

## The Prodigal's Confession

Typically, because we are instructed in Scripture to go to confession, it's a case that because it is in the Bible we must do it. James writes, "Confess your sins. (James 5:16). But rarely do we do things because we are told to do them.

A major foundation for the holy Mystery is found in Luke 15, the parable of Prodigal Son. Here the young son rightfully, according to Jewish law and custom, asks for his inheritance and goes off to squander it. The key line here is in verse 17: "Coming to his senses he thought ..." He had the proverbial light bulb over the head experience. Where do these experiences come from? It could be a logical conclusion or just luck. As Christians, we realize that this "Ah Ha" moment may have another source. When we are baptized God comes and dwells within us. We do not pray alone because the Spirit is in the movement of our prayers to the Father. God is present to all our thoughts and actions and speaks gently moving us closer to the divine.

The Prodigal Son realized that he had sinned, saying "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son ..." His relationship with his father had changed for the worse and he was not worthy to be a son but rather a servant. "I no longer deserve to be called your son, treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."

The Father waits for the son to return. He looks out for him patiently waiting hoping that he will come to his senses and return. "While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him." These signs of love were shown even before the son made his confession.

God is the Waiting Father. He waits for us to come to our senses. When we approach confession, that Father rushes to embrace us. Confession is not an opportunity for God to say, "I told you so" that you would regret your choices. It is the opportunity for God to say "you have returned and I love you".

There is an old theological expression that a sacrament is an outward sign of an inward reality. The inward reality of someone going to confession is that, moved by God within, they have already changed from being caught up in self and selfishness, but

have already turned to God. There is already a change of heart, a metanoia; and confession is the outward expression of that inward reality.

So, when we come to our senses and realize that being selfish is not the way to live, we go to confession. The form of confession has changed over the centuries. According to Tertullian, in the second century confessions were done publicly. By the fourth century they were becoming more private and individual. At the time of Augustine, a person could only go to confession once after Baptism. Now, we can go as often as we are moved to be forgiven.

The Prodigal Son expected a dressing-down from his father and instead received embraces. Confession is not an event that should be done rarely but more often than not. When we offend a family member or friend and realize that we have done so, as soon as possible we apologize. Hopefully, when we have done so there is joy. In some relations that joy is expressed in an embrace, in confession the priest extends the epitrahil. This vestment is symbolic of the priestly office. Some have seen that the priest's hand is a source of blessing which comes from the hand of God. So, as the priest places the epitrahil over the head of the penitent and keeps his hand there as well, it is a sign of a comforting embrace. "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted."

The comforting comes from the absolution. In English it is common to say that forgiveness and absolution mean the same. Forgiveness is what happens between two persons. Absolution is what happens to the person. A person who is absolved is restored. Biblical scholars translate Christ our God's words in John 20:23 as "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall absolve, they are forgiven them and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." A person who makes an insincere confession or has no intention of a metanoia (change of heart) will not be absolved so their sins are retained.

The Prodigal Son is absolved. He is restored. As the Waiting Father said "Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast." The feast that should follow confession is the Divine Liturgy were the penitent with a change of heart who has been absolved experiences this restoration in the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ.



*The Father's flowing garment indicate his speedy pace in greeting his son.*