



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Pastoral Letter: Lent

Bishop Kieran Conry, Arundel & Brighton

PASTORAL LETTER, EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR, 2 MARCH 2014

Dear brothers and sisters of Arundel & Brighton,

Sometimes when you go to the doctor you just know that you're not feeling well, but are not sure why. One of the skills of the doctor is that he or she can then get you to identify more precisely what the problem is. What sort of 'disease' is it – in other words, what is making you feel uneasy, what is taking away your normal feeling of ease? It's the same with counselling. A skilled counsellor will get you to identify your feelings; you're feeling bad, but is it anger, fear or regret? All these things can make us unhappy, but often it's difficult to pin the feeling down precisely without some help. And that help is enabling us to put a name either on the feeling of being unwell, or feeling bad and unhappy within ourselves.

This Lent, the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales is publishing material to help people either re-connect with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or get to know it for the first time. The sacrament has been referred to traditionally as 'confession', but the Church has recognised that there is more to the celebration than simply the act of confessing sins. It is a re-building of our relationship with God and with one another.

Over the last few decades, most churches have seen a steep decline in the numbers of people taking advantage of this sacrament, and the reasons are not always clear. One of the reasons may be a different attitude to sin. In the past there seemed to be great emphasis on sin as something that you 'did', or even thought of doing; many people confused sin with temptation and even now there is still confusion about what constitutes sin. Many adults, for instance, will confess anger as a sin, but anger is an emotional response we can't do anything about, and the Church has always taught that sin must be the deliberate and conscious carrying out of something we know to be wrong.

There may also have been a growing sense that the traditional 'penance' such as three 'Hail Marys' can't really put right something that I know to be seriously wrong, or make up for the hurt I might have caused somebody.

Sin is harmful because it does damage. It damages ourselves, it damages others, it damages the community and it damages our relationship with God. The sacrament of reconciliation helps to start repairing that damage. It helps to start, but the actual re-building of those relationships will perhaps take a long time.

While many churches have witnessed a decline in the number of adult 'confessions' there is some evidence of a growth in the numbers of young people celebrating the sacrament, especially in Rome, and probably because of the influence of Pope Francis. He has said some very helpful things, inviting people to take a fresh look at the notion of reconciliation.

While he says that confessing our sins is not to be equated with psychotherapy or counselling, he does refer to the counselling principle of putting a name on our problems and difficulties. He says that children don't talk in general or vague terms, in the way that adults sometime confess to being 'uncharitable' or 'selfish'. They say precisely what they have done wrong, and recognise it for what it is. And he says that it is important to have this conversation with a priest; it has to be real. To those who say 'I can confess to God,' Pope Francis says that it's not like sending God an email; it is personal encounter. It has to be eye-to-eye contact, he says. And while it is a very private and confidential meeting with a priest, the priest represents the community of the Church, and it is the community, as well as the individual that is being healed.

The pope uses the word 'shame' when he talks about our response to our own wrong-doing. This seems to be different from 'guilt'. Guilt is something that most of us carry around all the time, guilt for the things we have done and said and guilt for the things we have left un-done and un-said. But shame is possibly less easy to carry around, and must be washed away. And when shame starts to close a door, Pope Francis says, confessing our shame can open that door again, the door of our relationship with others and the door of our relationship with God.

And finally, he reminds us that this is not all about ourselves, it is about God and his mercy and love for us. Celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation is giving praise to God for his goodness and unconditional acceptance of us. This is the God who became like me to save me from my sin, and one of the most immediate and real ways to experience this salvation is in the sacrament.

You don't have to remember any formula of words, or how many times you have done something wrong. The priest will help you. The pope reminds us that the priest himself, bishops and even the pope himself need to celebrate this sacrament. So if you haven't 'been to confession' for some time and want to discover it again, this Lent might be a good time to do it. There are even a couple of smart-phone 'apps' that you can look at; one is called simply 'Confession', I think, and the other is Mea culpa. They don't allow you to confess over the phone – the pope says it has to be person-to-person - but they might help if you have that technology.

So I hope that Lent is a fruitful season for you, that you experience change not only in the weather and the lengthening of the days, but also in the light in your heart and the warmth of your inner self, and come to Easter with a real sense of re-discovered joy in the Lord.

With my best wishes and prayers for you all.

+Kieran

Bishop of Arundel and Brighton