

'Practical matters for Confession'

Zeph 3: *shout for joy, daughter of Zion!*

Is 12: *sing and shout for joy for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!*

Phil 4: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!*

Lk 3: 10–18: *A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people ...*

As well as the 'prophet for Advent,' Isaiah, whom we were thinking about 2 wks ago, the great announcer of Messianic tradition in Judaism, we also have the great 'saint of Advent,' whom we heard of last Sunday and again today, St John the Baptist. Isaiah's own prophecy — "*the voice crying in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord*" — pointed towards the forerunner of the Messiah, and hence St John the Baptist closes the OT, as the last prophet, and opens the NT as the first Christian saint, and indeed martyr. John is the saint whose powerful preaching at the River Jordan's banks prepared the way for Jesus to come; so his ministry speaks to us of Advent *preparation*, and only after that preparation do we move on to Christmas to celebrate the arrival of the Christ child, the one of whom John says he is not even worthy to untie the sandal straps!

St John the Baptist reminds us that mercy — God's tender forgiveness — remains a most special part of our

Catholic faith, and one that we cannot neglect. Each year in my parish Bishop John Arnold when he was in this diocese used to come to speak to the parents of First-Holy-Communion children, and he would always say that one of the problems is that whilst we might be urged in Advent and Lent in a general way to make use of the Sacrament of Confession, we are not often helped as adults to prepare properly for that Sacrament. We may remember the preparation we were given as children; and never have moved forward to relate to the Sacrament as adults.

There are probably 2 opposing problems as to why people find it hard to go to Confession: (i) there are those who consider that in fact they have nothing meaningful to confess, the 'I haven't really sinned' approach; and then (ii) there are those who instead think that they have too much, or things too bad, to confess. Each, for opposite reasons, can be wrongly discouraged from going to Confession. So let's take a few practical approaches to help:

1. **Not one of us is perfect.** Every one of us, even the most saintly, is in need of Confession, since the closer we

grow to God the more aware we are of offending Him. It's not enough to say, "Well, I've not killed anyone; so I don't need Confession." There are always things, events, attitudes, in our lives that could do with being forgiven; and anyway, it's the grace of regular Confession that helps us overcome bad habits: gradually, month by month, year by year, God can overcome in us the sins that we regularly suffer from. None of this can happen if we simply ignore our need of being forgiven. It's as if each day we didn't wash because we couldn't see the dirt; sooner or later that choice to ignore the dirt would become a big problem!

2. On the other hand, there can be the **fear, or challenge, of confessing one's sins**. Maybe one feels they are too big or too lengthy to bring to the priest. Wouldn't he be scandalized; would he be outraged? No — he would not be: in 22yrs as a priest I will have heard pretty much anything you would ever need to tell me, before. And anyway, the priest is far more upset by having no-one coming to Confession than by someone humbly and sincerely acknowledging their sins before God. It is a privileged situation to be in, as a Confessor; a humbling

one, receiving in the Sacrament those who are being open enough before God to want to be forgiven. It is a joyful and sacred thing, to minister God's mercy as a priest.

3. **Maybe it is hard just to go in!** Maybe it's just hard to set foot in the Confessional. Well, it's not so strange ... Here both I and Fr Ivano use the sacristy for Confessions, and it's soundproofed! There's the chance to kneel anonymously, unseen by the priest — that's what I opt for — and I think that Fr Ivano also offers the chance for Confession face to face.
4. Most significantly, maybe we ought to look at the **things we might need to confess**. The Church is not trying to judge us when she places lists for the examination of conscience before us; nor is she trying to scare us! She is simply trying to jog our memories; and open us up (as a plough churns up the soil for it to be fertile): open us up to the enriching grace of the Spirit. We should certainly only confess real things that are sins, not generalities. It's best to be specific, to say what actually happened, instead of using vague categories:
 - a. So, rather than saying, 'I am not charitable enough,' say: 'I was extremely rude and curt to my

mother the other day when she called on the phone, and I do that rather often.’

- b. Instead of saying ‘I tend to be selfish and ignore people,’ maybe say, ‘I know I deliberately avoided a homeless man’s gaze the other day, when at least I could have smiled and said hello.’
 - c. Instead of saying, ‘I am not praying enough,’ one might say, ‘I’ve set myself this particular time to pray each day, but I need the grace to stop missing that time for prayer at any old excuse.’
5. Now, another thing. We all know that there are lots of **insidious temptations out there** now ... especially on the internet; and we should be really cautious of our weakness in that regard. I am always keen to recommend in Confession that one install an internet filter (there used to be free downloadable filters, but in any case, make sure that you turn on whatever filter is available from your provider) to provide a buffer to the immoral images that are too easily available on the internet. My suggestion also is that when one sets the password for such internet filters, a holy word, or holy phrase, is used

... something that by its sacred character really helps prevent your bypassing it!

6. **With regard to missing Mass:** well, we should remember that our weekly devotion to Sunday Mass is the best expression there is of our faithfulness to Jesus Christ: to be with Him, near Him, adoring Him ... It’s a confusing time, admittedly, because the Bishops here in England & Wales have yet to restore officially the Sunday obligation — suspended in March 2020 — owing to some level of ongoing pandemic restrictions. For us who are perfectly well and fit enough to attend Mass, it’s good to do our very best to attend Mass. But it’s worth bearing in mind that in normal times, there are reasons — illness, for example, or caring for a frail or sick relative or through working shifts in essential services — that may sometimes mean that missing Mass cannot be helped; whereas taking a holiday, or just ‘being too busy’ is no real excuse.

So, let’s be honest and open, therefore, as we listen today with faith to John the Baptist. He gave real spiritual encouragement and sound practical advice to those

preparing for the Messiah. Let's do the same as we prepare for the Messiah's birth this Advent. Let's heed John's call, and act positively in response to him as did those tax-collectors, soldiers, and others at the River Jordan: seeking real forgiveness and a chance to live far better and more closely in God's way.

It may be that you will seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation at some point once you are at home for the vacation — but if you would prefer to act now, and to take the opportunity for your Advent Confession here, before you go, then I repeat the times possible, namely Sunday 6–7pm (me) and Monday 6–7pm (Fr Ivano): these would be the ideal times for you to come and avail yourself of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but otherwise just ask me / e-mail me for a Confession time at another point — I endeavour to be as available as possible. So, let's really make a humble and holy Advent — accepting the invitation of St John the Baptist by welcoming the Lord Jesus's absolute forgiveness of our sins.