

By Father Robert J. Kennedy

The purpose of the revision of the Rite of Penance is to make the celebration of the sacrament more fruitful for the Christian People. Any changes that have occurred have been with this pastoral goal in mind. It is why there are three forms of the sacrament, why communal celebrations are encouraged, why scripture has been included. This week we want to look at the sign of the sacrament, the form of absolution.

For at least the first one thousand years of the Church's life, the sign that God's merciful forgiveness took place was not the formula spoken by the priest ("I absolve you ..."), but the imposition or laying on of hands. In a ritualized way, this gesture was meant to be the "welcome-home" embrace of the Christian community in the name of Christ, like the loving father running to welcome his prodigal son.

The gesture of the imposition of hands originally comes to us from the scriptures and is rich with many meanings. It signifies blessing, the communication of the Spirit, unity and solidarity between those sharing the gesture, healing, conferring God's life, setting apart or consecrating, absolving and ordaining.

Obviously, many of these meanings could be applied to the celebration of Penance, and so, although the gesture had gone out of use in recent centuries, the new Rite of Penance reinstates it as the sign of conciliation. And what better sign could there be than to be welcomed back into the arms of the Father, to be "hugged" with reassurance after having experienced the brokenness of our own miserable failure!

In the individual form of the sacrament, the priest, as part of the form of absolution, extends his hands over the person's head or lays them upon the head. This, of course, would be in a face-to-face situation. If a person chooses to remain behind a screen, the priest would simply extend his hands toward the penitent, and the sign may not be as strong.

The laying on of hands, if done and received with faith, deepens our sense of contact with God's Spirit, and signifies the many blessings he gives us in absolution, and in reconciliation with God and his people. Words accompany this loving sign, too, beautiful, rich and powerful words.

"God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit

among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Notice the many beautiful and important emphases of these new words! God is the source and initiator of our forgiveness and reconciliation. These two gifts of his mercy are ours through the willing and loving sacrifice of Christ and his rising to new life; the way home to the Father is forever again open to us, through this, most central saving act. In addition, the Good Shepherd has sent his Holy Spirit among us to seek us out, to rescue us, to call us home. Finally, there is the prayer that we might find the gift of Christ's own peace in the midst of the family of the Church.

Those who worked on the reformulation of these words of absolution were concerned about one thing: should the words be a prayer asking God's pardon or should they be a proclamation of the great mystery which we share in this sacrament? They chose the latter so that the good news of our reconciliation might be clearly heard by the returning penitent and be cause for joy and praise of God.

Thus, when the priest extends his hands to the penitent and announces the words of hope, God in Christ seals the forgiveness of the sinner. The gesture and words of absolution are the sign proclaiming that God has renewed the broken covenant with his repentant: are the

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sign proclaiming that God has renewed the broken covenant with his repentant son or daughter in the body of the Church. It's no wonder we are now speaking of the "joyful

celebration" of Penance, and people are leaving reconciliation rooms and boxes with smiles on their faces. They have felt the Father's touch of forgiveness.



The Nazareth College Alumni Association sale will be a two day event this year, Friday, April 2 from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturday, April 3 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The displays on the first floor of Medaille Hall on the Nazareth Campus will include a greenerie, original paintings, ceramics, greeting cards, hand-crafts, gourmet items, antiques and a flea market. Lunch will be served. All proceeds from the sale go to the college's scholarship fund. Co-chairmen for the event are Mrs. James P. Mannix, Jr. (left) and Mrs. Norman J. Whyte, Jr.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Sunday's Readings: (R3) Jn. 12:20-33. (R1) Jer. 31:31-34. (R2) Hebr. 5:7-9.

Last Sunday the first reading talked of the Ten Commandments. This Sunday, the first reading speaks of the human heart.

The Ten Commandments are laws. Because they are, the Commandments are inadequate guides to perfection. Laws are generally promulgated for everybody and so they are often generalities. They are for the good of society as a whole and so they are concerned more with external acts than with motives.

Besides this letter of the law, there is another side — the spirit of the law. It is of the spirit of the law that the first reading speaks about this Sunday, namely, the heart of man. Jeremiah foretold that God's new covenant would stress this side of the law. "I will place my law within them."

A morality based only on law is a minimal morality. Honest citizens don't rob banks because it is against the law, but because they love honesty. Post-Vatican II morality is trying to lift us up to see sin as more than breaking a law. It is aiming to lead us to the heart of sin which is in the heart! Sin is a defilement of the heart. Sin gravitates around motives, likes and dislikes, attitudes, feelings, fears, prejudices. It is essentially a lack of love. So the psalmist prays in the Response: "Create a clean heart in me, O God."

When we view sin as coming from the heart, then we can realize that sin is as individual as the sinner. Everyone is made from a different mold. No two persons are alike, as no two fingerprints are. So no two sins are alike. Every sin has the stamp of one individual, just as style is the man. Therefore every sinner needs special attention. One man's food can be another man's poison. This is one of the many

reasons why confession has to be private. Jesus never cured the sick en masse, but individually — to teach us that no two moral problems are exactly alike and that they therefore need special handling.

Another consequence of this truth is that the telling of sin should communicate something of the uniqueness of sin. Sins are not anonymous acts, catalogues of events. They are failures in love. A good question to ask ourselves in making our confession would be, "Would my wife or husband, my best friend or roommate, recognize this confession as belonging to me?"

If a penitent kneeling for absolution and guidance is merely a voice with two sins of uncharitableness and four sins of impatience, he has confessed things and not revealed a person. He has brought a laundry list of sins to be confessed, not his life. Confession means exposing our real selves. Only then can we begin to live with ourselves and to live!

Blue Army Vigil

An all-night vigil sponsored by the Blue Army will be conducted at Holy Rosary Church, 141 Lexington Ave. Friday, April 2. The vigil, dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, will begin with a Mass at 9 p.m., celebrated by Father William Cosgrove. Monsignor John Duffy will conduct a Holy Hour from 10 p.m. to 11 p.m., and Father Robert McNamara will take over for the 11 p.m. to midnight hour. Father Robert A. Meng, pastor of Holy Rosary, will say a Mass dedicated to the Immaculate Heart at 6 a.m. to conclude the vigil.

The First Friday observance is part of the preparation for the Eucharistic Congress next August. The Bishops of the United States have recommended that the nine First Fridays before the Congress be dedicated to its success.



Hospital Benefit

The Seton branches are sponsoring a fashion show Tuesday, April 6, at Oak Hill Country Club to benefit St. Mary's Hospital. Lunch will be served at noon, with the show following. Seton members will model Sibley clothes. Pictured are the chairman, Mrs. Robert Herberger (left), Mrs. Paul Kircher, and Mrs. Donald Booth. Further information can be obtained from Mrs. Kircher, 586-1735.

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