

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Advent

Perhaps you've heard the recent news headlines about Pope Francis. As ABC News put it: "*Pope Allows All Priests to Absolve "Grave Sin" of Abortion*", or as the very liberal Huffington Post wrote: "*Pope Francis Just Changed Church Law On Forgiving Abortion*". Several of you have come to me concerned. And with headlines like this, I certainly understand. Unfortunately, the secular news media is generally not equipped to articulate the teachings of the Catholic Church in a coherent and accessible way. At the end of the day, though, I can assure you that Pope Francis has **not** changed Church law with respect to abortion. So, what happened?

As you probably know, the Jubilee Year of Mercy has just come to an end. And Pope Francis, in calling for this year, truly wanted God's mercy to reach out from the center of the Church to its peripheries – to all people. As I recently heard it explained, grace is God giving us what we don't deserve, while mercy is God NOT giving us what we *do* deserve. What does God not give us that we do deserve? Well, as Scripture tells us: "The wages of sin is death." Therefore, when Jesus came to die on the cross, He did so, so that we would not have to experience eternal death – eternal separation – from God, but rather, eternal life. In other words, Jesus' death and resurrection brought about God's mercy as the forgiveness of ALL sin. However, that was in an objective way. Subjectively, that is personally, we need to have that mercy and forgiveness appropriated to us in an individual way. And so, in the sacraments of baptism, and then in an ongoing way, in reconciliation, we experience, in a personal way, that forgiveness.

Now, by virtue of their ordination, ALL priests have received the power to absolve ALL sins, including abortion. In reconciliation, Jesus Himself, works through the ministry of the priest to personally bring the forgiveness of sins to an individual person. The only sin that “cannot” be forgiven, is the sin which we do not repent of and confess, because God will not force us. Only those priests who have had their faculties taken away for serious reasons – think priests who have been defrocked – cannot absolve sins, except in danger of death.

So, what should have been reported by the news was what the actual intention of the Holy Father really was – namely, that all priests have been granted the permission to lift the censure of excommunication resulting from the crime of abortion. Now, what does that mean?

Well, we’ve probably all heard the word “excommunication” before. Excommunication puts someone outside the communion of the Church, which means they are not able to receive the sacraments. The intention of excommunication is not to punish an individual for violating God’s law. Rather, its purpose is to act as medicine for the soul that will bring about repentance, so that the person can return to full communion with the Church. Basically, it’s meant to get their attention.

Not all offenses are worthy of excommunication in the Church’s eyes. This is similar to civil law, where penalties are imposed according to the severity of the crime. For example, life in prison might be a just penalty for a cold-blooded murder, but it would be totally unjust for theft of someone’s outdoor Christmas decorations.

Abortion, along with other serious sins like desecrating the Eucharist or a priest violating the seal of Confession, brings with it this penalty of excommunication. And, given the grave nature of these crimes, the Church has limited the lifting of the sentence of excommunication to the bishop. Therefore, a person confessing the sin of abortion or desecrating the Eucharist or the like would first have to confess the sin and then have to go before the bishop for the excommunication to be lifted. If that sounds complicated to you, it is – not to mention extremely difficult for the person confessing such sins. For this reason, the bishops of many countries, like here in the U.S., have given their priests the faculties to lift such excommunications. However, not all countries have done this. Therefore, Pope Francis is universally extending this permission to all priests, anywhere they hear confessions, to do so as an extension of the Year of Mercy. Why didn't all priests already have the faculty to lift such excommunication? First, the serious nature of such sins. Secondly, not every country has such a large number of people hurt by the sin of abortion as we have here in the United States.

I really felt it important to clarify this issue. Unfortunately these days quite a bit of what happens in the Church is misreported, accidentally or intentionally, by large segments of the news media. Please know that all sins that have been sincerely confessed in Confession have truly been forgiven by God.

Living the truth of our Catholic faith is not easy, but it is surely beautiful. Jesus told us that the way to salvation is through the “narrow gate” not the “broad road”. And yet, despite our best intentions, we are weak, sinful human beings. We are all imperfect. We have all sinned in ways both large and small. Therefore, we all need God’s healing divine mercy, for as we hear in today’s Gospel: “we do not know on which day our Lord will come.”

As St. Faustina, the Apostle of Divine Mercy, heard from the Mother of God, and wrote down in her diary: “you have to speak to the world about God’s great mercy, and prepare the world for the Second Coming of Him who will come, not as a merciful Savior, but as a just Judge. Oh, how terrible is that day! Determined is the day of justice, the day of divine wrath. The angels tremble before it. Speak to souls [now] about this great mercy while it is still the time for granting mercy. If you keep silent now, you will be answering for a great number of souls on that terrible day. Fear nothing. Be faithful to the end. I sympathize with you.” God bless you.