

Fifth Sunday of Lent March 22, 2015 B

Pope Francis offers questions to consider as we prepare for confession

The following piece is from the Catholic News Service.

As Catholics are encouraged to make going to confession a significant part of their lives during Lent, Pope Francis offered some quick tips to help people prepare for the sacrament of penance.

After a brief explanation of why people should go to confession -- "because we are all sinners" -- the pope listed 30 key questions to reflect on as part of making an examination of conscience and being able to "confess well."

The guide is part of a 28-page booklet in Italian released by the Vatican publishing house. Pope Francis had 50,000 free copies distributed to people attending his Angelus address Feb. 22, the first Sunday of Lent.

Titled "Safeguard your Heart," the booklet is meant to help the faithful become "courageous" and prepared to battle against evil and choose the good.

The booklet contains quick introductions to Catholic basics: it has the text of the Creed, a list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. It explains the seven sacraments and includes Pope Francis' explanation of "lectio divina," a prayerful way of reading Scripture in order to better hear "what the Lord wants to tell us in his word and to let us be transformed by his Spirit."

The booklet's title is based on a line from one of the pope's morning Mass homilies in which he said Christians need to guard and protect their hearts, "just as you protect your home -- with a lock."

"How often do bad thoughts, bad intentions, jealousy, envy enter?" he asked. "Who opened the door? How did those things get in?"

The Oct. 10, 2014, homily, which is excerpted in the booklet, said the best way to guard one's heart is with the daily practice of an "examination of conscience," in which one quietly reviews what bad things one has done

and what good things one has failed to do for God, one's neighbor and oneself. The questions include:

- Do I only turn to God when I'm in need?
- Do I attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation?
- Do I begin and end the day with prayer?
- Am I embarrassed to show that I am a Christian?
- Do I rebel against God's plan?
- Am I envious, hot-tempered, biased?
- Am I honest and fair with everyone or do I fuel the "throwaway culture?"
- In my marital and family relations, do I uphold morality as taught in the Gospels?
- Do I honor and respect my parents?
- Have I refused newly conceived life? Have I snuffed out the gift of life? Have I helped do so?
- Do I respect the environment?
- Am I part worldly and part believer?
- Do I overdo it with eating, drinking, smoking and amusements?
- Am I overly concerned about my physical well-being, my possessions?
- How do I use my time? Am I lazy?
- Do I want to be served?
- Do I dream of revenge, hold grudges?
- Am I meek, humble and a builder of peace?

Catholics should go to confession, the pope said, because everyone needs forgiveness for their sins, for the ways "we think and act contrary to the Gospel."

"Whoever says he is without sin is a liar or is blind," he wrote.

Confession is meant to be a sincere moment of conversion, an occasion to demonstrate trust in God's willingness to forgive his children and to help them back on the path of following Jesus, Pope Francis wrote.

Reflections on this Sunday's Readings

Today's first reading from Jeremiah ends with these consoling words:

*"I will forgive their evildoing
and remember their sin no more."*

When people confess sins that they have already received absolution for, it is as if they do not believe that God has forgiven them. The truth is that once we have shown even *imperfect* sorrow for our sins, we are forgiven. Imperfect contrition is motivated by the 'fear of losing heaven' and 'the fear of going to hell.' *Perfect* contrition is being sorry because we have offended and failed our God who loves us so much. Isn't it awesome to know that God has a poor memory for our sins once we have repented of them?

Recalling some sins is not all bad—especially when it helps us not to fall into them again. A recovering alcoholic's memory of his/her disastrous past would, hopefully, convince him/her not to ever drink again.

"Jesus offered prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears."

The above verse is from Hebrews 5, today's second reading. How many of us think of Jesus, the powerful miracle worker, who confronted the church and civic leaders of his time, crying out loud to God with tears? Scripture scholars tell us that this Hebrews verse is a reference to Jesus' agony in the garden as he struggled with the cup of suffering handed him by God. Isn't it consoling to know that our Lord and Savior struggled with the difficult and painful circumstances of his life? Jesus' crying out to God shows us that even though he was divine, he was also *fully* human. There is nothing in our human experience that Jesus is not acquainted with. Someone once said that *there is nothing that we suffer that has not first passed through the heart of God in Jesus: poverty, exile, betrayal, loneliness, rejection, abuse, abandonment, etc.* Isn't it comforting to know that our God does indeed know in his heart everything

we experience and feel? Can you imagine the impact that this might have on our relationship with Jesus if we took into our being this very human dimension of Jesus' life on earth? The God spoken of in these verses from Hebrews (5:7-9) is not some aloof or distant God, but a God totally *in sync* with our pain and suffering.

Today's Gospel

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of his 'special hour,' the 'grain of wheat dying,' 'hating one's life,' and other things. The following are eight comments on today's Gospel.

1. Jesus begins his discourse by speaking of his "*hour*"—a reference to his return to God. He will pass through death, be raised up, and return to his Father.

2. Jesus uses the analogy of a *wheat grain* to speak of life and death. Just as a grain of wheat must first die before it bears fruit, so too must Jesus die prior to his Resurrection, and so too must we die to sin and selfishness before we bear godly fruit in our lives. Married couples know this more than other people. For the marriage to grow, each spouse must frequently die to his/her own desires.

3. "*Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life, will preserve it.*" This implies that those who cling to their lives, concerned only about themselves, will eventually lose out on the meaning of life, which is to love and serve others. Thomas Merton talks about our *true self* and *false self*. The *true self* is that part of us that seeks to follow God and his ways. The *false self* is that part that wants to be independent of God and his ways, the part that is self-centered, controlling, jealous, etc. This self we must 'hate'—or we might say 'deny'—and not allow to control our lives. This false self must be transformed by praying, fasting and penance.

4. "*Whoever serves me must follow me... The Father will honor whoever serves me.*" Serving Jesus means, among other things, being willing to lay down one's life for others—to die to the desires of the false self. To serve Jesus is to follow him in his path of love and to carry one's cross. Such service and love will honor the Father.

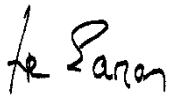
5. "*Save me from the hour*" is a reference to Jesus' agony in the garden. It is a beautiful statement about Jesus' humanity. As a person who loves life and people, he has no desire to die; he recoils from it. Yet, if going through this "*hour*" is what he must do, then he is willing to embrace it.

6. *“Then came a voice from heaven”* is reminiscent of the voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration. *“I have glorified the Father.”* Jesus gives glory to the Father (and so do we) by following the will of God. Jesus goes on to say: *“I always do the things that please the Father.”*

7. *“Now is the time of judgment in this world. Now the ruler of this world will be drawn out.”* The judgment is our ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to Jesus. When we say ‘yes,’ love is released into the world, and darkness and evil are overthrown, and vice-versa.

8. *“When I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to myself”* is a reference to Jesus’ cross and how the power of his love will attract and draw people to him.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Le Sarah". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.