

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospel this weekend speaks to us of repentance. Jesus points out that the people who Pilate killed and those who died when a tower collapsed were not more sinful and guilty than those around them. Jesus then says *all* must repent.

What is repentance? It comes from a word which means “to turn”... to turn *away* from sin, to turn *toward* God. You see, repentance is not just about *feeling* guilty, or being sorry for something we have done, said or thought. Repentance is about *changing our lives*, it is about stepping away from our sinful behavior, and even sinful thought patterns, so that we can reorder them toward God.

What about sin, though? Our culture often denies the reality of sin. As Bishop Fulton Sheen once said

It used to be that only Catholics believed in the Immaculate Conception. Now, everyone believes they are immaculately conceived. They no longer believe in sin. (From a retreat talk given in 1973 in the Diocese of Gary, Indiana)

We don't like facing the reality of sin, since the word (and the reality) often come with a stigma attached. Often we think of shame and low self-esteem when thinking of sin. But we all know what a broken relationship is. We regret it when we hurt someone we love. I've said it before, but sin is hurting our relationship with God. God has laid down certain laws (the 10 Commandments, the teachings of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit inspired teachings of the Church), and asks us to keep them. The laws are there, not because God wants obedience for obedience's sake, but because He knows our humanity, He made us, and He knows what will give us life... and what will bring us death. He also knows that if the law is not written on our hearts (which, in our broken world, it very often is not), we need it explicitly written out.

When we reject God's law, we are saying that we don't trust the God who loves us and knows what will bring us life and joy. I have been hurt when those I love don't trust me... and I know that I don't have all the answers. How much more is our relationship with God hurt when we don't trust Him, since He *does* know everything, and loves us far more than we know! Our sin implicitly says, “I don't trust your love for me.” This lack of trust goes right back to the Original Sin. Adam and Eve were told not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Instead of trusting that God would provide for their need, they *grasp* for themselves. Now everything is broken.

All this is to say that by our sin, we hurt our relationship with God. Talking about sin is not about putting shame on us, but about encouraging us to be open to God fixing our relationship with Him. It is not about making us feel bad about ourselves (living with an inferiority complex), but about recognizing “the overwhelming, never ending, reckless love of God” ... *for me for you* (from the song “Reckless Love” by Caleb Culver, Cory Asbury and Ran Jackson). Taking account of our sin is an opportunity to turn from our little selfish worlds to the incredibly immense world of God's love for me.

Take the parable Jesus uses in the Gospel today: the fig tree has not been fruitful for three years, but the gardener will pour out special care on the tree in this year, that it may finally bear figs. In the same way, God doesn't want our destruction. He works, He pours out His grace and love on every soul, hoping that we turn to Him and bear fruit. But will we? The ultimate end of our self-destructive (sinful) behavior is eternal death. Remember that God does not condemn anyone to Hell; those who are in Hell choose to go. These choices are made in our life when we choose to embrace God or not, to receive His mercy or not. Our sin is a choice to reject God and His love, and brings death to our souls.

This all being said, when we do fail in trust, when we do say “no” to God and His love, we don't need to stay in that “no.” We can let go of our sin. God has gone to the Cross so that we can be reconciled with Him. He has given us the ever-present gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation so that we can be forgiven of our sin, be healed of our tendency to distrust God, and hear with our ears the truth that we have been reconciled to the God who loves us. I invite everyone to experience this great Sacrament during this Lenten Season. In addition to Saturday afternoons (2:45-3:45), we also have Confessions during Lent before the Sunday Masses (7:30-7:45am, 10:00-10:15am, 5:30-5:45pm), other select days in Lent, and the Cluster Penance Service at St. Matthew in Windham on March 31 at 2:00pm. In addition, St. Joseph the Worker Shrine has Confessions every day. I invite you to take part in this incredible gift of mercy and love from the Heart of God.