

Respect Life Month

*Mercy and
Forgiveness*



Office of Life,
Justice & Peace
Archdiocese of Los Angeles



MERCY & FORGIVENESS

How do you think about God? Is He a loving Father, ever desiring to know and love you, and just waiting for you to run back into His arms? Or a tyrant, who has imposed rules for living and is just waiting for you to slip up? Unfortunately, a lot of us live our lives as if we believe the second option, even if we know that the first option is true.

A LAW WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS

If we believe that God has imposed arbitrary rules on us, then we tend to think that the guilt we experience from not following those rules is unnecessary, annoying, and a hindrance to our personal freedom. After all, what does it really matter what I do, as long as I don't hurt anyone else? And why should I feel bad about it? However, the guilt we experience on a daily basis is not as arbitrary as we might think. When we do something contradictory to God's love,

we don't just fail to attain some external goal, we contradict our very nature. The Second Vatican Council tells us that "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment....For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God" (Gaudium et Spes 16).

This law, which is present in our hearts, is what we call the natural law. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that it is “nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid” (CCC 1955). It complements our use of reason, it doesn’t override it. If God has placed this law on our hearts, then it makes sense that by listening to it, we will be drawn closer to God. He wants us to rest in Him, in perfect happiness, and become the best version of ourselves. When we violate the law of our hearts, we feel guilty, because we know, according to our conscience, that we have turned away from God by violating our very nature.

Unfortunately, the times that we don’t listen to our conscience are quite frequent. Some days we sin in small ways—gossiping about a friend, snubbing someone who needs kindness, briefly looking with lust at another person, forwarding a text that makes someone look bad, forgetting about God.

These sins are venial, offending and wounding our relationship with God, while still allowing it to subsist.

And some days we sin in big ways—watching porn, stealing from a parent or friend, cheating on an exam, drinking at a party, taking drugs to help us do better on a test or during a game or to escape something, having sex (of any sort) outside of marriage, ending a pregnancy, deliberately hurting ourselves, giving up on God. These sins are mortal, and destroy charity in our hearts and turn us away from God. For a sin to be mortal, it must involve a grave matter, and be committed with full knowledge and full consent.



HOW DO WE OVERCOME SIN?

But even though we fail so often, God’s love for us never decreases, in fact, He desires us even more! He is just waiting for us to come and experience His mercy—so much so, that He has given us the Sacrament of Reconciliation so that we can receive this grace as often as we need it. Pope Francis states that “This is the time for mercy,” and this could not be more true.

We often forget the real power of the sacraments. Sacraments



are not just symbols, they are signs which actually confer the grace that they signify (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1127). In the Sacraments, divine life is dispensed to us (CCC 1131). This is no small matter. The Catechism goes so far as to compare the

Sacraments to fire, “As fire transforms into itself everything it touches, so the Holy Spirit transforms into the divine life whatever is subjected to His power” (CCC 1127). With this in mind, the Sacrament of Reconciliation takes on a whole new meaning!

You might have had a non-Catholic friend ask you why you need to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation when you can just take your sins straight to Jesus. This is an ironic question, because taking our sins straight to Jesus is precisely what we do in Reconciliation, because the priest forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ, who gave them this authority in the Gospel of John, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23). God is just waiting for us to receive His infinite mercy and forgiveness. We just have to ask for it, which is what we do in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Consider this analogy: If you take advantage of a friend, that friend may forgive you long before you apologize to them for doing so. But you do not get to experience this forgiveness until you apologize to them, and ask for forgiveness. It is at this point that you can begin to heal, and rebuild your relationship. It is at this point that the two of you can be reconciled.

This is what happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation: we receive God’s forgiveness, His grace, and thus can be reconciled to Him, after wounding our relationship with Him through sin. God did not create Reconciliation for Himself, but for us, because He knows that we can only be truly happy when we are in communion with Him. And the grace which we receive in the Sacrament will help us avoid sin in the future, and thus prevent more ruptures in our relationship with God.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

And why should we care about avoiding sin? Pope Francis reminds us that we are all called to be saints! The holy lives of the saints often seem to be totally inaccessible to us--and so this call seems daunting. But the reality is, as the Holy Father states, "everyone is called to holiness in their own state of life. "Indeed," he said, "it is by living with love and offering Christian witness in our daily tasks that we are called to become saints...Always and everywhere you can become a saint, that is, by being receptive to the grace that is working in us and leads us to holiness." The Church teaches a universal call to holiness. And God wouldn't ask this of us if it was impossible, or wouldn't make us happy.

We are called to holiness precisely because it is the single way of life that will make us most happy, and will fill our ultimate desires. We become holy when we develop virtue in order to perfect ourselves in charity: when we consistently listen to and develop our conscience so that we act in accordance with the natural moral law, and not against it.

God has provided us with a conscience, with an innate understanding of what is right and wrong, however this conscience still needs to be formed and guided. We instinctively have natural reason, to point us in the right direction, however a full understanding of the truth is not accessible by human reason. This is why God chose to reveal



Himself to us: "By his Revelation, 'the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company'" (CCC 142). We must educate ourselves on what has been revealed. Some of

this has already been done, with the help of our parents and teachers, but it is still a life-long process. This is incredibly important, especially when it comes to issues that might seem good to us, but that are antagonistic to God's will, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, pornography, oppression, violence, and self-harm.

We can form our consciences by reading Scripture, attending Mass, finding out what the Church really teaches about something by looking it up in the Catechism or other Church documents. The best way is through receiving the Sacraments, which give us the grace to more fully comprehend Divine Revelation. We must also make daily choices that are in accordance with reason and the divine law, such as surrounding ourselves with friends who are supportive of our good decisions.

PREPARING TO BE SAINTS



The reason holiness often seems impossible is because we try to do things our own way, without God's help. But, we know that "It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance" (CCC 1811). Holiness is only possible with the assistance of God's grace.

Thankfully, He is just waiting to pour it out on us. "Christ's gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. Everyone should always ask for

this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow His calls to love what is good and shun evil" (CCC 1811). This is why it is so important for us to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation often - to receive the grace necessary to begin this journey towards holiness. We must experience God's mercy. During our pursuit of holiness, we will still slip up, and make mistakes, and so we must continually receive God's mercy through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

What is the point of striving for holiness, especially when it is difficult? It is because holiness is what prepares us for heaven--for "perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity" (CCC 1024) And how does holiness prepare us for heaven?

Remember that God Himself inscribed the natural moral law on our hearts, and so when we act in accordance with it, we not only become who we were meant to be, but we also become more like God. Holiness prepares us for happiness. The Church tells us that “Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (CCC 1024).

This is why being anti-sin is really being pro-life! We are truly pro-life when we help everyone, including ourselves, to become who we were meant to be, through obedience to the law of love written on our hearts by God. St. Augustine famously stated, “You have formed us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless till it rests in You.” This is what we should desire for ourselves, and for the whole world, which is why it is so important that we receive God’s mercy!

