

## **Sacrament of Reconciliation: The Forgiveness of the Father, Luke 15:1-32**

**Homily by Fr. Dennis Thompson**

As a priest I am always amazed at the healing and loving presence of our God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Throughout my life, I have experienced and seen the life transforming power of this Sacrament to change hearts and minds. The older I get the more I appreciate the gift that our Church has in this powerful rite. This sacramental rite is a powerful source of healing for those who come to receive it.

Just like the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable in Luke's Gospel, we are welcomed back home to the love of the Father through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Have we lost our way in understanding the powerful presence of our loving Father in our Sacrament of Reconciliation? Like the Prodigal Son we confess, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you..." In this sacramental rite we come to receive the love and forgiveness of the Father. We understand that our sins affect our relationship to God and one another. We live and celebrate forgiveness in our Parish in the context of our Catholic Church.

Thinking back to when I was a young child in the 1960's, I remember my parents would gather the family together throughout the year to visit neighboring parishes to go to "Confession," or "Penance" as it was called back then. For whatever reason, my parents did not like going to Penance at our own parish church. (I hope it was not because they feared what one of us would confess to our own parish priest. My dad said it was a great way to visit another church. He knew the history of all the churches we visited.) During the drive on the way to a church, my parents would go through a kind of examination of conscience of possible family situations needed to be addressed in our individual confessions.

It was an intimidating family ritual in the car, and then at the church standing in line to go to an unknown priest to tell him all your sins. Once in the confessional box, I would kneel down and anxiously wait for the door to bang open. I would take a nervous gulp of air, make the sign of the cross and say, "Bless me father for I have sinned. My last confession was one month ago and these are my sins..." I always had a good experience and the priest never made any kind of judgment or exclaimed in a loud voice, "You did what?!" (I'm sure once the priest got done hearing all my sins, and my brothers' and sisters', he must have felt like he had just been stoned to death with popcorn. My bothers and sisters also compared who was in confessional the longest and received the hardest penance.)

After all was said and done, I remember all my anxiety replaced by tremendous peace. I knew that all my sins were forgiven. A heavy weight had been lifted and it was a new beginning to be the kind of person God wanted me to be. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a time of healing to confess our sins, to do penance (conversion), and truly know forgiveness and peace offered to us

by God our loving Father. Not only are we forgiven, but we are also called to forgive others.

That is my grounding in the rite. I am very thankful what I learned and experienced over the years from my parents, nuns, and priests who passed on this gift of faith to me. No matter what we have called the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or the ways we have celebrated the rite over the years, it does not change the meaning for us as Roman Catholics. Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, we are invited to make a return back to the love of the Father in our Sacrament of Reconciliation. As a Church we must enter into the celebration and rejoice in the forgiveness of the Father. We cannot stand outside the embrace of the Father, like the older brother in the parable. Remember the Church offers us the love of the Father when we come to this rite.

The Church has three forms to be used in celebrating the rite of the Sacrament. Form I is the standard individual rite offered here each Saturday at 3:30 PM. Form II is the communal celebration consisting of hymns, scripture, and examination of conscience with individual confession with the parish priest presiding and visiting priests helping out. In form III the community also comes together to celebrate the rite with hymns, scripture, and examination of conscience, but allows for general confession and the general absolution given by the parish priest. The Church allows form III in case of necessity, but should not be the only form used. Form III also calls for those who receive general absolution to later confess serious sin privately to a priest confessor. In all three forms, forgiveness is forgiveness, and all three are valid rites. There should not be any conditions set on giving or receiving forgiveness.

It is our tradition here at our Parish to celebrate the rite of Reconciliation using form III twice each year, on the Sunday before Christmas and Easter. We have a very large gathering of parishioners and members of other parishes who pack our church for the celebration of the rite. Many seniors and families come because it is held at 1:00 P.M. on a Sunday afternoon, which makes it easier for many of them to attend. But it is also very difficult to find priests at that time on Sunday afternoon. Even if we had a large number of priests it would be very difficult to hear all the individual confessions.

Archbishop Harry Flynn, at the priest assembly this summer, directed all the priests of the Archdiocese that form III of the Sacrament of Reconciliation should only be used in the rarest of pastoral necessity. Respecting the pastoral wisdom of our Archbishop, St. Michael's parish will no longer offer the communal Sacrament celebrated before Christmas and Easter each year. I ask all our parishioners to seek out individual times for the Sacrament offered throughout the year at the parish. Like the Prodigal Son, let us return back to the love of the Father to confess our sins, to do penance (conversion) and live what we have received. Like the loving Father, God stands waiting with open arms ready to forgive us whenever we come to this Sacrament.