

September 18, 2011 – Fr. Tim Ralston

Arthur Flegenheimer is probably not a name any of us are familiar with. Perhaps there are a few of us who have heard the name, Dutch Schultz, though. Arthur Flegenheimer and Dutch Schultz are one and the same person. So, why the two different names? Because Arthur Flegenheimer isn't really a good name for a gangster. Dutch Schultz works much better for that line of work.

And Dutch Schultz wasn't just any gangster. He has been called "a criminal of criminals". He was suspected of everything from bootlegging to extortion, from robbery to murder. One day, in 1935, Dutch was with some friends in a tavern, his life of crime caught up with him. He was shot by two gunmen who had entered the tavern.

Dutch was rushed to the hospital, where he realized he didn't have much time. So, he called for a Catholic priest. He wanted to get himself straight with God, while he still had the chance. A priest came, talked with him for a while and proceeded to baptize him. Dutch died later that night, and was then granted a proper Christian burial in a Catholic cemetery.

This was all very controversial, though. People were confused, upset, even outraged that a notorious criminal like this should be welcomed into the Church on his death bed. And it seems that what bothered many people, whether they would state it this way or not, was that someone who lived such an immoral life could receive the same reward as those of us who struggle daily to be faithful to the Lord. Some of us spend our entire lives trying to do what God calls us to do, with the hope of receiving the everlasting life promised to us. And here is this man, this criminal, who waits until the very end, his last few hours, to convert, and he's given that same everlasting life. It didn't seem fair; it didn't seem just. God could ask the same question as the land owner in the parable, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

For that's what all of this comes down to, the generosity of God. That's the main point of the parable. God is generous beyond measure. He gives and gives and gives, even up to the last hour. God gives, even when our limited human thinking doesn't understand why. As we heard in our first reading, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." God is far more generous with His gifts and His grace than we could ever comprehend or grasp.

So God is willing to offer everything, including everlasting life, to each and every one of us, regardless of our past, regardless of our reputation, regardless of our life up to that point. And as I said, He is willing to offer this up to the final hour. God's generosity doesn't run out. We can see it in today's parable. We can see it in the story of Dutch Schultz. We can see it in the story of the Good Thief, who died next to Jesus, and to whom Jesus said, "This day you will be with me in paradise."

God will always be reaching out to us, offering us salvation, true freedom, and eternal life. He will do so until our last breath on this earth. This doesn't mean, however, that we can plan on having a deathbed conversion of our own. I'll admit, it might sound a little bit tempting. Live your life as you want, not worrying about God's commands, and just make sure you repent and confess before you die. Because, after all, if God is so generous, His mercy and grace will always be there when I need it.

However, this line of thinking is called presumption, which is itself a sin. We presume that we'll have the opportunity to confess and to repent. We presume that regardless of what we do and how we live, God will grant us that mercy and overlook our sins. One of the problems with this though is that we know not the day nor the hour when this life might end. We can't plan for the unknown. Also, and more importantly, our repentance, our conversion, our relationship with the Lord, must be sincere. It must be genuine. We have to truly desire God, and His great love for us.

This is why conversion, normally, isn't just a one-time occurrence. It is a daily renewal of our commitment to God. It is on-going. For we all have weaknesses in our lives. We all stumble on occasion as we strive for that holiness to which we are called. We all stand in need of God's mercy and grace.

And this is why God is so generous. Because He loves us and He knows that we need Him to be generous. We need Him to continue to offer us that grace of conversion and the forgiveness of our sins. God's offer is not just a one-time only offer, but is continuous. He offers it to saints, to sinners, to young, to old, to rich, to poor. He offers it to us. Indeed, God's thoughts are not our thoughts. He is generous beyond our comprehension. And for that, let us be grateful.