

2nd Sunday Advent Year "B"

December 7, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” As we heard in our second reading: the Lord “is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” I wish to speak today about the importance of the Sacrament of Penance in the daily life of Catholics, and about our Christian need for repentance.

Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance on Easter Sunday night, when gathered with his apostles. He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. For those whose sins you retain, they are retained” (John 20:19-23). Naturally, it took time for this teaching to be understood in the same manner in which we do today, as this is a textbook case of the development of doctrine.

Originally, the Sacrament of Baptism was **the** means by which sinners were reconciled. Soon though, it was obvious that people fell into serious sin after Baptism, and some of the early writers allowed for the possibility of one additional act of penance afterwards. During the period of persecutions, some Christians caved under threat of death and renounced their faith in order to save their lives. Soon, a vigorous debated ensued about whether these people should be re-admitted into the community of believers. This process was quite public, during which the penitents occupied a special place in church, the community interceded for them and they were publicly reconciled to the Church.

However, even dating back to the time of Pope St. Leo the Great in the mid-fifth century (d. 461 A.D.), private and individual confession was known and practiced, even if it developed more gradually throughout the entire Church. At one point, Leo argued against a practice that **required** a public confession of sins before granting absolution.

For this intervention we are all most grateful! In writing to the bishops in Campania (Sicily), the Pope clarified:

All that is necessary, however, is for the sinner to manifest his conscience in a secret confession to the priests alone ...It is sufficient, therefore, to have first offered one's confession to God, and then also to the priest, who acts as an intercessor for the transgressions of the penitents.¹

The Holy Spirit has guided the Church for 2000 years, and with legitimate development we have arrived at a consistent and clear teaching regarding the Sacrament of Penance. Private confession is an absolutely essential aspect of the spiritual life for any serious Catholic. St. John the Baptist stood tall as a prophet who called the people to repentance. He was not afraid to call out sin for what it is, namely, a transgression against God Himself.

There is a penitential aspect to Advent that, while distinguished from Lent, is nevertheless real. Several years ago, when celebrating solemn Evening Prayer at St. Peter's to open the season of Advent, Pope Benedict wore a special clasp on his cope containing three decorative brass pinecones, ancient Christian symbols of penitence. This was a gentle reminder, a recovery of a sense of the season perhaps forgotten. After all, the liturgy teaches, symbols themselves speak volumes. In his homily for that occasion, the Pope remarked: "The Advent cry of hope then expresses from the outset and very powerfully, the full gravity of our state, of our extreme need of salvation."²

During Advent, the color prescribed for the sacred liturgy is violet, indicating it's penitential aspect contained within the season of hopeful expectation. The Sacrament of Penance is especially recommended.

¹ Pope Leo I, *Magna Indignatione*, March 6, 459

² Pope Benedict XVI, homily at Solemn Vespers at St. Peter's Basilica, 29 Nov. 2008.

I urge all to receive this great sacrament before Christmas. To our young people, especially our teenagers and young adults, do not fear this encounter with Christ's mercy. When we run away from the admission of our sins, we become dulled in conscience. That which used to bother us, no longer does. Others struggle with a pervading sense that they confess the same things over and over, that they are not making any progress, and discouragement sets in. We understand this struggle. But we do not give in to this discouragement.

The season of Advent is indeed a season of looking forward, of looking to the East, from where our salvation comes. If we are to make ready the way of the Lord, we must clear away the brambles, the weeds and the refuse that impedes His way. We do all this in the strong and firm hope that our Savior comes to conquer sin and death; He comes as the light of the world into our midst in order to transform us into His likeness.