What a scene St. John the Baptist’s arrival must have been: a rough man, clothed in rustic, penitential garments, eating rare foods and preaching a shocking revelation! But he did find people ready to hear and heed his message, and it tells us that they went to be baptized by him. More than that, as he was baptizing, it says that they “acknowledged their sins”; yes, there was confession of sin, even in that time – it was not a concept invented by the Church in the Middle Ages, as some historians allege. And yet, as John himself stated, what he was doing was still only a foreshadowing: when the Christ came, there would be the real thing. “I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Ever since Jesus came, we have had the real thing: here in his holy Catholic Church, with her seven sacraments, through which the Lord himself truly reaches out to us, touches us, and changes us. When we were baptized, we were given his life of grace and a permanent mark identifying us as his followers. And confession restores what we lost through sin after baptism, also strengthening us for what lies ahead. Those two sacraments are so intimately connected and crucial for our salvation. John’s version was the dress rehearsal, but Christ brought us the main event. And what multitudes have lined up beside not the Jordan but the baptismal font, or queued up at the confessional, down through the centuries these last two millennia.

Yes, as I just mentioned, confession does also strengthen us for what lies ahead. This is an often-forgotten truth about this great sacrament: that is not only forgives our sins, but gives us special graces to amend our lives going forward. Some people wait to go to confession until they feel they are ready to change, as if it all depended upon them. Others recognize that they have insufficient power on their own to change, that God’s grace is needed; thus they seek out the sacrament right away to obtain that divine help. Without God’s grace it is impossible to please him. But more than pleasing him here and now, we must also be prepared for the test that awaits us, about which St. Peter spoke in the second reading.

“What sort of persons ought you to be?”, he asked, reflecting on the trial by fire that is to come for all, without exception. Throughout scripture there is the image of the “refiner’s fire” – that traditional way to purify precious metals, burning off the dross. Nothing impure may enter the kingdom of God, heaven, as we read in the Book of Revelation.\(^1\) God wills for us to be good as gold – to be like the purest, most precious gold. We can work at that process of purification now and it is possible to make great progress in this life, so that the fire perhaps only has to burn a little in the end. Or we can do things by halves now, or do the bare minimum – but then, there will be much still to be purified in the end.

Yes, these readings point us to the reality of purgatory. Many Catholics express the wish that they can “just get in the door”. If only they knew what that meant! There are many trials in this world, and we spend much time running from them. There are many opportunities to do good in this world, but we often allow them to pass us by. If only we would embrace the trials and do good now, instead of waiting for the fire later. When we go to confession, the Lord surgically removes the sinful impurity from our soul. When we do good works, the wounds left from the sin and the surgery are gradually healed.\(^2\) When we take up our crosses and follow after the Lord, embracing the trials, we are chastened and strengthened.

Truly, it is better to heed St. John the Baptist’s urgent call for repentance and allow God to do his work on us here and now, than to put it off in so many ways, but then suffer so much in

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\(^1\) See Revelation 21:27.

\(^2\) See 1 Peter 4:8 – “Love covers a multitude of sins”.

1 See Revelation 21:27.

2 See 1 Peter 4:8 – “Love covers a multitude of sins”.
flames in order to enter into heaven. And let’s be honest: if we aim so low, hoping only to “make it in the door” of purgatory, what are the chances we will miss the mark entirely? We need to aim high! Purgatory is a great gift of God’s mercy – but his mercy toward us begins long before we arrive there, in the ways I described. During November we prayed for the holy souls still being purified. During this month of December, as we recall the Lord’s first coming and anticipate his second, we have an opportunity to refocus our own preparation.