

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 11, 2022
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore Street
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 15:1-32

When a person does not receive Holy Communion at Mass, I usually don't ask why. But if the person persists in this over a long period of time, I will approach him, since the Lord's Body and Blood are the sure means of grace and thus the way by which we love God and neighbor as we ought. The answer very often falls along the lines of "I've done something so awful I am unworthy to approach God in the blessed Sacrament." Their shame keeps them from grace.

For most, the solution is simply to go to confession. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, by which we are absolved of mortal sins committed after baptism, we are like the younger son in today's Gospel. We come to God prepared to say we are unworthy to be called His child, before whom we can say, "...*treat me as one of your hired servants.*" But the Lord cuts us off and embraces us despite the ways we have rejected and hurt Him.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which we heard this morning, it is the hunger of the younger son that finally brings him to his senses and sends him back to his loving father. And hunger is what brings so many others back to where they belong. Whether that hunger is actual physical starvation or a hunger for another good—intimacy, sobriety, stability—the emptiness of one's life brings the penitent to his knees, and he finds in his humility the acceptance and the bounty he desires.

God here uses the desperation of the Prodigal Son for his own benefit. When he finally realizes that he has no other option, the crushed soul turns to Him who is the only One capable of restoring him. All the king's horses and all the king's men can't put Humpty Dumpty back together again, but God can. And this reality is the road back for so many sinners whose humiliation has kept them too long from the Divine power to heal. Perhaps you came home when you finally had nowhere else to go.

That wasn't me. I was more like the older son. The older son is self-satisfied and self-righteous, and he looks down on Holy Mother Church for being so generous to miserable sinners. Like the Donatists of the fourth century in North Africa, I thought the Catholic Church was lax for taking back into the fold those who had committed especially egregious sins. I was guilty of the heresy that some sins are unforgivable. In my case, I was especially angry when in the late nineties peace in Northern Ireland was achieved and terrorists who had killed and maimed countless souls were released from prison and welcomed back into the arms of Holy Mother Church. What kind of an institution counts terrorists as some of her faithful sons and daughters? In my mind, I surmised that such an institution was compromised and corrupt, thus unworthy of serious consideration. I was more Catholic than the Pope, as if the Keys had been given to me. I would decide whose sins could be forgiven and whose would be retained. Left unanswered was who had given me this authority.

I probably would have remained outside in my self-satisfaction, like the older brother who in his refusal to forgive and concomitant condescension missed out on the music, the dancing, and the sumptuous feast that is the Catholic Church. But God placed in my way kind souls who were as gentle with me as the father in today's Gospel was with his older son. They weren't put off by my arrogance and answered my foolishness with wisdom. More than that, they invited me in, specifically into the Church, sometimes pleading with me to come to the party, where, unlike me, everyone else is happy, too. Not only would they forgive the terrorists, but they would forgive the stuffed shirt, too.

Of course, this charity was not the only thing that helped me take seriously the Catholic Church and her mission of forgiveness. I've told you already how I read my way into the Church and came to revere her moral teaching. But one does not come into the community of an idea. We come into a community of persons, first the Trinity and then that community of all those devoted to Him who is Love. It was my experience of love that softened my hardened heart and allowed me finally to take my seat at the table beside the penitent terrorists, who thankfully forgave me for my refusal to forgive them. Their charity showed me the degree to which I was uncharitable.

Twenty-one years after 9/11, I haven't received any literal, real terrorists into the Church. But our parish has been blessed to welcome not just desperate, hungry souls with nowhere else to go, but also lots of older sons, like me, whose hearts of stone became hearts of flesh when for the first time they experienced true love. The origin of that love, of course, is God, but they saw it in you. Thank you for embodying the charity that wins the souls of even those who once thought they were too good for you.

Thousands of people out there still think they are too good for you. Be kind to them, too. They will, by God's love exhibited in you, come home, also.