

# MARCH 27, 2022: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT



Hearing a person's confession for the very first time is a memory firmly entrenched in my mind. It took place on my first day at Saint John's in Wellesley after celebrating daily Mass. A person came into the sacristy and said, "Father, will you hear my confession?" The funny thing is that at first I did not react; it took a moment before it dawned on me that the person was speaking to *me*. And, of course, that was the start of hearing many confessions. As a priest it is a truly humbling experience to have people place that level of trust in me. Their willingness to share their deepest regrets, brokenness and hurt, and to recognize how God is using me as a means to bring healing into their lives is a profound privilege for any priest. Being called to be an instrument of God's compassion and mercy as He brings healing and hope into his people's lives cannot be put into words. It is clear, though, that many people today do not see the need for the Church to have a role in this process; they feel they can do it on their own. The reality is that we are created in the image and likeness of God—and God is Trinity. As such, God at his very nature is community. We are created then to be social beings in community with others; it is our very nature. If this is true, then it makes sense that God would create a way for the community to take part in healing us when we sin.

As the Church grew and more people came into the fold, it was clear that some faltered in living out the gospel's teachings. The question then arose: Can such people be reconciled with God after baptism? Early on in the Church's history, baptism was understood as a once-only event. So, what does this mean for those who fall after baptism? How does God's mercy bring about healing in these cases?

As Christ began his ministry, He proclaimed, "Reform your lives, the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Mt. 4:17) This call for reformation by the people was not new. The prophets had continually called the people to reform their lives and return to living out the covenant. John the Baptist, preparing for the coming of Christ, reinforced the need for reformation in his baptism of repentance. What was different for Christ was his claim to personally forgive sins. It is in Christ, and in Christ alone, then that we find the power to heal the wounds inflicted by sin. It is through Christ and his ministry that the answer is to be found for how Christians would be reconciled after baptism. If reconciling sinners is to be considered such an important part of Christ's mission, it would not have ended as He ascended into heaven; rather, He continued that work through his Church. This ministry of reconciliation in which the Church is united with Christ is intended to reconcile all people with God, with themselves, with each other, and with the whole of creation.

Sin essentially ruptures each of those relationships, and only God can fix the damage that we create through our sinful actions. God calls us to cooperate with Him in bringing about the needed transformation in our lives through contrition of heart. Contrition is not only about true sorrow for our sins. An essential element of true contrition is about re-centering our lives in Christ. It is about rejecting that which draws us away from living out our baptismal promises. The necessity of confessing our sins, therefore, is not about psychological healing or simply letting go of our sins. Instead, it is more about our willingness to face what we have done, and to acknowledge that it has affected not only ourselves, but also the community as a whole. But, most fundamentally it has, in some way, hurt our relationship with God. It must also be recognized at this point that both God *and* the community must be involved in our transformation. Therefore, we place ourselves under the authority of another, who can speak for the community and God with an understanding of what has occurred, and who is able to declare us reconciled.

The ordained have the unique role of speaking for the community; that is part of their charism as ministers. It is also only when one understands what a penitent has done that a person can comprehend what is necessary to ensure that the penitent has truly turned away from their sin and is thus truly reconciled. The healing that occurs can only begin when one confesses what one has done. Because there is a person in the Church designated to hear such confessions, the penitent can speak the truth in the context of the community without being labeled or judged for a particular sin.

As one strives to comprehend the theology that underlies the sacrament of reconciliation, the first question one might ask is: From where, or better from whom, does the Church's power to reconcile sinners arise? The short

answer to that question, of course, is Jesus Christ. In both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John, Jesus explicitly grants this power to his disciples. The power to both loose and hold bound, then, is seen through this sacrament, a characteristic of the true nature of the Church.

However, it must be noted that this role of the Church in the sacrament is subservient to the reality that God alone is the one who forgives our sins. The Church's role is to help facilitate this forgiveness by leading the sinner to recognize and repent of the sin he or she has committed. This role, though secondary to God, is still of utmost importance, for sin ultimately has a social dimension to it. There is, in a Christian context, no such thing as a private sin: all sin by its very nature affects the community. Therefore, it is appropriate for the community to have an important role in reconciling the person both with God *and* the community.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at [fr.brian@theholyrood.org](mailto:fr.brian@theholyrood.org) , or if easier, please call me at 978-254-0560.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Fr. Brian". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Fr. Brian