

Second Sunday of Easter, A (Divine Mercy) – April 19, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30am Livestreamed Mass (COVID-19) – 725 words

We know this gospel well; we are aware that it has to do with the Sacrament of Reconciliation: Jesus gave his apostles the authority to forgive sins in his name by the power of the Holy Spirit. As with all the sacraments, it is Christ himself who does the work; the priest, using apostolic powers, acts in the person of Christ and so becomes an instrument of his mercy. Whenever there is a sacrament, we are challenged to look beyond the individual priest, to see our Lord Jesus Christ working in and through him.

But how can we more effectively see Jesus in the priests who bring us the sacraments – whether confession, the Eucharist, the anointing, or any of the others? The answer, I think, touches upon the question of how we prepare ourselves beforehand. There is always the remote preparation: learning what we need to learn through catechesis and ongoing study of one's faith. But there is the immediate preparation also. Since our theme is God's mercy this Sunday, let's consider the matter of the immediate preparation for confession.

We are used to examining our conscience – or at least we should be. In doing so, we ask the Lord to shine his light into our souls, helping us see our sin more clearly. We take inventory so we can bare our souls to God's mercy as we speak to the confessor. But do we also pray for our confessor beforehand? Here is an important step of preparation that many may not think to undertake! What a difference a prayer for one's confessor can make – not only in the way he celebrates the sacrament, but also in how you see Christ working through him.

Your confessor, ideally, prays for you beforehand. I have a lovely prayer before hearing confessions posted in our confessional here at St. Paul's. I will read an abbreviated version now:

Grant... O Lord, that wisdom seated beside your throne, that I may know how to judge your people with justice... and... discernment.... May my intention be pure, my zeal sincere, my charity patient, my labor fruitful. Let there be in me a gentleness which is not negligent... let me not look down upon the poor, nor let me fawn upon the rich. Make me pleasant for attracting sinners, prudent in questioning them, resourceful in directing them. Grant, I beseech you, ingenuity for drawing them back from sin, earnestness in confirming them in good, diligence in urging them to better things. Grant me mature judgment in responses, rectitude in advice, light in obscure matters, wisdom in complications, victory in adversities....

Ever since I started using this prayer, I have noted a positive difference. Prayer works. God wants confession to be a beautiful encounter of mercy, of peace. A priest who continually prays this way will perceive more clearly Christ's presence with him in the sacrament, as he absolves and advises in his name. (I have a full sheet of confessional prayers that I will gladly share with any priest.)

Well, back to our point: how can you pray effectively for the priest who will hear your confession, as part of your immediate preparation for the sacrament? It need not be a formulaic prayer. Ask God to enlighten the priest's mind, to help him give you good advice. Maybe the priest is tired; ask the Lord to give him strength. Maybe he has some rough edges; ask Jesus to smooth them and help him grow. There are many ways we can pray for our priests before we go to confession, to help us to profit better from the sacrament.

In the end, this prayer on the part of both priest and penitent helps all keep a spiritual focus, lest we get caught up too much in the humanity of our encounter. There is no doubt that it's not easy to confess your sins to a man. There is no doubt that it is very humbling for that man

to fulfill that role. But Christ is at work; he is very much present. As St. Peter said in the second reading, “Although you have not seen him” – Jesus – “you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, as you attain the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”