

REFLECTIONS ON THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

(AKA: CONFESSION AND RECONCILIATION)

Today many people ask the question, “Do we really need to go to confession anymore?” It seems that people have lost a sense of what this sacrament is really about. What follows are some reflections for you to think about as you make your preparations for Easter.

Confessing one’s sins and expressing sorrow for those sins are important aspects of the sacrament of Penance. However, there are other dimensions to this sacrament that we often miss. Do you thank God for the many ways that He has helped you overcome past sinfulness? The most positive aspect of this sacrament is what Jesus does, through the actions of the priest, forgiving our sins in a direct and personal way, and what Jesus does in us, in helping us change our lives so as to live as true disciples. Sin is not so much about breaking laws as it is about damaging relationships. Jesus gave us a new commandment: *“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Mt 22:37-39)

When we sin we hurt our relationship with God but sin also hurts our relationship with other people, including our faith community. We need forgiveness from those we hurt, directly or indirectly. We can receive this healing forgiveness through the sacrament of Penance. And through this

healing sacrament we have the opportunity to grow spiritually more and more in the likeness of Christ.

How can one examine his/her conscience? Take a few moments each day and reflect on your encounters with others. Ask yourself, “Did I treat others the way Jesus would have me treat them? Did I remember to ask God to be part of my work, my recreation, and my family today? How have I responded to God’s love for me today?” Don’t just focus on the times in the day when you fell short. Also pay attention to the times when you did respond to someone as Christ would. These few questions can lead you to a deeper sense of God’s love for you and your care for others.

Try to approach this sacrament as a gift given to you by God that can bring peace and wholeness to your life. Jesus came to bring peace. The experience of true forgiveness does just that. Holding on to our sins because we don’t want to confess them can bring a lack of peace and dull one’s conscience.

Lastly, in preparing for this sacrament, you may wish to consciously choose to whom you will go for confession. Find a confessor that meets your needs and with whom you can easily communicate. Remember that this is an opportunity for growth and healing. Choose someone who can be a companion for your journey of faith.

- Catherine Sims, Pastoral Associate

A “HOW TO GO TO CONFESSION” REVIEW

When you enter the reconciliation room [confessional] the priest will welcome you. He will then invite you to make the sign of the cross with him. Father may choose to read a brief text from Scripture telling about God’s mercy and calling us to conversion. You may choose a text if you wish. Tell Father approximately when the last time you celebrated the sacrament of penance: then confess your sins. Simply speak to the priest in a normal, conversational fashion. Father may ask some questions for clarification and/or give you some suggestions as to how to go about overcoming a particular sin.

Before you receive absolution, Father will invite you to express the sorrow you have for your sins through an Act of Contrition. There are many forms for this prayer. Here are three of them. You may use any one of these or use your own words to describe the sorrow that is in your heart.

A) *My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.*

Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy.

B) *Lord Jesus, you chose to be called the friend of sinners. By your saving death and resurrection, free me from my sins. May your peace take root in my heart and bring forth a harvest of love, holiness, and truth.*

C) *Lord God, in your goodness, have mercy on me: do not look on my sins, but take away all my guilt. Create in me a clean heart and renew within me an upright spirit. Amen.*

Once you have expressed your sorrow, the priest will give you absolution. If you are seated, just bow your head as Father extends his hands over your head for the prayer of absolution. After you receive forgiveness, you may wish to give thanks to God in your own words before you leave. Please feel free to bring this article with you when you go to confession if it will help you be more comfortable.