

A Reflection On The Sacrament Of Confession

By Fr. Jason Weber

The sacrament of Confession is one of the most precious gifts that we have received from God. The sure and certain sign of His love, drawing from the power of the cross, that forgives us our sins and allows us to enter once again into the sacred Liturgy. There are many catecheses written on the sacrament and we should all be eager to continue our education on every aspect of our faith and rejoice when we find something that is written well on this topic. However, I thought it would be appropriate here to give a brief catechesis of the sacrament and its importance in the life of prayer.

The confession of sins was already present in several places in the old testament. The liturgical roots begin with Yom Kippur (Lev. 16) during which the High priest confesses the sins of the people over the head of a goat (origin of the scape goat) which is then sent out of the city into the wilderness (as Christ was crucified outside the city). Just as in the new Covenant, the people of God in the old were to model their lives after the liturgical offering. Therefore when we see the prophets like Nehemiah and Daniel confess their sins and the sins of their Fathers we should not be surprised- they are simply living out what God has taught them in the liturgy. Nehemiah confesses his sins prior to taking up the great task for the Lord of rebuilding Jerusalem (Neh ch. 1). Daniel confesses His sins as he waits for wisdom to be given to him (Dan. 9:20). In both cases the confession of holy men is for the sake of greater purification to prepare their hearts to accomplish God's will in this world. Therefore when we begin a task or ask for enlightenment and wisdom we would do well to imitate these great old testament saints.

Confession is most intimately connected with the liturgical sacrifice. The high priests prior to entering into the sacrifice of the temple would symbolically purify themselves. Spiritual purification is more important than physical purification, which takes place through confession, prayer, penance and almsgiving. In the book of Nehemiah, after the walls of Jerusalem were restored, all of the people wore sackcloth, put ashes on their heads, and confessed their sins prior to participating in the sacrifice and great feast celebrating the restoration of the city of Jerusalem (Neh. 9:1-5). In the new covenant we too confess our sins regularly, not only when we have committed a grievous sin that cuts us off from God, but also simply to prepare for the Sacred Liturgy more perfectly, open our minds to the wisdom of God and receive strength to accomplish God's will. Confession prepares us for the gifts from God while the Holy Eucharist accomplishes God's work. In the Liturgy we receive the Bread come down from heaven that strengthens us as Nehemiah was strengthened, and we receive Wisdom Himself: our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence for the Christian, the reasons to confess one's sins is much greater even as the gifts given far surpass those of the old testament.

In the new testament Christ institutes the sacrament in John 20:19-23. He breathes on the Apostles (Jn 20:21-23, see Gen. 2:7, Ez. 37:9) which is symbolic of a new creation and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Then Christ says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." With these words he makes it clear that there is a judgment that must be made and the articulation of the sins is what allows them to be bound so that the penitent may be free. The letter of John (1:9) states with admirable clarity, "If we confess our

sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” He who is faithful, that is, the Lamb who was Slain has triumphed over sin and His victory is abundant. Through the ministry of the church, which He established to continue His work in the world, Christ forgives our sins in a sure and certain way.

When going to confession the penitent begins by stating when their last confession was. They should also pronounce their state in life (married, priest, religious, single- although single is assumed if nothing is said) because this can change the gravity of certain sins. The penitent ought to state their sins clearly by kind and number to the best of their ability. There is generally no need for extensive explanation. It is also a good practice to confess regularly, not only when we are in need of confession because of a serious sin, but also to prepare the soul to receive wisdom and strength for a task and especially to enter more fully into the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Most of us have the tendency of going back with the same sins all the time. This tendency, in part, ought to produce humility. It helps us to understand that we need God’s grace to overcome even the silliest of faults. It may also help us to understand some of the lies that we have accepted in our lives, or help us see some of the virtues that we ought to pray more fervently to receive and strive more earnestly to possess. However, sometimes it is helpful for us to examine our conscience using different tools that may help us uncover sins that we were previously unaware of. It can be helpful to examine one’s conscience using the beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12), the seven deadly sins, or even St. Paul’s exhortation of Christ’s love (Cor. ch. 13). Other places in scripture (the two edged sword) may have a similar effect in assisting us to examine our conscience and cutting away our sins.

At the heart of confession is the conversation with Christ. We can easily imagine this conversation that would have taken place with His disciples and apostles as he formed their hearts to be ever more like His own. We see this same conversation and forgiveness in some of His parables but especially in the moving scene from John 4 when he meets the woman at the well. He carries this conversation on with each one of us, gently forming our hearts to love God and neighbor. It is a conversation that takes place through many means, but the sacrament of confession is one of the most powerful tools entrusted to the Church for the sake of healing and removing the our sins, the lies of the evil one and obstacles to God’s love.

Some folks might object that too hard a consideration of our sins can make us sad or sorrowful but that we should live in the joy of the Spirit. It is true that we are called to live in the joy and peace of our Heavenly Father. The examination of our sins takes place within the loving context of the family knowing that the correction our heavenly Father gives is for our benefit in order that we may grow in accord with His Holy will. We confess our sins knowing that the remedy has already been provided and our loving Father readily embraces and blesses us as His children (Lk 15). In the parable of the prodigal son, the Father gives His son a robe signifying that wayward boy is restored as his child- we are clothed with Christ Jesus and restored as God’s children in confession. The prodigal son receives a ring signifying authority- we are given a share in Christ’s authority over evil to renounce and rebuke sin and evil. The prodigal son is given sandals on his feet signifying wealth and freedom- we have the riches of God’s kingdom through the Church and the freedom of His children. The Father says, ‘all that I have is yours’

and so it is for those united with Christ. The prodigal son was brought inside to feast on the fattened calf. We have been received into the Church to feast upon the meal provided by the Lamb who was slain: Christ Himself. Therefore, although we may enter confession in sorrow knowing our unworthiness, we are restored in God's image by the forgiveness of God the Father and leave in the joy and peace of God's children.