

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

September 11, 2022

Exodus 32:7–11, 13–14 • 1 Timothy 1:12–17 • Luke 15:1–32

I.

A highlight for a cathedral is hosting the ordination of priests.

There was an ordination here in June and there will be another in December.

The rite of ordination is one of the most beautiful and intricate in the Church's repertoire of ceremonies.

It's one that every Catholic should attend at least once in his or her life.

The day after an ordination,
a new priest celebrates his first Mass.

There is a lovely custom at the first Mass,
when the priest gives his mother the *maniturgium*,
which is the cloth used to wipe his hands after they were anointed with chrism.

The mother of a priest is buried with that sacred linen.

The priest gives his father a purple stole—
the stole used by the new priest to hear his first confession.

A priest's father is likewise buried that sacred vestment.

II.

Administering the Sacrament of Penance—hearing confessions—
is a main duty of a priest.

The Church regards this sacrament as one of two “sacraments of healing,”
the other being the Anointing of the Sick.

The Church defines the Sacrament of Reconciliation like this:

“In the sacrament of penance
 the faithful who confess their sins...
 [who are] are sorry for them,
 and [who] intend to reform themselves
 obtain from God...forgiveness for the sins they have committed after baptism
 and... are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning”
 (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 959).

The Sacrament of Penance, like all sacraments,
 gives us an experience of Christ’s death and resurrection
 that leads to new life.

III.

Today’s famous parable of the prodigal son
 offers a kind of instruction on the Sacrament of Penance:

“This son of mine was dead,
 and has come to life again;
 he was lost, and has been found.”

The four parts of the Sacrament of Penance can be associated with the parable:
 confession, contrition, absolution, and penance.

Confession is the admission of wrongdoing.

The parable indicates that the son
 “squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.”

More specifically, the resentful older brother tells the father that his brother
 “swallowed up your property with prostitutes.”

A penitent is obliged to confess his or her grave sins at least once a year.

Grave or mortal sins are to be confessed in number and kind;
 in other words, the penitent states what the sin was
 and how many times he or she committed it—
 details of the sin are not necessary
 and should not be given.

Venial or lesser sins can be confessed generically.

Contrition is the second part of the Sacrament of Penance.

It refers to sorrow for sin
and a determination to avoid the sin
and whatever leads to the sin.

In the parable,
the younger son says to his father:

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you;
I no longer deserve to be called your son.”

In the Sacrament of Penance,
the penitent echoes those words by saying the Act of Contrition.

Absolution is the third part of the Sacrament of Penance.

This term designates forgiveness from God through the priest,
who acts in the person of Christ.

In the parable,
the Father grants his “absolution” in a beautiful and vivid way:

“Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
Then let us celebrate with a feast.”

The priest’s formula of absolution concludes like this:

“Through the ministry of the Church
may God grant you pardon and peace
and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father,
and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Penance is the fourth part of the Sacrament of Reconciliation;
it is the hardest one to grasp.

Penance is something the penitent does to heal his relationship with God and others,
which have been wounded by sin.

Forgiveness does not depend on penance;
absolution is freely given and can never be merited.

But we know from everyday experience
that even when we grant or receive forgiveness,
we still have to work on the relationship that has been wounded.

In a sense,
the rebuilding of relationships is what must take place in the parable
after the party ends.

We can imagine that the father and the youngest son had much to talk about.

And the older brother also needs to be reconciled to his younger brother
and to his father.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation,
the priest assigns a penance to the penitent.

Penance can take the form of prayer, fasting, or some work of charity.

Penance not a punishment.

It's a spiritual exercise that helps the penitent avoid sin in the future.

IV.

This afternoon,
the children of the parish will have their first class on the Sacrament of Penance,
as they prepare to confess their sins for the first time
in preparation for their First Holy Communion in the spring.

That first confession is an important moment in the life a Catholic.

So, a thought and encouragement for us:
we're in this together.

We can pray for the children
as they approach the Sacrament of Penance for the first time.

We ourselves can confess our sins to be in solidarity with them.

Confessions are heard on Wednesdays at 5:30 p.m.,
and there are many other parishes in Richmond with different times.

V.

Christ wants us to experience new life through the Sacrament of Penance.

God, his Father,
wants these words to resound in our lives:

“We must celebrate and rejoice,
because your brother was dead and has come to life again;
he was lost and has been found.”