

Advent Reconciliation Service December 22, 2008

Readings: Ezekiel 36:23-28; Matthew 5:38-48

Growing in Virtue

Our Advent season is a time of preparation. It is a time to prepare for the celebration of Christmas; we prepare to celebrate that our Lord humbly came down from heaven to become one of us so that He could begin His work of redemption. But Advent is also a time of preparation as we look forward to the second coming of Christ. We are now almost at the end of our season of Advent. As part of our preparation for both of the comings of the Lord, we gather here this evening to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation; this sacrament which is such a great gift from a loving and merciful God. This sacrament provides us with the opportunity to have our sins forgiven, and also gives us graces to remove the obstacles in our lives and make straight our paths so that we will be better able to receive Christ in our hearts; and better able to resist falling back into sin again.

And so we come to confession not only to have our sins forgiven, but also with a commitment to grow in virtue. We come with a desire not only to avoid doing what is wrong, but with desire to do things that are good. The Catechism states: *“A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.”*

This is the direction that we hear from Jesus tonight in Matthew’s gospel; to be virtuous people. He tells us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to give more than what is asked for, to love our enemies and pray for them. We are not called to be minimalists, doing the least we can to avoid punishment. We are called to grow in holiness, to give the best of ourselves; not out of fear of punishment, but because of our love for God. As we say in the act of contrition: **“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You. I detest all my sins because of thy just punishments, but most of all because You are all good and deserving of all my love.”**

Growing in virtue, taking positive actions to do what is good, is an appropriate theme for us in Advent as we anticipate Jesus coming again seated on His throne in judgment. He will judge us based on whether we fed Him when He was hungry, or clothed Him when he was naked, or visited him when He was sick or in prison.

So how do we grow in virtue? We do it mostly with God’s graces, graces that we receive tonight in this sacrament of reconciliation; but also through our own efforts and practice. The catechism says: *“Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them. It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ's gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. Everyone should always ask for this*

grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil.”

As we come to the end of Advent, let us continue our preparation by removing obstacles in our lives and by straightening our paths. Let us also give praise that our God is a loving God who is willing to forgive our offenses, not once, not seven times, but innumerable times. For our part, let us make a commitment to grow in holiness and then act on that commitment by making changes in our lives. Tonight, let us ask for God’s forgiveness and pray for graces to soften our hearts so that we will be better able to walk by His statutes in the future. Through our sacrament let us be better prepared to receive Christ on Christmas with a pure heart, and be better prepared for that unknown hour when Jesus will call us from this earthly life.

Deacon Joe Hulway