

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
June 3, 2018
Spiritual Ponderings
Sacrament of Reconciliation

I had been ordained less than two weeks, when I was asked to help celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation at a Catholic grade school. I honestly do not know who was more nervous the children or me. I remember sitting in the confessional waiting for the first little penitent to come in and thinking that I was prepared as I was ever going to be. After all these were going to be children's confessions how bad could they be. About halfway through a group of second graders, a young boy came in and sat down and confessed his sins like all his classmates had done before him. I gave the boy a small penance to do and then I asked him to recite the Act of Contrition. The boy's little face lit up and you could just see how proud he was that he had memorized the Act of Contrition. He then proceeded to put his hand over his heart and instead of the words to the Act of Contrition coming out of his mouth, the words to the Pledge of Allegiance came out instead. It took every ounce of strength I had not to start laughing not so much at the boy but just that the Pledge of Allegiance was the last thing I had expected to come out of the little boy's mouth. Instead of laughing, I composed myself and congratulated the boy for his beautiful recitation of Pledge of Allegiance and then I invited him to pray with me the Act of Contrition that was on a sheet of paper in the confessional. After we finished I prayed the prayer of absolution and sent him on his way. I could not help but think of the beautiful lesson that God had just taught me about the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Sacrament was not about "making God forgive me" by perfectly reciting words but rather it was about receiving God's love and mercy in a way that I knew I was forgiven.

1. We need the Sacraments not God.

One of the biggest hang-ups that people have with the Sacrament of Reconciliation is that they think the Catholic Church is somehow trying to limit God's mercy or the way God dispenses it. This way of thinking shows a complete misunderstanding of the Sacraments.

God is not bound and controlled by the rites contained within the Sacraments. God can forgive anyone anywhere He desires. God does not need the Sacraments. It is we human beings who need the Sacraments so that God can communicate to us the invisible realities through visible signs.

I can ask God for forgiveness outside the Sacrament of Reconciliation and assume that I have received God's mercy or I can go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and be certain of it. The priest as the instrument of God affirms my forgiveness through the prayer of absolution. I do not have to spend my life worrying whether or not I was contrite enough to be forgiven. I hear God through the priest tell me that I was forgiven.

2. Penance is Medicinal not Restorative

The penance a person receives in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not meant to make up for the sins that we have committed in the past but rather it is medicinal. Like medicine, penance does not take us back into time to prevent an illness but rather as medicine assists us in overcoming that illness, penances are meant to assist us in avoiding that same sin in the future.

For example, people will sometimes confess a sin of unchastity and I will assign them a penance of praying a certain number of Hail Mary's. I do this because I found in my own life that when I feel tempted to be unchaste, I can avoid that sin of unchastity by praying a Hail Mary or three. This helps me redirecting my thoughts towards something good instead of giving into temptation.

A priest cannot give a penitent a penance that would disclose the penitent sin, for example if a person confesses stealing a candy bar from a grocery store the priest cannot ask the penitent to pay for the candy bar as a penance. A priest cannot also give a penitent a penance that he or she cannot complete. For example, I cannot assign a person a penance that he or she is unable of carrying out. For example I cannot assign a penance of praying the "Prayer to St. Michael" if he or she does not know the prayer of St. Michael or cannot find it. Jesus paid the price for our sins once and for all.



Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
June 10, 2018
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Some more reflections on the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

3. God desires to Forgive You

There are many Catholics who sadly do not celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation because they are afraid of somehow messing up the ritual. This is truly sad because the ritual itself is really meant only as a guide and a tool to help us confess our sins and to receive God's forgiveness. A person does not have to "Bless me Father, for I have sinned..." in order to have their sins forgiven. More times than not when I celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a person we begin by making the Sign of the Cross so that we call to mind that what we are doing at this moment is holy. I then ask the person to tell me his or her sins. The person can then confess all the sins they can remember. It is not important that they recall all the sins they have committed since their last confession but it is important not to hold anything back out of fear. Following the confessions of sins, the priest normally offers some advice on how to avoid those sins in the future and asks the penitent to perform a penance.

To make sure the person is truly sorry for his or her sins, the priest asks the penitent to pray an Act of Contrition. This can be a prayer that is memorized, read off a sheet of paper, repeated after the priest, or simple made up. The importance of the prayer is not so much the words but rather the taking ownership of the sins and admitting that one is sorry for having committed them. Finally, the priest prays the prayer of absolution and dismisses the person.

A person who is afraid of going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation should think of it not so much as a legal proceeding where every word is measured and might be used against you later but rather as a doctor's visit where the more information the doctor has the more the doctor can assist the person in getting better. Remember God desires to forgive you and His forgiveness like His love is unconditional. There is no jumping through hoops to earn God's love. This made most evident to us in the story of the Prodigal Son:

And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24)

Note that the younger son cannot even get his practice speech out to his father because his father has already forgiven him and just wants to love him. There are no thoughts of punishments on the Father's mind. No hoops for the son to jump through.

4.. It is alright to repeat

Human beings must admit that we are unique creatures in that we are not angels (morally pure and innocent) and at the same time we are not demons (morally deprived and evil). We, human beings, are stuck somewhere in the middle. St.

Thomas Aquinas stated in his philosophy that “no one ever did evil for the sake of evil.” In other words anyone who has done evil has done so out of choosing the wrong thing as the good.

Every time we mess up and sin, we need to return to God and ask for forgiveness.

The only way to grow in the moral life is to develop virtues and they are only developed over time and with great repetition. There are very few things that human beings do well right off the bat. We do get better with practice and experience. A baseball player would never advance if he only focused on the number of swings and misses. He keeps practicing shooting to get better. This should be our attitude when it comes to sin. God is a coach who will never give up on us.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

June 17, 2018

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Some more thoughts on the Sacrament of Reconciliation

5. It is about Forgiveness and Not Acquitting

Many people also avoid the Sacrament of Reconciliation because they confuse the idea of acquitting with forgiveness. Acquitting is a legal term that means that a person did not commit a crime that he or she was accused of. Forgiveness is about accepting the fact that a person has done wrong and instead of responding with hate, anger, or punishment, one responds with love and peace. As Catholics we do not enter the confession seeking to be acquitted. We admit right off the bat that we have sinned and that we are sinners. We confess our guilt. God instead of wiping away our past or punishing us for our sins offers us forgiveness. He wipes away our debt but not the fact that we were in debt.

This is an important distinction when we talk about faith being a relationship with God. When I admit to others that I have hurt them (intentionally or not) and I receive their forgiveness my relationship with that person is strengthened. The person I confess to becomes impressed with my willingness to admit my wrong and I am more grateful for their forgiveness. The more I confess to God my sins and the more I receive His forgiveness the closer we become.

6. Forgiveness is Also not About Feeling

Some people tell me that they have not been to confession in a long time because the last time they went they still felt guilty. God through the Sacrament does not promise us good feelings. He promised us the forgiveness of our sins. There are times in which I have gotten into my car and started driving to a place only to arrive at to destination without remembering half of my trip. Just because I don't remember making a right turn at an intersection or remembering going over a bridge does not mean I did not reach my destination.

God promised to forgive our sins through the Sacrament and our God is trustworthy. The power of the Sacrament rests solely on God's power and not on the priest or the penitent.

Sometimes people complain about the penance they receive from the priest and think that doing something like praying 3 Hail Mary's can in no way make up for the pain that their sins has committed. These are true but remember the point of the penance is not to repair the damage our sins has caused. Jesus did that through the cross. The purpose is to help us grow in holiness. Maybe saying 3 Hail Mary's as a penance is meant to make us realize how great God is or to remind us that we cannot earn God's love. It might also mean to remind us to avoid the sin in the future one should follow the example of Mary who said “yes” to God.

7. Guilt can B Good For Us.

Some people complain about leaving the Sacrament of Reconciliation still feeling guilty. Guilt though is not necessarily a bad thing. Guilt is a feeling that is meant to create a desire within us not to commit the same mistake again. If a person burns themselves by touching the top of the stove, the pain the memory of the pain they received should make them

more careful the next time they are around the stove. In the same way guilt is meant to help avoid committing the same sin over and over again.

We must be careful because there is such a thing as bad or truncated guilt which is not healthy because instead of learning from our mistake and advancing along the road to life, we begin to become fixated on the act that caused guilt and instead of growing from our experience we become fixated on it.

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June 26, 2018

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8. Confession is a Weapon in our Battle against the Devil.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, in his rules of discernment implies that the devil can best be defeated by talking with a confessor, spiritual director, or a group of spiritually enlightened people. St. Ignatius of Loyola says the devil is like a person who wants to have an affair with you and the devil knows this affair can only happen if you do not tell your spiritual spouse (God). Once you tell God that the devil is trying to persuade you and bring the temptation to the light the devil loses all power. What better way to do this than in the Confessional to a priest while celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

St. Ignatius also compares the devil to a bully than when directly confronted will back down. Again is there a better way to confront the devil than by going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and confessing your sins. Admitting our sinfulness to God strengthens our bond with Him. The devil must run away.

Finally St. Ignatius of Loyola compares the devil to a military general of sorts who is constantly probing to attack us at our weakest point. By having a daily examination of conscience and celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis one discovers one's weakest points and can strengthen them before the devil attacks there again.

9. Temptation versus Sin

Over the last few years, I have become more and more convinced that one of the problems in the world today is that we often equate temptation with sin. I might want to hit someone but until I do hit that person or enter into a fantasy about striking that person, I have not committed a sin. Maybe in wanting to strike that person is a temptation that I can turn into a moment of virtue by praying for the person I wanted to strike and/or by examining my reason for wanting to strike that person. It is important for Catholics to realize temptations are neutral because if we don't we can begin to beat ourselves up for having them and that makes us easier prey for the devil. Remember Jesus was tempted but never sin.

10. Stained Glass Window Effect

Finally, I want to discuss what I have named the Stained-Glass window effect. One of my jobs at my current parish is to lock up the Church each evening and during the winter months night comes pretty early and so when I enter the Church late at night and the sun is not out the stained-glass windows do not look very impressive because there is no light shining through them. In the morning when I open the Church and see the sunlight coming through the windows I see their beauty but also how dirty they are.

In the same way a soul that does not have the love of God shining through it will not recognize how dirty it is. When God is pouring His light through the person then he or she becomes more aware of his or her sins. This is most evident in Scripture in the story of Isaiah and the Call of St. Peter in Luke's Gospel. They both admit that they are "sinners in a world of sinners" and it is at that moment that God can work with them and them His co-workers.

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a

short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets." When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him.*

When was the last time you went to the Sacrament of Reconciliation? If it has been over sixth months, I would strongly encourage you to make the effort to go soon. There really is not a good reason to not go and be reconciled with the Lord.

