

There once was a priest whose church needed a fresh coat of paint. The budget was tight that year so he told the workers to stretch the paint by diluting it with water. Halfway through the project it looked like they'd still have to buy more paint so the priest told them to thin it out again. Just as they finished the job, the skies grew overcast, thunder rolled, and a torrential rain poured down. The water struck the newly finished church and stripped the exterior of its fresh paint. The priest fell to his knees, raised his arms to the heavens and called out, "Lord, what am I supposed to do now?" At that the clouds parted, a dove appeared in the sky, and a voice came from the heavens which called out, "Repaint and thin no more."

The full message Jesus preached was "Repent and believe the good news." Or, as our translation says, "Reform your lives and believe in the good news." That one sentence summarizes Jesus' preaching. It is the first sentence we hear from the lips of Jesus in Mark's Gospel, and everything else, you could say, comments on this theme. "Reform your lives and believe in the good news."

Notice there are two parts to this theme--sin and redemption, or guilt and gospel. Traditionally, Catholics are better at guilt than we are at gospel. Many of us are shamed of our sins more than we are joyful in the gospel. That's how Catholics used to be raised. Many of us have a low self-image that makes it difficult to accept praise. If this is you, after you cook a meal, for example, when everyone compliments you on the marvelous food, instead of saying, "Thank you," you say, "Well, the beans were overdone." Or you may know some children who hear about their mistakes over and over until they despair of ever pleasing their parents. Many of us heard the message "Reform your lives" loud and clear, but never could believe in the good news.

On the other hand, there are those who accept the gospel with joy, they believe in the good news, but they avoid repentance. They deal poorly with conflict so they tend to overlook it. They rarely say, "I'm sorry," to a spouse, to a friend, to an employee; they avoid the sacrament of reconciliation. If you look at our country over the last twenty years you can see how as a nation we behaved this way in regard to the Vietnam conflict. The war was a source of embarrassment, we didn't know how to welcome back our soldiers. So we ignored them. Only in recent years have we erected memorials, and created movies and a television series to reform our behavior, to thank those who served, to mourn those who died, to cry out for those who are still missing. We wanted to believe good news, but it was hard to reform our lives.

A balanced Christian follows both parts of Jesus' command. Balanced Christians admit their guilt to reform their lives; balanced Christians keep a joyful heart to believe in the good news. If you ever wonder, like a priest who loses his paint job, "Lord, what am I supposed to do now?" There are two simple answers to remember: Reform your lives, and believe in the good news.