

Thoughts from the Second Floor Front  
The IV Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 10, 2019  
Reconciliation / Penance – Part I  
One of the Sacraments of Healing

I know the practice of regular sacramental confession has fallen off in what I call Catholic Culture. However, I also know the power of a sacramental confession. While it can be a moment of profound conversion when one admits one's sins, for most of us it can be an ordinary part of the life we have as disciples. Ironically, and sadly, I think the responsibility for the decrease in the regular celebration of the sacrament of confession lies in the communal celebration of the sacrament. In marking the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent with a communal penance service what I think inadvertently happened was that the people of God somehow have associated the sacrament of Penance with those two times a year – only. Regular celebration of the sacrament may come around again, in time. In the church we take the long view and see how the celebration of the sacrament has changed through the centuries.

St. Paul believed that the efficacy of the sacrament of Baptism should by itself preclude the occasion of sin later in life. Imagine that. Think about what that means. Paul believed the power of Baptismal Grace to be such that sin was no longer a part of one's life. Ever. The first problems with that mindset emerged with the persecutions brought on by Roman emperors. A church community was assaulted, and people were threatened with their lives: Either deny the faith or be executed. Many died the heroic death of martyrs, but many did not, and chose to save themselves and did indeed deny the faith. Once the persecutions died down the people who survived sought reconciliation. It was a controversy as to whether or not they should be readmitted. Imagine if your spouse or child was killed in the persecution and your neighbor who was an apostate survived. How would you look on your neighbor after that?

Reconciliation for those people eventually was begun but the process was very long and involved; perhaps lasting a decade or more. The person was formally enrolled in a group called the penitents and was required to sit at the church door begging for forgiveness but never entering let alone receive Holy Communion. After a lengthy, and public penance, the person was received into the communion again, by the local bishop only, but the option for a second opportunity for reconciliation was not a possibility.

With the spread of Christianity, around the third or fourth century Irish and Scottish monks began to act as sort of spiritual directors and offer council and direction. These priests came to see that it was a necessary part of the journey of faith that one seek and receive sacramental forgiveness; without the former heavy and lengthy timeline of the earliest penitential structure.

While the history of the sacrament and the sacramental celebration of Reconciliation is a point of interest, our issue is not mere cognitive knowledge of the sacrament but a lived experience of the forgiveness available to us. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that God's omnipotence is made most clear in His forgiveness of our sins. If you think that you do not have any sins, I would counter that statement with a suggestion that you are either delusional or have joined some New Age religion attempting to find your way through some cosmic drama without engaging in any serious self-reflection.

Years ago, in the early 70's, a Psychiatrist named Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book called Whatever Became of Sin? In it he posits that if people no longer fully recognize their

sinfulness, they cannot be healthy. Menninger relates mental health and moral health. It is not just a sense of guilt that is important but a profound recognition that I am not perfect and am to be responsible for my actions. Admitting my responsibility, confessing my sins is not a denial of my human nature; it is part of an ongoing effort at spiritual, moral and mental wellbeing.

Faithfully,

Msgr. Diamond