

Turn Back to the Lord with All Your Heart

During this holy season of Lent, we are invited by Holy Mother Church to purify and renew ourselves in order to be properly disposed to celebrate the death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ at Easter: the summit of our Faith. How do we undertake this renewal and purification? Our Lord Himself tells us in what might be called His “first sermon.”

Speaking publicly to the people for the first time in His public ministry, He did not say: “God is love; God’s love is inclusive; go therefore and make the world over in accordance with inclusivity.” Rather, He said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:45). The word repent translated the Greek word “metanoia” which in turn translated the Aramaic spoken by Our Lord. The Aramaic “repent” connoted a turning away from a former way of life, now recognized as wrong, and going in a completely different direction. It involves not just atonement for past sins but a whole new orientation for the future.

This means that repentance is an ongoing process: something we must do each day of our lives. Repentance is not a “one shot deal” as in being “born again” and being given the

“absolute assurance of salvation.”

Despite our best efforts, our fallen human nature often reasserts. Recall the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Sounds like a familiar story for all of us. Fortunately, Our Lord left with the means to combat this tendency to sin within each of us: repentance and the sacrament of Penance.

We begin the season of Lent with the imposition of ashes on *Ash Wednesday* or, as is done in the Maronite church, *Ash Monday*. The ashes are both a reminder of our mortality and an ancient biblical symbol of repentance. When King David desired the lady Bathsheeba, he committed adultery with her and then had her husband killed to cover up the crime. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David repented: “I have sinned before the Lord.” He then put on sackcloth (another symbol of repentance), placed ashes on himself, fasted and composed *Psalm 51*,



Illustration: Maronite Monks

the great psalm of repentance. (That is an excellent prayer to use for daily repentance and as a preparation for the sacrament of penance). It’s a good story to read in *2 Samuel* in the Bible.

All of the elements of repentance are contained there: acknowledgment of sin, confession of sin and penance.

Before ascending back to His heavenly Father Our Lord empowered His Apostles to continue His mission of forgiving sins: "Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive are forgiven. Whose sins you retain, they are retained" (Jn 21). The priest then has received this power through sacred ordination to continue what Christ Himself did while on earth. This should remind us of why Our Lord came to earth in the first place. He didn't come to "make a better world" nor to help us "realize our human potential." His very name tells us why He came: "You will name Him Jesus because He will save His people from their sins." So the Church places the forgiveness of sins at the top of its Mission: hence the sacrament of penance and Lent.

Sadly, the sacrament of Penance is the most under-used sacrament in the church today. Many observers have noted that "the Communion lines are long (virtually everybody goes to Holy Communion these days) and the Confession lines are very short." In many parishes confession times are no longer scheduled and of course, there is the campaign for "general absolution." While many reasons are given for the unpopularity of the sacrament, perhaps one stands out which accounts for both its unpopularity and the push for general absolution. Unlike the other sacraments, you can't secularize this one. Like King David you have to get on your knees and say, "I have sinned." And that's the problem. Too many of us don't think that we've sinned in the first place. All types of rationalizations abound. "Vatican II changed that," "the theologians

are saying different things," "I can tell God direct without an 'intermediary'." Pop psychology denies personal responsibility ("it's your parents fault" is a popular one) and of course there's the newest one from the social justice crowd (sin is structural and caused by inequality).

But true to her Lord, the Church still continues her mission of reconciliation especially with the sacrament of Penance. Also, Vatican II hasn't changed anything but instead insisted on the necessity of this sacrament as essential to repentance. It is still a commandment of the Church that the faithful are to

Remember Man that thou Art Dust



Illustration: Maronite Monks

go to confession at least once during the year, preferably during the Easter season (which for this purpose includes Lent). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "According to the Church's command, 'after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year.'" (CCC #1457)

If we are conscious of mortal sin (yes, there is still such a thing) we are to go to confession as soon as possible. It's not something to put off until later because the ashes we receive remind us of our mortality. Eternity is at stake here. This concept has all but disappeared because of one of the current heresies active in the Church, which says, "God is love so everybody

is automatically saved no matter what." Remember that of all the persons in the Bible, Our Lord speaks the most about eternal damnation. Today people will think nothing of deliberately missing Mass on Sunday (or for many Sundays) and upon returning walk up to receive Holy Communion without prior sacramental confession. St. Paul tells that people such as these bring condemnation upon themselves.

Maybe I haven't committed any mortal sins; do I

still need to go? Absolutely! Do you know that our Holy Father Pope John Paul II goes to confession once a week? Blessed Mother Theresa would also go once a week to confession. Saint Padre Pio would tell people, "If you want to imitate me, then go to confession every eight days." If people like that went to confession virtually every week then how much should you and I be going? Read the lives of the saints and you will see that all of them had great devotion to this sacrament. Again the catechism states, "Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful." (CCC #1458)

Not only do we have our sins forgiven by the authority of Christ Himself, but also He gives us graces to fight the good fight of ongoing daily conversion. Precisely because we are so weak we need

to receive this sacrament frequently. And that's the beauty of it. We don't have to make a once in a lifetime pledge and spend the rest of our lives wondering if God really forgives us (especially in view of St. Paul's above mentioned experience that we all share). The priest's words (really the words of Christ Himself) "I absolve you from your sins" send the very blood that Christ poured out on the cross for our sins washing away our sins. Much better to hear these words and Christ's assurance of forgiveness than paying a hundred dollars an hour to tell the same thing to a "counselor" who will give you some dubious theories of Freud and Jung. Incidentally, penance is the only sacrament where no collection is taken up nor a stipend asked for. Talk about a deal!

We here at Most Holy Trinity Monastery pray that you will take advantage of this Lenten season to "turn back to the Lord with all your heart." May you find forgiveness and peace in the Sacrament of Penance and continue with daily conversion and repentance. Be assured of the prayers of the monks and may you have a Blessed Lent to prepare for the glorious resurrection of our Savior. ✕