

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
What My Four-Year Old Can Teach about Penance

My little four-year old son recently decided to play in the dog's water bowl. I was busy at the kitchen sink, and didn't notice him dipping a stuffed animal over and over again into the bowl, and then wringing it out on the floor. By the time I discovered the game, the floor was a soaking mess.

As I have done before, I handed him a towel and told him to get to work. I knew full well that he could not complete the job as quickly or thoroughly as I could. I didn't *need* his help. (He needed mine.) But I wanted him to make the effort because this is what a man of character does. He tries to clean up his mess, to make restitution, and to learn from his mistakes. This is also what we mean by the virtue of penance.

Non-Catholics often misunderstand the Catholic doctrine of penance. They speak as though we thought we could somehow earn God's favor by our penance, or as if the sacrifice of Christ were not enough to bring about our salvation. But this is not at all how Catholics understand penance. To return to the analogy of my four-year old - he did not earn my love by his efforts, nor could he finish the job without my help. Rather, because I love him, I wanted to offer him the dignity of making the attempt. I want to help him grow in character.

The Catholic faith teaches that it is always God's love that comes first, but His love does not leave us unchanged. He desires to make us into new men and women. "He saved us," says St. Paul, "not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

When we are washed and renewed in the Holy Spirit, we receive a reformed character. We want to make up for what we have done wrong, even though we know we could never do enough. When King David sinned against the Lord, he *wanted* to make restitution. He said, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." (2 Samuel 24:24)

St. Paul felt the same way. Because he had once persecuted the Church, he wanted to work harder than all the other apostles. (1 Corinthians 15:9-10) He could even say, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." (Colossians 1:24)

The virtue of penance has two aspects. First, there is a hatred of sin and a desire to purify and reform. Second, there is a desire to make up for past faults. Again, these do not conflict with the grace of Christ. These are *fruits* of Christ's grace in our lives. They are what characterize the life of a faithful Christian. "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. " (Psalm 51:17) And, when we bring this attitude to the confessional, we have Christ's assurance that our sins are forgiven. "If you forgive the sins of any," Christ said to the apostles, "they are forgiven." (John 20:23)

The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed this traditional understanding of penance. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* explained that penance and purification are essential to the Christian life. They are fruits of the grace of Christ:

While Christ, holy, innocent and undefiled knew nothing of sin, but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.

Lent is a time for penance, but also for joy. We renew our hatred of sin, and desire deep purification, renewal, and, in some small way, to make restitution for the wrongs we have done. This takes nothing away from the work of Christ. It is the grace of Christ that *impels* us to this attitude. Only by his grace and with his help that we can merit anything.