

Fr. Perozich comments —

Our homiletics professor in seminary, Fr. Charley Miller, CM, God rest his soul, occasionally would hear a statement which he thought profound, and would then quip, “There’s a homily in that!”

It is good for me to read this spiritual teaching on Penance, a welcome change from “jab for job” vaccine nausea by clerics, and every other socialist/communist/worldly issue which is uttered in a waste of the gift of speech instead of relationship with Jesus and the salvation He won for us.

Turning back to Christ in the Sacrament of Penance is a joy.

Thank you, Fr. Guthrie, for composing it!!

Thank you Matt Abbott for posting it on Renewamerica.com.

The power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

*By Matt C. Abbott **March 8, 2021***

The following Lenten reflection (lightly edited) was written by Father Ray Guthrie, pastor of St. Francis de Sales Parish in Lake Geneva, Wis. Thanks to Father Ray for allowing me to publish his reflection in my column.



Father Ray Guthrie

During Lent the season of repentance, which is a word that many know means “to turn away from,” calls us through prayer, fasting and almsgiving to turn away from the distortions and corruption as the world presents life to the light of Christ. For in Jesus we look at the world and life from the broader picture of how and why God created us and gave us dominion over all the world. Rather than from the narrow and

simplistic image that the world prefers we use in solving the issues and problems of life.

As through original sin we tend to want a logical and simplistic answer to life, simply put “keep it simple, stupid” to relationships that are anything but—relationships that are dynamic and complex when it comes to love and justice. It is with this conviction that we enter Lent with multiple acts of service and devotion helping us to more clearly come to know the world through the eyes of the Lord.

This challenge and offer from the Lord is explained multiple times in the Gospels, such as in verses that say “Those who have eyes to see: *see*, those who have ears to hear: *hear*.” In another situation Jesus states, “They have eyes to see but do not see, they have ears to hear but do not hear.” The two most common miracles, following forgiveness of sin are giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf.

One of the most powerful stories in the four Gospels is the story of the man born blind found in the Gospel of John. It is a long and theologically complex story which powerfully rearranges how sickness and sin need to be understood. Too often human sickness and sin were woven together in unrealistic ways, such as punishments from God or curses from an evil spirit called demons in the four Gospels.

As you may notice, I said interwoven in unrealistic ways. Why did I state it that way?

We know that human health and sin are truly connected to each other. Emphasizing even more the importance of repentance during Lent. Medically and psychologically we know bad choices do create sickness of mind and body. The saying ‘stress is a killer’ is not just a cute platitude but a real thing. We see that connection in Jesus’ sayings to the apostles and the communities when he utters “Peace be with you.” The peace he offers over and over is for the mind, heart and soul. Peace is the gift given to those with fear, stress and anxiety as they walk through this world.

The peace that Jesus reminds the apostles about when he states very emphatically, “I will be with you always until the end of the age.” But not all stress is a killer! The stress of having many things to do in a day may be life-giving because it gives us purpose. The stress that builds up the body and muscles so we can pass the stress test, whatever that may be, helps us improve our sight, balance, breathing and so many other wonderful things of the mind, heart and body.

The stress that is a killer as psychology has discovered and medical science has tried to take into account when a patient is in the hospital deals with fears based on bad decisions with people, anxieties centering on lack of concern for important people in our lives, and most often broken relationships which were life-giving and now are gone. This is the stress that kills. This is also where the body and sin are woven in the dance of life.

We know when relationships with God, self and others are broken and struggling, the body reacts through simple breakdowns that can lead to true physical sickness. There is abundant research that points out that heart disease and cancer are not just issues of heredity and what you eat, but it’s becoming more obvious in science that relationships dictate the conquering of many (but not all) of the effects of these diseases.

Recall as stated in my earlier writings that the word sin most importantly is the word which means to be separated or divided, or to “miss the mark.” Through sin we have put a wall or/and obstacle between ourselves and life-giving relationships. For us as Catholics, that begins with our powerful and life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ, which then infuses and cultivates all other relationships.

That is why Lent so powerfully calls us to prayer, as I have stated before, as the way of improving our relationship with our God. Because as we know relationships cannot be life-giving if we don’t talk with each other. Nor do they grow and deepen if there is no communication. We give alms to grow in our human

relationships. Recall that almsgiving is not just about giving, food, money and shelter to others, but just as importantly, and probably as a Christian more important, to give love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

And finally the most important part of fasting in Jewish-Christian belief is to empty oneself of needs, things, thoughts and other distractions, allowing us to reach out more often and in life-giving ways to God and neighbor. Hence *Repent and believe in the Gospel*, the words of Ash Wednesday. Turn away from all the other distractions, distortions and corruptions in daily life and turn to God and neighbor. For the two great commandments of Jesus Christ are to “love God with all your [heart]” and to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Sin being that dividing factor between God and neighbor for each of us then helps lead us to focus on the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as I mentioned before, as a way of clearing out the junk in our lives in order to reconcile what is broken, distorted and separated. As we look at the call to repent during Lent we see the Sacrament of Reconciliation as the best way to begin that refocusing on God and neighbor. You may ask why do so few Catholics used the sacrament even after explaining how this sacrament has been one of the greatest gifts in Church history, finding its institution in the acts of constant forgiveness from Jesus our Savior toward all humanity.

A very important part goes back to the way we look at sin itself. Starting from childhood on we look more at the action of sin verses the consequences. The prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah always point out the consequences of sin. Which is why so much of what they write or say seems like fortune-telling or predictions. In reality the prophets are saying if you continue to do these actions, this is the result you get. An example for the prophets would be if you continue to treat the poor and lowly this way, a society is only as strong as its weakest link. By your actions you

are weakening the link that struggles the most to survive; hence all the body (society) suffers.

Jesus continues to teach about sin in the same way, which is why Matthew's Gospel states that Jesus came to fulfill the prophets. Watch how often Jesus refers to the consequences of the action and not the action itself. A great example is if your hand leads you to sin, cut it off, or they can burn the body, and take your life, but cannot darken your soul. Hence because we in our younger years learn about the action itself versus the consequences, we see the sin as something I do. I am totally in control and because it is my action I just need to change my actions. But it is the consequences of our actions which is central to repentance.

The actions of a sin have multiple consequences way beyond the self. The consequences of a lie can lead to a distrust in a friendship, to a crack in a loving relationship, to a questioning of another's intention in that relationship. Look at all the damaging consequences over a simple lie. It's not so simple. Because of reflecting only on the action and not on the consequences, people lose one of the most fundamental issues of sin: Sin is Communal! What? How can that be? In many sins it's seems like just me and God. So I just need to go to God for reconciliation. Again, *all sin* is communal.

Let me explain. When you diminish your own character, your own self-understanding, or other things that seem to affect only you, the consequences don't just end there. You are part of a larger community; therefore, if you are "lesser than" through a private sin, you give less of the fullness of your true self to build up the community. You back off on certain things because of doubt or shame. You may stop thinking about another because either of selfish control of your own life or a worry that you may be found out in your failure. Shame of self has led many people down a dark path. Because *all sin* is communal based on the consequences, not the actions—as Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Our Lord

Jesus taught—reconciliation just between me and God doesn't cut it!

In the early Catholic community forgiveness of sin after baptism happened only at one other time. That time was in the liturgy when we prepared to receive the Holy Eucharist. Our liturgy today still reflects that. Notice how the Mass begins. First with the Sign of the Cross, then a blessing of God's peace to be in communion with one another, then (here it is) the Penitential Rite, when as a community we ask each other through the mercy of Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Only after that moment do we give praise to God (Gloria) and turn in prayer as a community in prayer called the Collect (Opening Prayer).

For hundreds of years before the full development of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, at this point in the Mass, people would publicly state their sins. Do realize the gatherings were smaller in those days. But the individuals gathered understood how their individual actions brought negative consequences to the whole Body of Christ. Consequently all reconciliation for an individual's actions is directed toward God and the community.

This may help as adults to see why the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not just God and me. As the communities grew and the Sacrament of Reconciliation became more highly developed and defined, to publicly state your sin during the Penitential Rite was slowly moved to the sacrament solely for the forgiveness of sin. Hence the rite within our Mass became more of a symbolic call for unity among those gathered at the altar so we could truly be in communion during Holy Communion.

As we turned exclusively to the Sacrament of Reconciliation by the fourth century for forgiveness, the priest became the one we go to instead of the public proclamation for two powerful reasons. First, as the presider of the community, he represents the whole community in the sacrament as our president represents our country to other countries. Second, our community is called the Body of Christ in the world, such as St. Augustine states when

giving the Body of Christ to his community. He would not say “The Body of Christ” even though he fully understood this. He more powerfully challenged those who received by saying, “Receive what you are.” Therefore, the priest not only represents the human community as presider, he also represents the Body of Christ in the world, what we call *In Persona Christi* (in the person of Christ).

So during this Lent reflect on the repentance called for by turning away from sin and death and turning to God and neighbor. As Matthew, Mark and Luke would say: turn to the Kingdom of God. That kingdom is God and humanity together, united as one. St. Paul beautifully proclaims Jesus will continue acting in the world until God has made all things one. The best way to turn away from sin and death is to reconcile with God and neighbor. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the best way home, through the mercy of God, self and others.

A blessed Lent to all.

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