

4th Sunday of Lent (B)

This weekend we continue our monthly catechetical homilies on the Mass, as part of the Year of the Eucharist. Last month we talked about the Procession, the Altar, and the Sign of the Cross. Today we are talking about the Penitential Act and the Gloria.

Once Mass has begun with the Sign of the Cross and the Greeting, we prepare ourselves for what is about to happen by calling to mind our sins in the Penitential Act. The Penitential Act is that part of Mass where we call to mind our sins. There are three different forms of this, but here at Visitation we observe the first option by saying what is called the *Confiteor*, which begins, “I confess to almighty God...” The word *confiteor* simply means “I confess” in Latin.

This prayer is very rich and beautiful. It covers the different types of sins very succinctly for us, and so can be an aid in examining our consciences. Sins are acts of the will, and can be divided into two groups: sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission are things that we do in our thoughts, in our words, or by our actions. Sins of omission are things that we have failed to do, meaning we became aware of a good action to be done but we did not do it, we omitted to engage in a good action.

During the Penitential Act we should think of specific sins from our past that we are sorry for. If not we are letting a very significant moment slip away from us. It is good for us to be reminded of our sins. The Apostle John says this in his first letter, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If

we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8-10). We should not dwell or obsess over them, but being sorrowful over our sins is a good thing because it is revealing our love for God to us. We are only sorry if we’ve hurt someone we love.

By calling to mind our sins we are also reminding ourselves of how dependent we are on the mercy of God, and our need for salvation. This requires humility on our part to recognize this, but it is the heavenly road. The saints thought themselves the greatest sinners because of their deep sorrow and contrition over their sins. And so Mass begins with calling to mind our sins to prepare ourselves for the rest of the Eucharistic Liturgy, and preparation always involves contrition in the Church.

We need to be adequately prepared especially if we are going to receive communion later on in the Mass. We might think that we have to receive communion every time we come to Mass, but that isn’t true. Technically, the Church asks us to receive communion only once a year during the Easter Season, sometimes referred to as the Easter Duty.

Some of you might be thinking, “But what about the Sunday obligation?” The Sunday obligation, which is still dispensed with right now due to COVID, is to attend Mass on Sunday, and NOT to receive communion on Sunday. The point is we can attend Mass and not receive communion. We should do this if we have not observed the one hour fast before receiving communion. We should especially

refrain from receiving communion if we are conscious of serious sin on our soul called mortal sin.

The prayer that the priest says after the *Confiteor*, called the Absolution, goes, “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgives us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” That prayer said by the priest forgives our venial sins. Any venial sins, even those we are not aware of, are forgiven. It does not forgive mortal sins. That’s what the Sacrament of Confession is for.

If we are aware of mortal sin we should seek Confession before receiving communion. Again, we can attend Mass without receiving communion. If we receive communion when we are in the state of mortal sin we commit the sin of sacrilege against the Holy Eucharist. This comes from the very words of St. Paul who says, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor. 11:27-29). This is the particular reason why we offer Confession before every weekend Mass here, so that Jesus’ mercy can be received for those needing it before receiving communion. We also have another opportunity this Wednesday evening as every church throughout the Archdiocese will be open from 5-6:30pm for Confession.

Then the *Gloria* is sung for major feasts and solemnities, and on Sundays outside of Lent and Advent. We refrain from the *Gloria* during Lent due to the

penitential character of the season. Joy comes with Easter. Now is the time for contrition, better understanding our needing to be saved in the first place. Jesus is our savior, which means that we needed saving in the first place. But saved from what? What did we need Jesus to save us from? Sin and death. And He did this through the blood of the Cross, which is made present to us at every Mass. We pierce the mystery of our salvation at every Mass.

The *Gloria* begins with the words, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will.” These are the words sung by angels in Heaven as witnessed by the shepherds on the night Jesus was born. At Mass Heaven and Earth embrace, become one. The *Gloria* is one part where this is made clear. We are using the very words of angels and making them our own. Think about that. We are praising God with the very same words that the angels use. Heavenly and angelic words are now heard on the tongues of men.

When we come to Mass we swept up into the life of the Trinity. We encountered divine and heavenly realities beyond our finite comprehension. What is primary at Mass is Jesus Christ and encountering Him. Let us remember this the next time father is giving another boring homily, or their singing that song I don’t like, or that baby won’t shut up, or whatever else might distract us. We come to Mass to be brought up into Heaven, to participate with the myriad of angels worshipping God. May each encounter with Heaven at Mass help us to be heavenly people to the world.