

December 18, 2019 The Sacrament of Penance Homily: A few years ago, the American film Institute compiled a list of the one hundred most memorable quotations in the history of motion pictures. Near the top of the list... number thirteen to be exact, is a quotation lifted from an award winning 1970 film, *“Love Story”*: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry”. The date of the film’s release to the public is noteworthy if for no other reason than Western culture had then begun its long slide into the abyss of moral relativism and skepticism. Around this same time, John Lennon, one of the four Beatles, wrote a song, *“Imagine”* trumpeting a culture without religion and entertaining no possibility of a life after death.

So let us ask ourselves, do we ever owe another person a sincere apology for our bad behavior? Does the wounded person need to see some concrete evidence that the wrongdoer is truly contrite? Are we obliged to make amends for our past misdeeds and then, once given the opportunity, seek to be reconciled with the injured party? Is an offense against our neighbor who bears the divine image also an offense against God, the source of all truth? No doubt our words may, at times, ring hollow and lack seriousness, but still represent a first small step on the path to conversion.

In a secular culture often marked by division and partisanship, an apology is often seen as a sign of weakness, and a foolish capitulation to our weaker brothers and sisters. An apology, says the secularist, gives the other person a decided moral advantage because he is in debt to him. Such a wrongheaded view suggests that there are those who are simply too proud ever to admit there is anything wrong in their lives; or are too attached to that wrong, so that they are unwilling even to think about changing their ways. Clearly, the loss of the sense of sin is widespread today.

However, in popular music, the importance of an apology is featured in many best selling songs. You may be of an age to remember fondly Connie Francis’ delightful song, *“Who’s Sorry Now”* or Etta James’ classic, *“I’m Sorry”*. More recently, *“Sorry seems to be the Hardest Word”* and Justin Bieber’s *“Sorry”* reached the top of the Billboard charts. Causing someone pain is no laughing matter. It requires a genuine act of contrition and a willingness to repair the wrong done to a friend, family member, co-worker or stranger. Even some of our most successful songwriters recognize this most basic truth.

In Jesus’ marvelous parable of the prodigal son, a young man who foolishly squanders his inheritance finally “comes to his senses”. (Lk. 15:17) He painfully realizes that he “has sinned against his father and heaven”, (Lk.15:20) so he goes back to his father. (Lk.15:20) He immediately apologizes. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.” (Lk. 15:21) The parable ends on a high note. The father’s mercy all but guarantees a beautiful reconciliation and a fresh beginning for the wayward son.

The Sacrament of Penance, otherwise known as “confession”, is all about the mercy of God. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we learn that “those who approach the Sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion”. (Catholic Church 1422)

In today’s toxic environment, it takes considerable courage to admit our sins and beg forgiveness of God and of our neighbors. The enemies of our faith will always push back and resist. They are relentless.

At the end of the day, an apology is a wonderful gesture; one in keeping with Our Lord’s teaching that “He who humbles himself will be exalted”.

Amen!