

We are preparing our second graders for their first confession next month, and last week I had a great conversation with their parents about sin and forgiveness. People often ask why Catholics go to a priest to get their sins forgiven when you can go directly to God. Well, you can and you should go directly to God for forgiveness. The Church recommends confession to a priest for any sin; it is required only for the most serious sins – when we are so separated from the body of Christ that we need to hear from our minister that we are forgiven. The priest is here to assure you of forgiveness, not to add a layer of bureaucracy in the process. But even when our sins are small, using a priest keeps us honest; it makes us tell the truth and live by it. Jesus told the apostles, “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven,” and we believe that they passed on the ministry of forgiveness to their successors.

If you’re looking for an excuse not to go to confession, there are plenty of them around. “I can tell God on my own that I’m sorry. I haven’t done anything really bad. I’m not free on Saturday afternoons. I’m afraid the priest may recognize me. I forgot how to go to confession. It’s raining. My knee hurts. I don’t have the right shoes.” There are plenty of excuses to go around. I should know; I’ve used a number of them myself over the years. But before long, our excuses make us sound like the Pharisee in today’s gospel. “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.” The Pharisee takes over God’s role as judge. He judges that he is righteous, and that other people are sinners. He puts all this in his prayer so God won’t be confused by the facts.

But the Pharisee is confused. He does not really know the hearts of others, and he is too consumed with himself to see who he really is. Ironically, he is a good man. He fasts. He tithes. He believes in God. But he is so stuck on himself that he does not know how to pray.

The tax collector stands at a distance, lowers his eyes, beats his breast, compares himself to no one else, and says one of the most perfect prayers in the gospel: “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.” He believes in God, he sees himself as a sinner, he believes that God is merciful, that God *can* forgive, and that God will be moved to forgive by a prayer of sorrow. Many Christians use this prayer like a mantra all day long: “O God, be merciful to me a sinner. O God, be merciful to me a sinner. O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

But this prayer runs contrary to today’s culture. We hear advice like this: “Stand up for yourself. Don’t expect someone else to do it for you. Don’t be weak. Don’t admit you’re wrong. Accuse someone else. Show your strength. Be confident. Others won’t respect you if you don’t respect yourself. You deserve everything the world has to give you.” Well, everyone benefits from self-esteem, but no one benefits from self-centeredness. We shouldn’t become a doormat, but we should live honestly. Honesty will help us see ourselves as lovable as God sees us, but also as sinful as God sees us. Each of us is good, but each of us sins. The Pharisee and the tax collector are both examples of this.

On Wednesday night, November 14, we’ll celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation for our second graders and for the other children in our school of religion. All of you are welcome. If between now and then, the Holy Spirit moves your heart to come to church and pray, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner,” then come. Confess your guilt, and hear the words of Christ: “I absolve you from your sins.”