Conversion

The Apostles proclaim the Good News which includes telling the truth to power. They clearly challenge the high priest of the Sanhedrin by stating: “The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:30-31). The Apostles lay out the crime, but in the same breadth, they also offer a way forward. They admonish the sinners AND they invite them to repentance.

The high priest and other leaders are hard hearted. They would rather kill the Apostles than admit any fault. The Apostles hold their ground. They have been well prepared by Jesus who taught them, “If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first... Remember the word I spoke to you, ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:18, 20a).

A leading Pharisee, Gamaliel, helps defuse the situation and convinces the Sanhedrin to let the Apostles go. If they are not speaking for God, their movement will die of its own accord. But if this is from God, the Sanhedrin will not be able to stop them. A cease fire is brokered, but there is not yet reconciliation. The road to reconciliation and repentance is often a long and hard one. Let’s turn to history for an example.

With the Italian Army faltering in World War II, the German Army moved in and took control of much of the Italian Peninsula including the capital city of Rome. LTC Herbert Kappler commanded a special police force that hunted down Jews and sent them to death camps. The force also recaptured escaped Allied Prisoners of War.

While the Vatican officially remained neutral, Pope Pius XII and his staff could not help but do everything possible to protect innocent lives. Among them, was a Vatican Diplomat, Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty who played a vital role. The Irishman helped to organize an underground effort to aid Prisoners of War in escaping and to protect the Jews. O’Flaherty soon enough became a hunted man for thwarting the efforts of LTC Kappler and his occupying force.

The efforts to protect life were not always successful. The Germans recaptured many escaped POWs and deported many Jews. Some in the underground were also arrested or killed. Against all odds, Monsignor O’Flaherty continued operating to save as many lives as possible. “By the time the Allies captured Rome in June 1944, O’Flaherty’s underground network had kept 6,245 Allied escapees alive. Of the city’s 9,700 Jews, 5,000 were hidden by the Vatican at different properties, and 3,700 were hidden by O’Flaherty’s group. Tragically, 1,007 Jews were shipped to Auschwitz.”

As the tide of the war turned and it was obvious that the Allies would liberate Rome, LTC Kappler asked his archenemy to save his family. It was a difficult decision for the priest to make. O’Flaherty had no sympathy for the Gestapo who had committed so many atrocities. He asked himself, “What would Jesus do?” He then chose mercy and arranged for Kappler’s wife and children to escape to Switzerland.

Kappler and the other soldiers were held accountable for their war crimes. Kappler was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. Every month, the priest visited him in prison. At some point, the conversation must have echoed the truth the Apostles spoke in the formative years of the church. “The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead. Your sins, your persecution of the Jews, held him fast to the crucifix. Repent, seek forgiveness of your sins, and believe.” With persistence and mercy on the part of Monsignor O’Flaherty, Kappler converted to the Catholic faith. He was baptized by Monsignor O’Flaherty in 1959.

Jesus suffered death for all of humanity including those who condemned him to death. He taught us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies. And amidst the excruciating pain of
the crucifixion, he prayed “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). All things are possible with the help of God, even the conversion of great sinners.

Throughout the bible, we see and hear of many miracles that happen almost instantaneously. Sometimes, it takes much longer. Sometimes the miracles will only happen if we do our part to proclaim the Good News … even to those we have infuriated and that wish we were dead. Loving God with all of our heart, mind, and soul sometimes means we must love our enemies as Christ loves them. Are you willing to help God in changing the most hardened of hearts?

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\(^1\) catholicnewsagency.com/resources/apologetics/controversies/pope-pius-xii-and-the-holocaust (Throughout the greater war effort, The Catholic Church under Pius XII was instrumental in saving 860,000 Jews from Nazi death camps. Tragically 6 million Jews and 3 million Catholics were killed in the Holocaust.)

\(^2\) warhistoryonline.com/instant-articles/monsignor-hugh-oflaherty-priest-converted-nazi-m.html

\(^3\) en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scarlet_and_the_Black; (In the 1983 made for television movie, the Scarlet and the Black, Gregory Peck played the role of Msgr. Hugh O’Flaherty); en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_history_of_Italy_during_World_War_II