

Lent is clearly a fitting time to celebrate the sacrament of Penance either individually or in common with fellow parishioners. More than any other time of the year, during these days we look to the cross of Jesus Christ and we are reminded of the words of St. Paul who told us, “God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8). Like St. Paul, we too can also say, “Christ loved me and gave himself up for me.” (Ephesians 5:2).

We are so frugal in our willingness to forgive one another. Yet God is so lavish. Pope Benedict once reminded the young people of the world that because we are redeemed by the Blood of Christ, no human life is useless or of little value. Each of us is loved personally by God with a passionate and faithful love, a love without limits. How can we be afraid to seek His mercy?

In his Lenten message in 2009, Pope Benedict reminded us that those 40 days provide us with “an itinerary of more intense spiritual training.” The traditional penitential practices of prayer, almsgiving and fasting, he said, help us experience God’s power, which, as we will be reminded during the Easter Vigil, “dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy, casts out hatred, brings us peace and humbles earthly pride.”

I sincerely hope that you will take the opportunity through the sacrament of Penance to free your hearts from slavery to sin.

Another Prayer of Sorrow

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.

Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.

(from Psalm 51)



Sacramental Confession

By Archbishop John Vlazny

Catholics no longer approach a priest as frequently as they did 50 years ago to confess their sins and receive the sacrament of Penance. I don’t think we sin less than our grandparents. But we do seem to have a certain aversion to sacramental confession. At the same time, however, folks are regularly “confessing” their faults to therapists, counselors, support groups, radio and TV personnel, even to barbers and beauticians! I suspect some have never truly experienced the sense of relief and peace this sacrament brings. Many others are simply embarrassed because they aren’t sure about the way Catholics receive this beautiful sacrament of spiritual healing and reconciliation.

When we take the time to celebrate the sacrament of Penance, three privileged moments occur. First of all, there is the confession of sin which necessarily includes all serious sins that we can recall and an honest admission of some lesser faults which regularly impede our journey of faith. The second moment involves penitential prayers or activities which hopefully counteract some of the selfish remnants of our sinful behavior. Finally, and most importantly, there is the expression of God’s forgiveness through the words of absolution spoken by the priest. Sin is a personal matter, not necessarily private. Reconciliation also is a very personal matter. But the sacrament of Penance can likewise be celebrated with a number of persons present, as often happens in many of the Penance services that take place across the Archdiocese during this holy season.

When the sacrament of Penance is celebrated with a number of persons present, the rite usually begins with readings from Scripture, followed by a homily, an examination of conscience, individual confession and absolution, praise of God’s mercy and prayers of thanksgiving. When we approach the sacrament individually under normal circumstances, the order of the sacrament is as follows.

How to Go to Confession

The priest usually greets the penitent and both of them make the sign of the cross together. The priest then invites the penitent to trust in God as he or she confesses sins. Sometimes the priest also reads from a Scriptural text that proclaims God's mercy. After the penitent makes a confession of sins, including all serious sins that he or she may recall, the priest offers a word of advice and proposes an act of penance. The penitent then expresses sorrow through an Act of Contrition.

There are many variations of this Act of Contrition. I tend to use the traditional form I learned as a youngster. But I include here one that strikes me as especially appropriate and worth our prayerful consideration.

Act of Contrition

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 things.
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.

However you do it, the prayer I've proposed does contain the essential elements of a true Act of Contrition. Following that prayer of the penitent, the priest extends his hands and speaks the words of absolution. He then dismisses the penitent with words and/or gestures of peace.

Preparing to Go to Confession

We Catholics prepare to receive the sacrament of Penance by examining our consciences in the light of the word of God. We all have different responsibilities in life and, hence, the examination of conscience will be different for children, for young adults, for single persons, for married persons and for clergy and religious. An examination of conscience for married persons, for example, would include reflections about the way a person has dealt with his or her

responsibilities to God, to his or her spouse, to children in the family, and to society. The commandments of God and of the Church are helpful as guides in our efforts to review these responsibilities and our efforts to carry them out.

An Examination of Conscience

- 1. You shall honor no other God but me.**
Against idolatry of self, others or the state.
For faith in a loving and forgiving God.
- 2. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.**
Against irreverence for God and people or making light of the mystery of their relationship.
For the reverence and value of the mystery of God and human beings.
- 3. You shall keep holy the Sabbath.**
Against refusal to acknowledge our dependence on God's love and mercy.
For an ever increasing gratitude for God's gift of life and covenant-affirming worship.
- 4. You shall honor your father and mother.**
Against any force of influence that weakens or destroys family life.
For behavior that builds strong, Christian family life.
- 5. You shall not kill.**
Against those who deny or destroy the sacredness of human life.
For the honoring of every human life as sacred.
- 6. You shall not commit adultery.**
Against dehumanizing sexuality and irreverence of the marriage vow.
For human dignity and fulfillment in light of covenantal, married love.
- 7. You shall not steal.**
Against stealing personal property, including exploitation of the poor.
For protection of personal property and economic justice for the poor and those who are oppressed.
- 8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**
Against lying, cheating and defamation of character.
For the values of truth and honesty in society.
- 9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.**
Against lust and the permission of disordered passions.
For the value of humans as worthy of love and reverence, coupled with respect for the marriage vows.
- 10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.**
Against greed, avarice, or exploitation of the environment.
For wholesome love of creation, poverty of spirit and loving care for the world's environment.