

Homily - Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed, and does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life; since he has turned away from all the sins that he has committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.”

As most of you know, this year our bishops have invited us to join in the National Eucharistic Revival, including by asking us to deepen our knowledge and reflection on the liturgy and worship of the Church.

So today, and most likely for the next several weekends, we’re going to do something a little different.

I want to shift gears a bit in terms of the style and focus of these homilies to be a bit more catechetical, and dig a little deeper into some of the theology and practice of Catholic life - some of the content may be new, some may be familiar, and some hopefully may answer lingering questions that we’ve always sort of wondered about but never thought to ask.

Today’s reading from Ezekiel which I quoted a moment ago highlights a theme that’s especially underappreciated and misunderstood in Catholic life, and therefore seems like a perfect place to start:

Forgiveness and healing. In Christianity, these are two sides of the same coin.

Think about how many healings there are in the Gospels.

Healing the sick is one of Christ’s chief ways of ministering to those he encounters.

These healings, we know, had both physical and spiritual dimensions.

Demons were cast out, cripples stood and walked, and - most powerful of all - sins were forgiven.

Ever since the disciples were commissioned to carry out a similar ministry in Christ’s name, healing has been an integral means of carrying the Good News into the world and strengthening the faithful in their times of suffering.

Today, that ministry is lived out in the Church primarily in what we call the 'sacraments of healing,' which are, as you probably know, confession and the anointing of the sick.

I want to unpack each in turn, and especially to give some practical thoughts and direction about how both should fit into our lives as Catholics.

First off: Confession.

This is a sacrament of spiritual healing, because it forgives our sins, regardless of how grave and serious they may be, and restores our soul to the state of grace, like how we were on the day of our baptism.

The priest is able to absolve our sins because he is acting *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, to offer us his healing mercy.

Those are the fundamentals, but let's get a bit more granular.

If you remember nothing else from this homily, the most important thing to know about Confession is... you need to go to Confession!

Yes, yes, I know, it's not fun.

In the strict sense, going to confession at least once a year is one of the precepts of the Church - the bare minimum requirements for being a practicing Catholic. While that may be the only strict requirement, I like to think that only going to confession once or twice a year is like only taking a shower once a month.

It might not kill you, but you're probably not that fun to be around.

So how often is ideal? The short answer is "as often as you need."

Anecdotally, I and others have found that a good target to aim for in a healthy spiritual life is roughly every month or two.

When we examine our consciences more often, we start to notice patterns, ways that we're growing or struggling in the spiritual life, and get more data about what's actually helping us make progress.

Our spiritual lives are never neutral, we're either making progress or sliding backwards, so it's important we be aware of which way we're going.

And, most important of all, with regular confession, our souls are just generally more open to receiving and responding to the Lord's actions in our heart.

The only reason I was able to start discerning my own call to the priesthood was because I started making good confessions and built a regular prayer routine as I started in college. It can literally shape the course of our lives.

What about the confession itself? One of the best ways to make sure it's a fruitful experience is to make a good examination of conscience.

We have guides you can use outside the confessional, but it helps to make sure you take time to really pray through them.

Think about the patterns and connections between sins and spiritual successes. Invite the Holy Spirit to show you where the Lord is inviting you to conversion.

Then, in Confession itself, it helps to start with the big things. If there are mortal sins to confess - the really grave sins that we did with full knowledge and consent of the will - then start with those, or any other serious sins.

More general sins can be stated more briefly: general struggles with pride, patience, vanity, that kind of thing.

In general, a good rule of thumb for Confession is to remember why we're there, and, as I like to say, focus on sins, not stories. We usually only need to include just enough details to explain what it is we're confessing - if the priest needs more information, he'll ask for it.

Back in the day, you'd hear the phrase "number and kind" - in other words, what's the sin, and how many times it was committed.

That rule also applies, though, to our state in life: some sins only make sense if we share that we're married, or single, or a priest, so that can sometimes be helpful to mention as well.

Why is all of this important? A lot of it is because we often try to place our sin in the context of the story we tell ourselves because it makes us feel less responsible, or takes our mind off of the spiritual wounds.

But it's important to also confront the reality of sin's effects, because real spiritual freedom comes when we set aside our attachment to those lesser things and learn to find joy in our relationship with the Lord.

That's why, in the end, as challenging as it is in the moment, Confession really is awesome. It's truly beautiful.

I have heard confessions where I knew at the end without a shadow of a doubt that I had just watched God save somebody's soul. It's one of the things I was most excited about in becoming a priest, and it's still a great joy in my ministry.

And, once again, I know it's uncomfortable. I go to confession about once a month, I just went last week, and it's still challenging to go to a priest I know and confess my own failings.

But it's the most freeing and beautiful experience in the world.

Spiritual healing is the most important kind of healing we can receive, because its fruits last for eternity.

So, go to confession. The schedule's in the bulletin!

Now, what about bodily healing? This is where the Church gives us the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

It's very much a biblical sacrament.

The apostle James writes, "Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord."

Many Catholics don't know much about this sacrament, and often have never even seen it celebrated.

One common misconception is that it's the same thing as Last Rites - it's not!

When I was a seminarian, I remember I actually got into an argument with a hospital chaplain who didn't want me to wear my clerical clothing into the hospital because they thought I would scare people, because in their minds, by the time a priest shows up, you're done for!

In reality, anointing serves as one *part* of Last Rites, but we'll touch on that in a moment.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy explains that this sacrament isn't just for the dying.

In fact, it says, "As soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived."

So it's certainly possible, and encouraged, to take advantage of this sacrament far before death is expected or even likely.

The Rite of Anointing recommends that we should receive the Anointing of the Sick if health is "seriously impaired," or in other words, a situation where there's significant health risks of any kind or a potential for death from these health conditions.

So on the one hand, this isn't a spiritual Band-Aid to be received whenever we feel like it.

In fact, most people don't know that the Church has other blessings we can offer to those who are sick or injured in less severe ways.

Don't be afraid to ask for those blessings if you need them.

But it's also important to try to receive anointing before a health situation gets particularly dire, or even before a dangerous operation.

The effects of this sacrament can be dramatic at times and subtle in others, and it really depends on God's will for a situation; either way, it always helps.

Much like Christ's healings, sometimes priests witness and hear about remarkable physical recoveries after anointing.

Many other healing graces have a primarily spiritual character, helping to heal and resolve someone's fear and spiritual anxiety as the Lord is preparing to take them to himself.

Regardless of how it works out, the most important thing to remember in these situations is that the Lord is present in that moment, and with the strength of that sacrament, a Catholic who receives those graces will be that much more able to take up their cross at this pivotal moment in their life and journey with Christ.

And, for anyone who is expected to be nearing that final encounter, the Last Rites themselves are a beautiful and uniquely powerful moment of grace.

Here, if there is a practical takeaway I really want everyone to remember, it's this:

If death is expected for a loved one in the near future, please DO NOT wait to call a priest!

And make sure your family members know to call us quickly if anything happens to you, either - it's especially hard when non-Catholic family members don't understand why it's so important for this to happen sooner than later.

I don't care what time of day it is or where you are, when it comes time for Last Rites, we will do our absolute best to be there.

And I always tell people: It's okay if we celebrate Last Rites and you get better! I won't hold it against you!

The Last Rites are a combined celebration of reconciliation, anointing, and Viaticum - your last Holy Communion to prepare to meet the Lord.

So obviously, the best way to receive these graces is to be conscious, aware, and able to receive the Eucharist and join in that prayer.

There's a lot more that could be said about these rites, but I hope this sheds some light on an often-hidden dimension of Christ's healing ministry as it exists in the Church today.

From the beginning of the Church's ministerial life until now, this is why your priests are here - to help give you these most powerful healing graces we have at our disposal at the moments we need them most.

So, please, don't ever be afraid to ask for them.

Seek the Lord's mercy in Confession, and his healing graces as they are needed in holy anointing.

The Sacraments are the greatest joy of our lives as Catholics, and they're here to strengthen you in good times and in bad.

Today, then, let us once again take advantage of the strength offered us by the most sublime sacrament of them all - the Holy Eucharist, where we share in divine life which we hope and pray, one day, we shall come to know forever in eternity.