

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – June 10, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,200 words

Today’s gospel speaks about the blasphemy or sin against the Holy Spirit, which – the Lord himself tells us – cannot be forgiven. But what exactly this sin is, is not immediately clear either here in Mark or its parallels in Matthew and Luke. Christ is responding to those who claim that he acts by the power of a demon rather than the Holy Spirit: they are confounding good and evil – they are calling God evil. That is obviously a serious matter, but is it really unforgivable? After all, we have heard conversion stories of those who formerly cursed God, rejected him, or did or said other unspeakable things toward him; yet, by his grace, they repented and were forgiven and now serve him with love. So we need to look more closely at what this sin against the Holy Spirit is and why it is, in fact, unforgivable.

St. Augustine, who was such a brilliant mind and explained the scriptures so extensively, said that this was one of the most difficult teachings in scripture to understand.¹ Many of the Fathers of the Church wrote on this passage and its parallels. I have seen references to as many as six different sins that fall under this heading of “sin against the Holy Spirit” – sin which may not be forgiven. For our purposes, I will comment on the three species of this sin that I find the most convincing. And it is important to preface all of this by underlining that God can overcome all sin in this life. When we die we pass from this age of mercy to the justice of divine judgment. That is when these certain sins become unforgivable; that is, if we die still guilty of them.

The first “species” of sin against the Holy Spirit is the sin of presumption. Presumption is an abuse of God’s mercy. Through presumption, we either delay seeking his forgiveness because we assume it will be there when we need it; or, worse still, we might even sin with a view to that forgiveness. “I know X is a mortal sin” – so we might think to ourselves – “but I can always go to confession after I do it”. It’s easy to see how this is an abuse of God. And we do not know when he will call us. Think of the parable of the rich fool, who built bigger barns to hold his many worldly possessions, but did not prepare himself for eternal life with God: he presumed upon the length of his life and supposed he might prepare for eternity later on. But the Lord said to him in the parable, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you!”² We play with fire if we delay repentance, or if we justify sin with eventual repentance. And if we die in such presumption, there is no further forgiveness.

The second “species” of sin against the Holy Spirit is that of despair. Now here we must be careful, especially in light of recent tragedies in the news – the sort that may have even touched our own families or circle of friends at times. These tragedies often involve a despair that is passive in nature, arising from mental illness or very serious depression, and that is not the same as the more classical type. The despair of which I am speaking here involves a positive act of the will: by it, having resolved in the intellect that there is no hope for deliverance from sin, one voluntarily ceases to hope for salvation from God, losing trust in his good promises. Someone who walks away from the practice of the faith may indeed commit the sin of despair – although we must be careful to avoid reaching that conclusion ourselves, since we cannot see their thoughts or their will; rather, we must invite them back and pray for them. We pray and invite because we have hope – and want them to return to living in that hope as well.

The third “species” of sin against the Holy Spirit is related to the other two: it is called “final impenitence”. This is the sin that a person commits if he never repents of his mortal sins before he dies. Repentance ordinarily happens in confession; we will consider the extraordinary

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Serm. ii de verbis Domini*, c. v; cited in the Catholic Encyclopedia entry, “Holy Ghost”, accessible at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07409a.htm>.

² Cf. Luke 12:13-21.

means in a moment, but with regard to the ordinary way, we see this prefigured even in the very beginning of history. With today's first reading, from Genesis, we must be clear: God knew exactly what Adam and Eve (and the serpent!) had done, but he still asked them about it! He wanted their confession. And we see what a big mess it was – Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, all are punished; but ultimately, our faith teaches us, Adam and Eve were forgiven – we revere them as Old Testament saints. They did not die in impenitence.

Confession to God through his priest, is the ordinary way for us to have any and all of our sins forgiven. There is nothing he will not forgive in this life! Now there is an extraordinary means of forgiveness also: what we call the “perfect act of contrition” – an act of repentance made to God from the heart, sorry for having offended him, who is all-good and deserving of all our love.³ Those who cannot have their sins forgiven in the ordinary way may still be forgiven in this extraordinary way. But we would be foolish to presume upon it or otherwise delay. And that means that if we should ever be guilty of a mortal sin, the correct and prudent thing to do is to repent immediately using the extraordinary means, directly asking God for forgiveness, and then immediately resolve to go to confession right away, so that we may be certain of his forgiveness. If we live this way, we can avoid committing the unforgiveable sin also.

The prayer of absolution that we hear in confession says that God “has sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins”. Christ gave his priests the power to forgive sins by breathing the Holy Spirit upon them.⁴ Thus you see that the three sins against the Holy Spirit that I have named are those that deny his power or neglect to take advantage of it. One who dies in that state cannot be forgiven – not because God was not standing at the ready, but because the person did not seek God out. The Lord alone can save us; we cannot save ourselves! We should cultivate a healthy confidence in his mercy and goodness regularly; he warns us about the unforgiveable sin because he does love us and wants us to avoid committing it! If we form good and regular habits of repentance, recourse to the sacraments, and trust and confidence in God, then we will rest securely in his mercy. As we continue in this year of St. Joseph, let us again reflect upon his role as the patron of a good death: may he help us always to be ready for God, obtaining the graces of repentance and forgiveness for us. May he help us never to reject the Holy Spirit's gift!

³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1492.

⁴ Cf. John 20:22.