

How to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation with Confidence, Overcoming Anxieties

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Hello, I'm Father Daniel Scheidt, and in this meditation, we'll be exploring how to approach the sacrament of reconciliation with great confidence, overcoming our anxieties, and receiving all the gifts that the Lord wishes to give us. And so let us pray.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father of mercies, we ask that by the power of your Son, by His Holy Spirit, you would give us all that we need to receive all the gifts that you wish to give us, that we, in receiving this mercy, would ourselves share it super abundantly to extend the kingdom where you are Lord, for and ever, Amen.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

When we consider the mercy of God and approaching it in the sacrament of reconciliation, it's important to start at the very beginning. It's a very good place to start. And when God creates the world, He beholds it as very good. And all of the plottings of the evil one, all of the disastrous tragedies that can pile up in History are as nothing compared to the goodness of the creator and the goodness of His creation. And sometimes we can live vast stretches of our life presupposing this goodness, thinking that we understand it and accept it, but focusing too soon and in some unhealthy ways on what's wrong. And we can do a little spiritual exercise of just asking ourselves, well, when was the last time we actually paid attention to what is in the ground underneath us?

So there are vast aquifers, for example, that are in the subterranean realm. And our lives depend on these aquifers, the water that that's gathered in the ground, that's purified by the ground. And even deeper than those aquifers, the very molten core of the earth, the center of gravity, for example, that tethers us to this planet. We can go years, decades of our life by ignoring these aquifers and the molten core of the earth, and yet they're there. And they're good. Our lives depend on them. We should be grateful for them. And if that little thought experiment is true, and it is, how much more true is the grace of our own baptism?

We have received by water and the Holy Spirit eternal life, the divine life. We have been made, by baptism, adopted sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, made members of the body of Christ, made temples of the Holy Spirit. This is true. And how much more true than the molten core of the earth is the fact that at the center of reality, permeating reality is the divine love of the most blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All of the relationality of the cosmos has as its necessary precondition God Himself, who, as St. John will say, is love.

This is our starting point when it comes to examining our life where we've failed, where we've sinned, where we've been wounded by evil, where we've wounded other people. It's coming again and again to the origin of the Lord's goodness and of the goodness of His creation and of the goodness of our creation that we can understand what needs to be healed.

Also, we should know that, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Colossians, that our lives are hidden with Christ in God. St. Paul says, "Our lives are hidden with Christ in God, and when Christ Himself appears, then we too will appear with Him in glory," which means that there is more goodness in our life that God sees than the goodness we see. And we should never presume the opposite, that the goodness that may be in us is small and pathetic, and that God really knows us as utter failures. No, God has created us good. He knows the goodness that He's planted in us, like so many seeds, and He's the one in charge of the harvest.

We can always assume that the Lord knows more goodness in us than we know in ourselves. So with that preliminary, now we're in a better position to examine why Jesus comes to forgive our sins and to conquer the evil one. He comes because we need it. And that need can be put in terms of a patient who suffers a disease. So to understand what disease is presupposes that we study what health is.

So a good doctor, for example, is trained, yes, to identify disease what's wrong, but even more profoundly to look through the disease, to the health that needs to be restored. And when it comes to, for example, examining our conscience, we should be studying the good that needs to be restored as much as, even more than, studying the specific failures to do that. Or to put it another way, we can only understand the failures in light of what needs to be restored, healed by the Lord. He's the divine physician before He's the judge of our imagining. And Jesus is clear that even in this movement of identifying disease, it's done in love. He's come not to condemn us, but to free us to save us. He comes that we might have life and have it in abundance.

Christ And His Mercy

So first, when Jesus frees people from the grip of the evil one, he exposes some truths about the devil that would be really helpful for us in our examination of conscience. The first is that the devil is the tempter. So we can see in the book of Genesis, first book of the Bible, Adam and Eve, the tempter is always out to make evil appear good. And the good appear impossible or unrealistic. The tempter is always out to isolate us from referring our life to the Lord's goodness and seizing our life on its own. That's when we get into trouble. But what happens by the end of scriptural revelation, the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation or the apocalypse, the unveiling, is that the devil is finally revealed not simply as the tempter, but also as the accuser.

So no sooner do we fail, do we sin than the devil is right there magnifying what we've done wrong and minimizing anything that we may have done right. It's like a twisted fun house mirror where all of the good is minimized and described as hypocrisy, and all of the evil is magnified and presented as who we really are, our true self. Christ sees the opposite. The more pitiful we are, the more Christ reveals that He is full of pity for us, not feeling sorry for us, but actually the type of mercy, misericordia in Latin, that comes to our misery. We

become magnets for the Lord's mercy, even to be able to say that, "Lord, I am a magnet for your mercy. I am so pitiful that I need the fullness of your pity."

It's very interesting that when Our Lady appeared to the children in Fatima and she taught them that prayer, *"Oh, my Jesus, forgive us our sins. Save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy."* Oh my goodness, Our Lady was thinking of us, of you and me, go figure. We who are most in need of the Lord's mercy provide the occasion for the Lord to reveal the fullness of that mercy in us.

When we think of the life of St. Paul, knocked to the ground, exposed as colluding and the murder of Christians, the fact that he can actually not only be restored from that catastrophic evil and tragedy, but actually be all the more on fire with the Lord's merciful love, it's that forgiveness that Paul received that prompted the missionary journeys throughout the Roman empire that would eventually lead to Paul giving his very life for the service of this gospel of mercy. So we should be not afraid, but of course, sometimes that can be easier said than done.

Recalibrating Our Spiritual Life

So here are a few further reflections when it comes to any anxieties we may have. There's that song, "Feelings, nothing more than feelings." Sometimes our feelings take on an exaggerated role in our life. They're meant by God actually to be pointers to wellbeing. So our emotions that draw us to things and that cause us to defend ourselves from things, from dangers, those feelings are created to be good. But sometimes we allow our feelings to over-determine what we think and to fool us in our identity. And so sometimes our feelings can be hyper-sensitized. They can become inflamed like a raw nerve.

And we need to attend to the anxiety first before we can attend to what the symptoms of that anxiety may be. I'll give some examples. Sometimes in the sacrament of reconciliation, we can become so focused on one particular sin or one particular group of sins that we lose sight of the larger picture of what health in our life looks like. So for example, for some people, there can be a hyper-focusing on sins of anger, "Oh, I'm losing my temper all the time. I'm lashing out at this person, the other person." Or focusing on sins of lust, "Oh, I failed again and again and again, failed this way and that way." Or on sins of gluttony, "Oh, I can't stop eating this or drinking that."

And when we find ourselves feeling really stuck in a particular sin or a group of sins, sometimes in our prayer, if we can ask the Lord to help us just switch out whatever the names of the sins that are really preoccupying us are, to switch that out with just the word anxiety or even stress. "Lord, I am so anxious in this, that, or the other situation." And if we can ask the Lord to help us work through our anxieties, oftentimes that can open up some new perspectives and possibilities on gaining some deeper healing from our particular sins.

And it can certainly help recalibrate the balance in our spiritual life. I'd also point out that sometimes anxieties can really make us feel like a moral failure, and we can start condemning ourselves.

Attentiveness Against Self Condemnation

We should be very attentive to the fact that self-condemnation is not of God. The Holy Spirit reveals the truth of our sin. But remember, like a doctor reveals the truth of disease, namely that there's a deeper health that needs to be engaged and worked on, the devil is the accuser, the prosecuting attorney who wants us damned.

So whenever we hear playing over in our head, "You are nothing, you're a failure. If anybody knew what you really did, you would just crawl and wither up and die," et cetera, we need to see through that as the smoke screen of the evil one. When we approach the sacrament of reconciliation, we do it with confidence because underneath whatever guilt and shame is actually love.

The love of God prompts us to return to Him again and again. And here's the paradox. The more we give the Lord our sins in the sacrament, the greater the revelation of our humility, of our courage, of our honesty, of our love, of our hope, and of our faith. The very instruments that the devil has used to beat us up actually become the trophies of the Lord's victory. He reveals in us His humility, His courage, His honesty, His faith, and His love of us.

And so oftentimes at mass right after the Lord's Prayer, as the priest is praying, we can skip over that portion of the prayer where we're asked for freedom from sin and asked to be kept safe from all distress. We can really make that prayer our own. "Lord, keep me safe from my distress. Lord, you are the calm at the center of the storm. You are the one at rest in the tossed-and-turned boat of my life." Jesus wishes to give us His mercy through good confessors, and we should pray to receive a good confessor.

The Importance of a Good Confessor

So my final part of this meditation is some suggestions for a good confessor. A good confessor can work with us in the preparation for reconciliation. So we can perhaps prepare a list, but we can also ask the confessor, should I actually make the list more focused, less detailed, and much more focused on what's essential? The confessor can help us adjust what's going to serve our spiritual health. Secondly, a good confessor can help in creating a more simplified penance. Sometimes we can get nervous because we don't know what to do and whether we can carry out the penance. We should ask the confessor to help us.

And sometimes he can give us one even in the confessional that we can do and be reassured that we've fulfilled it. Also with our memory, if salvation depended on our memory, we'd all be sunk. So we have to trust that whatever the Holy Spirit brings is what we're meant to say at the moment. A good confessor reminds us that God is able to bring greater good than we can imagine from our forgiven sins. And we can trust that the Lord will put people in the lives of people that we may have hurt, put people in our own life who can help us beyond what we can see at any moment.

And finally, we should never forget that there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who don't have any need. And so we pray,

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, I ask to be the one repentant sinner over which the whole host of angels and saints rejoices. I want to be a magnet for your mercy. I want you to look at how pitiful I am because you are so full of pity that transforms me from a sinner into a saint. I give you my anxiety, and I ask that you would keep me safe from distress. You are with me always, Lord, until the end of time. You are the Father's merciful embrace. Amen.