

This morning (yesterday) we had first confessions for the second graders. As we observe Advent, a natural time for confession, I want to share with you my memories of four confessions from my own life. My first confession was also in second grade. And I remember almost nothing about it. I do know that I memorized the Act of Contrition because it stayed in my head over the many years I never said it. But, unlike today, we did not make a big deal about first confession. The only memory I have of it is standing in line along the wall in the sisters' chapel at St. Mary's School with the other kids waiting my turn. And then going into the darkened little room. Nothing else – good or bad. It took place during a regular CCD class. There were no parents there.

The second confession I want to share took place in high school – 10th or 11th grade. It was during Advent or Lent. I did not want to go, but my mom was making me. It was a battle for her to get us there, but periodically once or twice a year my mother would fight

the battle out of duty, guilt, and love, knowing that we should be going to confession. I don't know if I believed in the sacrament or not, but I do remember being very nervous and even afraid. It was like going to get a root canal at the dentist.

An older Jesuit was the confessor. I don't remember what he said, but the priest surprised me with his kindness and calm. He left me peaceful and very relieved – although as much as from being through the ordeal as from being free from sin.

The third confession was after being away from the Church for seven or eight years. At the age of 26 I had returned, and this was my first confession after all those years and sins. Only now I did believe – and I did have real sins to confess. I was nervous as I entered SS. Philip and James in Baltimore that Saturday afternoon. There was only one elderly lady and me. And I sure wasn't going to be first. I didn't know if I was going at all. After she was done, I was hesitating whether to go in or not, when the voice of the priest rang out. "Well.

are you coming in?” I was spotted. So, trapped in my pride, I went in and confessed my sins. It was remarkably easy once I got started – the priest was easy on me – maybe too easy. And I left that confession relieved because I believed and was free from my sins.

The fourth confession was to Fr. Gus Belauskas, my spiritual director at the seminary. It was 1996, shortly before my deacon ordination. It took place in his office face to face. I was making a whole-life confession in preparation for my ordination. I went through my entire life’s worth of sins from age 7 to 35. There was sadness – even a little shame still, that came from my pride at having to tell Fr. Gus everything. But no fear. No hesitation. I knew who God was and who I was, and that I needed His mercy.

I tell you all this because it’s Advent and this is the time to repent of our sins and seek reconciliation with God. And from my own varied experience of the sacrament, I know it’s hard for some of you – as it has been for me at times. You are somewhere along that

spectrum of my own confessions – childlike, forgetful, afraid, nervous, questioning, ashamed, relived, comfortable, grateful. And all of these experiences are based on two realities from today’s scriptures.

First, John the Baptist tells us, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand . . . you brood of vipers! Produce good fruit of repentance.” The Baptist is formable, even frightening. Prophets often are. But the warning is spoken out of concern for souls. “Stop what you are doing or else!” That is sometimes part of the reality of the Kingdom.

But perhaps you think you can’t repent -- that your sins are too big to forgive, or you have sinned too many times and returned too often to ask forgiveness for the same things. But surely that hurts the heart of Jesus who come to earth at the first Christmas precisely to die for us, just to forgive our sins. Sometimes people say going to confession again and again is cheap grace. But it’s not cheap. Jesus

paid for it with His own blood and life. Will we waste that blood by not making use of that forgiveness offered in the sacrament?

And that brings me to the second reality about confession. God is not only concerned with repentance. He also offers reconciliation in the sacrament. Remember the first reading from Isaiah 11. “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse and from his roots a bud shall blossom . . . Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.” God offers reconciliation to all adversaries and sinners. Through the child Messiah peace is offered to us. That too is part of the sacrament.

Whatever your past experience of confession, try it again if it has been a while. Put your trust in the sacrament of reconciliation. Our penance service is Thursday, December 18 at 6:30 there will five priests there. Keep us busy. Our regular hours are Saturdays from 3:00 – 4:30 and Wednesday mornings from 8:15 – 8:35.