

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2010

Fr. Robert VerEecke, S.J.

Bless me father for I have sinned. It's been... since my last confession. How long? A week, a month, a year, 5 years, 10 years? How long has it been since you "went to confession" or "celebrated the sacrament of reconciliation" as we have called it for the past 40 years?

For some it may have been recently. For others during last Easter season to fulfill one's Easter duty. For others perhaps a very long time.

But let me ask another question. When was the last time you felt that you experienced the forgiveness of God? Some might say "just a few minutes ago. At the beginning of the Mass. When you asked us to consider our sins and you said 'may almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life.'" Or you might say, "when I asked forgiveness of my spouse, or friend, or colleague and they said they forgave me." Or you may say "I felt God's forgiveness when in the middle of the day, I stopped to say, 'I'm so sorry God for messing up again.'"

During this Lenten season you will be hearing or reading a great deal about "going to confession," the sacrament of reconciliation. The diocese has a special program called "the light is on for you" where a priest will be available in the church to hear confessions on Wednesday evenings during Lent. If you look in today's bulletin you will see many opportunities to celebrate the sacrament, especially in parish reconciliation services.

The church has a great gift to offer in the sacrament of reconciliation but so many Catholics don't avail themselves of this gift that there is a need to stress the beauty and the importance of that gift.

My question this morning is "why" don't Catholics avail themselves of the sacrament the way we did before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican council? Do we no longer think that we sin? Are we so amoral that we think we do not need forgiveness? I don't think that is the case but it could be.

So what may be the reasons why folks don't feel the need for sacramental "confession" and "reconciliation." I said sacramental, since we clearly feel forgiven from talks with counselors, therapists, friends, loved ones.

One of the reasons may be that people experience the forgiveness of God when they come to mass. As we know the pre-Vatican 2 liturgy was private and mysterious. The people were not called to “full, active, conscious participation,” as we are know. If our participation now is so, full active and conscious, then we are aware of all the graces we receive in the Eucharist, including forgiveness. The Eucharist has always been the primary source of God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ and it always will be.

Or it could be that “confession” and reconciliation never was a particularly “meaningful” religious experience. “I always said the same things, every week.” “I lied 10 times.” “I was uncharitable 50 times.” “It didn’t really seem to make a difference in my behavior”.

Or it could be that there is not enough preaching from the pulpit about “mortal sin,” going to hell. Too much emphasis on love and not on eternal damnation. We priests hear it all the time. You need to tell people more often that they are committing mortal sin by missing mass on Sunday, not to mention the whole list of sins against the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. You’ve just gotten too soft. Fear worked for centuries: it should work again.

The great irony of course is that the sacrament of reconciliation was never meant to be prompted by “fear” but rather by “love”. The reason for the sacramental experience of reconciliation was to be overwhelmed by God’s infinite love for us in the saving mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. One of the things that we might never have understood is that “confession” is not about “me,” it’s not simply about the sins I have committed. That is only one “infinitesimal” part of the sacrament. It is “infinitesimal” in comparison with the “infinite” love God in Christ has for us. Yes, I know that’s hard to believe. Like the Prodigal Father who we will hear about in the gospel of the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, God is always seeking, loving, forgiving, reconciling.

So why then do we need to go to confession, also known as the sacrament of reconciliation? There are so many ways to experience God’s forgiveness. Why celebrate St. Valentine’s Day? Do we need a day to find gifts and symbols to say “I love you, I cherish your friendship.” Do we need this day? All throughout the year we express our love by signs and symbols, cards, flowers. But there is something about having a day when we are called explicitly to remember who we love and how we are loved.

The sacrament of reconciliation is a wonderful way to “remember who we love and how we are loved.” At its best it’s the opportunity the Church gives us to “hear Christ word’s of love and forgiveness” said “to you,” not just to the whole assembly but “to you”: “through the ministry of the church may God grant you pardon and peace and I absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the son and of the Holy Spirit.”