

Homily Sun 11C: 16 June 2013: HT-W/XII-PC

This gospel passage is rich in instruction about the topic of Penance and Reconciliation. I warmly recommend it for prayerful reading and meditation. For now, let's consider just a few aspects. One facet of penance is sorrow. The sinful woman is weeping. She knows that she has done wrong. And she brings her sorrow to Jesus. She cries before him. She washes his feet w/ her tears and wipes them w/ her hair, as well as anointing them w/ ointment. Awareness of sin should elicit confession and sorrow. For sin offends the good God. In fact, sin is what nailed our Savior to the cross. And so when we acknowledge our sin, it naturally evokes grief. This is important to remember in this era of feel-good spiritualities w/ no room for penance. The gospel truth is that Jesus Christ died to save sinners. If we take that lesson to heart, then appreciation of Christ's sacrifice for our sake should move us to mourn our transgressions w/ deep sincerity.

Another dimension of penance is love. Our God is rich in mercy. He forgives all. The blood of Christ poured out upon the cross washes away all guilt. As the Lord tells Simon the Pharisee, because the woman has been forgiven much, she also loves much. The sadness that she dramatically demonstrates is inseparably tied to love. Hers is a grateful love that responds wholeheartedly to the abundant mercy of God. This helps us understand the puzzling paradox that appears so often in the biographies of the saints. As holy people draw closer to God, they become more keenly aware of their own sins. Growth in love of God grants clearer insight into one's own faults and failings: the conscience of the saints is sharper, their self-understanding more acute; and this evokes a fuller expression of repentance than is found with the average mediocre sinner.

Finally, one more aspect of penance is reconciliation with God and neighbor. The woman's great act of penance reconciles her more fully with the Lord. It also opens her to communion with the other disciples of Jesus, w/ all who praise the generous God who has forgiven them their many sins. As God has forgiven us and welcomed us into his family, so we must forgive and accept one another. Simon the Pharisee, by contrast, shuts himself out from this community that is born of Christ's reconciling love. His unspoken thoughts betray a judgmental man who spurns association w/ a public sinner; also, the passage suggests that he disapproves of the Lord's engagement w/ the woman--if this man were a prophet, he would know what sort of woman this is! Simon's attitude excludes him from friendship with the woman and with Jesus too. This lesson is particularly timely nowadays when our Church is rent by internal dissension and division. At least part of this crisis has been caused by individual Catholics, individuals of every ecclesial station and ideological persuasion, who are too much like Simon the Pharisee, that is, too busy damning their fellow believers' faults and too lax in examining their own hearts. When we realize, brothers and sisters, the magnitude of God's tremendous mercy shown towards each of us, we also become more generous in extending that mercy to other sinners who often are not so much unlike ourselves. In this regard, I heartily encourage more frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this tribunal of God's mercy, we not only are forgiven our own sins, but we are also fortified w/ Christ's love that helps us to forgive the faults of our fellows. Let's pray that this holy Eucharist will help us find mercy for our sins and also to forgive those of our brethren.