

From the PA's Desk

### **The Sacrament of Reconciliation:**

As I mentioned in my three minute talk before Mass a few weeks ago, one of the reasons why Catholics have declined in attendance at confession might have to do with our appreciation of the Eucharist as a sacrament of God's love and forgiveness. If you listen to the prayers spoken at Mass, many of them speak of the forgiveness of sins. At least six times during the Mass we ask for God's forgiveness.

Regardless of this, we have a strong tradition in the Catholic Church, both in the historical development of the church, and throughout the Bible (think of the prodigal son story), of our need to be intentional and public in asking for God's forgiveness, not only from God, but from the rest of the community which sin alienates us from. We are asked to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, not because we have to, but because it is a sacrament and our tradition—a sign and celebration of God showing forth his mercy in yet another way.

I was thinking of the similarities between Mass and what we do at a Communal Reconciliation Service in which we have the opportunity for private confession and absolution, and it brings together nicely all the elements of what we believe in being called together to be the body of Christ in our own little piece of Isabella County.

If “real” sin not only alienates us from God and who God has made us to be at our deepest levels, it also equally alienates us from one another and the holiness of the body of Christ, the community. This is where the priest's role comes in, because he not only is the voice of God hearing us hear the words of forgiveness, but he also represents the other people we are being reconciled with.

At Mass, and at a Communal Reconciliation Service, we always have four main actions: **1) The Gathering.** God may call us individually, but God always calls us to be a community united together as the body of Christ. James Joyce was once asked to describe the Catholic Church in a few words, and he said this: “Here comes everybody!” We long to belong, and whenever we pray as a church, we pray together. A communal reconciliation service begins with the gathering also. **2) Storytelling (Liturgy of the Word).** We listen to the sacred stories from our tradition, and during the homily, we try to apply them to our own lives today. Have you noticed that most of us keep retelling certain stories over and over again? We do that because they are so important to what our identity is, and we constantly try to discover their meaning for our lives. The Scripture readings are so important that the Vatican Two *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says this: “When the Scriptures are read in church, it is Christ himself who speaks.” **3) Reconciling.** During the Eucharist Prayer at Mass, we pray to a merciful Father in thanksgiving for being restored to harmony with God by the paschal (life-death-resurrection) victory of Christ. In the Communal Celebration of Reconciliation, we have the chance to tell God we are sorry, and “through the ministry of the Church,” we hear and are reminded that “the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself” and we are forgiven. **4) Commissioning.** At both Mass and a Communal Reconciliation Service, we are reminded that we are sent to bring the gift of God's love to others. We are forgiven so we can be healed and whole for others. We take the Body of Christ into us, so we can become the body of Christ for others in the world.

Years ago the focus on the Sacrament of Reconciliation (either privately or communally) was on us individually and our sinfulness. Today we focus instead, not on what we do, but what God does through Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite stories on healing and reconciliation comes from John Shea who is an international storyteller and pastoral theologian. This story helps me understand why we need to appreciate the gift offered us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and Eucharist, for in celebrating those sacraments in my life, I am able to keep going.

“The man crept into the back of the church. Early Sunday Mass, 8:00 a.m., last row, aisle seat. Barely in, quickly out if need be.

It was his habit since the divorce. He was afraid not to go to Mass, and he was afraid to go to Mass. So he snuck in and out. It was not that he was well known in this parish. When people looked at him, they would not be thinking, “Poor Don, what a messy divorce!” But he was thinking it. It was how he saw himself. In his head he was guilty, a major failure at matrimony. And at a young age. It was hard to handle. Not matter how much they talked about forgiveness there was very little room for failure in the Catholic Church. The last row, aisle seat was a perfect place. It was where he belonged.

The old priest was saying the Mass. He was soft spoken, but if you paid attention, he made you think. He preached on the text where Jesus says the kingdom of God is within you. He was gentle, insistent, quoting from a gospel Don had never heard of. “If the kingdom of God is in the sky, then the birds of the air will precede you into it. If the kingdom of God is in the sea, then the fishes of the sea will enter it before you. But if the kingdom of is within you...” The homily ended.

As usual, Don did not go to communion.

After communion a woman soloist sang a haunting rendition of “Amazing Grace.” Every “wretch that was saved” was moved.

Except one. Suddenly the old priest was on his feet and walking toward the congregation.

“I hate that song. I am not a wretch. You are not a wretch. The gospel is right. The kingdom of God is within you. The kingdom of God is within you.”

Then the old priest began moving down the center aisle. “This is my recessional song,” he shouted.

Then he began to point to people in pew after pew. “The kingdom of God is within you. The kingdom of God is within you. And you. And you.”

“And the kingdom of God is within you,” said the old priest in voice that was now quiet, not from exhaustion, but from the intuition that the truth he was saying had nothing to do with loudness.

Last man, last row, aisle seat: The kingdom of God is within you!”

Don tried but he could not stop the tears. After a while he even stopped trying. Everyone walked by him. Finally, he stood up, walked out, and went back to his home.

We tie knots to our failures so tight we can barely breathe. We know we have to untie those knots, but we do not know how. Sometimes we untie them slowly, patient as a sailor, knowing the sea waits once we loosen the rope.

Other times it is a swift blow that frees us. An unlikely Jesus comes out of nowhere and wields the words of freedom. An old priest finds us hiding with our guilt in the last row and breaks through our self-hatred. We are unparalyzed and on our feet, striding out of the place we crept into, knowing that forgiveness and walking are the same thing.