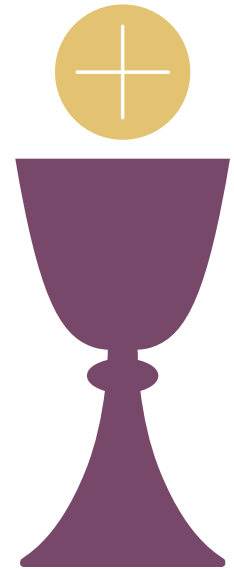


Finding Forgiveness

One of the great ironies of church life is that numerous people may actually *stay away from church* at times when they feel their lives are “too messy.” When their need for God is perhaps at its greatest, they withdraw from the very place where loving acceptance, support, and forgiveness are supposed to be freely given!



What this says about the human heart is poignant. Shame can bind us. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, people hide when they know that something is wrong. Unable to face other people in the hour of their distress, they may even find it hard to face God.

There are times when the “mess” is of our own making. We sin. We go astray. Perhaps we fail to live up to the standards we hold for ourselves, or we fear the judgment of others. At other times, however, it’s not so clear just what went wrong. We only know we’re in pain, and we don’t want to let others in on that.

The sad reality is that sin, whether our own or someone else’s, tends to isolate us. We become prisoners of our own unhappiness.

JESUS LIFTS OUR SHAME

It doesn’t have to be this way. In fact, the gospel story of the woman caught in adultery offers a beautiful illustration of how Jesus lifts our shame. An angry mob, about to execute a sentence of death upon a woman caught in adultery, is dispersed by the words of Jesus: “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7).

The story does not end there, however. The next step is perhaps the most important one, and allows the full

meaning of the encounter to dawn on us. Jesus says to her, “Neither do I condemn you.” He sets her free, with the command to sin no more.

“Neither do I condemn you.” What words of grace! If only this message could resound in our parishes, and in every Eucharist we celebrate. It is good news. Jesus lifts our shame, and breaks through the trap of sin to free us. He accepts and does not condemn us. He sends us out with the admonition to sin no more, yet never destroys our dignity. The Church, as the bearer of the Good News of Jesus, has the privilege and challenge of conveying just such forgiveness and peace. The whole believing community is charged with this sacred task.

EUCHARIST AND THE FORGIVENESS OF JESUS

The mercy of God is celebrated in the Eucharist from beginning to end. In the Penitential Act during the Opening Rites, we admit our sinfulness and ask God’s forgiveness. In the Gloria, we call upon God’s mercy in jubilation. In the Communion Rite we pray to the Lamb of God, who takes away “the sins of the world.” Before Communion, we express our humility, saying “Lord, I am not worthy....,” yet we remain confident that he will indeed come to us. “Neither do I condemn you.” In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray “forgive us our trespasses.” Aware of the sins we commit every day, we ask forgiveness. Is forgiveness given? Are

our prayers for mercy answered? Of course they are! Yet even beyond all these individual prayers, there is a great, overarching theme of forgiveness present throughout the celebration of Eucharist.

The whole mystery of redemption is, in a certain sense, about reconciliation. What sin divided, God has reunited, through the cross of Jesus Christ. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ," St. Paul tells us, "not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Forgiveness flows from the Cross, because here the love of God is poured out for sinners. The reconciliation brought about by God does not wait for our initiative. It is offered to us, not because we are righteous, but "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). The Paschal Mystery of Jesus, to which we are united in the Eucharist, is a mystery of reconciliation. Here is the fountain of forgiveness—in the heart of the Mass.

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

There are times when we need or want to experience reconciliation through the Sacrament of Penance. This too is important. Serious sin, which damages our relationship with God and one another, requires sacramental reconciliation. Forgiveness of less serious sin through frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance can also bring us spiritual benefits.

The four movements of Penance—contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution—wonderfully lead us through a process of repentance. They allow us to return to the eucharistic banquet full of joy at having received the pardon and peace of Christ.

THE PASSION AND FORGIVENESS

As Holy Week begins next week, we shall recall Jesus' Passion. In many ways, it is a story of sin and forgiveness. Judas's betrayal, Peter's denial, the Apostles who ran away,

the injustice of the trial, and the whole ordeal of injustice, abuse, cruelty, and mockery: all this cascades down upon Jesus. Sin, upon sin, upon sin.

What shines through the darkness of sin, however, is Jesus himself. The dazzling power of his forgiveness appears even on the Cross. The Passion according to St. Luke makes this forgiveness especially evident. "Father, forgive them," Jesus says of his torturers and executors, "they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). "[T]oday you will be with me in Paradise," he promises the repentant thief who was crucified at his side (Luke 23:43). His forgiveness is limitless. He is our peace.

REFLECT

How ready am I to receive forgiveness, and to give it? Are there people in my life whom I need to forgive, in order to share fully in the banquet of reconciliation that is the Eucharist? For what sins do I need forgiveness?

ACT

Be a reconciler in your family, workplace, or neighborhood. This may not be easy. You may not be thanked for trying. But try anyway. Offer your efforts to Christ.

PRAY

Loving God, I long to hear you speak words of forgiveness. Draw me into the heart of your mercy. Make me an instrument of your pardon and peace.

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