



THE PASTOR'S DESK

March 28, 2010 - Confession and Past Sins

Dear Parishioners,

As we enter Holy Week, we are reminded of the obligation to go to Confession at Easter time. This week, there are many opportunities to go to Confession. You can see them in the schedule in the bulletin. I thought this week and the week after Easter, I would present some thoughts on a couple of issues that come up in confession: past sins and struggles. This week I will say some things about past sins.

Confession and Past Sins

As we draw closer to the Lord and make a habit of examining our consciences and going to confession, we can be dogged by memories of past sins. Sometimes, penitents who confess what they have done since their last confession also feel the need to bring up something from the past. They have the sense that they forgot to confess it in the past or did not specify the sin well enough. What priests do (me included) is dismiss this as scrupulosity. Scrupulosity is a kind of obsessive disorder that leaves us feeling that we have not done something completely or correctly. Someone with this disorder can have anything as an object for this problem. Chronic hand-washing, cleaning things over and over again, re-doing some task over and over again are manifestations of this problem. When the object becomes confession, the penitents can feel as if they have never made a good confession, they must have missed something, or not confessed the exact number of times they committed a particular sin, etc.

I want to distinguish scrupulosity from the remembrance of past sins. Perhaps priests should be slow to account someone as being scrupulous, since that is part of a definite mental disorder. But what is happening when past sins crop up in our consciences and still cause us to want to confess them again?

Going through a box of old papers, I found a math test from first grade. Of course when I looked at it I had to laugh at my mistakes. Who knew that five plus six equals twelve? It's easy now to laugh at these kinds of mistakes. That's what's expected. But, what if I felt terrible? What if I scolded myself, hitting myself on the head saying: "how could I have been so stupid?" What if I ran to the nearest grade school, sought out the first grade teacher, and fell before her saying how sorry I was that I made this mistake, knowing now that five plus six equals eleven?

Something like this happens when past sins crop up in our minds. If we are faithful to the Church, to the sacraments, prayer, and works of charity we will become holier and our consciences will be sharper in something of the same way that our math abilities will develop if we pay attention in class and study. While

we can laugh-off the mistakes we made in first grade math, past sins can seem now more serious. What is happening is this: we are now looking at past sins with a more highly sharpened conscience. We not only remember past sins, but also see them through the lens of our present, sharper, conscience. We now think we should have been more sorrowful, more repentant. We do not remember having the kind of sorrow or contrition over a sin that we would have now.

This is where we have to have faith in God's forgiveness and in the power of the sacraments. Ideally, we should have perfect contrition for all our sins. This is complete sorrow based on a pure love for God without any hint of sorrow for punishment. We rarely achieve this. But, the power of the sacrament makes up for our deficiency in perfect contrition. The encounter with Christ in the sacrament of penance fills any deficiency we have in perfect contrition. So, while looking back, we may think we were not sorry enough or contrite enough at the time we confessed, still we trust that the power of Christ in the sacrament allowed us to be fully forgiven of our sins *at the time when we confessed them and with the contrition we had at that time.*

Of course, if we are certain that we intentionally neglected to confess a mortal sin, we must confess it. But, if it's merely a sense of not having confessed it well enough, let it go and trust in God's mercy.

**God bless,
Fr. LaHood**

Holy Thursday is also the First Thursday of the month. It is the day on which the Plenary Indulgence for the Year of the Priest is available. Here is the relevant part of the decree:

The Plenary Indulgence is granted to all the faithful who are truly repentant who, in church or in chapel, devoutly attend the divine Sacrifice of Mass and offer prayers to Jesus Christ the Eternal High Priest, for the priests of the Church, and any other good work which they have done on that day, so that he may sanctify them and form them in accordance with His Heart, as long as they have made expiation for their sins through sacramental confession and prayed in accordance with the Supreme Pontiff's intentions: on the days in which the Year for Priests begins and ends, on the day of the 150th anniversary of the pious passing of St John Mary Vianney, on the first Thursday of the month or on any other day established by the local Ordinaries for the benefit of the faithful.

You may go to Confession a few days before or after the first Thursday and apply it to the Indulgence. This is a beautiful opportunity for this Indulgence: applying the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.