

STRUGGLING TO SAY “I’M SORRY”: THE ROADBLOCK OF IMPENITENCE

For decades, my parents have done daily crossword puzzles, and done so religiously. It made birthday gifts and Christmas stocking stuffers a cinch, as there is always some new book of puzzles. The gold standard for these word games is without question *The New York Times*, in which the daily puzzles increase in difficulty as the week progresses. Buckle in for the week. Since it is Sunday, here’s an easy one. The clue– “Don sackcloth.” The answer contains six letters, the fourth of which is an “e.” Bingo–REPENT. An alternative clue could easily have been, “Say ‘I’m sorry.’” Why are these words so difficult to say, both to loved ones, but especially to God? If **repentance is key** to the spiritual life, then certainly the **refusal** to do so is...are you ready? The word has ten letters, five of which are vowels and begins with the letter “c”....but more on that later at the bottom of this column!

The next in the list of sins against the Holy Spirit to be considered is that of **impenitence**, a word that refers to the situation that occurs when we are loathe to change our behavior, simply because we refuse to be sorry in the first place. If we are unrepentant, we will wind up in serious spiritual straits. Our Catechism wisely teaches the necessity of repentance, especially **final repentance**. “There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit.” (CCC para. # 1864) St. John Paul II desired to teach on this important topic in his 1986 encyclical letter on the Holy Spirit. There, he taught: “If Jesus says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven either in this life or in the next, it is because this ‘non-forgiveness’ is linked, as to its cause, to ‘non-repentance,’ in other words to the radical refusal to be converted.” (Dominum et Vivificantem, para. #46)

Above one of the confessionals on the Dayton Ave. side of the Church is a window depicting **Saint Dismas**, the “good thief” who represents the quintessential antidote to impenitence. Here, as he was being executed for his crimes, he was offered one final opportunity to repent. Recall, the criminal opposite Jesus had mocked him saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Dismas rebukes him: “Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied to him, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:40-43) Dismas accepted the **final grace of repentance**, whereas the other criminal apparently did not. Each decision that day had eternal consequences.

It should be noticed that the case of Dismas proved to be quite a conundrum for St. Augustine. In his earlier writings, he accepted the fact of thief’s salvation, despite having neither been baptized nor martyred. But in his later works he reconsiders his thoughts. He admitted that Dismas’ baptismal status was unknown– the Scriptures are silent on the matter. In his “Treatise on the Soul and its Origin,” he speculated that perhaps Dismas’ cry for forgiveness constituted a real and authentic return to the faith **after** Baptism. He raised a second possibility, namely that Dismas’ salvation was the result of – get this– having been “washed with a baptism of this most sacred kind,” in reference to the **blood and water** that sprung forth from the side of Jesus when pierced with a lance. For Augustine, the bottom line was the man’s words: “For beyond doubt his faith and piety appeared to the Lord clearly in his heart, as they do to us in his words.” (III, 12,9)

One of the scenarios we discussed in the seminary regarding the Seal of the Confessional centered upon a hypothetical situation in which the priest is called to the bedside of someone who is rather notorious in his moral failings. The family calls for a priest, and almost miraculously the dying patient agrees to see him. The family leaves the hospital room for privacy. When the priest finally emerges, the family members immediately want to know– “Father, did he go to confession?” The question became, “In light of the seal of the confessional and Canon Law, could you answer their question?” Ah, the days of seminary musings!

But the possibility of **deathbed conversions** is real. The Lord desires that everyone would have that final opportunity to overcome pride and admit one’s failings. Deathbed conversions happen. Michael Wayne reported that his father, famous actor **John Wayne**, was **received into the Catholic Church** on his deathbed.

Other famous converts at the end of their life include: Buffalo Bill Cody, Patricia Neal, Oscar Wilde, King Charles II of England. These conversions at the finish line are not cop outs— in fact, they take tremendous courage. In some cases, people admit failings that they had previously and stubbornly refused to do for any number of reasons. May Saint Dismas continue to intercede on behalf of sinners from his place in heaven. (To be continued) Answer above: **Calamitous**.

- The U.S. Bishops were poised to pass concrete measures to respond to the abuse crisis, including proposed standards of conduct for bishops and a special commission (with laity) for review of complaints against bishops. At the insistence of the Holy See, that has been tabled until after the February meeting of heads of the world’s Episcopal Conferences in Rome. This clearly caught our bishops by surprise—they are not alone in their utter disappointment!
- **Asia Bibi**, a 47-year-old Catholic mother of five was finally acquitted by Pakistan’s Supreme Court after being falsely charged with blasphemy, punishable by death in the Muslim country! Her case became known throughout the developed world. Her “crime” was insulting the Prophet Muhammad, following an argument with Muslim women over her use of a drinking vessel meant for Muslims.
- The situation remains dangerous for some “underground” Chinese Catholic bishops who remain loyal to Rome. Wenzhou’s **Bishop Shao Zhumin** was arrested and will be subject to isolation and government indoctrination. Despite the recent accord with the Vatican, the Communist government still forbids religious education for anyone under 18 years of age.
- Lost in much of the post-election banter is the good news that West Virginia voters approved an amendment stating: “Nothing in this Constitution secures or protects a right to abortion or requires the funding of abortion.” God willing, concrete measures to protect the unborn will follow upon this clarification.
- Sanctity is for all ages. **Venerable Carlo Acutis** died in 2006 from leukemia at just 15 years of age. A happy and joyous youth who reached out to the poor, even while suffering serious illness, he inspired many in his northern Italian hometown. He said: “To always be close to Jesus, that’s my life plan.” Learn more about his remarkable young life by visiting www.carloacutis.com/en/association.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector