



## Fifth Sunday of Lent March 21, 2010 C

### NO ONE DESERVES GOD'S MERCY Responses to Seven Questions People Often Ask about Confession

Reflecting on today's Gospel (Jn 8:1-11), Fr. Dennis McBride writes:

The story is told of a young French soldier who deserted Napoleon's army but who, within a matter of hours, was caught by his own troops. To discourage soldiers from abandoning their posts, the penalty for desertion was death. The young soldier's mother heard what had happened and went to plead with Napoleon to spare the life of her son. Napoleon heard her plea but pointed out that because of the serious nature of the crime her son had committed, he clearly did not deserve mercy.

"I know he doesn't deserve mercy," the mother answered. "It wouldn't be mercy if he deserved it."

**That is the point about mercy: nobody deserves it. Everyone deserves true justice; mercy, on the other hand, is sheer gift.** Mercy cancels out wrongs and transgressions—not because a sparkling defense has been found or excusing causes have been skillfully argued—but because that is the free response of the person who is grieved. Mercy does not suggest that the guilty are not guilty; it recognizes the guilt but does not demand satisfaction for the wrong. In all this, mercy reflects the utter graciousness of the one who has been wronged.

#### Misery and mercy

In today's Gospel, we have a magnificent story of the mercy of Jesus as he forgives the woman taken in adultery. It is interesting to note that the story is missing from the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel. *Some scholars argue that the delay in accepting the story as part of the gospel reflects the difficulty many people had in the ease with which Jesus lets the woman off the hook, an easiness which was totally at odds with the strict penitential practices of the early Church.* If this is true, it reflects an old problem many people had with Jesus and many people have with God: really believing in what Graham Greene has called "*the awful strangeness of God's mercy.*" *Does God forgive as easily as that?*

In the gospel story, the woman is caught committing adultery. *If it takes two to tango, it takes two to commit adultery, but the man seems to have had ready access to*

*an emergency exit* leaving the woman in the hands of the scribes and Pharisees. These men know the Law of Moses which stated: "If a man has intercourse with another's wife, both must die, adulterer and adulteress, and so Israel is rid of a plague." (Deut. 22:22) The scribes and Pharisees are zealous about the execution of the Law which means the execution of the woman. They are in the moral majority for they clearly have the Law on their side. Thus armed they come to tackle Jesus on the issue.

*Jesus' reaction to all the fuss is to start writing on the ground. But his questioners persist and Jesus responds not by taking issue with the law but by taking issue with the lawyers.* When you remember the law but forget what the law is for, perhaps your memory is a little selective. Jesus seems to think that all victims can do with some form of allegiance and he refuses to join this moral majority. Jesus does not say the woman is innocent or argue that adultery should be taken off the books; but neither is he persuaded about the innocence of her accusers. *He asks them to exercise their memories and check their own track record on sin. If any are innocent, they can throw stones. And while they're all having a good think running their own home videos in their heads, Jesus goes back to his writing.*

At least the woman's *accusers* are honest people for they readily recognize that they *are* not innocent accusers. So the "*procession of unemployed executioners*" is led away by the eldest—who is no doubt giving the example of necessity! Of course Jesus doesn't want them just to walk away but to exercise their forgiveness too. Jesus and the woman are left alone. As St. Augustine described it poetically, "two are left: misery and mercy." And the woman hears good news from Jesus: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

#### Caught up in forgiveness

When we see that Gospel scene, we can all imagine ourselves in the place of the woman caught in adultery, and probably have no trouble filling in the faces of our accusers who are ready to heave a stone or two in our direction. But that scenario is too easy. The challenge of the Gospel is not whether we can see ourselves as the woman who is caught in adultery, but see ourselves as *the man who is caught up in forgiveness.* Can we forgive as readily as Jesus forgives? Or do we dote on people's wrongdoing, reminding them of past failures, and lighting

vigil lamps to their mistakes? Can we forgive and leave it?

We spend time wondering whether God can really forgive without hoarding the hurt. God's track-record on forgiveness is clear: he's had lots of practice and he's good at it. How about our track-record?

### **“Let the one without sin cast the first stone”**

In a society and sometimes in a Church where people find it easy to point out the sins and faults of others, the above words of Jesus should be ringing in all of our ears. In judging others we judge ourselves. “Judge and *you* will be judged. Condemn and *you* will be condemned (Mt 7:1-3).

### **Seven questions people ask about the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

#### ***1. Why confess to a priest? Why the need for a middleman?***

Isn't it interesting that no one asks this question when it comes to the other sacraments, three of which also cleanse us of sin: Baptism, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick. In Catholic Tradition, grace is mediated (comes to us) through persons, signs and symbols.

But the main reason we bring our sins to a priest is the Church's deep sense that sin diminishes our relationship not only with God, but also with others. Hence, the need for us to confess not only to God, but also to the Church. In the confessional, the priest represents both God and Church.

#### ***2. How often should one celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation?***

Strictly speaking, one only has to go to confession when one has committed a mortal sin. But the Church recommends more frequent use of the sacrament. Automobile engines run more smoothly if they have a regular tune-up, and teeth stay healthier if they are cleansed regularly by a dental hygienist. In a similar way, our spiritual lives are enhanced by the frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

#### ***3. Is there an unforgivable sin?***

Mk 3:28-29 implies that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable sin. The only unforgivable sin is the sin we are not sorry for. If we are not sorry for a particular sin, God cannot forgive us.

#### ***4. Why are some people afraid of confession or find it very hard to go to this sacrament?***

There may be one or more reasons for the fear. We may have had a bad experience as a child in which a priest yelled or shamed us or even refused to give us absolution. We may have a difficult time being vulnerable before

another or we may be ashamed of some sins. Or pride may be at work in us—making it very hard for us to admit that we have failed. If we are fearful of going to the sacrament, we should pray for a healing of the fear and pray for courage. We could also visit with a priest and share with him our fear of the sacrament.

#### ***5. Why do so few Catholics go to the sacrament of Reconciliation today?***

Loss of the sense of sin is widespread in our culture today. People can be mean and nasty to others and think they have not done wrong. Many Catholics believe that sin is a private matter between God and them. Some are fearful of the sacrament. Many Catholics who have not gone to the sacrament for years have a strong resistance to returning. Finally, priests are partially to blame because of their failure to preach about sin, to stress the value of confession and to offer more opportunities for people to celebrate the sacrament.

#### ***6. Do you have any suggestions for those of us who seem to confess the same sins all the time? What can I do if I am stuck in some recurring sin?***

If we confess the same sins repeatedly, we may have to take a deeper look at *how* we examine our conscience. Perhaps our examination of conscience is very narrow and superficial. Do we ever examine our conscience in the light of Scripture (especially passages like Mt 5, 6 and 7) or in the light of the good that we could have done (sins of omissions)?

As for dealing with a recurring or habitual sin, here are five suggestions:

- Begin each day by admitting you are powerless in dealing with your particular area of weakness. Pray: “Jesus, I admit my total weakness or addiction to this sin (name it). But I also believe that you can help me to overcome this sin. Please help me to do so *today*.”
- As you go through the day, be aware that you are engaged in a spiritual battle and Jesus is on your side. Be determined to avoid whatever leads you into the occasion of committing this sin.
- At night do a brief examination of conscience. For the successes, say: “Thank you, Lord.” For your failures, say an act of contrition and then resolve to fight the battle again tomorrow.
- Go to the sacrament of Reconciliation regularly until you experience victory in this area of weakness and, ideally, go to the same priest who can counsel and encourage you.
- Do some appropriate form of fasting which will train your inner muscles to say “no” to sinful habits.

The main reason we repeat some sins over and over is because we never get serious about eliminating them. If we commit ourselves to acting on the above five suggestions, we will be surprised at how quickly we may experience victory over an area of weakness.

### **7. Do you have a suggestion for a way to examine our conscience?**

Remember that sin is not only “choosing to do wrong,” but also “failing to do good.” As disciples of Jesus, we are called not only to keep the Ten Commandments, but also to live according to the new commandment of love.

- What am I doing to express my love for God? To what extent do I seek to discover God’s will when it comes to how I use my time, treasure and talent, and make decisions? Is fostering a relationship with God through prayer a priority in my life? If it is, we will gradually become ever more aware of sinful habits in our lives. Remember that the loss of the sense of sin is nearly always connected to a loss of the sense of God. Committing to being honest with God in prayer is the best thing we can do to have a clear sense of God and his ways alive in our heart.
- To what extent do I seek to live the Golden Rule, treating others as I wish to be treated? To what extent have I developed a compassionate heart for the marginalized members of society? Are the poor included in my budget or do they only get loose change or my leftovers?
- To what extent am I aware of my call to develop my talents and use them to some extent to bless the communities I belong to?

### **Fix the moral flaws before reconciling bill— Bishop Wenski**

In the March 10, 2010 edition of the Orlando Sentinel, Bishop Wenski wrote the following article.

*The 40 days of Lent, which evoke the time that Jesus spent fasting in the desert, is a time of conversion and reconciliation. Yet, even as we have passed the midpoint in our Lenten observances, the word “reconciliation” has taken on a new and infelicitous connotation in our secular world.*

*Reconciliation, as a “legislative process intended to allow consideration of a contentious budget bill without the threat of a filibuster,” seems now to be the preferred tactic of the Democratic leadership in Congress to secure passage of what has come to be known as Obamacare.*

*While such reconciliation might bring together the House and Senate health-care reform proposals, it will not bring the nation together, for however the two bills may be reconciled, serious flaws remain.*

*Almost everyone, regardless of political ideology, agrees that there is a need to fix health-care in our nation. Our present system serves too few people and at too high a cost. The U.S. bishops have consistently advocated for health-care reform for more than 40 years. We believe that health-care is a basic human right—and we continue to support adequate and affordable health-care for all. Health-care coverage should not be denied to those in need because of their condition, age, where they come from, or when they arrive here.*

*However, no health-care legislation is better than bad health-care legislation. And we fear that the reconciliation process will give us bad legislation. Any genuine health-care reform must protect human life and dignity from conception to natural death. Those pushing reconciliation in order to get health-care passed now have opened the door to an expansion of abortion coverage by refusing to incorporate language that would honor conscience protection presently afforded individuals and institutions by the Church, Hyde and Weldon Amendments.*

*Using taxpayers’ money to pay for other people’s abortions would make all citizens complicit in what many regard as a morally heinous act. The so-called prochoice advocates now argue that Roe v. Wade did not merely declare a right to have the government not interfere with a woman’s privacy; they assert the right to have the government positively assist in a woman’s having an abortion. Whatever you might call it, a procedure that results in the death of a living human being—whether at the beginning or end of life—is not health-care.*

*The lack of conscience protection in the proposed health-care legislation (like recent attempts at redefining the traditional understanding of marriage) undermines the religious freedom that has been part of the history of this country for more than two centuries. Religious freedom is at the foundation of all other freedoms.*

*Cardinal Francis George said in a recent speech: “The Founding Fathers understood when they amended the Constitution that the separation of church and state springs from a concept of limited government and favors a public role for churches and other religious bodies in promoting the civic virtues that are vitally necessary in a well-functioning democracy.”*

*If congressional reconciliation gives us expanded abortion coverage and eliminates conscience protection, the results will not be a healthier nation but one more divided and less reconciled than it had been before this debate began.*

Have a blessed week,

