

Insights in Liturgy

Penance — A Celebration?

By FATHER ROBERT J. KENNEDY

Who would ever think that we would speak of the Sacrament of Penance as a celebration? Yet that is what it is; an act of worship in which we humbly praise God for his steadfast mercy on us, and receive in return his gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is (or should be) a joyous interlude along the difficult road of leading the Christian life: a celebration that the healing power and strength of God in Christ is with us.

This aspect of celebration can be seen more clearly perhaps in the communal forms of Penance, but it is also true of the Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents. When the penitent and priest meet, it is "to celebrate the sacrament."

How should Penance, in the individual form, be celebrated?

First, as for any celebration of the liturgy,

there should be careful preparation. For the priest, this means that his prayer "should call upon the Holy Spirit so that he may receive enlightenment and charity," and thus be able to exercise his ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation as Jesus did. For the penitent, the prayerful preparation should enable him or her to compare his or her life with the example of Christ, to seek forgiveness for any failures to live that example, and to rediscover the ways in which Christ has "held on" to us in his mercy, the ways in which he has been present in the individual's life.

The celebration then begins with words of friendly greeting and welcome to the penitent, and the encouragement to have confidence in God. With the sign of the cross, the penitent may begin by providing the priest with information that may help him exercise his ministry of healing to the fullest possible extent.

Then a text from scripture is read as preparation for

the confession. "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."

Although this reading of scripture is optional, its omission should be the exception and not the rule, since the word of God is central in providing the norm for living the holy life. Its message offers us hope in the face of our own weakness.

The penitent's role in this act of worship takes full form in the confession of sins. Here the penitent acknowledges the God who is the source of life and the father of mercies; here God is praised and thanked for having called the sinner back to himself and for having had an active role in

that return; here the penitent makes specific the ways he has failed to live the Christian life and the ways God has helped to correct that waywardness. The confession of sins should not be a difficult burden, but an honest, humble expression of joy for the mighty works of the Lord in that individual's life.

It is a joy supported and shared by the priest who encourages the growth that has taken place, and offers simple, sensitive guidance so that growth in holiness may continue. A carefully selected penance should enable the penitent to heal the wounds created by his/her sins.

The celebration reaches its climax when, after a humble prayer for God's pardon, the penitent hears the words of absolution —

words that should bring joy to his or her heart since they are words of welcome and serve to confirm the resolution to move into the future with confidence and new hope. Additional words of thanksgiving and praise may be spoken by priest and penitent, and then the penitent is told to go in peace, the peace he has received in fuller measure. That peace is expressed and deepened by a life "renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God." That's reason enough to celebrate!

MONTHLY VIGIL

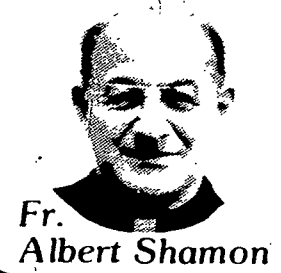
The monthly vigil sponsored by the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima will begin with Mass at 9 p.m. Dec. 2 celebrated by Father Thomas Corbett in Holy Rosary Church. Father Leo Hetzler, CSB, will direct the meditations from 10 until 11 and, Father Enrique Rueda will take the hour before midnight. Father Robert Meng, pastor, will celebrate the closing Mass at 6 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 3.

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WORD FOR SUNDAY



Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 3:1-12 (R1) Is. 11:1-10. (R2) Rom. 15:4-9

"A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse." What a poetic sentence—shot through, as it is, with alliteration!

Jesse was the father of David. From that root grew the large tree of Judah's kings.

Isaiah's reference to the "stump" of Jesse augured ill for the house of David. It implied that the proud tree would be cut down, reduced to a charred stump. John the Baptist announced the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy when he thundered, "The axe is laid to the root of the tree" (R3). At that very moment, one of the noblest scions of David's sons was a tree-cutter, a carpenter from Nazareth, and his regal wife a humble virgin named Mary, whose Child was "the shoot."

At the time of the Baptist's preaching, the budding Child had blossomed into a man. And the Man came to John, who baptized Him. Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon the Man and poured out upon Him His sevenfold gifts. So empowered, the Man dispensed justice, set things right, made them just as they ought to be.

The fruit of justice is peace. He brought peace to those hostile by nature: the wolf and lamb, the leopard and kid, the lion and calf. In a word, he started to reconcile the irreconcilables. Thus a tax collector, like Matthew, could be an apostle alongside of a zealot, like Simon. The Response capsules His achievement: "Justice shall flourish in His time, and fullness of peace forever."

During Advent two creations are popular: the Jesse tree and the Advent wreath.

The Jesse tree was inspired by the first reading. It is a tree having the word "Jesse" written on the roots. Pinned on the branches are symbols of the sevenfold gifts, of types and texts foretelling the coming of the Messiah. At the top of the tree is the name Jesus.

The Advent wreath is probably an adaptation of the fire wheel. In some parts of Germany, people used to bind a great wheel with straw and take it to the top of a hill near a river. The straw was lighted and the wheel sent blazing down the hill. If the straw burnt and the wheel rolled into the river, it was a good omen that Santa would come.

The wheel has survived. It is entwined now, not with straw, but with evergreen. Instead of lighting the wheel, four candles are lit around the wheel—one for each week of Advent. In the center is a white candle, lit on Christmas eve.

The four candles remind us of the four weeks we have to prepare our hearts for Jesus. Three of the candles are purple and one is rose, signifying that our preparation should be one of joyful penance.

The wreath of evergreen suggests hope (R2); and its circular form, eternity. The white candle in the center is for Christ, the center of life and light.

The Jesse tree reminds us of the thousands of years man waited for the Messiah. It is meant to teach us patience while we await the second coming of the Lord—patience with one another. "Accept one another, as Christ accepted you." (R2)

To live up above with the saints that we love—that is glory!

To live here below with the saints that we know—ah, that's another story!

The advent wreath reminds us that patience is worthwhile—it leads to eternal life!

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