

***Third Sunday of Advent; Gaudete Sunday (English and Latin Masses)***  
***December 17, 2023***  
***Year of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ark of the New Covenant***

*“All would wish to be saved and to enjoy the glory of Paradise; but to gain Heaven, it is necessary to walk in the straight road that leads to eternal bliss.”*  
*(Saint Alphonsus Liguori, Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent.)*

I assume all here have become accustomed to the word: “Recalculating.” Our familiarity with this word may derive from a navigational GPS device as we drove. I joke that it is a nice way to say: “Hey Dummy, you’re on the wrong road.” As we continue our preparation for Christ’s arrival at Christmas, on this Third Sunday of Advent, let us take this time to examine if we need to “recalculate” the roads our lives have been traveling upon this past year. We can accomplish this with one simple question: “When was the last time I went to Confession?”

As Catholics, we profess both the belief in and the need for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is not something which was “invented” by men; nor is it something which was done away with by the Second Vatican Council. James Cardinal Gibbons, in his book The Faith of Our Fathers (p. 277), summarized it best with these words: *“The whole history of Jesus Christ is marked by mercy and compassion for suffering humanity. From the moment of His incarnation till the hour of His death every thought and word and act of His Divine life was directed toward the alleviation of the ills and miseries of fallen man.”*

We can affirm this mission of Jesus, as described by Cardinal Gibbons, through a thorough reading of the New Testament. We do not possess the time to engage in an exercise of this detail, however, allow me to illustrate this point using four key texts. The texts are: Matthew 1:20-21, Matthew 9:2-8, John 20:21-23 and 2 Corinthians 5:18.

The mission of Jesus as Reconciler and Divine Savior is first proclaimed by Heaven. Our first text from Saint Matthew describes how Saint Joseph is told of this in a dream. Whether it was an angel or God Himself, translations vary, the point is still made for *“He will save His people from their sins.”* Matthew would show Jesus doing this using His Divine Authority. In our second text, Matthew recounts to us the beautiful story of the healing of the paralytic. The first words of Jesus, after the paralytic is brought to Him, are these: *“Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”* To further prove that He does possess the authority to forgive sins, a point questioned by some scribes present, He heals the man of his paralysis. Later Church Fathers would comment on this passage noting how this one situation shows Jesus more as Divine Savior, than Divine Physician. For, as they would say, the physician cares for the body and the Savior cares for the soul. The third text from Saint John recalls how Jesus allowed His apostles to participate in His ministry of reconciliation when, in the upper room after His Resurrection, He breathed upon those present saying: *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* On these verses from Saint John, allow me to pose two further

points for your consideration. First, for the apostles to be able to forgive the sins of any, they first had to know those sins. This implies that a form of confession had to have taken place. Second, if all sins for all time were forgiven by His Cross, then why would He have given the apostles the authority to retain sins, to withhold His forgiveness? If His apostles and their disciples truly believed that He had imparted a share of His Divine Authority to them to forgive sins, could we see this via the Scriptures? Our fourth and final text is our witness to this. Saint Paul, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, reminds them that Christ had reconciled them to Himself, and “*gave us (the Apostles) the ministry of reconciliation.*”

The practice of confessing one’s sins to a chosen minister of Christ is further attested to by the writings of early Church leaders and Councils. We can read the letters of Irenaeus (180), Origen (240) and Cyprian (250) and see direct references to a form of confession. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), in an effort to address the lax morals of the Christians at that time, further regulated the existing duty of Christians to confess their sins to a priest before receiving the Eucharist. It stated that Christians must confess all mortal sins at least once a year. My friends, the Council regulated an already existing sacrament; it did not invent one.

My family, Saint John the Baptist begged that we make straight the way for Jesus to enter into our hearts. Jesus would provide the means to do this by His choosing to share with mankind His Authority to forgive sins which would arise after Baptism. Some may be under the illusion that this can be accomplished in another way; one not established by Christ. To those who may feel this way, I can only say; I am sorry. If Jesus had desired another way, He would have given us that other way. To follow Christ means to follow Him even if what He requires us to do makes us feel uncomfortable. It was not an Apostle, a disciple, a Pope, a Bishop or even a priest who taught us in prayer to ask Our Father to: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.” It was Jesus who said this. And to do anything other than what He requests of us, is to honestly question if we are truly His disciples.