

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Dearly beloved,

Today we mark the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, and the Gospel tells of the well-known story of the paralytic brought to Our Lord by his friends, whose sins Jesus forgave and then whose body He healed. The question Jesus asks, “Which is easier to say?” can be considered from many angles. One obvious meaning is that it is harder to do something than to speak of it. It is easy to say, Your sins are forgiven, or Rise and walk, but it is not easy to effect either of those things. A deeper meaning is that the material is actually easier than the spiritual; Jesus was not concerned with the mere saying of such things, but the doing of them, and He healed the man’s body to show that He could also heal the man’s soul. He did the easier thing so that His disciples and opponents would believe that He could do the harder thing.

Being bodily creatures, we have a tendency to marvel at material feats and disdain the spiritual ones. Men are praised for bench-pressing 400 lbs, for rushing for 200 yds in a game, for hitting 60 home runs in a season, but the men who battle daily with demons are unknown and unappreciated. We fail to value the strength of soul won by persevering in prayer day after day while we concern ourselves with our diet, our physique, our appearance, our bodily comfort. The spiritual is harder to accomplish than the material and therefore it ought to be held in greater awe and striven for more fervently. A simple proof of this is that a man can woo a woman with perfect manners, say all the right things, buy her roses and treat her like a gentleman, and still he can fail to win her heart, for love, like all things of the spirit, is harder to truly possess or control.

Given today’s Gospel, then, we ought to marvel at the wonder of the forgiveness of sins, especially through the sacrament of confession. To have our sins forgiven is greater than having our bodies healed; to bring back a sinner to spiritual health is more amazing than to bring one near death back to health of body. One aspect of confession that can increase our gratitude for it and our wonder at it is the way that it breaks our evil habits and infuses grace and virtue into our souls.

It is the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas that at baptism, we not only receive sanctifying grace and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, we also receive infused virtues to perfect our intellect, will and lower appetites. Thus at baptism, whether of an infant or adult, the person receives such virtues as prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. This makes sense because the powers of our soul cannot simply be void of all direction; they necessarily incline to something, and knowing that, God gives us the right inclinations, in a way that perfects our powers.

These infused virtues, however, do not guarantee our good actions; rather, they strongly incline us to good actions fitted to our powers. This is most striking in the case of adult baptism—though that person had been a thief or promiscuous or a glutton, such habits are broken by the sacrament and good ones put in their place. What remains is the acquired habit—the one achieved through repeated actions. That is weakened but not extirpated, and thus the moral life is fundamentally a struggle to get our acquired virtues in line with our infused ones. It is as if God gives us the first part of the loan, and we must produce a matching fund for it all to work correctly.

In Psalm 115, one of the most beautiful in the entire Psalter, the Psalmist says, *Domine, ego servus tuus; dirupisti vincula mea; tibi sacrificabo hostiam laudis.* Lord, I am Thy servant; Thou hast shattered my chains; to Thee I will offer a sacrifice of praise. Confession is a sort of second baptism, in which we are cleansed from the sins committed since Baptism. In that sacrament, Christ breaks the chains that have been forged by our sinful actions. Since there are so many ways we can err in the moral life, there are also many chains; the beauty and mercy of the confessional is that they are broken each time we enter it with compunction and contrition.

At certain times in our lives, a chain of sin can be broken such that it never is forged again; we can think of the conversion of St. Augustine from unchastity to chastity. But much more common is the chain that is snapped

only to be formed again by our bad habits. And the stronger the fetter, the more often it must be broken by the grace of confession. Thus most of us are bound by the chains of pride, of resentment, or acedia; these are spiritual maladies that are at times close to invisible but are the most deadly to our soul. We can hide them and even convince ourselves we don't carry such bonds, but we must face them honestly.

With this kind of image in our minds, Confession becomes an opportunity to break as many chains as possible, to have Christ infuse into our souls the grace necessary to break the old deadly habits and infuse the new life-giving ones. The more fetters we want broken, the more we should mention in the confessional; the more shameful the chain that binds us, the more it needs to be exposed and snapped apart. For example, many of us are good at appearing kind and humble and forgiving, but we know in our hearts we are not those things—that we often harbor resentment or look down upon others or even despise them. We keep this from our confessor because we want to keep his respect, we say we don't want to burden him with such commonplace sins and feelings or tell him what he already knows. We should say them anyway; the deadliest sin is not impurity—it is pride and it is so insidious that it hides in our good intentions.

So the more a confessed sin exposes our true character and shows the things no one else knows about our interior life, the more soundly will the chain be broken when we confess it. And if a chain is broken over and over and over again, it can only be repaired so many times before it becomes good for nothing; confession breaks our vices until they cannot form any longer and God's grace triumphs in our souls. The less often we go, the more do those fetters gain strength and break only with great violence. But when we make the ascetic effort to go frequently, even if we see very little exterior progress from our frequent confessions, they work our salvation despite our sinfulness, for only the power of the sacrament can truly smash the fetters of sin with which we bind ourselves. Some day we will have the joy of experiencing true freedom from sin in our souls, and then we will also see that it was not from our efforts but from God's grace given so generously through confession. Let us rejoice, then, at the gift of this sacrament, which the Church possesses to the exclusion of all other religions, including the Protestants. Only we have the blessing of this tremendous help in reaching heaven.

Because of this, a final point is that today's Gospel says Christ healed the paralytic because of the faith of his friends rather than his own faith. Jesus can forgive the sins of others through our prayers for them—we carry them to Christ though they cannot walk themselves. Think of all the ways in which God has drawn us to Himself while we were in sin or uninterested or spiritually asleep; can He not do the same for others, especially when we are begging Him to do so? Thus even though our fallen away loved ones and others whose eternal fate worries us cannot benefit from confession as we can, nevertheless we can bring them to Jesus through our prayer so He can heal them through some means other than the sacraments. And then, through God's mercy, they may return to the practice of the faith or enter the Church and then know firsthand the spiritual benefits we have known and experienced for years.

May Our Lord, through His holy Body and Blood, today give us the courage and even joy to confess our sins more often and more honestly, and may we also be renewed in our efforts to pray for the salvation of others. God cannot fail to answer such worthy desires of our hearts such that He will bring us ever closer to the place where our hearts will rest and all chains will be broken, in the glories of heaven, in the New Jerusalem.