St. Mark Seeker's Study Guide

February 8, 2017: Sin and the Sacraments of Healing, Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Sin

Scriptural realism does not hesitate to pronounce judgment on the good and evil that affects our lives. The New Testament is filled with calls to conversion and repentance, which need to be heard in our culture today. If we say, "We are without sin," we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. (1 Jn 1:8-9) Despite society's efforts to downplay the reality of sin, there is an instinctive recognition of its existence.

- Children generally know, even when not told, when they have done something morally wrong when they lie, cheat in school, steal from their parents, bully others and the like.
- Adults readily admit the evil of terrorism, unjust war, lies, unfair treatment of people, and similar matters undermine the capacity of nations to live in peace.
- Society as a whole must also learn to admit the evil of abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and obtaining stem cells from embryos, which results in the death of embryonic human life and degrades the value of human life.
- Sexual sins that disconnect the conjugal act from new life, such as abortion, pornography, use of artificial means of contraception, fornication, adultery and masturbation, undermine our capacity for relationship and family.

Some sins are more popular than others in every age. We can only recognize some sin by recognizing what a whole human being looks like in Christ. Denying evil around us corrupts us spiritually and psychologically. Rationalizing our own evil is even more destructive of our wholeness.

The Sacraments of Reconciliation
(Also called Penance, Confession and Forgiveness)

THE SACRAMENTAL FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Through the gifts of the Church, Jesus, our divine physician, has given us the Sacraments of Healing—Penance and Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick—for the forgiveness of sins and the ministry to the sick and the dying. Sins committed after Baptism are forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, also called the Sacrament of Forgiveness, Confession, and Conversion. Divine mercy and conversion from sin are constant themes in Scripture. God's

mercy makes possible the repentance of the sinner and the forgiveness of sin. Time and again in the Old Testament, the sins of the people are met with God's outreach of mercy and the invitation to be healed and return to a covenant relationship. Even when the beloved King David lied, committed adultery, and caused the death of an innocent man, he was not beyond God's mercy, to which he had a humble recourse. Psalm 51 gives us words to express the kind of contrition and to trust in God's forgiveness that David felt after committing these sins.

JESUS FORGAVE SINS

The Gospels provide numerous examples of Christ's mission to forgive sins. On Easter night the Risen Christ imparted to his Apostles his own power to forgive sins. He breathed on them, imparting the promised Holy Spirit, and said, "Peace be with you." Jesus was actually filling them with peace that is rooted in friendship with God. But he did more. He shared with them his own merciful mission. He breathed on them a second time and said, As the Father has sent me, so I send you.... Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained. (Jn 20:21-23) That night Jesus gave the Church the ministry of the forgiveness of sins through the Apostles (cf. CCC, no. 1461).

Only a bishop or a priest can confer the sacraments of healing on behalf of God and the Church as he acts in *persona Christi* and as the representative of the community. "When he celebrates the Sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep.... The priest is the sign and instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner" (CCC, no. 1465). The Sacrament of Penance involves a conversion of our hearts to God, a confession of sins to a priest, the forgiveness of our sins, a penance to make some amends for sin, and reconciliation with God and the Church. For those who commit mortal sin after Baptism, this Sacrament is necessary for being reconciled to God and the Church.

SIN AND CONVERSION, FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

The Sacrament of Penance must be seen within the context of conversion from sin and a turn to God.

- Peter wept bitterly over his triple denial of Christ but received the grace of conversion and expressed it with a threefold confession of love for Jesus (cf. Lk 22:54-62; Jn 21:15-19).
- Paul was converted from persecuting Christians to becoming one of the greatest disciples of Christ who ever lived (cf. Acts 9:1-31).

These moments of conversion were only the beginning of their lifelong commitment to living in fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sin harms our relationship with God and damages our communion with the Church. Conversion of heart is the beginning of our journey back to God. Liturgically this happens in the Sacrament of Penance.

CONTRITION, MORTAL AND VENIAL SIN

- **Mortal sin** destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him.
- **Venial sin** allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it. (CCC, no. 1855)
- **Contrition:** In order to be forgiven, we need to have sorrow for our sins. This means turning away from evil and turning to God. It includes the determination to avoid such sins in the future. Such sins may either be mortal or venial. Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture (cf. 1 Jn 5:16-17), became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience. (CCC, no. 1854)

- **Perfect Contrition:** Contrition that arises from the love of God above all else is called “perfect contrition.”
- **Imperfect Contrition:** Contrition that arises from the fear of punishment is called “imperfect contrition.”

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION, CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

Confession liberates us from sins that trouble our hearts and makes it possible to be reconciled to God and others. We are asked to look into our souls and, with an honest and unblinking gaze, identify our sins. This opens our minds and hearts to God, moves us toward communion with the Church, and offers us a new future. In confession, by naming our sins before the priest, who represents Christ, we face our failings more honestly and accept responsibility for our sins. It is also in confession that a priest and penitent can work together to find the direction needed for the penitent to grow spiritually and to avoid sin in the future (cf. CCC, nos. 1455, 1456). When we have examined our consciences and have taken responsibility for our sins, we then confess them to the priest. We must confess all our mortal sins in kind and number. The Church strongly recommends confessing venial sins, though this is not strictly necessary.

EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT

The Sacrament of Penance reconciles us with God. “The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God’s grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship” (CCC, no. 1468). This Sacrament also reconciles us with the Church. Sin should never be understood as a private or personal matter, because it harms our relationship with others and may even break our loving communion with the Church. The Sacrament of Penance repairs this break and has a renewing effect on the vitality of the Church itself.

Absolution in the Confessional

The Priest, raising his hand, says: “God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace; and (the priest makes the sign of the cross over the penitent) I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

SACRAMENT OF ANOINTING OF THE SICK

(Extreme Unction, Healing or Last Rites)

The sacrament is not only for those who are at the point of death. Hence as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.” —CCC, no. 1514, citing SC, no. 73 The sacrament is for the ill, the aged, and children may be anointed if they would be comforted by the sacrament. **Viaticum** is the last reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist in anticipation of death. There are also prayers for the dying and for after death. Prayers of the Church, the people of God, surround our sick and dying brothers and sisters.

EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT

The priest anoints the sick and the dying with oil after imposing his hand upon their head. He says, "*Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit*" as he anoints the head. As he anoints the hands he says, "*May the Lord who frees you from sin heal you and raise you up*." When the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given, the hoped-for effect is that, if it be God's will, the person be physically healed of illness. But even if there is no physical healing, the primary effect of the Sacrament is a spiritual healing by which the sick person receives the Holy Spirit's gift of peace and courage to deal with the difficulties that accompany serious illness or the frailty of old age.

- The Holy Spirit renews our faith in God and helps us withstand the temptations of the Evil One to be discouraged and despairing in the face of suffering and death.
- Also, a sick person's sins are forgiven if he or she was not able to go to Confession prior to the celebration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.
- Another effect of this Sacrament is union with the Passion of Christ. By uniting ourselves more closely with the sufferings of Our Lord, we receive the grace of sharing in the saving work of Christ. In this way, our suffering, joined to the Cross of Christ, contributes to building up the People of God.
- This Sacrament also prepares us for our final journey when we depart from this life. The Anointing of the Sick completes our identification with Jesus Christ that was begun at our Baptism. Its grace and power fortify us in our final struggles before we go to the Father's house.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. **How can we prepare for the Sacrament of Penance?**
2. **Why is an examen important to prepare for the Sacrament?**
3. **Why do we fear revealing our darkness to others?**
4. **What is the seal of Confession?**
5. **How does reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation anticipate a person's judgment before God?**
6. **When should we receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick or the Sacrament of Reconciliation?**
7. **Why do you think assisted suicide is gaining momentum in our country as religious faith declines?**
8. **Are you afraid to be a burden to others or to die alone?**
9. **Why is it important to be with the dying and to have the support of God, the church and their family and friends?**
10. **Why is it important to acknowledge and incorporate those who are sick and dying into the faith community?**