

REGRETS, I'VE HAD A FEW

(I like the way I am. And I want to think the way I think. And I want to do what I want to do. And I want God to be okay with that. But that is not the message of Jesus. And that is not how it works.)

Sometimes I get asked by people, “Yo, Father, if you had it to do all over again, would you still become a priest?” It’s a bit forward but my own response is: “In a heartbeat.” Yes I would make the same decision to be a priest if I had it to do over.” That is decidedly not the case for all of us in our chosen vocations. We also use expressions like “If you knew then what you know now would you still have moved or gotten married or taken that job or gotten divorced, etc.” We have this expression that has become rather popular recently. A Do-Over. You can have a personal Do-Over, meaning that you undergo a whole transformation of the way you look, from hair to clothing, to glasses, etc. Or you can have your house, or a room in your house undergo a Do-Over and that means a complete transformation—new rugs, window treatments, furniture, paint, decorations, etc.

And then in the world of work there are Do-Overs that usually mean we didn’t get it right the first time, but back to the drawing board and try to get it right this time. There is an implication of error or failure or at least inadequacy at the performance level. But if you were to apply the expression Do-Over to your personal life. What would you do differently? If you had a chance to change a decision in your life and do it over what would you do differently, what would you change? And why? The rationale behind this question has to do with regrets and like it says in the opening lines of the Frank Sinatra song “My Way,” “Regrets, I’ve had a few but then again too few to mention.” I have heard that while most people identify that song as kind of emblematic of Frank Sinatra himself that he personally was not particularly fond of the song or the lyrics even though he sang it very well.

But we all have regrets. Things we did that we would now not do again. Hurts we inflicted that we did not realize until it was too late. Pathways gone down that led us to places that harmed us rather than places that helped us. Missed opportunities. Things not done because we lacked courage or were afraid or just didn’t understand or were too immature or stupid or selfish to realize what was really at stake. Yes, we all have regrets. Our sins are in this category. Regrets. And it is precisely here that repentance enters the picture. I submit to you that if we look at our life and can find no regrets than we will never be moved to repent of anything we did or failed to do. Regrets and repentance are the two sides of the same coin.

And sometimes the regret is based on certain patterns of behavior that we have come to realize are harmful but are now habitual to us and hard to shed in our daily lives. There are bad habits we have allowed to develop or even fostered the development of that we find it very hard to shake in our adult life. It could be smoking or drinking too much or TV addiction or Internet game addictions, or pornography, or sports betting, or out of control shopping, or workaholism, or the development of a hyper-critical and judgmental attitude. For some it is an attitude of mistrust or cynicism or resentment. For others it is a laziness that presents itself as overwork. For still others an attitude of smugness or superiority. Some of these things—actually, all of these things—can be pretty hard to shake. And yet, we have a God who is a great believer in Do-overs. What is salvation itself if not a mighty Do-Over for the whole world and everyone who will ever be born into it?

It is God’s commitment to the Do-over that brought Christ into the world and God’s desire to re-create and renew the face of the earth that moves him to meet us not with condemnation but rather with his forgiveness. So, Jesus is the One sent from God not only to extend God’s forgiveness to us despite our sins.

But Jesus also models for us what the new way of life, the Done-Over way of life looks like in person. He modeled for us the way he calls us to live. Before Jesus came God sent the Judges and the Prophets to remind the people and to challenge the people to remain steadfast and true and to resist the embracing of ways of living that were hurtful, destructive and personally harmful. Sometimes the people listened and sometimes not.

Then God sent John the Baptist to call people to repent of their sins, to acknowledge their regrets in the way they were living their lives and to offer them a Do-Over by undergoing a cleansing bath in the waters of the Jordan River. John the Baptist called people to acknowledge their sins and selfishness and to enter into an attitude of true repentance and then undergo the water baptism that would wash away the past sins. But that was just preparatory. After John would come Jesus, the true Lamb of God who would lay down his life for his sheep and be the Good Shepherd that the people yearned for. But also Jesus would show them how to live. He would teach them and then give the example of his own life so that all could see. All did see. Some believed and some did not.

We who gather here this day are numbered among those who do believe in Jesus Christ and strive to live in his forgiveness and strive also to live his way. But this way of Jesus calls for honesty and a certain humility because none of us likes to admit our sins and ask for pardon. We have a lot of pride and sometimes a lot of arrogance and hubris too. Integrity, though, demands that we be truly honest with ourselves about our failures and our acts of selfishness and our sins. When we do this the Lord extends to us an offer of true happiness and genuine harmony, unlike anything we have personally witnessed, much like the scene in the prophet Isaiah describing all the wild animals living in close harmony with what would be considered their prey. All things are possible with God.

This is Advent. Christmas is three weeks away. Resolve to receive God's offer of forgiveness and ask for the grace to be completely set free of any sin which still holds you in its grip or which you are afraid you cannot overcome. Let Our Lord do the doing. Just give Our Lord the entrée he desires. Ask for the help you need. That is the admitting of regrets. And then we go to the God whose name is forgiving love and we find him welcoming us with open arms. And my friends, I know that that is precisely the God whom I long for and precisely the God I need.