

**‘Turn around so as not to miss out’
Our Lady of La Salette invites us to repent**

P. Abner Hubertus Sito MSF

In the beginning ...

There was a message of Our Lady of La Salette on repentance that we are all now very familiar with. Why did the Virgin Mary, 180 years ago, willingly came down to earth and appeared to deliver an important and urgent message about repentance? One of the main reasons for this was (here I just simply quote a passage that is very relevant to our very identity), because:

“The priests, ministers of my Son, the priests, by their wicked lives, by their irreverence and their impiety in the celebration of the holy mysteries, by their love of money, their love of honors and pleasures, the priests have become cesspools of impurity. Yes, the priests are asking vengeance, and vengeance is hanging over their heads. Woe to **the priests and to those dedicated to God** who by their unfaithfulness and their wicked lives are crucifying my Son again. The sins of **those dedicated to God** cry out towards Heaven and call for vengeance, and *now vengeance is at their door*, for there is no one left to beg mercy and forgiveness for the people. There are no more generous souls, there is no one left worthy of offering a stainless sacrifice to the Eternal for the sake of the world. God will strike in an unprecedented way.”

Our immediate and spontaneous reaction to the message above is to say: “Let us repent!” Indeed, as members of the MSF, we even promote and spread this message of repentance, even we always strongly encourage the faithful to keep this in mind. So, why then do we still need to reflect on repentance, something that is already so clear and so easy for us to understand? The answer to this question is another question: So, if it is about something that is clear and simple, easy to explain, I must question myself then: have I received the sacrament of Reconciliation faithfully and frequently? Or perhaps the real question is: have I repented honestly?

Meanwhile, life goes on ...

“Closed mouth gets no feed” – this is an expression used to express the idea that if you keep your mouth shut, you will not get any response. So, even when something is already clear, it is still worth asking ourselves exactly what this act is: “repentance”. We can take a look at the terms used to describe this act in our respective languages; perhaps from these terms we can derive a meaning that goes beyond the Christian theological framework. But another question I’d like to invite you to ask is: Why, then, is this act so urgent and important for us Christians — or perhaps it would be better to say, for humanity? In fact, the act of repentance is not an exclusively Christian concept; indeed, we must bear in mind that the term used in Hebrew for this act is in absolutely unrelated to any kind of religious obligation, but rather represents a natural human response.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “to repent” is *šûb*. This word does indeed have various meanings in its application and is used with various subjects (usually

people, but also God, animals, and even objects). The central meaning is: to have initially moved in a certain direction and then changed direction to move in the opposite direction, which (unless otherwise specified) means that one returns to the original starting point. It can therefore be said that this verb has a spatial and physical dimension.

So, if we're talking about the road – and life, after all, is really a journey – then repentance is a very logical, normal and natural reaction. If I realise that this path is actually leading in the wrong direction, then I turn back to the starting point so that I can start over, seeking out and choosing the right path (this same pattern can also be found in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15).

In my life, however, do I need to change something? But considering the journey that has brought me to this point, I don't feel I need to change anything; I am at peace with this journey. I am convinced that God walks beside me, so I do not feel lost; therefore, I do not feel the need or urgency to repent. But does this mean that I am still a follower of Christ, that I am still a Catholic, a religious, a priest? Yes, that is probably still the case; I could easily say that I am still a religious (and a priest). Is that really the truth? Or perhaps I feel happy and at peace with this way of life I am living because, quite simply, "my heart has grown dull, my ears can barely hear, my eyes are closed, so that I cannot turn my way" (cf. Mt 13:15).

Repentance is not merely a question of going to confession and receiving forgiveness. For after that moment, we must still continue on our journey: 'Go, and from now on, sin no more' (Jn 8:11). There is a concrete action that follows receiving the sacrament of reconciliation; there is a physical and spatial dimension that shows the change. For what does it mean to be human if one cannot carry out something as simple as the word 'sub'? What does it mean to be an MSF if one cannot put into practice the message of repentance from Our Lady of La Salette? What does it mean to be a follower of Christ if we cannot follow Jesus' command: 'Repent and believe in the Gospel' (Mk 1:15)? We must not forget: religious vows are called 'evangelical counsels', so let us go back and truly walk the path of our vows, Let's live it up!

If tomorrow never comes ...

This phrase is the title of an old song, remade by Ronan Keating in 2002, with a video clip that begins with Keating sitting on a bed, gazing at a woman asleep there. He then leaves his house and, after falling onto the road right in the path of an oncoming car, he is hit by it. He experiences the same scene over and over again, as if trapped in a time loop, while continuing to sing—something that is unrealistic. In the end, he breaks the time loop by avoiding crossing the road and, instead, walks along the pavement right in front of his front door. It is indeed a romantic song, but if one observes the pattern, is there any change to be found? Fortunately, he had time to break out of that loop and take a different approach.

The New Testament uses the Greek term for repentance: *metanoia*. Its literal meaning is "to change one's mind," to transform one's mindset. With that, we now also

have an internal dimension to the conversion. “But I think things are going just fine. I don’t feel the need to change my life or something particular in my life, then why do I should change my mind? Do I need it?”

Let us return to the beginning, to the message of Mary of La Salette. In the message quoted above, there is an expression “The sins call for vengeance and now vengeance is at their door”. This kind of warning is not a new idea originating from the Virgin Mary; for the same pattern already appeared since the beginning, in the first book of the Bible, when God warned Cain before he eventually killed Abel: “if you do wrong, sin is *waiting* at the door, desiring to have you” (cf. Gn 4:7). It becomes even more striking if we look at the final book of the Bible, still with the same pattern but the subject changes: “Behold, I (*i.e.* Jesus) *stand* at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him” (cf. Rv 3:20). At the end of time, it is Jesus who stands at the door. As the journey of the story continues, since the beginning until the end of time, is there a kind of change in mindset in the Bible narrative?

We could certainly explore this issue in further depth, but for now let us simply reflect on these three passages — from Mary, Genesis and Revelation — and reread them several times and very carefully, both from a grammatical perspective and in terms of any other insights you might discover by meditating on them personally. Perhaps this could be a source of inspiration for each of us in embracing metanoia. What emerges from these three passages? Do I need to change my way of thinking? Why should I?

The most important question is: when? What if tomorrow never comes? Should I still make some changes to my life now, or not? Can I trust my own judgement and feelings about my life? Or, as the message of La Salette continues to say: ‘Since true faith in the Lord has been forgotten, every individual desires to be independent and to feel superior to those of their own kind’. James wrote in his letter: ‘Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire’ (cf. Jm 1:14), that is, on their own path, in their own way, according to their own mind; but what then happens to the way of life and the mindset of religious life, of priestly life, of our congregation? Everyone follows their own ideas and their own ways of doing things. But, in faith, is there a unique and narrow path, or rather many different and broad paths? (cfr. Mt 7,13-14 also Jn 14:6)

As a follower of Christ, as a Catholic, as a religious, and even as a priest (*alter Christus – imitatio Christi*), do I need the sacrament of Reconciliation? Do I have anything to repent of? Or rather, do I simply feel that I am behaving well? Or perhaps I even think that God will surely appreciate the great and numerous work I have done as a ‘labourer in His harvest’ (cf. Mt 9:38), so that He – who is ‘kind and merciful’ (Ps 103:8) – will certainly not punish me for the minor faults and negligences I have committed. I don’t feel the need to change anything, because it is enough for me not to commit grave sins and to focus on working for the Kingdom of God (for this kind of mindset, try going back to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Lk 18:9–14).

John the Baptist said to the Pharisees and Sadducees: ‘Bear fruit in keeping with repentance (*metanoias*)’ (Mt 3:8). If someone claims to have changed direction but

continues to walk in the same direction, the change is not real. A sense of guilt without change is regret, change without guilt is a modification of behaviour, whilst repentance is both: the heart and the feet moving in the same direction (sub and metanoia); if nothing changes, nothing has changed. Let us return to the starting point: let us look at the small things mentioned by Our Lady above – has anything changed within me? If nothing changes, nothing has changed. Let us change our minds and turn our feet, because...

The end is near ...

As a Catholic, repentance naturally begins with the journey of walking towards the Sacrament of Reconciliation, then it is only afterwards that a life-changing journey begins. There is no need to discuss about how important and necessary the Sacrament of Reconciliation is if we still call ourselves Catholics. Apart from that, another thing which we know for sure is that every journey must come to an end. And Our Lady has warned us that “God will strike in an unprecedented way”.

But still, since “there is no man on earth of such righteousness that he does good and is free from sin all his days” (cf. Eccl. 7:20), why is this message of repentance so important? No matter how great we may be, we are not free from sin; however, once again, it is not enough to simply confess our sins. Therefore, at the end of this reflection, let us take a look at the Hebrew term for the verb “to sin”, that is: *ḥāṭāʾ*.

The word *ḥāṭāʾ* which is, of course, a term used many times in our Old Testament, because literally means “to fail or to miss in reaching a goal or target”. For example, in Pr 19:2: “whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way”; or in Jg 20:16, “everyone could sling a stone at a hair and not miss”. The underlined phrase in the translation does not reveal the specific word used, but in the Hebrew text, it uses the same root: *ḥāṭāʾ*. Therefore, to sin is also the same as failing or deviating from one’s goal. In the passage from Genesis that we just looked at: “Sin is waiting at the door”, the same root *ḥāṭāʾ* is used. If then sinning, failing to achieve a goal, and missing the target are all definitions of the same word, then what is our goal or target?

It may not be the case that, despite having accomplished many great and significant things in the course of my life and having achieved many goals, or despite being known by many and knowing many people, I might finally fail as a religious person and as a priest precisely because of something I considered insignificant, something I failed to see or recognise in myself (cf. Mt 7:3–5). Is there something I need to change in myself?

Ultimately, the goal of human life is to love God and to love one’s neighbour (cf. Mt 22:37–40). In this sense, the fact that Jesus ‘has been tested in every way, as we ourselves are tested, yet without sin’ (Heb 4:15) takes on a deeper meaning. Throughout his life on earth until his death on the cross, Jesus never sinned; indeed, he never failed to achieve the goal of loving God – his Father – and loving his neighbour – humanity. This is what God desires of man, and this was demonstrated by Jesus, so it is not impossible for man to live without sin. There is no excuse, neither the fact that Jesus is God, nor the fact that we are merely human beings, weak and fragile. Jesus, a

truly human being, proved that man can live without sin, and he gave us the strength to do so: 'He will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever' (Jn 14:16). The Holy Spirit is our GPS and the force that guides us on our journey. Given this truth, the rest depends on us.

Therefore, what does it mean to love God as a member of the MSF? What does it mean to love one's neighbour as oneself as a member of the MSF? It is not necessary to answer these questions, but it is good to return to and bear in mind the message of Our Lady of La Salette quoted above, which serves as the starting point for conversion. Through simple, small things, which are often considered insignificant in my daily life, am I perhaps irreverent, a lover of honours and pleasures, unfaithful, despite being a religious, a man of prayer, a man of God, a man for others, etc.? (feel free to add other wonderful terms).

Understanding that 'sinning' is a failure or a misstep on a person's journey towards their final destination therefore requires us to make a *šûb* and to accomplish *metanoia*. The Holy Spirit has already indicated to us (cf. Jn 16:8), but we choose otherwise; we do not realise that in reality I have failed or made a mistake, I am not consistent and disciplined in the lifestyle I have chosen, but I think I am fine, and in any case there is the sacrament of reconciliation. I have been shown where my weaknesses and my errors lie, but I have changed nothing; indeed, I have created my own 'path' and 'mindset', saying that change is my own business and there is no need for others to know or see it. Let us not forget how broad, vast and deep the two dimensions we have considered together are: conversion is not simply a private matter, but is always realised in communion: 'bear fruits in keeping with conversion' (Mt 3:8) because 'by their fruits you will recognise them' (Mt 7:20).

As members of MSF, the questions 'when should I repent' and 'why should I repent' no longer seem relevant to us. The question we should perhaps reflect on more is: what do I need to remedy or change in my life, as I proceed along the path of MSF? We are grateful that, through Our Lady's message, God has shown us our weaknesses; therefore, is it urgent? Jesus said: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!' (Mt 3:2), for 'what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, yet lose or ruin himself? (Lk 9:25). So, is it truly urgent and necessary to change ourselves whilst we know that the end is near? Am I truly on the right path towards the goal, or is this 'right path' merely my own subjective feeling? May the Holy Spirit guide and strengthen us; may the prayer of our Heavenly Mother help us. Amen.