

113008 FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

I have a story to share with you – a little bit long – and it is one that makes me emotional in my heart; sometimes that emotion comes to the surface. I believe this to be true -- let me tell you this as I heard it told....

A priest went to Rome and he was in a situation where he was given a special papal audience invitation to come the next day as one of the people who could come to kneel at the feet of the Holy Father. It would be very brief: kneel in front of the Pope, receive his blessing and say a few words, "Thank you Holy Father." And then get up and leave. I saw this very thing happen when I visited Rome in 2004. I had a prime seat for the Wednesday General Audience with the Pope and I saw this happening that day.

At any rate – the priest who was invited to be a part of this special up-close and personal audience with the pope – he had time before this next day event. So he, the priest went about touring some of the sites in Rome. He went to visit one of the basilicas and as he arrived at the top of the steps, he noticed a poor man – a silent beggar... and there are many of them... many of them in Rome. The priest was about to walk past – but he did a double take at this one beggar. He went up to him and said, "You look familiar. Who are you? The man didn't answer right away and the priest said again: "I think I know you – who are you." The beggar said he was a former priest – in fact they had gone to seminary together for a year in Italy long before they were ordained. When pushed for details, the beggar said he had sinned and he had given up his faith. He had given up being a priest... and he only wanted a handout for he was in much need. The priest responded...

They reestablished a little bit of knowledge of each other – exchanged names and contact information – although there wasn't much info about the beggar.... And then the priest left to go inside and tour the basilica.

The next day – the visiting priest went early – very early so he could be at St. Peter's for the general audience with the Holy Father. The priest was seated in a close up chair – with good visibility of the pope. And after the greetings and teaching and some words by the Holy Father – those in these special seats were invited to come forward... kneel, accept the Holy Father's blessing and then leave.

When the priest received the Pope's blessing – as he got up – he blurted out some words to this effect... “Holy Father – there is a priest – a former priest – I met him at a basilica near here... he has left the priesthood... I ask you to please pray for him... please...” The visiting priest then got up and started to walk away. He didn't see the Holy Father motion to an aide near him. After the aide listened to the Pope, he hurriedly moved and stopped the departing priest. The aide said that the Holy Father wanted to invite both the visiting priest and the former priest to come to dinner the next night. The representative of the Holy Father got all the necessary information, gave instructions about where and what time the two priests should arrive. So then the visiting priest who was the cause of this – he had to go find the lapsed priest, the beggar and to convince him this was true – convince him that the Pope – the real Holy Father John Paul II wanted to see them. They got some clean clothes for the lapsed priest.

The next day, the visiting priest had the beggar priest come to his hotel and take a shower and clean up... I'm rushing this story as much as I can...

That evening – they both showed up at a certain door at the Vatican. They knocked – the door opened and they gave their names. Sure enough the person had a sheet with their names on it. They were escorted down corridors and up steps and down halls until they were ushered into a dining room... and after some minutes, Holy Father JP II enters.

They begin to have dinner – the beggar priest was, of course most nervous and didn't say a lot. At the end of the main course – the Holy Father motioned to the visiting priest that he should leave the room. He did so, and outside he was told to wait until he was summoned to come back.

About twenty minutes go by – and finally the door is opened and the first visiting priest is invited back into the dining room. He sees that the lapsed priest looks emotional... different ... he wonders what happened. Pope John Paul II invites them to have dessert and they spend time in general conversation... And then the evening is over.

The two priests bid goodnight to the Holy Father and they leave. Outside on the streets below – as they walk – the visiting priest says, “If you can tell me – what happened inside?”

Well said the beggar priest, “the Holy Father asked me if I would hear his confession.” I said, “Holy Father I'm a sinner... I am a former priest – without faculties or standing.”

The Holy Father said, “You are a priest forever... and I can reinstate you right now if you ask me.” “Yes Holy Father... Yes... please reinstate me.” So he did so – and then he again asked me to hear his confession.” The first priest – in astonishment at this turn of events said... “You did this? You heard the Pope’s confession? Did it take so long?” “Oh no – it was over in a few moments. What took longer was when I asked him if he would hear my confession – that is what took so long... Well I went to Confession and after it was over, he hugged me in his arms... He welcomed me back into the family.”

As you dear friends here in this church have heard – as you know – today is the First Sunday in Advent... and in our first reading, there were these words, “we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.” Are any of us so hardened or filled with pride that we dare reject the fact of sin in our lives?

In my own life, all too often, I get to feeling like the lapsed priest in the John Paul II story I shared. I ought to be begging in the parking lot outside this church rather than standing at a pulpit in here. But I’ve also come to know of the Sacramental embrace that restores my dignity. In the sacrament of Reconciliation – Confession, again and again I am given a dignity I do not deserve just like the Prodigal Son... and so, too can you. In receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I hear a voice saying, ‘Quick... bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’”

I share this Pope John Paul story for any here today who don't believe in the necessity of going to Confession to a priest... to a mere human. I share this story to say that if the Holy Father – our pope can go to confession to a sinful beggar priest – you and I ought to have a similar humility. This Advent – whether you go on a Saturday afternoon – or go to our parish Penance Service later in December – or if you make arrangements to see a priest for an appointment – know that the Father – God our Father is waiting to wrap you in His arms of mercy... his loving arms of reunion.

I would like to paraphrase words from Servant of God Catherine Doherty of Madonna House. She said, "In Christ, each day is a day of starting new with God." Advent offers us a chance to start anew with God... not just adding prayers or giving up candies or such... but a fresh slate – available to us, every time we repent and confess. What a wonderful step in Advent as preparation for the coming of Christ... if only we are humble enough to say... Bless me father – for I have sinned.

Reading 1

Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

You, LORD, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever. Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for, such as they had not heard of from of old. No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him.

Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways! Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind. There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you; for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt. Yet, O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

R. (4) Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth. Rouse your power, and come to save us.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Once again, O LORD of hosts, look down from heaven, and see; take care of this vine, and protect what your right hand has planted the son of man whom you yourself made strong.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

May your help be with the man of your right hand, with the son of man whom you yourself made strong. Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

R. Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Reading II

1 Cor 1:3-9

Brothers and sisters: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel

Mk 13:33-37

Jesus said to his disciples: “Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”