

FROM FATHER JOHN: *“Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love; in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions. Thoroughly wash away my guilt; and from my sin cleanse me. For I know my transgressions; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your eyes. ... you are just in your word, and without reproach in your judgment.” ~ Psalm 51:3 – 6*



This week, our children in second grade will be making their First Confession and receiving the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation for the very first time. This is a big step in the life of discipleship for each of them. They will receive the forgiveness of their sins in the grace of this sacrament. All of us have the opportunity to receive the grace of the forgiveness of our sins every time we come and participate in this blessed sacrament.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that *“In the life of the body a man is sometimes sick, and unless he takes medicine, he will die. Even so in the spiritual life a man is sick on account of sin. For that reason he needs medicine so that he may be restored to health; and this grace is bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance.”* St. Thomas went on to define sin as *“nothing more than committing a morally bad act.”* While St. Augustine wrote that *“the confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.”*

Two weeks from Wednesday, February 18th is Ash Wednesday. We will begin the season of Lent which has character of repentance and penance. Lent is an important time in the life of the Church and in the life of every baptized Catholic. Lent gives us the opportunity for spiritual and interior renewal. We will focus our lives on renewing our relationship with our Lord and God. We are invited, by God and the Church, to train ourselves spiritually to grow in love for the Lord and in love for one another.

A few years ago, our diocesan website had a wonderful resource on the site concerning the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance that was entitled *General Questions*. Unfortunately, that page no longer exists on the website but I saved three of the questions that help us recall what the Sacrament is and how important it is to us in the practice of our Catholic faith. I thought I would include them here in order to give you an opportunity to prepare for the season of Lent by re-familiarizing yourself with the sacrament, our need for forgiveness and how God shares his love with us through the sacrament.

“What is Confession?” Confession is a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ in his love and mercy. It is here that we meet the loving Jesus who offers sinners forgiveness for offenses committed against God and neighbor. At the same time, Confession permits sinners to reconcile with the Church, which also is wounded by our sins... Through this sacrament, we meet Christ in his Church ready and eager to absolve and restore us to new life. The graces of Christ are conferred in the sacraments by means of visible signs -

signs that are acts of worship, symbols of the grace given and recognizable gestures through which the Lord bestows his gifts. In the sacrament of Penance, the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of grace are the gifts received through the outward sign, i.e., the extension of hands and words of absolution pronounced by the priest.

What is sin? Unfortunately, in society today, many people have lost the understanding of sin. Our Holy Father has stated that "it happens not infrequently in history, for more or less lengthy periods of time and under the influence of many different factors, that the moral conscience of many people becomes seriously clouded. . . . Too many, signs indicate that such an eclipse exists in our time" (*Reconciliation and Penance*, 18). In our day, many people have lost the sense of sin and feel that they can do whatever they wish without considering or fearing the consequences.

For such people, the term "sin" has no meaning. Yet we know that sin is a terrible evil which all of us must come to understand and with which all of us must struggle. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, sin "is an offense against God as well as a fault against reason, truth and right conscience. Sin is a deliberate thought, word, deed, or omission contrary to the eternal law of God" (1849, 1853). In other words, sin is willfully rejecting good and choosing evil...

Why is Confession necessary? We need the sacrament of Penance because each of us, from time to time, sins. When we recognize that we have offended God who is all deserving of our love, we sense the need to make things right. Like the prodigal son in the Gospel, we long to know again the loving embrace of a forgiving father who patiently waits for each of us. Jesus himself has established this sure and certain way for us to access God's mercy and to know that our sins are forgiven. By virtue of his divine authority, Jesus gives this power of absolution to the apostolic ministry. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "in imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church" (1444).

We need to know that our sins are forgiven. There is something in our human nature that calls out for the assurance that our sins are actually forgiven. Confession is the visible manifestation of God's mercy that provides us, in human terms as well, the clear awareness that God has forgiven us."

May God Bless you and all those who love the Lord.