

An Encounter with Christ **Allison Gingras**

Ahhh Lent, the time that many of us who have spent the year avoiding confession, start to consider the fact that maybe it's time we come back to confession. At least that's how I used to feel many years ago. When I came back to the church, I had a reversion and I came back and I went to confession because I knew I needed that sacrament before I could return to receiving the Eucharist, but I didn't really embrace it. Let's say I was kind of a little afraid of it. I spent most of my life, a confession chicken. Am I the only one? I very much doubt that. And I think it's because I didn't really understand the beauty of what confession was. It didn't realize that it fell under the sacrament of healing.

I kind of just for years, looked at it kind of as my “get out of hell” free card. Like if I went to confession, was hit by a bus on the way out of the parking lot, it would be good, right? I'd go right to heaven. As long as I didn't think about anything. Then I start to have thoughts I'm in trouble, but I didn't fully embrace or understand the gift, the true gift that confession is to us that God gives us this amazing gift. And the thing about gifts is that they're not very useful unless they're received, opened and used.

But it would take me a very long time from the first moment I came back to the church in somewhere around 1990 something till I walked into a confessional with my heart on fire to receive God's mercy, more than 10 years later.

Confession Three Times in a Row

We had been going to a certain church for a while and it was a great, it was a great church. It was very family friendly; we had met lots of people and made lots of friends and then some kind of difficult circumstances in our life kind of led us to leave that church. There were friends at that church, it wasn't anything to do with clergy in fact, the clergy was amazing. All the priests we had encountered there were incredible, and it was difficult for us to leave but there were just some falling out with friends that happens sometimes it was just really difficult, painful memories for me to be there.

So actually, went back to the church we had met, and I always say we were a match made in heaven because we met at church. I had started teaching religious education, first graders and high school. That's where I met my husband. We've been together a very long time. It's a good thing, I like him. And we went back to this church and of the things that this church had was weekly adoration. And I remember the first time I was introduced to weekly adoration, I had never really heard of this before even heard of adoration before, sitting with Jesus exposed in the monstrance, this time of prayer, this really being in the presence of Jesus, body, blood, soul and divinity. I had never heard of this really before.

And I got kind of nudged into a Holy hour. That was happened to be in 2:30 to 3:30 on Saturday and the exact time of confession, one of the weeks I was in confession, I mean, an adoration, it was some wintertime, it was cold. I live in new England and we had three priests and the first

priest came over for confession. And it was cold, it was miserable. I felt really bad that no one came over. So, I was like, well, I haven't been in a while petrified to go, but I hadn't been in a while. So, I decided that I would, could think of a few things. Can't we always think of something?

So, I went into confession and came out feeling pretty good. I always think of what the second graders that go into their first reconciliation and they've got the droopy shoulders and they're really struggling to get up the nerve to go in there, keep looking nervously back at their parents or their teacher. And then after their confession, they come bounding either out of the confessional or off of the altar or from wherever they've had their confession. And they're so excited, they're like bouncing all around high fiving thrilled to have had confession.

That's kind of how I feel on the inside like when I go into confession, I have a hard time, I'm nervous, I'm scared, I don't really want to be there kind of droopy shoulders. And then when I come out, I'm bounding, I'm excited. I'm happy and then the next week, different priests came miserable weather, again, nobody showed up. I was like looking around like, Well, I'm still dealing with, I was still that time dealing with those feelings about those friends and really trying to work out forgiveness and the pain.

So, I was like, well, all right, fine. I'll go back to confession. Sure, I could think of something if you can't think of something for confession let me give you a little advice, but use it wisely pray to the Blessed Mother. She will definitely help you figure out what you need to confess but what I get to tell you is do you use it sparingly because nobody knows better than your mom what you need deep down to let go of. And it can be a very powerful confession experience.

Feeling the Difference and Grace

So, I go back in second week, I have another great confession, I come out, I sit in front of them Jesus and the monstrance and adoration and I was like, you know what? I started just kind of reflecting on the week ahead. I was like that pain of not forgiving those friends. It started to kind of melt a little bit that week. And I felt like I had more patience with my kids and even driving in my home state of Massachusetts which itself is usually an occasion of sin and the necessary the need for confession. Anyway, so I was like, well, what, this is weird and I kind of felt this peace.

Third week the weather is worse than ever, the oldest priest we have with us comes over and nobody shows up. I'm like, okay, really? I'm looking at Jesus in the monstrance, I'm like, really? You want me to go three weeks in a row? That's a lot, dude. Like that's a lot to, okay, yeah, I did call Jesus dude. Reverently of course. Cause I love Jesus very much, but I was like, okay, all right, fine.

And I went in and it made my confession and I knelt before Jesus and I had this epiphany after this by the way I came out and there were people waiting, I felt a little duped. I was like, wait a minute, Lord, you knew these people were coming but what He did in those three weeks is He started to open up my heart to this beautiful grace that comes from confession. I had never heard

of grace. I had never really thought about what grace does in the sacraments. And the fact that the sacrament of confession, reconciliation, penance is the sacrament of healing.

What's So Special About Confession?

So, I went, and I opened up my catechism of the Catholic church and I started to really research. What happens? Why do we go to confession? What do we get from it? That's so special that it would become a sacrament. And so many different things I learned that you would've thought I would've picked up in catechism class, but I just hadn't yet. In the presets in persona Christi, we are meeting face-to-face with Jesus. Sure, we're looking at father so-and-so, but He's not, He's there in the place and the person in the presence, we're in the presence of Jesus. And He's the one who takes our sins, He's the one who forgives them, He's the one who loves us so much that He died for us on the cross. And that's who we are encountering in confession.

And anytime you have an encounter with Jesus Christ you are never the same again, whether it be in the Eucharist in adoration or in mass or in reconciliation or baptism, prayer, sacrament, scripture, every time we have these moments with Christ, we're never the same again. And how much more when we come and meet His mercy face to face, when we come to the grace of that sacrament, to the throne of Jesus who loves us so much.

So, we bring Him this brokenness, these hurts these pains, these mistakes, these missteps these things that we just want to be cleansed of. And we lay them at the foot of the cross. And we don't have to guess if we're forgiven, we get to hear the words through the priest. Your sins are forgiven. If you hear the words of absolution you can almost sometimes feel the grace just coming upon you and healing you, wiping you clean of all of your sin. And we're given that opportunity to that penance that opportunity to be fully clean, to make amends, to connect, to reconnect, to be reconciled back to God and to our church and to each other.

It is such a full and beautiful and amazing sacrament that I don't know why I wasn't paying attention all those years and catechism classes, why I wasn't thinking about what I was receiving and why I was so quick to want to avoid it when it's truly one of the greatest gifts God has for us. Where we don't have to guess if we're forgiven, we can hear it. We can be filled with His grace. And grace is the undeserved yet freely given gift of God's Holy spirit within us. And that grace that we take from the confessional stays within us. And we can use that daily moment to moment to help us heal from the things that we keep falling into temptation with. It can help us heal from our brokenness.

Truly, for me, I started after that day, going to frequent confession, sometimes every two weeks, sometimes every once a month sometimes more often if I was really struggling with something no more than once a month a week though. And I started to feel that that grace was healing me. It was bringing me to a new place in my faith. It was bringing me to a new place of my relationship with Christ and with the world. And what an amazing gift that confession became in my life.

But the fear of going that took a little bit longer to shake from my bones. And there should be. There should be a little bit, a moment of you should be contrite. You should be sorry for your

sin. You shouldn't be able to just breeze on in there and lay them all down and breeze on out like it's no big deal. No, this is a big deal. We are bringing to God our brokenness, the ways that we have offended Him. There should be some contrition. There should be some little discontent in going in there, but I shouldn't frighten us.

An Unforgettable Confession Story

And I remember kind of early in this process as I had started to go to confession more often, we had a new priest come to the church and I thought this isn't the best gift ever because you know what happens that first time you go to confession and this was like one of those screeny places, the first time you go to confession with a priest who doesn't know you. Now I had met him once. Briefly, very briefly and met him once. And so, I was very excited for that confession of anonymity that he wouldn't know who I was those are always the best. So, in that way, some of us go to churches far away so that we don't have to, if we could just, some people don't want the priest to know who they are.

Personally, just as an aside note I love going to the same priest again and again. You build that repertoire. He like Jesus knows you inside and out he knows you so well that you can continue to work on the places that you stumble more most often. You can continue to work on those places that you have the most difficulty with that it's a beautiful gift. And I can guarantee you, they have that seal of confession, they don't hold it against you in fact, in all the years that I've now been going to confession and had different confessors, I find speaking to priests that they find people who embrace this beautiful gift of the sacrament of reconciliation. They look at them in a different light, like they really do admire. I guess that's one looking for. They admire your strength to be able to bring your brokenness and your sins to God and know that He is where you're healed. So, they don't look at you. They're not going to hold those against you.

But anyway, in this case, this was many years ago. I was still kind of newbie to this stuff. And I really looked forward to this confession where a priest who would not know me. So, I go in now, it's four, o'clock on a Saturday this day that I went, and I was the first one in line. I always try to be the first one in line because I don't like to sit there worrying of going in. I've changed but at that time of my life, I was like I want to be first. So, this was about five or six people waiting to go after me. I go in, I kneel down. I know, bless myself, forgive me, father for I have sinned. It's been at that point. Like maybe just a couple of weeks since my last confession. And here are my sins and I kind of start rolling them out. Like I like to write them down. Sometimes they feel like I'm ruling out Sanchez list.

I start to go into my confession, and he stops me, and he says, "Oh, are you the new, are you the lady that came "a few months ago to start the youth group here?" I was, so I felt like in that moment, I had a couple of options, I could lie and say no and keep having my confession of nobody the veil of nobody knows me confession, but I'd have to start my confession with I lied one time, a few minutes ago to you. Just didn't seem like that was going to work out for me. So, I said, "yes father, that's me." And he starts to get all excited and he completely forgets we're in a confessional. And he starts to go on with all these things that he's so excited to be there to do and all these ideas that he has.

And now we're in like five minutes in and I finally, he takes a breath. I'm like, father, "I don't mean to be rude "but I have a few things I want to talk to you about "and there's other people waiting." He's oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Go ahead. So, I finished my confession. It gives me a tiny little bit of something to work on something, to pray about a scripture, to think about. I get absolution, which I love. And then I go to leave, or I do back to contrition too in there. And then I put my hand on the door to leave, I opened the door, I make eye contact with the now 10 people or so waiting to come in. And I hear from the other side of the screen thing, Oh, wait, one more thing, should you get called back into the confessional it's very, very uncomfortable.

So, I don't know what to do with the myself. So, I close the door. Now I'm sure that half of those people bolted for the door because they were thinking, "oh my gosh this priest calls you back in I'm not going to him" and to the other half had to start there in confession with, "I judged one time that woman that you just call back into the confessional". I didn't even know what to do with myself cause there's no chair, so I just know that back down. And he started talking about a retreat for married couples that he's involved with that he thought my husband and I would really like, and he was going on and on and on on, and he finished it. I said, "father, is there a trap door or a back exit?" And he thought I was kidding. I was not kidding.

I did not want to go back out there, especially because I was the lady who had come to start the youth group at the time. And I thought, who is going to send their kid to youth group with the woman who gets called back into the confessional. Nobody nobody's going to love that person. So, I finally came out. There were half the people, of course we'd also use up half the time before mass. So there really wasn't time for everybody.

A Conversation with Jesus

I knelt before Jesus and they had continued to put Him out for confession. He was out for adoration in the monstrance on the altar. I knelt down before Him to do my penance and I just started to laugh hysterically. And then Lord, I will never be afraid of confession again. I will come with contrition. I won't come all, gallantly in there, but I will never be afraid because I know that all you want is to have a conversation with me, that you want me to bring everything to you. And you're so excited to have me there, to heal me, to strengthen me, to send me back out, to do your work and your father's will have nothing to be afraid of.

I'm not sure how many kids really were kept from these group that after that experience, I hope that most of parents, I did share that story, that's very clear, quick to share that story are all over church so people know what happened. It's not funny, but I was just so worried about how people thought of me kind of missing the point of my whole story.

The Best Place to Start is in the Confessional

No really, just knowing these few things about confession. It is grace, It's God's undeserved gift freely given gift of God's Holy Spirit within you that helps you to say yes to Him, to grow in your faith, to become holier and to choose faith. It is a time of healing, that this is a sacrament of healing that God is taking your broken pieces and He is making you whole again. And it is this beautiful time of mercy. And we need God's mercy in order to encounter him in this world, in this fullness and of course in the next.

We should always be heavenly focused on what we do here overcoming our fears and our insecurities, our doubts and the best place to start with that especially if you haven't been in a long time during this Lenten time is in the confessional. Make this time to pray, reach out to a priest if you need a little extra support. Let God heal you. Let Him fill your heart with grace and take every burden from you.

I'm Allison Gingras and I really do pray that you find time to return to confession this Lent.