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The Grace Trifecta, Part III: The Sacraments

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Hi, I'm Allison Gingras of Reconciledtoyou.com. And in this third session of the Grace Trifecta or prayer, sacrament, and scripture, during our Pray More Novenas Lenten retreat, we're going to be looking at the sacraments. In particular, we're going to be looking at my favorite sacrament: reconciliation. Before we jump into that, let's start with a prayer. *In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear good and gracious God, thank You so much for the sacraments, for the outward sign of Your grace in our life. Help us to embrace that every single day through our baptism, if we're married through our sacrament of matrimony, Lord, through our vocations, and of course in the Eucharist. And today, as we talk about the sacrament of reconciliation, please open up our hearts and our minds to be moved to how You wish us to see this sacrament, and hopefully be moved enough to participate in it. Lord, again, I ask always that Your work and Your will be done, and let me get out of Your way. Amen. And in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This is one of my favorite sacraments. It wasn't always one of my favorite sacraments. In fact, I was kind of what I would call a confession chicken. I was petrified. Petrified to go to confession. I didn't want to say what I had done wrong, I was worried the priest would judge me, or, you know, at that time, a little kid, go tell my mom what I had done. There was just so much involved with going, it just seemed so scary. So for many years, I avoided it. I avoided it for probably longer than I really should have. And when I did go, I'm not sure I was completely getting what it was really proposed to give me, which is healing, and peace, making me right again with God. But before I go too much further into that part, let me first tell you what happened to make me stop being such a confession chicken, and really embrace what God had for me in that sacrament. And has for all of us really.

So a few years ago, we moved to a new church. And I was incredibly excited for that first, you know, confession, the anonymous confession, when you, at that time, the church that we were at only had one of those little rooms with the screen. And I was excited, like "I'm going to go and have this great confession." I hadn't been in a really long time and, you know, these priests, there was 3 priests at the church, and they hadn't all met me yet. And so I was ready. So I go in, it's Saturday, I'm first in line, there's quite a few people waiting. But I go in, and I kneel down, and I start to pray, you know, "Forgive me Father, for I have sin. It's been however long since my last confession. And hear all my sins." And I get to about 2 or 3 of them.

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And then he says “Oh, are you the lady the came to our church to start the youth group?” Umm, I was.

And so I felt at that moment I had a couple of options. Yeah, I thought I had options. I could start with I could say no, and then go back to my confession with “And I lied one time to you.” Or I could obviously be honest and say “Yes, Father, that was I.” And so I said the honest answer, and he started to talk all about all of the exciting things that he wanted us to do in the parish with the youth. And he went on, and on, and on. Finally, I interrupted and said “Look, umm, Father, I don’t mean to be rude at all, but I do have a few more confession, you know, sins I want to get through this confession with, and, you know, there’s other people waiting.” He goes “Oh, yeah, yeah, no problem.”

So I finish up my confession, and I finish up my sins, he gives me a little bit of spiritual direction, a little bit of encouragement of what not to do, and how to avoid some of those things I was really struggling with. And then, you know, I say the Act of Contrition, I get m absolution. I’m excited, you know. I blessed myself, I am ready to go. I’m feeling all clean inside. And I open the door to leave, and I make eye-contact with the now 15 or so people waiting for their turn in the confessional. And I hear from behind the little screen “Umm, one more thing.”

So, what do I do, right? I look at the people waiting, and I slowly close the door. Now, you know that half of those people bolted for the door, thinking “Oh my gosh, if he calls you back in, I’m not going to this priest.” And the other half had to start with their confession with “I judged one time that woman who just got called back into the confessional.” I didn’t even know what to do with myself. So I knelt back down, because there was no seat, and he started talking about a marriage retreat that he offers. And he went on, and on, and on. Finally, you know, we get to the end of the conversation. I’m like “Father, I am so excited. I can’t wait to participate in this with my husband, and I got all the information from you. Is there by any chance a trap door or a backway out of this confessional?” He laughed and said no. He thought I was kidding. I was totally not kidding. I did not want to go back, you know, out there with all of those people staring at me. I was new to this church, I was new to this parish. I can’t even imagine. Like, that’s not a great way to start.

So, I go out, and at that parish, the confessions take place at the same time as a holy hour. So, I knelt down before Jesus to say my penance, and I just start cracking up. “Like, oh my goodness God, You are so funny.” It really showed me that what happens in the confessional is a conversation, and the priest is there in Persona Christi, which means he’s in the person of Christ. So really, all you’re doing is having a conversation with Christ about the sins that He already knows

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about. Because like I said in session one, “If He gave you your brain, He can read it.” He knows, He sees everything, He knows what’s happening. And confession isn’t for us to come and feel embarrassed or humiliated, but it’s for us to come and say these things out loud.

I don’t know about you, but the things that I keep inside always seem heavier than they are. And if you think about it, the prince of darkness is who? And he wants us to stay closed in, and frightened and stuck where we are. He’s the prince of darkness. He doesn’t want us to see the light. But when we speak things out, and you, like, picture those words coming out of your mouth, you are speaking them into the light. And who is the Prince of Light but Jesus. So you’re taking that shame, that guilt, those lies that devil wants you to live in, and you are speaking them out loud. And there, in Persona Christi, the priest is there to receive them, to put the light of Christ upon them, and to free you from them.

Jesus said “I’ve come to give you life and give it to you abundantly.” I John 10:10. There’s nothing more abundant in life than being free from your sins, to being unyoked from them and yoked to Christ. And, oh my goodness, you just bring all that junk and you just lay at the foot of Christ. After that experience of just... I laughed, and I thought “I will never be afraid to come to You again, because You clearly are excited than I’m there, and You have so much to share with me, with all of us.” There’s no reason to be afraid to go to confession.

I thought that it would be kind of interesting, because the Catechism of the Catholic Church, number 1423, lists several different names for confession, which I’m not sure you know. I did not, so I wanted to share them with you. I did not memorize them, so I am going to read them quickly from this piece of paper here. It is called the sacrament of conversion, because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion – The first step to returning to the Father, from whom we have strayed in our sin. It is called the sacrament of penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner’s personal and ecclesial, I hate big words, steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction. It is also called the sacrament of confession, which I think we’re all pretty familiar with, because it calls us to disclose our sins, to make a confession of it, and also to have a sense, a profound sense it says, of a confession. Of acknowledgement and praise of the holiness of God, knowing that God’s mercy is huge.

I mean, we need to come and ask for it and it just pours out in that confession of admitting and saying out loud “I’ve done this against You, and I’ve done that.” Then we can receive His mercy. You know, the only sin unable to be forgiven is the sin of us not accepting God’s forgiveness, which makes sense. Through that opening ourselves to receive His mercy. It’s called the sacrament of forgiveness,

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since by the priest's sacramental absolution, God grants the penitent, pardon, and peace. There's that peace again. You know, that kind of has followed us through all 3 sessions, that prayer, the answer to prayer is... The answer to prayer is peace.

We saw in the scriptures when hemorrhaging came to Jesus, He said "Go in peace." And today we see in the sacrament of reconciliation, the sacrament of forgiveness, forgiving, pardon, and peace. And the fifth in the sacrament of reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the life of God, who reconciles, to be reconciled to God, which is actually where my ministry, Reconciled To You, comes from. 2 Corinthians 5:20: Be reconciled to God. ***Who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call, go first be reconciled to your brother.*** So we're given all of this wonderful blessings in one simple act: going to confession. Easier said than done, right.

But the thing about confession that we have to understand is that it's a true gift from God. That it is this way that He is going to impart His mercy, His grace, His blessings upon us. But the funny thing about gifts is if they're not used, they're kind of useless. A gift needs to be received, it needs to be opened, and then it needs to be used. And here's an example that I have, and I think it fits this really well. One Christmas, my very thin, energetic, healthy, exercise-conscious-minded sister, the one who runs marathons for something to do on the weekend, and I'm pretty sure can bench press a Buick, gave me Wii Fit for Christmas. I was not a happy receiver. I had received the gift, and I opened it, the wrapping anyway, and then I stuck it in the corner somewhere and I never touched it. I never used it.

A couple of months later, my mom, who has diabetes, was told she needed insulin shots, and my dad, who had his first heart attack at 34, had a heart transplant at 55, had started to have congestive heart failure. So their health both started to deteriorate, and it was in that moment that I recognized what my sister's gift truly was. Both of my parents' conditions are things, or conditions, that can be prevented through a healthy lifestyle. Eating and exercise. So my sister's gift was more to do with what was going on in my insides than my outsides. She didn't care what I look like, it wasn't a matter of saying "Oh, you could use lose a few. Here's a Wii Fit." No, it was "Our parents are really sickly, and I don't want that to happen to you. So here's a gift that I know will help you."

I needed to receive it, open it, and use it, and I wasn't doing that third part. And it wasn't hurting the person gifting it, I was the only one being harmed by not using the gift. My sister cared so much for my insides that she gave me this great gift, so that I might be physically and... physically well. God gives us the gift of reconciliation because He cares so much about our spiritual wellbeing. He wants you to be spiritually well. He gives us the sacraments, this outward sign of His

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efficacious grace, because He wants us to live an abundance life, to be spiritually well, to be at peace, to be filled with His joy. Not happiness, that's fleeting, but joy, knowing that no matter the circumstance, God is always with us. Those are the great gifts that He gives us. And we see those in the sacraments, through our baptism, through spending time in adoration, in the Eucharist, we see it in the Eucharist at Sunday Mass or daily Mass if you're blessed enough to be able to do that.

But then reconciliation. Here's the other thing about it, I had no idea. So I started to go more frequently a few years ago. I found myself having the holy hour at that new church during confession. And there was a few weeks that nobody seemed to come to confession, I felt bad – the priest had come all the way over to the church. So I went. And I ended up going 3 weeks in a row. And that week I noticed something different about myself. I had been going through a really difficult time with forgiving some people in my life, and I started to find that I had more peace, there's that word again, more peace with the situation. That I felt more... the sins that I usually grapple with, I didn't fall into them as quickly. And I definitely had more joy in my heart and I thought "What is going on? Something's happened, because this wasn't happening before."

And so, I looked at the week, and I looked at my life, and I thought "What has been different in the last few weeks, months?" And I realized the only thing that I really added differently was I started to go to confession more often, more frequently. So that was what brought me to the Catechism of the Catholic church, and just said "Well, what's going on in confession that's such a big deal?" And here's something that I somehow missed in all of my Catechism: it's the sacrament of healing. There's healing that's going on when I go into that confessional, when I spend time with the priest in Persona Christi. When I receive that absolution and the grace, I'm also receiving a healing, a spiritual healing, emotional healing in the case of forgiving these people and the situation and myself as well – usually the hardest one to forgive is ourselves, we're the hardest on ourselves.

So here we have this great gift from God, this confession that is a sacrament of healing, and Catechism calls it a radical reorientation. When we participate in this sacrament, be prepared for a radical reorientation of your life to God, and your whole self you regain. For me, I regained hope, and I regained strength, and I felt closer to Him than ever. And the effects of the sacrament are peace and serenity. Who doesn't... The Catechism says so, right in my notes, peace and serenity. Who doesn't need that? Who doesn't want that? And Lent is this perfect time, as most churches are offering extra confession during the time.

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I know that most diocese have something called “The Light Is On For You,” and you would go on a Wednesday – That’s when our diocese is, is a Wednesday night. Some have a whole 24 hours of confession. So there’s no... there’s many, many opportunities to avail yourself of this amazing gift that God has for you. He wants to heal you. He doesn’t want to tell you all the things that you’ve done wrong so He can shame you. He wants to free you of that, come to give you life, and give it to you abundantly. This great gift that God has for us of healing, of hope, of being made new again, and most important, of being brought closer to Him. Sin separates us. God wants us to be brought closer.

My prayer for you this Lent is that you will consider being brave. Because I do think it takes a lot of courage sometimes to give yourself an examination of conscience. There’s lots of them all over the internet if you can’t remember how to do it, there’s lots of instructions on how to do a confession. I know Pray More Novenas has a lot of great resources, and we can get them for you if you need anything. To get yourself into that confessional, to remember that this is a conversation with Christ, who loves you, who wants to heal you and strengthen you.

And I think that’s it. I think we’re going to close with a prayer. I’m just so overwhelmed and excited, what God is going to do in your life when you take that step to go and be healed through this great sacrament. And when we allow God’s overpowering of His grace within our life through prayer, sacrament, and scripture, it truly is a Grace Trifecta. Let’s close with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear good and gracious God, we thank You so much for this time together, for our time learning about the great gifts that You have for us of faith, and of joy, and of hope, of grace. And how we can grab and just ask for the outpouring of grace, Lord. You tell us that the grace is abundant, but we need to ask for it, and we ask for it every time we turn to You in prayer, every time we participate in the sacraments, and every time we read Your word in scripture.

Lord, we ask You to continue to bless our Lenten journeys, and long before that, when we enter into the Easter season, let us never draw away from You. Saint James tells us when we draw near to You, You draw ever nearer to us. Lord, we ask in our hearts, and in every day of our lives, in all that we do, that You continue to draw close to us, and keep us from drawing away from you. And we ask all of this in Your most precious name, Jesus Christ. Amen. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you.