

Sunday, February 18, 2018

First Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Genesis 9:8-15

Responsorial: Psalm 25:4-9

2nd Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22

Gospel: Mark 1:12-15

Experiencing God's Forgiveness and Cleansing Power Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation

It is . . . an appeal to God for a clear conscience. (1 Peter 3:21)

While St. Peter is describing the Sacrament of Baptism here, he could just as easily be talking about Reconciliation. For what could possibly be a better way to experience a clean conscience than by going to Confession?

We know that when we confess our sins, we are forgiven—completely! But then comes the real challenge: keeping our consciences clear after we have received absolution. It's one thing to experience God's forgiveness, but what will change us so that we don't end up confessing the same things over and over again?

You may be surprised to find that the answer lies—again—in Confession! The sacrament doesn't just empty us of the past; it also fills us with grace for the future. That's because in Confession we meet Jesus, who came not only to pardon our sins but also to make us holy. In Confession, Jesus lifts the weight of our past sins from our shoulders so that we can go out into the world free from guilt, inspired by grace to say an even firmer no to sin than before.

Of course, we all face temptation, just as Jesus did in today's Gospel. But because Jesus triumphed in the wilderness, we can triumph as well. Jesus, the victor, is always ready to help us when we call out to him. He is right next to us, reminding us of his forgiveness and urging us to accept the grace he has stored up for us. He is here to remind us that he has overcome sin and that we can now enjoy the fruits of his victory.

So make sure you celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation this Lent. And when you do, know that the grace of this sacrament is there to cleanse you and to fill you with God's power. It is an ongoing grace that brings you closer to Jesus and strengthens you against any and all temptation.

"Thank you, Lord, for the grace that comes with Confession! Give me greater confidence in your mercy and love."

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. The first reading describes one of the many covenants made by God in the Old Testament: “God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ‘I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth.’ God added: ‘This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’”
 - How would you describe some parallels between God’s covenant with Noah and his New Covenant with us?
 - What are some differences?
2. The responsorial psalm begins with these words of the psalmist: “Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.” The psalmist continues with these words: “Remember that your compassion, O LORD, and your love are from of old. In your kindness remember me, because of your goodness, O LORD.”
 - How often do you turn to the Lord during the day when faced with difficulties? What steps can you take to do it more often each day during Lent to allow him to “make known,” “teach,” and “guide” you in his “ways”?
 - The words of the psalmist also remind us of God’s compassion, love, kindness, and goodness toward each of us. Why are these characteristics of God so important to keep in mind during this grace-filled season of Lent?
3. The second reading opens with these words: “Beloved: Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the Spirit.” We should also be encouraged by the truth that our Lord Jesus Christ “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.”
 - What impact do the words from this reading have on your confidence and trust in God because of what Jesus did for you through his passion, death, and resurrection?
 - How would you describe the relationship between these words and 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”?
4. The Gospel reading begins with St. Mark’s abbreviated description of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. Unlike Adam, who fell, Christ triumphs over the power of Satan and then begins to proclaim the “gospel of God” with these words: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”
 - Do you believe that in Christ, you too have the power to resist and/or overcome Satan and his temptations? Why or why not?
 - What concrete steps can you take during the day to help you in resisting and/or overcoming temptations?
5. The meditation describes the impact the Sacrament of Reconciliation has on a “clean conscience” with these words: “For what could possibly be a better way to experience a clean conscience than by going to Confession? We know that when we confess our sins, we are forgiven—completely! But then comes the real challenge: keeping our consciences clear after we have received absolution. It’s one thing to experience God’s forgiveness, but what will change us so that we don’t end up confessing the same things over and over again?” The meditation ends with these words: “So make sure you celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation this Lent. And when you do, know that the grace of this sacrament is there to cleanse you and to fill you with God’s power. It is an ongoing grace that brings you closer to Jesus and strengthens you against any and all temptation.”
 - How would you answer this question presented in the above quotation: “It’s one thing to experience God’s forgiveness, but what will change us so that we don’t end up confessing the same things over and over again?”
 - What additional steps can you take before or after you go to Confession to allow “the grace of this sacrament ... to cleanse you and to fill you with God’s power” and bring “you closer to Jesus and strengthens you against any and all temptation”?
6. Take some time now to pray and thank the Lord for all the graces he wants to pour out on you through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as the starting point.

“Thank you, Lord, for the grace that comes with Confession! Give me greater confidence in your mercy and love.”

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the **ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization** (www.christlife.org/) and a member of the **National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal** (www.nsc-chariscenter.org).

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