

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

1. Read (Seek) — Read the verses slowly and prayerfully several times. Write down any words or phrases that seem to stand out:

2. Meditate (Find) — Now begin to reflect on the verses and ask God what it means and how he wants to speak to you through the passage. **God what are you saying to me through this?**

3. Pray (Ask) — Respond from your heart to what God has been saying to you. **What do you want me to know?** Write down your prayer to him or record whatever he says to you.

4. Contemplate (Taste) — Be quiet before the Lord enjoying His presence. **How is God calling you to act in response to what he has shown you?**

- [1] www.usccb.org/liturgy/penance.shtml
- [2] *Rite of Penance*, no. 45
- [3] The Order of the Mass; Penitential Rite
- [4] Sunday Compline; Divine Office; page 55
- [5] Matthew 5:48
- [6] Matthew 5:48
- [7] Catechism of the Catholic Church 1847
- [8] CCC 1863
- [9] *Lumen Gentium* 53, 56

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Gospel Reading – Matthew 3:1-12 – Roman Missal

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: A voice of one crying out in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Spiritual Reading - From St. Jose Maria Escriva

We are witnesses and precursors. We have to bear witness and at the same time we have to show others the way. Our responsibility is great, because to be Christ’s witnesses implies first and foremost that we should try to live our lives according to his doctrine that we should struggle to make our actions remind others of Jesus and his most lovable personality. We have to act in such a way that others will be able to say, when they meet us: This man is a Christian, because he does not hate, because he is willing to understand, because he is not a fanatic, because he is willing to make sacrifices, because he shows that he is a man of peace, because he knows how to love.

Go and sin no more - Lesson and Discussion

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

When we were younger and we got into trouble, sometimes our parents would put us in “time out”. A “time out” helped us to think about the choices we had made. After some time had passed, our parents would

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talk to us and make sure we understood why we were punished and how to avoid making those same bad choices in the future.

Does our soul need a “time out”? Do we give ourselves a “time out” to think of how we have offended God and how we can stop doing it? One way to give your soul a “time out” is to make a good examination of conscience and then pray an Act of Contrition each night. If we diligently make this practice we will be ready for the Sacrament of Penance.

Why do we need the Sacrament of Penance? “Because of human weakness . . . Christians ‘turn aside from [their] early love’ (see Rev 2:4) and even break off their friendship with God by sinning. The Lord, therefore, instituted a special sacrament of penance for the pardon of sins committed after baptism. The Church has faithfully celebrated the sacrament throughout the centuries—in varying ways, but retaining its essential elements.”[1] When we go to Confession we acknowledge that we have offended God by our thoughts, actions, and omissions. We also reflect on how we have hurt both our neighbors and ourselves. Near the end of confession we say the Act of Contrition. We make a promise to God, “I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.” [2] We are repenting from sin and asking God to help us sin no more. We know that we cannot repent from sin on our own, we must continually ask for help in avoiding sin. During the Confiteor at every Mass, we ask for the help of God and ask “blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters”[3] to pray for us. An older form of the Confiteor, which is prayed each night after the Examination of Conscience in the Officium Divinum, asks the Saints and Angels by name to pray for us. “I beseech blessed Mary, ever Virgin, blessed Michael the Archangel, blessed John the Baptist, the holy Apostles Peter and Paul and all the Saints to pray for me to the Lord our God.”[4] Saint John the Baptist is placed third in the list, right after Mary and Michael and before the great Saints of the Church, Peter and Paul. Saint John the Baptist is the saint of repentance and a powerful help in avoiding sin.

What do we mean when we promise “to sin no more”? “Nobody is perfect!”[5] It means exactly what it says, to sin no more! We understand that left to our own power, we will never be able to accomplish a life without sin. That is why we preface our promise by saying, “with your (God’s) help.” Only with God’s help can we fully keep from sinning. God is perfect and He allows us to participate in his perfection through the gift of His Grace. He made Mary perfect at her conception and He alone offers His Grace that makes us perfect. Although we are not perfect, we should be on the path of perfection. Blessed John Paul II said the path of perfection consists in “your yes” and “God’s grace”. We know we are called to walk this path of perfection for Jesus says, “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”[6] He calls us to be perfect in mercy and have perfect love. Are we ourselves working towards perfection or away from it? When someone is learning music they practice long hours in order to perform perfectly and get every note right. We must strive to live perfectly by choosing to cooperate with God’s grace at every mo-

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ment of our lives. To receive his mercy, we must admit our faults. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”[7]

Is it possible to really sin no more? It is possible for us to avoid greater, mortal sins in and through God’s help alone. However, it is not possible for man on earth to avoid every sin. “While he is in the flesh, man cannot help but have at least some light sins. But do not discount these sins which we call “light”: if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What then is our hope? Above all, confession.”[8] The Blessed Virgin Mary is the exception as through the Grace of God she avoided all sin. This is a unique privilege given to Mary alone. “Because of this gift of sublime grace, she far surpasses all other creatures, both in heaven and on earth.”[9] We ask the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary to cooperate fully with the Grace of God, to avoid sin, and pursue good.

STORY – Saint Mary of Egypt

Saint Mary of Egypt is a prime example of turning from a life of great sin to a life of “little” sin. Saint Mary of Egypt’s life is a testimony of God’s Grace conquering sin. Mary, from the age of 12 to 29, lived a life of public prostitution. At the age of 29, Mary went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, not for holy reasons but rather in hopes that she would meet some clients on the ship and ports. They happened to be in Jerusalem on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross and so her group visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where a relic of the True Cross is venerated. Mary attempted to enter the Church four times but was prevented by an invisible force. Mary, upset at not being able to enter, went to a statue of Our Lady outside the Church where she bitterly wept and beat her chest in repentance of her long life of sin. She promised to “sin no more” and listen to Our Lady’s direction on the manner in which she should live the rest of her life. After repenting, she entered the Church and kissed the relic of the True Cross. She returned to the statue of Mary and while praying, she heard a voice from afar which told her to cross the Jordan there she would find peace. Mary reached the Jordan and there receive Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament in a Church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. She then traveled into the desert and, for 47 years, lived a life of solitude and penance, similar to that of Saint John the Baptist. It is only in God’s holy providence that this great sinner, turned Saint, imitated the great Saint of conversion and penance, Saint John the Baptist, not only living like him but receiving the Blessed Sacrament at a Church named in his honor.