



FAITH CIRCLES

WEEKLY SMALL GROUP CATECHESIS

31ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME • YEAR A

SUNDAY GOSPEL

Integrity in Word & Action

MATTHEW 23:1-12

Addressing the people and his disciples Jesus said, 'The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do what they tell you and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do: since they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they! Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader phylacteries and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honour at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being



Woe unto You, Scribes and Pharisees by James Tissot

greeted obsequiously in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi.

'You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven.

Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted. ■

A WORD FROM POPE FRANCIS

The readings for this Sunday also occur during the Lenten Season. As we come towards the end of the Church year, it is timely to be reminded of the conversion of heart and mind to which we were called at year's beginning during Lent. This reflection by Pope Francis is drawn from his reflections on these readings as found during the Lenten Season.



As we know, Lent is a time for us to draw closer to the Lord, It is a time for "conversion". In the first reading, the Lord invites us to conversion; and interestingly he calls two cities harlots: Sodom and

Gomorrhah. And he issues them this invitation: "Be converted, change your lives, draw near to the Lord". This too is the invitation given to us: we all need to change our lives".

How meaningless it is to excuse ourselves by saying: "But Father, I am not such a great sinner!" For we all have something inside of us and if we look into our soul we will find something that is not good, all of us. We are invited to amend our lives, to put them in order. This invitation and response is precisely what allows us to draw near to the Lord, who is always ready to forgive.

The prophet Isaiah points out in the first reading that "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow". With these words the Lord

says to us: "I will change your soul." What does he ask of us? To draw near. To draw near to him. He is a Father; he awaits us in order to forgive us.

The Lord also gives us this counsel: "Do not be like the hypocrites". The Lord does not want this [hypocritical] type of drawing near. He wants us to draw near in sincerity and truth.

What do hypocrites do? They mask themselves. They mask themselves as good. They mask their faces like a holy picture: they pray looking up to heaven to make themselves seen, they feel that they are more righteous than others, they look down on others. And they boast of being good Catholics because they have acquaintances

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among benefactors, bishops and cardinals.

This is hypocrisy, and the Lord says no to it. No one should feel self-righteous. We all need to be justified and the only one who justifies us is Jesus Christ. That is why we need to draw near: to avoid being masked Christians. When appearances vanish, reality comes to light and we see that they are not Christians. What is the touchstone? The Lord himself tells us in the first reading: "Wash yourselves;

make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good."

What is the sign that we are on the right path? Scripture tells us: defend the oppressed; take care of your neighbour, the sick, the poor, the needy, the ignorant. This is the touchstone. Hypocrites cannot do this, for they are so full of themselves that they are blind to seeing others. But when one journeys a little and draws near to the Lord, the light of the Father enables one to see these things and to go out to help one's brothers

and sisters. And this is the sign of conversion.

Certainly, he added, this is not the whole of conversion; because conversion is an encounter with Jesus Christ. But this is the sign that we are with Jesus: taking care of the brethren, the poorest and the sick, as the Lord teaches us in the Gospel.

May the Lord give us all light and courage: light to be aware of what is happening within us; and courage to be converted, to draw near to the Lord. It is beautiful to be close to the Lord. ■

TALKING POINTS

1. Pope Francis reminds us that we have been invited to new conversion, to change our lives and draw near to God. Conversion involves a change of heart and renewal of our minds. Have you experienced conversion in your faith journey? What did God do and what did he ask of you?
2. We often think of hypocrisy as saying one thing and doing another. Pope Francis describes it as like wearing a mask, hiding oneself from God and others. Why do you think we do this? What can we do to help each other (and ourselves) to "come as we are"?

PRAYER POINTS

Pray for Each Other: Ask about and pray for the needs of the group members. Individuals might pray for themselves or ask someone else to pray for them.

Response: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)*

Reflect: We all wear masks to some degree. Perhaps because we are afraid of not being accepted as we are or because we want the world to believe we are perfect. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the masks in your life and to give you the grace to take them off.

Closing Prayer: Father in heaven, you say, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." Your mercy is never-ending and overflowing in abundance. Help us to grow in trust so that we may always come to you as we truly are, knowing in your steadfast love and kindness. Amen.