

34. 'Go and sin no more'

34.1 In the Sacrament of Penance it is Christ who forgives.

*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? No one, Lord. Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.*¹ They placed her in the midst, says the Gospel.² They have humiliated her and shamed her in the extreme, without the slightest concern for her. They remind Our Lord that the Law imposed the severe penalty of death by stoning for this sin. *What do you say*, they ask him, disguising their ulterior motives so that *they might have some charge to bring against him*. But Jesus surprises them all. He does not say anything; *He bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground*.

The woman is terrified by them all. The Scribes and Pharisees go on asking questions. Then, *Jesus stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.'* *And once more He bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground*.

They all went away, one by one, *beginning with the eldest*. Not one of them had a clear conscience and they were trying to set a trap for Our Lord. All of them went away. *And Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'*

Jesus' words are full of gentleness and clemency, a manifestation of God's infinite mercy and forgiveness. She answered straight away, *No one, Lord*. And Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.' We can imagine the enormous joy of that woman, her desire to begin again, her deep love for Christ.

Such a deep change has taken place in that woman's soul, stained by sin and suffused with her public shame, that we can only partly see the alteration in her with the light of faith. The words of the prophet Isaiah are fulfilled: *Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing. ... I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert ... to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.*³

Every day, in every corner of the world, Jesus, through his ministers, the priests, continues to say *I absolve you from your sins ... 'Go', says our Lord, 'and do not sin again.'* It is Christ himself who forgives. *The sacramental formula, I absolve you ... and the imposition of the hand and the sign of the Cross made over the penitent show that at this moment the contrite and converted sinner comes into contact with the power and mercy of God. It is the moment at which, in response to the penitent, the Trinity becomes present in order to blot out sin and restore innocence. And the saving power of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus is also imparted to the penitent ... God is always the one who is principally offended by sin – 'tibi soli peccavi!' – and God alone can forgive.*⁴

The words pronounced by the priest are not just a prayer of supplication to ask God to forgive our sins, or a mere certification that God has deigned to grant us his pardon, but *at that moment every sin is forgiven and blotted out by the mysterious intervention of the Saviour.*⁵

¹ John 8:10-11

² cf John 8:1-11

³ Is 43:16-21

⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia*, 2 December 1984, 31, III

⁵ *Ibid.*

Few words have ever produced more joy in the world than the words of absolution, *I absolve you from your sins* ... St Augustine affirms that the wonder they work is greater than the very creation of the world.⁶ How glad are we to receive these words when we go to the sacrament of forgiveness? How grateful are we? How often have we thanked God for having this sacrament close at hand? In our prayer today we can show Our Lord our gratitude for this great gift.

34.2 Gratitude for absolution; the apostolate of Confession.

Through absolution, man is united to Christ the Redeemer, who willed to take our sins upon himself. Through this union the sinner shares once again in that fountain of grace that springs without ceasing from the open side of Jesus.

At the moment of absolution we will intensify our sorrow for our sins, saying perhaps one of the prayers from the ritual, such as the words of St Peter, *Lord, you know all things, You know that I love you*. We will renew our purpose of amendment. We will listen attentively to the priest's words which grant us God's forgiveness.

It is the moment of savouring the joy of having grace restored (if we have lost it) or of receiving an increase of grace and greater union with God. St Ambrose says: *See [the Father] comes out to meet you: He will fall on your neck and will give you a kiss, the pledge of love and tenderness. He will make them bring you a cloak, shoes for your feet ... You still fear a reprimand .., you are afraid of hearing words filled with anger, and he prepares a banquet for you.*⁷ Our Amen turns into a longing to start again, even though we may have confessed only venial sins.

After each Confession we must *thank God* for his mercy towards us and stop, even though only momentarily, to decide exactly how we are going to put into practice the advice or indications we have received, or how to make our purpose of amendment more effective. Another manifestation of our gratitude is to make sure our friends, too, come to this well-spring of grace and that we bring them closer to Christ, as the Samaritan woman did. She ran to tell her people so that they too should benefit from the unique opportunity that Jesus' journey through their town afforded them.⁸

It would be hard to find a greater act of charity than that of announcing to those who are covered in mud and lacking strength, the source of salvation that we have discovered, when we are purified and reconciled to God.

Do we use the means to carry out an effective apostolate of Confession? Do we take our friends to the Tribunal of divine mercy? Do we increase our own desire to purify ourselves by going frequently to the sacrament of Penance? Do we sometimes leave this meeting with God's mercy for later?

34.3 The need to carry out the penance given by the Confessor. Generosity in our reparation.

⁶ cf St Augustine, *Commentary on St John's Gospel*, 72

⁷ St Ambrose, *Commentary on St Luke's Gospel*, 7

⁸ cf John 4:48

*Satisfaction is the final act which crowns the sacramental sign of Penance. In some countries the act which the forgiven and absolved penitent agrees to perform after receiving absolution is precisely called his penance*⁹.

Our sins, even after they have been forgiven, deserve a temporal punishment which has to be undergone in this life, or after death in Purgatory, which is where those souls go who die in a state of grace, but without having made full satisfaction for their sins.¹⁰

Moreover, after its reconciliation with God, there are still left in the soul the remains of sin; a weakness of the will to abide in good. There will remain also a certain facility for making wrong judgements a certain disorder in the sensual appetite... They are the weakened scars of actual sin and the disordered tendencies left in man by original sin, which are brought to a head by our personal sins. *It is not enough to remove the arrow from the body, says St John Chrysostom; We also have to heal the wound caused by the arrow. It is the same with the soul; after we have received forgiveness for our sins, we have to heal the wound that remains through penance.*¹¹

Even after absolution, John Paul II teaches, *there remains in the Christian a dark area, due to the wound of sin, to the imperfection of love in repentance, to the weakening of the spiritual faculties. It is an area in which there still operations an infectious source of sin which must always be fought with mortification and penance. This is the meaning of the humble but sincere act of satisfaction.*¹²

For all these reasons we must put a lot of love into fulfilling the penance the priest gives us before granting absolution. It is usually easy to perform and, if we really love God, we will be aware of the great disparity there is between our sins and the penance we have been given. It is yet another reason for increasing our spirit of penance during this Lent, when the Church calls us to it in a special way.

'Cor Mariae perdolentis, miserere nobis!' – *Invoke the Heart of Holy Mary, with the purpose and determination of uniting yourself to her sorrow, in reparation for your sins and the sins of men of all times.*

*And pray to her – for every soul – that her sorrow may increase in us our aversion from sin, and that we may be able to love the physical or moral contradictions of each day as a means of expiation.*¹³

Taken from the book, “In Conversation with God” by Francis Fernandez, Scepter Publishers Inc, Princeton, NJ, 2000

‘Hablar con Dios’ Francis Fernandez, Ediciones Palabra, Madrid, 1986

⁹ John Paul II, *loc cit*

¹⁰ cf Council of Florence, *Decree for the Greeks*, Dz 673

¹¹ St John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Gospel of St Matthew*, 3, 5

¹² John Paul II, *loc cit*, cf also *General Audience*, 7 March 1984

¹³ J. Escrivá, *Furrow*, 258