

FINDING PEACE

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Heavy sigh.

I just heard of (yet another) taking of one's own life. It seems to be so frequent these days, especially among young people. I saw a stat the other day that we've lost more military and veterans to suicide than to the Gulf War and the conflicts thereafter. Why so much angst in so many?

Well, the reasons are no doubt as varied as the tragedies. A lot comes from despair in finding paths out of abusive relationships, being sunk into alcoholism or depression, fear, hopelessness, forlorn love, money problems ... the list can go on. And, I think a lot of it might be avoided—or at least ameliorated—in finding the anchor that so many in our day have lost: the hope found in faith.

This came to mind while reviewing the Gospel reading for this Sunday (April 7) from John 20. The resurrected Jesus enters the room where the apostles were gathering (hiding, really). They had heard He was alive but had not yet seen Him. So, when He appears miraculously, they no doubt are rather panicked as at seeing a ghost and probably are remembering how they abandoned and denied Him.

But, rather than the expected blow, they hear a simple: "Peace be with you." Terror becomes incomparable relief, and so "... the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord..." ...the Lord who had come in peace, who reiterates a second time: "Peace be with you," implicitly telling them: "Be at peace; quiet your qualms."

Now, one of the things that drags us down to mental depths of despair is recollection of past sins ... the evils, the treacheries, the vile actions we may have done in our past, especially when we are young adults before we develop a determined sense of self-control and resistance to peer pressure. Yet, we have an innate impulse to confess what we've done ... to "let it out."

It seems interesting that, with the wane in avowed Christians and churchgoers, we seem to have a concomitant increase in psychologists and psychiatrists ... and suicides. Is it perhaps because fewer visit the priests or ministers to whom people would have previously bared their souls?

Now, Catholics are well-known to have that sacrament of reconciliation, or "confession"; in fact, it is often criticized, ignored and ridiculed. "Hey, Father...better clear your schedule for THIS one!" Yeah ... hardy, har, har. And often, non-Catholics—and even many *Catholics*—dispute any need for confession. "I don't have to confess my sins to a man. I confess directly to God!"

But then we read in John 20 that, after Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the apostles (the first bishops), He tells them: "I send YOU...Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." One wonders, if we could just pray to God for forgiveness, why Jesus would instruct the apostles to do this; it would seem unnecessary and redundant.

"Only God can forgive sins!" Yes, but as the sweeper uses a broom, perhaps God uses the priest who is a mere instrument in the hands of Him who is actually doing the work.

"But that priest is sinful, too!" Yes, no doubt. But we recall Naaman's visit to the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5) in which Naaman at first refused to bathe in the muddy waters of the Jordan River to be healed, but subsequently relents ... and *was* healed. Just so, Catholics believe that (using saints' analogy) as sunlight does not lose purity even when shining through a dirty window, neither does the grace of God lose its purity coming through the "muddy" instrument of a priest.

And there IS precedent. The early Israelites confessed sins in the presence of the priest during sin offerings: "... he shall confess the sin he has committed, and he shall bring his guilt offering to the LORD... and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin." (Leviticus 5:6) Or: "When a man or woman commits any of the sins that men commit...he shall confess his sin...and he shall make full restitution for his wrong..." (Numbers 5:6-7) Much later, after the Exile: "...the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth...and [they] stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers." (Nehemiah 9:1-2)

As for the New Testament, at the Jordan with John the Baptist, the people: "...were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Matthew 3:6) And in the letter of James: "...confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:16)

Confession, I think, is not only a forgiveness of sins, but also the spiritual and mental "safety valve" which relieves us a bit from the inner burdens we tend to hold on to. Not to mention that shame we feel in confessing assists us in avoiding sin in the future.

"The priest will tell my wife/husband/others!" No, we're excommunicated automatically if we did. "Priests just want to hear people's sins!" Except for the grace confession brings ... no, hearing confessions is no picnic, trust me ... and priests would much rather be doing a lot of other things. But, by Jesus' own words above, the penitent can be sure of forgiveness IF he confesses with sincere sorrow and has at least a real intention to avoid sin in the future because what God says IS cannot NOT be. This is joy to both priest and penitent.

But we must not presume on God's forgiveness: "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:13-14)

Yes, God already knows our sins, but that's not the point; in confession, we "apologize" to God, and receive forgiveness through His physical instrument, the priest ... as He seems to want us to do, Jesus having given that power of forgiving and retaining of sins in our Gospel.

In a world that often scoffs at God, it takes courage and determination to remain faithful. But those who stand sincerely with Christ will one day know everlasting life with Him and hear those words ringing without end: "Peace be with you."