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Reconciliation and Penance

Second Sunday of Easter (Octave of Easter or Divine Mercy Sunday)

Confession. Penance. Reconciliation. This one sacrament has had many different titles over the years. Nevertheless, these names refer to the same event: the sacrament by which Christ forgives sins through the priest. We should truly stop and reflect on this awesome sacrament more fully, particularly on this Divine Mercy Sunday.

Each of these three names expresses a different aspect of this sacrament. “Reconciliation” best expresses the original use of the sacrament, which was to reconcile serious sinners with the Church. In the early Church, there was no private confession to a priest. This was a later development which began in Ireland. Instead, this sacrament was first used to reconcile serious, grave sinners with the Church community. This was a very public event, in which the penitent would undergo some form of public penance, usually for the forty days of Lent. Then, on Holy Thursday morning, the sinners would be received back by the community after prostrating themselves in front of the bishop.

Thankfully, none of us has to go through this procedure when we approach this sacrament. Still, many find themselves at various points in their lives far from the Church. Perhaps they have committed serious sin by neglecting Sunday Mass attendance or by violating the Church’s teaching on sexual ethics. If they come to the priest with contrition for what they have done, these sins will be sacramentally forgiven, and they can be fully reconciled with God.

A second component of this sacrament is “penance.” For many of us, this word calls to mind “two Hail Marys and three Our Fathers.” But it also refers to our daily struggle with sin, during which we often commit what we call “venial sins.” These less serious sins are not to be taken lightly, as they are offenses against God and neighbor. Nevertheless, as we seek to live the Gospel more fully, we can find ourselves coming up short in certain ways. For these sins too we can approach the sacrament and receive grace and advice to overcome our tendencies to selfishness. The penance we then receive is meant to set us back on the road of grace. Sometimes, familiar prayers are helpful in this regard. Other times, a priest might give a Scripture passage to pray with. For sins which involve unjustly taking someone’s property or reputation, penance involves restoring that as best as one can.

Finally, there is the term “confession.” Though technically an unofficial name for this sacrament, it is the term most ingrained in our culture, both among Catholics and in popular media. You’ve undoubtedly seen a movie or television show or read a book in which a character “goes to confession.” This name brings out the fact that this sacrament involves saying one’s sins to someone else. This is a private affair. The priest can never reveal what a person says in Confession to anyone, even when testifying in court. Think of the awesome responsibility of the priest in this regard. Many of us constantly ask ourselves how unworthy we are to listen to the faults and failings of others when we ourselves are so imperfect. Yet this is not a task we priests could appoint ourselves to; instead, Christ ordains us for this purpose.

The penitent who approaches the sacrament comes with a great degree of trust. One must trust that the priest will be a kind and caring confessor, but also that God will freely forgive our sins. Many people struggle with unforgiveness in their lives. They are afraid to tell God what they have done because they worry he will not be compassionate. This often stems from experiences of other people not forgiving them.

Yet we must never cease repeating the beautiful words of Pope Francis: “God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy” (*Evangelii gaudium* 3). The greatest example of this is Jesus’ encounter with the Apostles in the Upper Room. They had abandoned him in his hour of need. Peter, the leader of the group, had denied *three times* that he even knew Jesus. But on that first Easter Sunday night, Jesus comes not with reprimands but with mercy: “Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” (John 20:19 NAB). From that beautiful act of forgiveness comes our belief that Jesus *still today* forgives sins, especially through the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance (i.e. “Confession”).

We call this Second Sunday of Easter Divine Mercy Sunday, which was introduced by Pope St. John Paul II to promote the devotion to Divine Mercy. This is particularly associated with St. Maria Faustina Kowalska, a Polish mystic who developed the Divine Mercy Chaplet. But we must remember on this Second Sunday of Easter that God’s mercy is nothing new. It is rooted in God’s eternal love for us, which Jesus revealed so perfectly in his death and resurrection. That is the mystery we celebrate every time we sit down in front of a priest and say, “Bless me father, for I have sinned...” ~Rev. Eric J. Banecker