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# Teaching the Faith

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Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

## ***Entering the Narrow Gate: The Need for Frequent Confession***

By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P., S.T.D.

*Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time,  
August 25, 2013*

*Readings: Isaiah 66.18-21; Psalm 117;  
Hebrews 12.5-7, 11-13; Luke 13.22-30*

Christ died on the cross to save the whole human race. He certainly never limited the reach of grace based on any ethnic, social, or historical criteria. In this he fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah in today's first reading: "I am coming to gather the nations of every language. They shall come to witness my glory." This prophecy was fulfilled in Pentecost, when the confusion of the languages of men which occurred because of the darkness of sin was rectified, and all spoke a new language of faith which all could understand.

Those who witnessed this "will proclaim my glory to the nations." This includes not only the Gentiles but also all the Jews as well, so that they may become an "offering to the Lord." From these God will take "some of them also for priests and for Levites." Indeed, the Church in her mission to spread the faith has fulfilled the responsorial psalm verse: "Go out to the entire world and tell the Good News."

Jesus is asked in today's gospel if this universal promise of salvation is severely limited: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Our Lord does not accept the terms in which the question is framed. He does not, for example, say that only Jews can be saved. Nor is salvation limited to only those who have personally experienced him and could say, "We once ate and drank in your company; you taught in our streets." In fact, the fruits of the Passion are sufficient to save the whole human race. As is the case with the Master, the Church as the earthly instrument of these fruits cannot limit them to any time or place or people.

Though the original promise of salvation was made to the Jews (they were "the first"), they are called to faith and works as are "the last," the Gentiles. These are the ones who have believed. In the words of today's gospel reading, they are the ones who have come "from east, and west, from north and south," to "take their places at the feast of the kingdom of God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

### ***The Narrow Gate***

If grace is not restricted in these ways, why is it that our Lord insists on saying that the gate to grace and salvation is narrow? The reason is because, though baptism is easily open to all, perseverance in grace, which is itself a grace, is not an easy thing. It demands the good formation and use of our freedom. This is accomplished through gospel living, which is characterized by two moral attitudes: persistence in rooting out faults and an assiduous desire to grow in the virtues. Spiritual books often call this disposition, which we can adopt through our cooperation with the grace of baptism, "detachment."

An important place where one exercises detachment is in the regular practice of the sacrament of Penance. Christ instituted this sacrament precisely because he knew that over the long period of a person's life there are many areas where moral weakness needs healing. Though we receive the presence of the Holy Spirit in our souls at baptism, when we reach the age of reason, our freedom must begin to be shaped by grace. But by sin the engraced person can preclude the action of the Holy Spirit. The engraced person needs to know specifically where and how the soil of his soul should be cultivated by freely chosen acts of virtue. This process is the formation of conscience, and it does not happen automatically.

## *Forming and Examining Conscience*

In order for us to be personally conscious of both our sin and our need for virtue, we must go through a long and rigorous process of moral formation. Conscience is a judgment of reason about actions which should be or have been performed or avoided in the here and now. Conscience applies reason to individual acts to be pursued or avoided precisely so that grace may bear fruit in the soul of our souls. This formation of conscience is the most important education a person can receive. In the words of the *Catechism*,

The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart. (CCC, 1784)

The sources of this formation are many: we are “assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness and advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church” (CCC, 1785). Importantly, when we put our lives under the moral microscope of conscience, we participate in the death of Christ on the Cross, for the primary cross each of us carries is our own sinfulness.

A thorough and frequent examination of conscience will lead a Christian to admit that he is not what he should be, that he needs help in both renouncing sin and embracing the virtues. This reckoning is the principle penance of life. When a Christian sees the difference between what he is and what he should be, when he sees his experience of lust, for example, which is primarily the desire to dominate and rule others, then that awareness should cause interior suffering. He suffers realistic guilt. This experience stems from the incompleteness and disorder of soul caused by sin, and Paul alludes to it in today’s second reading: “My son when the Lord corrects you, do not treat it lightly; but do not get discouraged when he reprimands you.”

It is hard but necessary to realize that we can sometimes be monsters to others by manipulating and controlling them for the sake of the ego. But unless we become aware of this tendency to the unbridled ego, we cannot allow the Holy Spirit to reign in our souls. Nor can we experience the truth and beauty of an ordered soul wrought by an upright conscience. True guilt should lead to contrition and the desire for repentance. Paul gives us courage to embrace this fact: “The Lord trains the ones whom he loves and punishes all those he acknowledges as sons. Suffering is part of your training.”

## *Toward a Change of Heart*

When a Christian becomes aware of a place where he needs a change of heart (an experience called *metanoia*), he must actively take steps to change his heart. If he regrets an action which is so serious a breach of the moral law that he has lost grace, then he must come before the Church, the instrument of Christ’s mercy in the person of the priest, and he must verbally express his sin.

Today people may commonly hear that they need not include a “laundry list” of sins when they go to confession. But we need to consider why conscience focuses on *specific acts*. Wouldn’t it suffice just to form one’s general intention to love? The answer is no: Any such intention cannot remain generalized but must be realized in *actual deeds*. In the same way, for absolution to be effective, any and all remembered mortal sins must be confessed. This was the requirement of the Council of Trent (1545-63), and it is still in force today:

All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly. (*Council of Trent [1551]: DS 1680 [ND1626];* quoted in CCC, 1456)

Each of us needs constant encouragement in any difficult endeavor, and this is especially true when it comes to the moral life. Frequent confession offers a deeper support of grace to our daily death to self. As Paul writes, “So hold up your limp arms and steady your trembling knees and smooth the path you tread; there the injured limb will not be wrenched, it will grow strong again.” Frequent confession brings us the suffering of admitting our need for help, which is always a sure cure for pride.

The *Catechism* summarizes the value of frequent confession, even when one has not committed mortal sin:

Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed, the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful. (CCC, 1458)

In frequent use of the sacrament of Penance, the Christian strives to enter by the narrow gate. The narrowness of this gate is not due to the fact that Christ wills that few be saved. Sometimes Christians, like the Jews in Jesus’ time, take for granted their privileged position. We spiritually eat and drink in Jesus’ company through our baptism. But how sad if we refuse to repent and change through the grace offered us by Christ in the other sacraments!

We ought to be mindful of Jesus' words in today's gospel. When we knock at the door of heaven, will we receive that sobering answer from the Master: "I do not know where you come from"? As sons and daughters who have been corrected by the grace offered us by the sacraments, may we experience the divine intimacy of that grace and cry: "Abba, Father!"

#### *About the Author*

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### **FOR FURTHER READING**

*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1422-1460; 1776-1794.*

*John Paul II, Reconciliatio et penitentia, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents)*

*Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem., How to Make a Good Confession (Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2012).*

*Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P., Both a Servant and Free (New Hope Publications, 2011), pp. 172-218.*

*Pennsylvania Conference of Catholic Bishops, A Guide to the Sacrament of Penance (2002), available at <http://ewtn.com/library/BISHOPS/GUIDEPEN.HTM>*



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#### **IN SHORT . . .**

- ***Baptism is easily open to all, but perseverance in grace is not an easy thing.***
- ***Christ instituted Penance because he knew that over our the course of our lives, many areas of moral weakness need healing.***
- ***When I put my life under the moral microscope of conscience, I participate in the death of Christ on the Cross, for the primary cross each of us carries is our own sinfulness.***
- ***Unless we become aware of our ego-driven tendencies, we cannot allow the Holy Spirit to reign in our souls.***
- ***"The Lord trains the ones whom he loves and punishes all those he acknowledges as sons. Suffering is part of your training."***
- ***Frequent confession brings us the suffering of admitting our need for help, which in turn cures our pride.***