

Saint Leo the Great - Lenten Parish Retreat
Reflection II. March 26, 2020

I hope and pray that all our parishioners are safe and that you are free from any undue anxiety as we walk (together) day-by-day during this pandemic which has indeed touched every place on earth. Perhaps it's not the invisible virus itself that people are nervous about so much as it is the complete disruption of our lives that feels strange. As I go to the church each morning to celebrate the 7:30 am. Mass in union with the Cardinal, the bishops and all priests of the Archdiocese of Toronto it feels surreal to be doing so with no one in the pews and no responses to the parts of the Mass. I think Holy Week will seem all the more strange and sad as we are not together in celebration, yet Easter will and should be celebrated by us still in order that we never forget what our loving God has done for us in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. No world event can change what Christ has forever won for us, most especially His friendship and steadfast love.

In Reflection I, I addressed the necessity of doing some soul-searching in this Lenten season, a reality we have universally been forced to do with the widespread quarantine we are all under. If we are afraid, it is good to ask ourselves what we are afraid of and how we can address this fear in prayer before the Lord. Repeatedly throughout the scriptures, through the popes and saints of the Church we are reminded 'Do not be afraid'. (Have you ever noticed that whenever someone tells another person to calm down, they almost never do, in fact, they often get worse?) Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus tell any of His followers that they should be afraid or worried or upset. The only ones who should be afraid are those who have placed themselves as the enemies of God. As the friends of God we desire to be, the benefit of looking back on our lives is to bring it all before Christ. He already knows, of course, every detail, hurt, sadness and concern we have had in our past and can bring about healing, renewal and forgiveness.

And that is why one of the great things we can do with our past and its sins is to take them and leave them in the confessional. In the sacrament of Reconciliation (confession) Christ waits, yes waits for us to come seeking the healing forgiveness He died on the Cross to bring. Yet if we resist availing ourselves of this awesome grace and necessity for our souls then we end up carrying around all our hurts, wounds, bad experiences, neglects and anger almost as a self-imposed penance. Once again, I recall the words of my sainted grade one teacher, Gray nun Sister Mary Jacqueline, who in preparing us for our First Confessions taught us that:

"When God forgives your sins, he takes your sins and throws them into the sea of forgetfulness and puts up a sign that says, 'No fishing'."



So not only has our God blessed us with the great gift of a conscience that enables us to know that we have sinned and are in fact sinners, but He has given us the remedy for sin, His real, lasting Sacramental forgiveness that came from the Cross where He died for those sins. We can practically drag ourselves in reluctance to confession because we think it is too hard, too embarrassing or humiliating and that is probably because we picture the priest as the good guy and we've got the bad-guy part who has to admit their guilt. The reality is, however, that the priest himself is a sinner, in fact could be a greater sinner than the penitent, and that it is not the priest himself who forgives sins but Christ who uses the priest as a conduit of his love, grace and forgiveness. Once, when Bishop Sheen was giving a retreat in a prison, he began his talk by saying to the inmates something to the effect that,

You may be thinking that I am the man with the white hat and you with the black hats because you are in prison. The difference between me and you is that you got caught; I didn't. We are all guilty of sin.

We have all heard the saying and perhaps have striven to “forgive and forget”, but we can only forget if we have allowed the Lord to first forgive us. And we can only open ourselves to His forgiveness if we have taken stock of our sins for “the just man falls seven times a day”. (Proverbs 24:16)

Looking back and taking stock is only effective if we are doing so according to the standard of the Kingdom of God. St. Paul himself said, “No longer do we judge anything by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so.” (2 Cor. 5:16) If I compare myself to others, and particularly bad ‘others’ at that, then I might be led to believe that I’m pretty good, but if I compare myself to God, then I truly see myself for who and what I am.



Philosopher George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” and we could tie this truth to our spiritual lives. Since Jesus has loved us, loved YOU, from the beginning it is important that when we approach the great mercy seat of Jesus in confession we do so remembering all our sin and not just the ones we want to talk about. As someone once said, ‘When you generalize, it’s generally lies’. And remembering all of our sins by doing a good, thorough, reflective *Examination of Conscience* enables us to approach Jesus

with the intent and desire to have all the sins we bring before Him revealed and thereby forgiven. That’s why an *EofC* is so useful because it breaks down for us the Ten Commandments into the everyday sins we might have committed. We could approach confession with the attitude that the Ten Commandments are the ‘biggies’ and in one sweep dismiss them from our list of sins, yet each of them encompasses all sins. The sin of gossip, for example, could come under the fifth commandment, Thou shall not kill, because, as my mother used to say, “*Though the tongue is but six inches long it can kill a man over six feet tall*”. We can kill a person’s reputation with the words we say or the lie we tell or the failure to defend them in their absence when another slanders them.

Our future in God, while it is not dependent on our past, can be most fully embraced when we bring our whole lives before Him, deal with the past with Him and begin anew. A great biblical scholar who had devoted his life to studying the scriptures was once asked that if he could sum the whole bible up in one phrase, what would it be? The scholar, while at first thinking this was a rather impossible question, pondered over it and realized that “A New Creation” would sum up the 73 books of the bible fittingly. Our God is always doing something new. He made us new when we were baptized, wiping away the effects of original sin and giving us a new start, a new beginning. When we approach the sacrament of confession, confess our sins, receive a penance and say an Act of Contrition, Christ makes us new again.

Throughout the Old Testament we see

In Ezekiel 36:25-27, we hear through the prophet what God intends to do to us in making us new:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

This is a text that is often read during the Liturgy of the Word at baptisms because it directly reveals that beautiful work of God who makes us *a new creation* in Him. And in the sacrament of reconciliation, Christ

does the same thing as He truly makes us clean in washing away our sins, setting us out again on the road of life, renewed and made clean. Then we are able to begin anew, mindful of the Act of Contrition we said that in effect makes us, "I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace.... to amend my life." We also hear of this "new creation" Christ makes of us at the conclusion of the *Reconciliation Eucharistic Prayer* I we sometimes use at Mass in the season of Lent, *"Then, freed at last from the wound of corruption and made fully into a new creation, we shall sing to you with gladness the thanksgiving of Christ, who lives for all eternity."*



What should be our motivation to look back and take stock and make a good confession to be rid of our sins and set on a new path? The love of Jesus. The love Jesus has for us, for you. The great love that is so richly symbolized when we look at a crucifix or the powerful crucifix that hangs on the west wall of our church is the tremendous sign to us of Jesus who came to the earth and died that we might live. We see it in the image of the Sacred Heart, whose heart burns with love for us. We learn of it when St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, wrote: *"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8) Can you imagine loving someone who already hates you or is indifferent toward you? Could you love someone you already know would like to kill you? That's our Messiah, our Saviour.

Venerable Fulton J. Sheen spoke of our own hearts that are incomplete and incapable of full

love when he said, *"When God made your heart and my heart, he found it so good that he saved a little piece of our heart with Him in heaven and sent the rest of our hearts to live in our bodies on earth, so that, no matter how much we try to love anyone or anything in this life with a whole heart, we can't because we don't have a whole heart to love with. And we will never have that wholeness of heart until our heart goes to be with that little piece of our heart that God has kept with Himself for all eternity."*

Perhaps we could ask or do ask in our lives sometimes what difference does the love we have and show to others make? Why bother? Isn't the world we live in corrupt and selfish and sinful? Isn't the Cross with Christ on it too horrible for us to look upon or to hang in our churches when our intent is to inspire, move the soul and adorn with beauty? There is the true story of a little boy who one day, when his mother came into his room as he lay on his bed, had perhaps for the first time noticed the terrible scars on his mother's face and hands. He said to her, "Mommy, had did you get to be so ugly?" She sat down at the side of her sons bed and explained to him that "When you were just a baby our house caught on fire and you were in your crib. Your room was filled with flames and smoke and I ran into your room, reached into your crib and took hold of you and carried you through the flames and out of the house to safety. The flames burned my face and my arms." The little boy looked at his mother and said, "Mommy, I love your scars. I love them."

When St. John had his vision he recorded as the Book of Revelation, he said that he looked up and saw in heaven, a lamb with the marks of slaughter on him. We, too, can see the great love for us found in John's vision and recognize the One who went to death for us so that we might be saved, and live. Jesus Himself

said, "No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for their friends." We are the friends of Jesus when we desire to follow Him and do as He did in our relationships with one another.

God love you.

Fr. Charles

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION DURING THE PANDEMIC *(from the Archbishop of Toronto, March 25)*

"The only ordinary way of attaining forgiveness for sins is participating in individual and integral confession and absolution. Nevertheless, if a person is unable to make an appointment with a priest for the Sacrament during the current pandemic, it will suffice for the moment to pray the **Act of Contrition** as best as one can intending it truthfully, and to commit to participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as possible when conditions allow."

Please join with Catholics all over the world
who have been invited by our Holy Father, Pope Francis,
to receive his special blessing,
his "**Urbi et Orbi**" which means,
"To the people of Rome and to the world",
tomorrow, Friday, March 27 at 1:00 pm.
from the steps of St. Peter's Basilica
and an opportunity to receive a plenary indulgence.

You can watch the Holy Father
online at <https://saltandlighttv.org/live/>
or on TV at <https://saltandlighttv.org/live/waystowatch>

*"I invite everyone to participate spiritually
through the means of communication..."*
"We want to respond to the virus pandemic with the universality of prayer".
Pope Francis