

Second Sunday of Easter, A (Divine Mercy) – April 23, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 1,200 words

One of the reasons why Christ remained here on earth forty days after his Resurrection, instead of immediately ascending to heaven, was to continue instructing his disciples.<sup>1</sup> In today's gospel we hear him teaching them concerning the forgiveness of sins. He was, in fact, enabling them to celebrate one of his seven sacraments. As the Church teaches, Christ personally instituted each one of the seven sacraments during his time on earth;<sup>2</sup> in other words, none of them was invented by the apostles or by others afterwards. Some of the seven sacraments are easier to identify in the New Testament than others; but, as we heard at the end of our gospel, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book" – he instructed them in many things, and they have handed them all on to us through his Church.

On this Divine Mercy Sunday, then, we have the opportunity to contemplate the sacrament of confession – also called "penance" or "reconciliation". When our Lord breathes the Holy Spirit onto his disciples, he makes them apostles: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you", he says – an apostle is one who is sent on a mission. Then he tells them that they have the power to forgive and to retain sins. We understand the forgiveness part, but what does it mean for them to retain sins? The apostles may have had that same question, and during those forty days he taught them the answer. It has to do with a sinner's proper disposition for the sacrament of reconciliation. If someone is not properly disposed or prepared for the sacrament, the priest cannot give absolution or forgiveness; it is delayed, rather, until the person is ready to receive it. In such a case, their sin is retained.

To understand forgiveness and retention better, we need to review what are called the three "acts of the penitent" with respect to the sacrament of confession.<sup>3</sup> The first is to have contrition for one's sins. This means, according to the Catechism, to have "sorrow of soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again". That resolution is called a "firm purpose of amendment", and we usually express it in our Act of Contrition prayer with words like, "I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen."

The second of the three "acts of the penitent" is the confession of sins. We learned in Catechism or RCIA that this means telling the priest of each and every mortal sin that we may have committed, confessing them in "number and kind" – that is, saying what we did and how many times we did it. Sometimes it's difficult to know the exact number of times, but we can get close by thinking about over what period of time we may have committed this or that sin and with what frequency. Then there is the confession also of venial sins: it is not strictly required, since venial sins may be forgiven apart from the sacrament. But the Church does warmly recommend that we confess some – perhaps those connected with our primary fault, or those that have been most prominent since our last confession – as there are special graces available to us through the sacrament of reconciliation to overcome them.

The third and final of the three "acts of the penitent" is called "satisfaction". It is how we expiate or atone for our sins. Christ primarily does this through his death on the cross, but we are invited to participate in his atonement through our penance and also by righting any wrongs that we can. For example, if I have hurt someone I need to try to smooth it over and heal the wound. Thus the priest assigns a penance – which is often a token, a few prayers or something – but we

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<sup>1</sup> See Acts 1:1-9.

<sup>2</sup> See Catechism no. 1210.

<sup>3</sup> See Catechism nn. 1450-1460.

are invited to consider also what more we must do to make things right. Indeed, the Church teaches us that penance is an ongoing part of our Christian life.<sup>4</sup> Each one of us is invited to draw nearer to God by making small sacrifices and doing loving and generous things for him and neighbor frequently, for as the Scripture says, “love covers a multitude of sins”.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, in order to make a good confession – what is called an “integral” confession – the penitent must focus on three areas: contrition, confession of sins, and satisfaction. If one or more of those areas is lacking, the person is indisposed – not properly prepared – for God’s forgiveness. Now a good confessor will also try to help a penitent make a good confession, to the extent that he is able. But if, in the end, the penitent is determined not to fulfill the proper conditions, then he or she – sadly and tragically – would not yet be ready for God’s forgiveness. The priest would have to withhold and defer absolution, praying and hoping that the penitent will give it further consideration and come back ready to make the necessary change.

Thus there could be the retention of sins. But as I said, this is sad and tragic, for the mercy of God is so great and he so greatly desires to share it with us. If we cannot receive it, it is because we have put up some sort of block or obstacle, and the Lord always respects our freedom. But when we do go to the sacrament with the proper dispositions it is a wonderful thing indeed. Jesus not only forgives, but he forgets. He “forgets” in the sense that he no longer holds whatever we did against us. In other words, after forgiveness there is no retention – it’s not like, on judgment day, he will remind us about some awful thing we did but had already had forgiven; it’s gone! It is drowned in the ocean of his mercy.

On this Divine Mercy Sunday and always, then, the Lord invites us to have confidence in his power and mercy. Think always of the line on the image that he gave to St. Faustina: “Jesus, I trust in you”. Many people today hesitate to seek the Lord’s mercy because they do not trust; like Peter, who first walked on the water and then sank when he took his focus off Christ and began to focus on himself, they look to their own weakness rather than to the Lord’s power. In the sacrament of confession he will forgive anything and everything through the ministry of his priests, and then he will forget about it; he will strike it from our record. What’s more, he also offers us the grace so that we can live differently going forward: the sacrament of penance is an important part of our path to holiness. Sometimes there is a struggle, but if we are seeking to have the proper dispositions, the Lord will struggle with us. The victory over sin is his, and he invites us to share in it. Let the words on the image echo through our minds and hearts today and every day: “Jesus, I trust in you”. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See Catechism nn. 1427-1439.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 4:8.