the pastoral approach recommended by Matthew. They also indicate the conviction that conversion of heart was indeed a possibility in such circumstances and should be actively sought by the members of the community. Perhaps Matthew had in mind the community's prayer for the conversion of recalcitrant members when he added at this point Jesus' encouraging reminder that the Father would answer the prayer of those gathered in his name. Conversion of heart, as the early Christians knew well, is ultimately a gift of God's grace.

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Catholic Doctrine

Conversion

The injunction to "repent" or "be converted" is the first preaching that issues forth from Jesus as he begins his public ministry and is an essential characteristic of the proclamation of the kingdom of God (CCC 1427). It is the underlying theme for all the subsequent teaching of Jesus and indeed all his healing miracles and ministerial activity that brought him to the cross and resurrection. Conversion is a constant theme in the life journey of all who follow Christ and thus who seek to put into practice the way, the truth, and the life of the kingdom which he proclaimed.

The New Testament uses two terms to speak about conversion: *metanoia* and *epistrophe*. The former indicates the internal mechanisms of thinking and willing which occasion the conversion, while the later term carries with it the sense of the outward, visible characteristics of change (NDictTheol 233). Nevertheless, both terms signal a turning around.

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of the person who no longer pursues old ways, but has embraced a return to our true home in the holy and the divine.

Two classic stories of this Christian conversion or of turning around are found in the lives of St. Paul and St. Augustine (d. 430). Both the scriptural account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (who became Paul the Apostle) in the Acts of the Apostles and the account found in St. Augustine's autobiography, *The Confessions*, point to a typical pattern of conversion. This pattern can be described as (1) a perceived tension or disorientation in one's life, (2) a synthesis, learning, or insight gathered from the elements of one's past life, (3) an experience of mercy or forgiveness for failures, and (4) the gracious invitation and call from the Holy One, God, to a new, better life. The great drama involved in St. Paul's and St. Augustine's conversions may not be experienced by others, and yet the pattern may well be valid for many. There is a radical reorientation of one's whole self toward a gracious God that takes place gradually over time and eventually involves every facet of one's personality.

Besides being lifelong, the radical reorientation that describes conversion in Christ is characterized by several other important features. First, Catholics understand that conversion has an ecclesial dimension. While faith in God is a personal act, it is not an isolated act of the individual. No one comes to belief in the love of God in isolation, just as no one lives life alone. We Catholics understand that faith is received and handed on through human beings, in the Church (CCC 166). In addition, the entire body of the Church is called to conversion, for while it is holy it embraces sinners and thus is always in need of purification. (It is no accident that the third stage of adult Christian initiation is called "purification and enlightenment.") Second, Catholics understand that conversion does not remain a purely internal facet of one's being. For when one's whole self is converted to Christ, external actions necessarily issue forth. A true interior change of heart is manifested through visible signs, gestures, and works (CCC 1430). Third, Catholics understand that the way in which human beings grow and mature—along with the fact of sin, which is still present in this world—means that those who have begun the conversion journey may falter. Nevertheless, God gives us the grace and the ability to begin anew and take heart in divine love (CCC 1432). Fourth, Catholics understand that the seven sacraments are not only signs of the believer's growth and maturity in the Lord, but that they are, in effect, living symbols by which Christ acts within us to conform us more closely as adopted sons and daughters of the living God. In the sacraments, divine love heals us, transforms us (CCC 1129), and propels us further along the path of conversion.



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Ultimately, Christian conversion means that the believer has embraced a living person, Jesus Christ. In other words, the change that occurs is not mere acceptance of Church teaching or fascination with the beauty of Catholic ritual, culture, or art. These things may certainly lead one to embrace the Lord, but in the final analysis the change brought about by Christian conversion is born of one's devotion toward, love of, and challenge found in the person of the Messiah, the one who suffered, died, and rose for each one of us.

