

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Lent

I have to admit to you, I am not good at confrontation. It's one of my weaknesses and I know it. I suspect, however, that many people, whether by nature or nurture, typically do not like confrontation. Now, usually in talking about confrontation, we think about telling someone something they don't want to hear, and we're worried how they'll receive it. But if you think confronting *others* is a challenge, how about confronting yourself? Even more so! In fact, it can be easier to leave someone else with an admonishing word than it is to live with that word ourselves day in and day out. Nonetheless, during Lent, to help us face the truth about ourselves, the Church invites us to the sacrament of self-confrontation, better known as the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Now, as you know by now, I love dissecting words down to their roots – we call that etymology. Well, the interesting thing about the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also known as Penance or Confession), is what that title means. Literally, reconciliation is formed of the words: 're' + 'con' + 'cilia'. You probably know that 're' means "again". 'Con' means "with". And 'cilia'? Those are the little hairs that line your nose and your ears and make a ring around your eyes – also known as eye lashes. And so, a rough translation of 'reconciliation' is actually "eyelash to eyelash". Something else I have to admit is that before preparing for this homily I never knew that!

So what does self-confrontation have to do with being “eyelash to eyelash”?

Well, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we confront ourselves with the truth of our shortcomings, our failures, and our sinfulness, we stand eyelash to eyelash with God – with the God who knows us infinitely better than we know ourselves, and who knows every last detail of our lives – past, present, and future. Now, if you’ve ever stood eyelash-to-eyelash with someone before, you realize it can either be a really uncomfortable experience, or something that is intimately delightful. Take for example, a public elevator. And you think elbow to elbow is too close? Uncomfortable. But, looking into the eyes of your sweetheart or your beloved? Comfortable. What makes the difference? Love – in particular, being in a personal, meaningful relationship with the other person.

When it comes to Confession, though, I worry that sometimes people are so uncomfortable with that eyelash to eyelash position before God, that they just avoid it at all cost. In fact, maybe you’re afraid of Confession because you had an experience where the priest was more like Jesus turning over the money-changers’ tables in the Temple rather than the Good Shepherd, and you’re afraid. Or maybe you think your sins are just so scarlet that thinking of looking into God’s eyes makes your cheeks turn crimson with guilt. But the truth of the matter is, the Father always looks deeply into our eyes with nothing but unconditional love.

Making a truly “good” confession, then, is about “how well we engage ourselves in letting God stare us in the eye. In other words, a good confession is determined by how well we perform our “examination of conscience”. If you’re like many people, when it comes to remembering your sins, you might try sweeping them under the carpet, pushing them away or deep down within – anything to try to forget what we are all capable of when we do not cooperate with God’s free gift of grace. But again, God already knows everything about us – and He loves us still. And so, an examination of conscience is just that, a guide that helps us examine our consciences with the light of the Holy Spirit, so that we can be as honest with ourselves and with God as possible. Many popular examinations of conscience, like the one we just happen to have put in the bulletin for you this weekend, are based on the 10 Commandments – as in the same 10 Commandments we just heard in our first reading today. Neither coincidence nor conspiracy!

Don’t let this Lent pass you by without seeking the sanctifying grace of Reconciliation. Don’t let yourself settle by saying, “I’m a good person. God will understand.” When tempted to say this – and it is a temptation, because as the Scriptures tell us, no one is truly Good but God alone – don’t forget the righteous anger displayed by the Son of God in the midst of the Temple, when many of the Jews took God for granted, and gave Him lip service while still committing their own unrighteous deeds.

My brothers and sisters, God calls us to confront ourselves in a healthy way when it comes to sin, and to come eyelash to eyelash with Him who can forgive our sins – the only one who can truly forgive them. And as Catholics, we are invited and called to do this in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Time does not heal our sins. And neither does distance nor separation nor age nor anything else forgive them. Only God alone forgives us our sins – but only if we give Him “permission” to do so. God bless you.