

2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT – 2022 (December 4, 2022)

Every year in the season of Advent, as we do today, we meet that strange figure known as John the Baptist. He certainly played a unique role in salvation history--his job was to prepare the people more immediately for the coming, the arrival of Jesus, the messiah. But in the meantime, John is baptizing and preaching to others the need for repentance—acknowledging one’s sins and the need to change, to be converted.

That call to repentance is timeless; it’s addressed to everyone of every time and place—including you and me. It’s true that Lent is the penitential season *par excellence*, but repentance is an Advent challenge as well. Don’t forget: besides preparing for Christmas, Advent is also about preparing for Jesus second coming and his coming into our daily life as well. So we each need to regularly take a good, honest look at ourselves and see what we need to change, what we each need to repent of and be converted from.

And there is no better, more effective way to do so than the sacrament of reconciliation. In today’s bulletin is a list of all the extra times I’ll be available for confessions between now and Christmas. And the bulletin cover, as usual, lists all the regular times for confession as well. I often talk about and try to encourage confessions especially during Advent and Lent, and I do so again today because it’s such a powerful and healing gift God gives us—the chance to be free of the burden and guilt of our sins and to be assured of the immense gift of his forgiveness and love.

But I also speak about this again because, to be honest, I am not exactly overwhelmed by large numbers of people coming to confession. Now, I must also say that every Advent and Lent we have confession times for our religious education students in all five of our cluster parishes. We did that again over the last 2-3 weeks, and the students did a really fine job with their confessions—especially those making their first confessions. Adults: how about you?? I know that confession isn’t exactly ‘fun’ for you any more than it is for me. But when we feel sick or get injured, we don’t hesitate to go to a doctor to do what we can for physical healing. Why are we so afraid or reluctant to seek the sacramental healing and grace that confession provides?

In October the Vatican held a seminar for the laity about this sacrament. One of the speakers gave a “Top Ten” list of reasons that people give for not going to confession and then responded to them. Just to mention a few of them:

1. “Why confess to a priest? I can talk directly to God.” You certainly can and should talk directly to God. We all need to stay in touch with God; that’s what prayer is all about. But confession gives us an assurance of the mercy of God that we can’t know on our own. Besides, let’s remember that Jesus established this sacrament—in John chapter 20, the risen Christ gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles and told them “whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” Jesus never did anything without a good reason, and he obviously gave the apostles (and their successors) the power and authority to be ministers of his forgiveness. Why would we not want to gratefully avail ourselves of this great gift?

2. “It has been so long since I’ve been to confession; I wouldn’t know what to say.” That’s by far the easiest objection to respond to. If that is your situation, simply come to the priest and say

exactly that! I've had that happen many times over my years as a priest, and my first response is: "I'm so glad you are here! Let's take this one step at a time, and I'll help you all the way." I promise you: no priest worth his salt will ever think bad of you or look down on you. And if you ever do or ever did have such an experience, then go to a different priest (and please pray for the conversion of that priest who treated you badly).

3. "Confession doesn't do me any good; I just keep confessing the same sins." To which my first response is: "join the club!" Let's remember: this sacrament is all about the healing grace and mercy of God. That grace not only forgives the sins we have committed, but also strengthens us to move forward to grow in the holiness to which we are all called. Regular confession, even if it only involves 'the same ol' sins', keeps us mindful of our need for God's help, and it keeps us grateful for the fact that God gives us that help that can keep us from falling more deeply into sin.

4. One last excuse for now: "Well, I haven't killed anyone or stolen anything." Good for you. But as the speaker at that Vatican seminar pointed out: "One may not be guilty of ...theft or murder, but there are still eight other commandments to keep." Confession is not only for the serious or mortal sins, but for the everyday or venial sins as well. We can so easily fool or justify ourselves in such matters. "Oh, it won't really hurt if I share this juicy bit of gossip". Then the next time: "well, this is a little worse, but everybody does it." Little, so-called 'harmless' things become bigger and more harmful if we aren't careful. The Catechism says it well: "Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin." (n. 1863). That slippery slope can indeed get really slippery very quickly! Regular confession helps us be aware of such tendencies and temptations and 'nip them in the bud' before things get out of hand.

John the Baptist was all about preparing the people for the coming of Jesus. Ongoing repentance and conversion in all things—serious and not-so-serious-- is part and parcel of that preparation work for us now as it was for those of his time. Let's not be afraid or ashamed to heed that call. And perhaps more importantly: let's not fall into the temptation of thinking that we don't need to.