

Penance and Scripture

By Father Robert J. Kennedy

The Second Vatican Council was insistent in its call to have the words of sacred Scripture restored to the lives and worship of the Christian people. "The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's Word. Sacred Scripture is of paramount importance in the celebration of the liturgy. In sacred celebrations there is to be more reading from holy Scripture, and it is to be more varied and suitable." (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, para. #51, 24, 35.)

So, in the new Rite of Penance, the reading of God's Word has been given a prominent place, and a wide choice of selections. For individual celebrations, 12 short scripture passages are provided; for both communal and individual forms, a further 101 texts, which are longer or more complete, are suggested. In addition, the suggested texts of prayers for the celebration are either directly quoted from yet other scripture

passages or based on them. The new Rite of Penance, then, is meant to be alive in the Word of God.

But why should there be this kind of emphasis in the sacrament of Penance? The rite itself gives the answer: "through the word of God, the Christian receives light to recognize his or her sins and is called to conversion and to confidence in God's mercy." (Para. #17)

The reading of Scripture, then, is not just a nice, inspiring message, but the actual voice of God calling us to conversion and to ever closer conformity with Christ. In this voice, the mystery of our reconciliation with the Father through the death and resurrection of Christ is revealed to us. It is a voice that assures us of his mercy and tender loving care.

God's Word, whenever it is proclaimed, is a living word, spoken directly to us and to our lives. Thus, it awakens our own faith, and serves as a guide; it enlightens our consciences so that we might know both our sins and the ideals of the

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Gospel message. As we hear His Word, our hope and confidence in him are made stronger. Our desire to pray is aroused, and we are called to respond in faith and action, in conversion and repentance, to God's merciful call.

For these many important reasons, therefore, the reading of Scripture has again become an integral part of the celebration of Penance. Obviously, 113 suggested Scripture passages could only be a beginning of possibilities when one considers the richness of the Word of God in unfolding the mysteries of God's steadfast mercy and gift of reconciliation in Christ, and the demands of Christian growth and living.

The use of Scripture in the celebration of Penance will require careful advance preparation on the part of priest and penitent, in the individual form, and on the part of priest and committee when communal forms will be offered. Ideally, in the individual form, the penitent should select a brief passage that touches his, or her particular concerns for this particular encounter. In this way, God's Word will be truly alive and active, and the sacrament rich and fruitful for the penitent. However, the priest should also be ready to select and read an appropriate Scripture passage for each penitent, a selection that can challenge the penitent yet touch him or her with healing.

The reading of Scripture should always be done from a book of some dignity and beauty, as befits God's presence with us in this way. Whether the Bible be enthroned in a reconciliation room or carried with dignity at a communal celebration, it ought to be honored as God's own message to us by its use.

The Church has deliberately restored the proclamation of Scripture to the rites of individual and communal reconciliation. Though the reading is called "optional" in the individual form of the sacrament, its deliberate omission most of the time would demonstrate and cause attitudes not conducive to better celebration.

NAS Plans Special Rite

The Nocturnal Adoration Society (NAS) will conduct a special Holy Hour on Sunday, April 4 at Sacred Heart Cathedral at 3 p.m.

The purpose will be to promote the success of the Eucharistic Congress to be held in August in Philadelphia. The theme chosen by Pope Paul for this year's Congress is "The Hungers of the Human Family."

The service will consist of recitation of the Second Nocturn, Private Meditation, homily by Father Henry Atwell and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Urban G. Kress, executive secretary of NAS, has invited all members as well as the general public.

in the framework of seven days and pictured God Himself as resting on the Sabbath. Thus the Sabbath Day became holy once again.

Briefly, out of the misery of the Exile came the synagogue; the editing of the Old Testament, the observance of the Sabbath, and finally the Restoration of God's people to their homeland. Truly as Jeremiah had foretold, God had led Israel out into the desert again (the Babylonian Captivity) to speak to her heart and give her a new one. His love is ever creative!

What was done in the Old Testament was done by way of example. God is still offended by sin. Sin still exacts its own punishment. Yet God in His mercy draws good greater by far than the evil itself, for God's love is creative. "Because of his great love for us he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead in sin" (R2).

This life, our salvation, is the sheer gift of God. This is not your own doing, it is God's gift; neither is it a reward for anything you have accomplished. Yet God's gift obliges us "to lead the life of good deeds."

This latter point is often misunderstood. If God gives us talents, we are obliged to use them. But our talents don't get us our talents. These are God-given; but once given, we must use them. So with good deeds. Good deeds do not win grace for us; but because grace has been given us, we must do good deeds. We say, "noblesse oblige" — nobility imposes obligations. There are many things a king's son must do just because he is the king's son. We go to hell because of our bad deeds, but we do not go to heaven because of our good deeds. Heaven is God's pure gift to us — our good deeds are the consequence of the gift.

Jesus said the same thing in the gospel. God sent His Son to save the world. And who believes is saved. The sign that one has believed is his good deeds. Good deeds mean one is letting the light that is already there shine out! We have a wonderful opportunity to do this this Lent with Operation Ricebowl and, next Sunday, with supporting the American Overseas Aid Appeal. We do good, not to win God's love, but because God has already loved us. And His love is creative!

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Jn. 3:14-21, (R1) 2 Chr. 36:14-16, (R2) Eph. 2:4-10.

In the Old Testament God's love, as always, is everywhere creative, not destructive. The history of Israel was a long one of intermittent rebellions against God. Israel sinned. Israel kept sinning. Prophets warned, but to little avail. God let Jerusalem and its Temple be destroyed and its inhabitants be carried into captivity. For seventy years (the Temple was destroyed in 587 B.C. and restored around 517 B.C.) for ten sabbaths of years, to atone for all the violations of the Sabbath, the land lay desolate. So the Chronicler tells us in the first reading of this Sunday.

Yet this period of apparent calamity was one of the most prolific in Israel's history. Under the great prophets — Ezechiel, Daniel and Second-Isaiah — the exiles learned to gather together in prayer and to listen to God's word. Thus the synagogue was born.

During this period, too, Israel began to examine her conscience. Why she asked herself, did her God who had conquered Egypt permit Babylon to lord it over His people?

The prophets answered, "Because you broke your part of the Covenant, you did not keep your pact with God."

"What pact?" they asked.

So the prophets urged the scribes to gather the writings of Moses and the prophets that the people might learn once again that a covenanted people was meant to be a different people. Thus a great part of the Old Testament was born.

Then the people met to pore over God's word prayerfully. In so doing they discovered how they had violated the Sabbath because of their greed. So to restore reverence for the Sabbath, the compilers of the inspired writings stressed its sacredness. In fact the editors of the first book of the Bible (Genesis) described the creation of the world

REGION ASSEMBLES

Auburn — The Seneca-Cayuga regional assembly will meet at St. Alphonus parish center at 7:30 p.m. on Monday, March 29. The agenda will include election of a representative to the Diocesan Pastoral Council.

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