

Thoughts from the Second Floor Front
The VI Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 17, 2019
Reconciliation / Penance – Part II
One of the Sacraments of Healing

An essential element in the Sacrament of Reconciliation / Penance is contrition; sorrow is essential. By analogy think of the human relationships you have and now think of the times that the relationship was somehow harmed. Perhaps the harm was inadvertent; the person did not intend to hurt you in any way but through a lack of consideration, impatience or any of a host of reasons, this person hurt you. The guilty party approaches you and says those powerful words “I’m sorry.” But what if there was a sense that the apology lacked contrition, lacked sincerity? Incredibly, many times we say: “Oh, that’s OK.” Or “That’s alright.” Well, in actual fact it is not OK, and it is far from all right. For the apology to be authentic and sincere it necessarily must be accompanied by contrition. Our response must necessarily be marked by mercy and sincerity. There is certainly shame and embarrassment on the part of the offender, but those two reactions are not sufficient for forgiveness. There needs to be clear evidence of transformation; what the Gospel calls metanoia. The person needs to show you that he or she has changed; or at the very least is willing to enter into an effort to change. Is not the same true of our relationship with God?

One of my favorite writers is a mystery writer: James Lee Burke. Most of his stories are set in New Orleans, Louisiana. Burke’s writing career has been for several decades focused primarily on a police detective, Dave Robicheaux, originally on the New Orleans Police Department and now on the New Iberia Police Department. The character is a practicing Catholic and a recovering alcoholic. Robicheaux sees the seamy side of life – he is after all a homicide detective. The books are pretty gritty. Clearly in evidence in Robicheaux’s approach to his work and his life is his acceptance of grace. He is flawed and knows it. He has slipped in his sobriety and is always fearful and watchful not to allow that to happen again. He deals with other flawed people; people much more deeply flawed and defective than he. These people populate a world devoid of altruism, a concern for the other and a willingness to accept Grace; a world smeared with self-interest and an endless search for pleasure – no matter the cost to the other. In addition to his alcoholism and his police work, remember that Robicheaux is also presented to the reader as a practicing Catholic, an aspect of the character that is defining of who he is. I believe it is the character’s Catholic faith and living each day in recovery, that empowers him to treat others with the dignity they deserve as a child of God even in the face of evil that we could hardly imagine engaging. He has been through and continues to experience metanoia. He regularly goes to Mass and confession and tries to live in the Grace available to him.

Our life is not fiction. The hurt that we have suffered and caused others to suffer is not the stuff of a novel’s plot. Ours is a lived reality which makes demands on us. One of those demands is that we become reconciled. Reconciled to those whom we have hurt; those against whom we have sinned. Sin has the same effect on everybody no matter if the sin is notorious and known publicly or if the sin lies within the silent hardness of our heart. Sin creates alienation. Sin separates from God from our self and from others. Those are the only three relationships any of us are ever going to have: God, self and others. Sin harms those relationships; sometimes partially and lightly (traditionally called venial) sometimes seriously and fatally (mortal). Leaving the sin untouched means that it is in control, not you.

We can be free of the sin through the power of sacramental confession. To hold on to the sin gives it power over us and that is very dangerous. Many people, I contend, think that in confession we drag up the worst parts of ourselves. In fact, what we do is hold our lives out to God and say: Lord, these things for which I am responsible are not right. Please forgive them and heal me.

The Evil One has only one trick, he is a liar. If the Evil One can get you to believe that what is actually 5 % of your life is 95% of your life, Old Scratch has won. Not asking for forgiveness; holding on to hurt, keeping resentment only feeds the engine of evil and binds us. We are called to be free and as Jesus said: *If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.* (John 8:37-38)

Faithfully.

Msgr. Diamond