

It's been an interesting week. I have voted in a lot of elections, but I cannot remember one so bitter. The country is divided and protests continue over the outcome. They will probably continue for a while, but it is time to begin healing. It is time for both sides to work towards the common good of all.

Before Election Day, I had people talk with me about how they should vote when both candidates had shortcomings. They talked about issues with trustworthiness, racism, bigotry. And they spoke of concerns that both candidates supported some but not all Catholic teachings, the biggest being issues of social justice and right to life.

But they also had concerns of how their choice would affect them spiritually. Would choosing a candidate not supported by this or that religious leader, some of whom were Catholic, condemn them to hell as they suggested?

It always bothers me when someone proclaims judgment in the name of God and that we get pulled into believing him or her.

But I thought about the readings this week, particularly from the prophet Malachi,

“Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven,
when all the proud and all evildoers will be stubble,
and the day that is coming will set them on fire,
leaving them neither root nor branch,
says the LORD of hosts.

But for you who fear my name, there will arise
the sun of justice with its healing rays.”

Fear can lead us to question the consequences of doing wrong.

But the fear that Malachi speaks of is not a fear of punishment; it is a respect for the voice of God. Time and time again in our lives we will be challenged to make choices, difficult choices. The blessing is that God knows why we make those choices.

The fact that someone was struggling to find the best candidate, that they evaluated the issues and the character of those candidates shows a thoughtfulness and concern in their heart for following God's voice. It is the stirring of Christ through the Holy Spirit within them.

If we make choices from our desire for goodness, out of seeking the truth, out of love, with sincere hearts, then we have made faithful choices and we've done our best to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

If our choices are made maliciously, are meant to inflict pain and suffering, or are for personal gain at the expense of another person's dignity and humanity, that, too, is known to God. And at some point we will find ourselves before Jesus, our true judge and our hearts will be revealed.

How do we get in touch with God's voice? How do we know the Holy Spirit's guidance within us?

Jesus is about the conversion experience, an awaking to the Spirit. How that conversion is triggered is unique to the person but it often begins with the question, "Why?"

"Why do you smile at me? Why did you help that stranger? Why did you show compassion to me?"

Conversion is not a one-time thing. We are continually converted in faith by experiencing Christ. We are always learning, listening, and growing in our faith and journey.

God seeks to sow both love and truth into our hearts, and then nurture their growth in the sun of justice with its healing rays.

Jesus is that light. How this works is part of our conversion. His actions, his teachings were not even well understood by his original followers at first. But Jesus continued to model love and truth for his disciples, even to the point of his sacrifice on the cross and the revealing of God's power through his resurrection. And it changed them. It changes us.

Conversion is about experiencing Jesus and then living that experience, letting it become who you are and finding the joy he brings to your life. And then it becomes a desire to share that love, truth, mercy and forgiveness with others without expectation of what you will receive in return.

That is not always easy. We are creatures of the natural world and the spiritual world. We are so often caught up in the physical world, the world of our flesh, the notion of me first.

We find conversion in our spiritual selves. There is a humbleness to it, a sense of holy surrender, and a sense of gratitude.

If we live solely in the flesh, conversion is almost impossible to achieve. But if we allow ourselves to also live in the spirit, it is more likely to grow. So as beings of spirit and flesh, we will always be internally challenged.

I think that that is one of the reasons Jesus insisted that we love our enemies, why he insisted that we pray for them. That is something that has to come from our spirit. It challenges our spirit to counter the instinctual response of the flesh.

To sincerely pray for an enemy has to touch our own spirit, it has to put our soul within sight, within perspective. It seems unnatural, but it helps us learn not to approach others judgmentally. This type of prayer lets us live compassionately, genuinely caring and respecting life, in the footsteps of Christ.

It helps to have the support of our community of faith because outside of this community, our family that comes together to worship, it can be like Jesus said, "You may not be understood, you might even be hated by many on account of following my name."

We will always face challenges to our beliefs, from our family or friends or neighbors. But finding the voice of God within us strengthens us. When we hear his voice, our lives become more Christ-like, and we live the truth, not simply proclaim it.

Whether you chose this candidate or that one is not as important as whether you listened to your heart and made a choice in faith.

Jesus knows us and if we try to be guided by him, he will never condemn us for trying to do what is right.

As he said in today's gospel,

"Not a hair on your head will be destroyed.
By your perseverance you will secure your lives."