

I helped out at the penance service in Chillicothe this past week. It was so well attended that it took three priests about an hour and half to hear all the confessions. Afterward I told Father Tom Hermes, the pastor there, that our attendance is smaller for penance services because we don't have as much sin in Cameron as they do in Chillicothe. We all struggle with sin, and one purpose for Lent is to help us overcome it. During this time we reflect on our faults, we confess our sorrow, and we receive God's forgiveness.

All sin is serious, but Catholics divide sin into two categories: mortal and venial. Mortal sin is a grave violation of God's law; it destroys charity in the heart and turns us away from God and toward some lesser good. Venial sin does not destroy charity, but it offends and wounds it. There are three conditions for mortal sin: grave matter, full knowledge, and complete consent: The offense has to be serious, you have to do it fully knowing it is wrong, and you have to choose to do it. If you're going 100 mph on the highway, that is seriously wrong, but if you are the passenger, you may not choose to go that fast, and if you're a sleeping passenger, you may not know what's going on. But if we know something is wrong, and we feely choose to do it rather than obey God's law, we sin.

Saint Paul says our bodies are dead because of sin, but the spirit is alive because of righteousness. We make some bad choices because our bodies seek pleasure, and not all pleasure is good for us. Whether it is food, drink, drugs, sex, or anger, we sometimes perform actions or say words that we think will make us feel good, but they cause harm instead. In the end, our sin hurts us more than it hurts anyone else. It makes us dead – dead to good judgment, dead to the needs of our neighbor, dead to the voice of God. But if we open up to the Spirit, we will rise from death.

At this stage of Lent, we speak of 3 kinds of "death": physical, moral and spiritual. Physical death happened to Jesus, but he rose to new life; he prefigured this physical miracle by raising Lazarus from death to life. Moral death happens when we sin; but through forgiveness we can rise again to the life of grace. Spiritual death is a condition that exists before baptism – original sin; it is a quality of life outside the body of Christ. When you are baptized, you leave behind this spiritual death, and you rise to new life in Christ.

None of us likes to think about how sinful we are. It's a lot easier to think about how sinful someone else is – whether it's a member of the family, a bothersome neighbor, an annoying classmate, or even those folks in Chillicothe. But it's important to think through how we have offended God and our neighbor, how we have not lived up to the expectations we have of ourselves, the prejudice we harbor, the pride we have, the language we do not control, and the way we often make life difficult for the people we love the most. We are dead because of sin, but we receive life through forgiveness.