The Sacrament of Reconciliation: A Beautiful Vehicle of Mercy

One of the hardest things to understand can be the incredible mercy of God. As humans, we are used to going back and forth with gifts; you give me a gift, I return the favor, or at least should send a note of thanks. But with God, there is no asterisk next to this gift. He gives us His love freely. All that we have to do is ask for it and seek it with an open heart. And there are many ways we can do that, from personal prayer, to coming to Mass and receiving Holy Communion. Such is the beauty of our faith – God's love comes to us in so many ways.

A big conduit of mercy is the sacrament of confession. In confession, we have a beautiful gift given to us by God. The challenge for us is to use it, and grow in our faith by doing so.

Jesus, appearing in our Gospel today, says to the disciples, "whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, whose sins you retain are retained." The Church has looked to this verse as Jesus giving us the sacrament of confession. Jesus certainly forgave sins in His lifetime on earth; but, as He has risen now and His mission on earth is completed, while He may not physically be walking the earth anymore, He still wants His love to be conveyed, and so He passes on this power to the disciples, who in turn will pass it on to their successors. So what goes into the sacrament?

A confession has 4 parts to it: contrition, the confession of sins, absolution, and satisfaction, and I'd just like to run through them briefly.

The first part is contrition. We show some sorrow for what they have done. That is typically obvious by the fact that one has taken the time to show up, but we begin with "Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been....since my last confession" and then begin with the second part.

The second part is what can be scary for some people, but it really shouldn't be. That's the actual confession of sins. To prepare for this, we take a few moments to do what's called an examination of conscience, where we think about the things we have done that we aren't too proud of. It's a good idea to do some soul searching and ask "what is it in my life that has diminished my ability to see God and be His face to others?" Think about your relationship with God, yourself and other people. You can find some great examinations of conscience online too. If you can't think of everything, don't worry; everything is washed away at confession. The priest is also there to give advice and counsel, though it's not a time for lengthy spiritual direction unless a private confession. One should go to confession in case of serious sin too; but as for what makes a sin serious, it has to be grave, you have to know its of grave matter, and you have to carry it through while being free to do so. So if you think about robbing a bank, plan it out, but then come to your senses, there is no mortal sin there. The priest isn't on a mission to know every detail about what you confess, but he will probably take a few moments to talk about things with you and give you some words that will help you grow. If there's something in particular on your mind too, don't be afraid to point it out to the priest – sometimes it can be hard to pick up on what's bothering the person the most. You can also make an appointment for a private confession if you'd like to talk about something at greater length.

And now, the million dollar question. We have a penitential rite, we have Holy Communion, and many of us take time to reflect on things in life we could do better and pray about them. Why then is a priest needed? The authority to forgive sins is also handed on by Christ, as we hear in

our Gospel today. But beyond that, the priest is also there to help the penitent understand their sins better. It's not meant to be a counseling session, but sometimes people think they have done something horrible, when in fact no sin has been committed. Or, if someone thinks something is very minor when it fact it's something that really needs to be changed, the priest is there to help too, and gently point out that the penitent should take something more seriously. Most importantly, the priest is there to say the words of absolution and we hear those beautiful words of mercy.

Following the confession, the act of contrition is recited. If you don't have this memorized, don't worry; most confessionals have a copy of it there, and if you don't know it, the priest will help you with it. There are multiple versions. It is said aloud because it is how we show our sorrow for our sins. Then, a penance is assigned. This isn't meant to be some kind of carrot on a stick to "get" absolution, but rather is a way we show our sorrow and help make up for the things we did.

The final part is the actual absolution. The priest, as my spiritual director reminded me, is God's imperfect instrument – meaning we go to confession too, and are sinners just like the person coming to us. Our job is to let people know how much they are loved by God, and we say the words given to us by the Church that reflect that beautiful verse from John, those whose sins you forgive are forgiven.

Confession, like I said, might sound scary, but it is all about rejoicing. The priest is called to be compassionate, for it is not he who forgives the sins, it is Christ, whom the priest represents. And one of the most powerful examples of that is the father in the story of the prodigal son. In that story, you might remember the son who figured out he needed to go back home has his lines all memorized: treat me as a worker, I have sinned against God and you and am not worthy to be called your son. But how does the father react? He does not even get the words out before he is embraced with love. That is what confession is meant to do: embrace us with the love of God.

I mention this because today, besides being the Second Sunday of Easter, today is also Divine Mercy Sunday, which celebrates the infinite mercy of our Lord. I'm privileged to hear confessions Sunday after Mass from 11:30 to 1. Maybe you have been away from the sacrament for quite some time, and have fear about going. Or maybe at times, you get frustrated with something in your past, thinking you have to keep it hidden. Reflect on the words of Sister Faustina Kowalska, the Polish Saint, who had a vision of Christ that led to this feast being established. She wrote that Christ told her: ***Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet. My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or of angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity.***

If you've seen the image of Christ based on her visions, in it our Lord is pictured in the act of blessing, with two rays, one red and the other white, representing blood and water, shining from His heart, with the words "Jesus, I trust in thee" placed at His feet. We have a beautiful painting of this we place in front of the ambo every Divine Mercy Sunday. Sometimes we can get down on ourselves, and perhaps be like Peter before the resurrection – focused on the past, wanting to hide the truth of ourselves from the world. Each one of us has mistakes, and each one of us are sinners. Peter though didn't deny the past; rather he trusted in the love of His Lord and he became a transformed man. On this Divine Mercy Sunday, may we do the same and take to heart

those words from our second reading: “He touched me with His right hand and said, Do not be afraid...” We do not have to fear our Lord – but rather must invite Him into our hearts. God has given us a beautiful gift in His Church and in the sacrament of Reconciliation. It might not make us perfect, and indeed after we go we will sin again, but as Pope Francis recently said, God never tires of mercy. Hopefully we trust in that always, and let His mercy shine the light of love on our hearts and souls by reaching out to Him through this beautiful sacrament.

Have a very blessed week and Divine Mercy Sunday,

Fr. Paul