

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

September 15, 2019

Exodus 32:7–11 • 1 Timothy 1:12–17 • Luke 15:1–32

I.

In 2011, I visited the British Isles with another priest; we went to Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

After landing in Dublin, we drove to Down, Northern Ireland, to visit the grave of St. Patrick.

It was interesting to me that we never passed through a border checkpoint when leaving the Republic of Ireland and entering Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom.

Such an absence was part of the Good Friday agreement (1998) that officially ended the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland.

As I remember it, the only indication that we had entered Northern Ireland is that at some point, I saw some Union Jack flags flying.

After we visited the tomb of St. Patrick, we tried to call the place where we were going to stay, which was in nearby Ardglass.

Now, by way of background, neither my friend nor I were dressed in clerical attire.

A priest at home, who had made many visits to the area, advised me that, while in Northern Ireland, I not tell anyone that I was a priest—don’t look for trouble.

Anyway, our cell phones weren’t working, so I found a pay phone.

In the phone, I found a slip of paper that took my breath away.

It read,

NO PRIESTS, NO MASS, WOULDN’T THAT BE WONDERFUL?

Exasperated, I asked myself: How do they know I'm a priest?

I felt scared, to be honest.

And then I realized it was anti-Catholic propaganda, part of the ongoing tension between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

The peace agreement had been in place for over a decade, but there was still work to be done.

II.

That slip of paper, which I still have, has been a reminder that there is a constant need for reconciliation, both at the level of society and at the level of the individual person.

In that regard, it's telling to whom, specifically, Jesus addresses the parables in today Gospel, including the parable of the prodigal son:

“Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So to them he addressed this parable.”

The parables are not addressed to the tax collectors and sinners, who recognize their need for forgiveness.

Instead, the parables are addressed to those who don't sense a need for reconciliation.

For this reason, the parable of the prodigal son has an allegorical dimension: the tax collectors and sinners are like the younger brother, while the scribes and Pharisees are like the older brother, who doesn't want his sibling to be forgiven.

It may be the case that we do not sense the need for reconciliation in our lives.

“I haven't done anything that bad.”

So, rather than identifying with the younger brother, perhaps we can identify with the older brother.

In the parable of the prodigal son, we see that reconciliation takes places within a series of relationships: specifically, a family.

Reconciliation, for Catholics, also involves relationships: our relationship with God and our relationship with one another: the Church.

There is a sacrament that “consecrates” and facilitates our reconciliation: Penance, which is also known as Confession or Reconciliation.

The Sacrament of Penance restores not only our relationship with God, but also our relationship with the Church, whose unity we injure through our sins.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”

Because, for a Catholic, it’s never just “me and God.”

There is always our place within the community of believers, the Church, and broader society.

In this sense, no sin is ever really private; it always affects, to a greater or lesser degree, other people.

So, a few thoughts about the Sacrament of Penance.

It is, above all, an encounter with God and the supreme experience of divine mercy.

We can think of the father in the parable, who, we are told, “while [the son] was still a long way off,” “ran to his son.”

If you’re looking to take one concrete step toward God, if you’d like to go deeper in your faith, this is a great way: receive the Sacrament of Penance.

Remember that the whatever the penitent says in confession stays there; the priest is bound to keep that secret forever.

Our obligation, as Catholics, is to confess our mortal or grave or serious sins at least once a year.

That is so that we can, at a minimum, receive Holy Communion at least once a year.

This is the “Easter duty” or “paschal precept.”

Beyond that, the Church encourages us to confess our venial or minor sins frequently, because each time we receive the Sacrament of Penance we grow in holiness.

There is no reason to be scrupulous; there is an invitation to trust in God’s mercy.

I’m often asked: “Father, how often should I go to confession?”

I would say this: shoot for once a month.

If you’re not there yet, it’s OK.

Why not go once a quarter, perhaps as the liturgical seasons change?

And then, gradually, work your way up to once a month.

To encourage greater use of the Sacrament of Penance, I’ve added confessions on Wednesday evenings, after Mass, beginning around 7:30 p.m.

So you could come up after work, or after dinner.

Saturday at 4:00 p.m. is another option.

The father of the prodigal declare to us the meaning of this sacrament:

“Your brother was dead and has come back to life.”