

Saint Peter in Chains, Rome, Italy
Sunday, March 10, 2013
12:00 p.m.

HOMILY

By

His Eminence
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Archbishop of Washington

Before beginning these reflections on today's liturgy, I want to express my appreciation to the community of the Canon Regulars of the Lateran who has the care of this ancient church for their kindness and hospitality when I have the opportunity to visit my titular church especially to celebrate the Eucharistic Liturgy.

Today the Church commemorates the fourth Sunday of Lent. We need to hear once again the possibility to be free from sin. We are here at Mass because we need to be here. Our participation in this Mass is an act of personal faith.

I want to begin with an experience that points out to us the necessity to be always open to the presence of God in every moment of our life.

Each year couples from all over the archdiocese gather at a Mass in which we recognize their anniversaries, ranging from twenty-fifth to fiftieth and beyond. On rare occasions we have celebrated seventieth wedding anniversaries.

In the reception line I often ask a senior couple, "What is the secret to your success?" The answers vary. But one that I will long remember came from a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. They told me that they have made it a practice every day of their married life to say a prayer together before they go to bed. "Otherwise," one of them noted, "we could forget that Jesus is a part of our love, our marriage, and our lives."

The Church and her sacraments are a continual reminder to us of God, God's love, and God's place in our lives. These great gifts to us from God are precisely so that we never forget that God is a part of our love, our lives, all that we do.

The seven sacraments of the Catholic Church are the means by which Christ's redemptive work in his passion, death, and Resurrection are present for all time and for all the faithful. The sacraments are the continuation, in every age, of the signs and wonders that Jesus worked while he walked on the earth some two thousand years ago. We believe that the sacraments are, as it were, arms of the Savior himself by which he extends his action throughout place and time to give life, to bless, to renew, to heal, and to multiply the bread of life.

One sacrament looms very large in the renewal of the life of the Church and particularly in the New Evangelization. Confession or penance has been called the sacrament of the New Evangelization.

The Synod on the New Evangelization recognizes the central place of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the New Evangelization. As Proposition 33 states: “The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is the privileged place to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness. It is a place for both personal and communal healing. In this sacrament, all the baptized have a new and personal encounter with Jesus Christ, as well as a new encounter with the Church, facilitating a full reconciliation through the forgiveness of sins. Here the penitent encounters Jesus, and at the same time he or she experiences a deeper appreciation of himself and herself. The synod fathers ask that this sacrament be put again at the center of the pastoral activity of the Church” (Prop. 33: The Sacrament of Penance and the New Evangelization).

Saint Paul’s cry from the heart is something each of us has experienced. Why is it that we have the best of intentions, sincerely make New Year’s resolutions, firmly renew our aspirations, sometimes every day, and then allow the worst in us to come out?

We can find an explanation in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. They chose their own desires over God’s will and plan. This teaching, whatever the imagery, is very clear. Sin entered the world through the decision of a human being to choose self over God and God’s plan. God is not responsible for the evil in the world.

Yet we are not lost. We are not left to our own devices. Saint Paul, writing to the Corinthians, reminds us that just as in Adam sin was introduced into the world and, through sin, death and all of its consequences, so, too, grace and new creation come to us in Christ. Just as death came through a human being, so, too, the resurrection of the dead came through a human being. As in Adam all people die, so in Christ all shall be brought to life — a fullness of life, a new creation already beginning in us through grace (cf. 1 Cor 15).

It is in Jesus Christ that we now find the beginnings of the new creation. He leads us back to the Father, overcomes the tragic alienation of sin and restores harmony. Jesus gives us newness of life in grace that begins to restore our relationship with God which will lead to full communion with God in glory. It is for this reason that we identify Christ as the new Adam. Grace is the beginning of a new creation for all of those baptized into Christ.

The Church believes in the forgiveness of sins. Not only did Jesus die to wash away all sin and not only in his public life did he forgive sin, but after his Resurrection Jesus also extended to his Church the power to apply the redemption won on the cross and the authority to forgive sin.

The Gospel today of the loving forgiving father and the prodigal son calls us to see in ourselves all of the failure of the son, his repentance and his father's forgiveness.

Fully conscious that only God forgives sins, we bring our failings to the Church because Jesus imparted to his apostles his own power to forgive sins. In doing this Jesus gave to his Church the authority to restore and reconcile the sinner with God and also the ecclesial community, the Church. This ecclesial dimension is expressed most forcefully in Christ's words to Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).

In the simple actions of contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction we are restored to a whole new life. It remains one of the great marvels of God's love that God would make forgiveness so readily available to each of us.