

Romans chapter 10 verse 9 is a bible verse as beloved by many Christians as John 3:16. In John's gospel, Jesus says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." In the Letter to the Romans, in a verse that appears in today's second reading, Paul says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Christians love this verse because it packs an entire creed into one statement. It announces two things we believe about divinity: Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead. It tells us our responsibilities: to believe this in our heart and to confess it to others. And it pledges this implication: You will be saved.

It's astonishing how simple this statement is. It makes salvation sound easy. But it is easy only for those who have the gift of faith. For others, coming to that faith is very hard.

In this particular verse, Paul says nothing about good works. This is another reason why this verse became so popular among non-Catholic Christians. It rests the entire gift of salvation upon belief, not on our actions. But elsewhere the New Testament is clear about the importance of our behaviors, and I'm sure Paul would be the first to say that if you really believe Jesus is Lord, you will lead your life accordingly. When Paul says that belief leads to justification and confession on the lips leads to salvation, he doesn't put good behavior in the forefront, nor does he rule it out.

The early church faced the heresy of Pelagianism, the belief that we could earn our way to heaven exclusively on our own good works. Many Catholics still are affected by this heresy, and Paul's reminder of the source of salvation comes as a good corrective.

It is to our benefit that salvation comes from God and not from us. Salvation is such a wonderful thing that only God is capable of granting it. And no matter how hard we try, we will always be stuck in sin. This weekend the Catholic Church in the United States released a very disturbing report on the sex abuse scandal. It states that over 4000 priests are guilty of abusing children over the past 50 years at a cost of over \$1 billion of funds contributed by people of good will. We are very aware of the sin that lives even in our leaders, and the need for sincere repentance.

Each year on the First Sunday of Lent our church celebrates a ceremony called the Rite of Election. It takes place at the local cathedral, and it is especially for those who are asking to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. In the Rite of Election, godparents testify to the belief and the behavior of catechumens. Then the bishop announces that they are among the elect, the chosen people of God, specifically those chosen for baptism this year. From our parish we will have 9 people at the Rite of Election.

At their baptism, the elect will be asked to make their profession of faith, to confess with their lips the belief they hold in their heart – that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. On the strength of that belief, they will be baptized, their sins forgiven, and salvation offered.

Throughout this season of Lent we are to reflect on our sins and confess them before God. This is the perfect season to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. But let us never forget that our confession leads to forgiveness and our forgiveness to salvation.

Lent is a season of penance. We acknowledge that we are sinners. We ask forgiveness. And we resolve to change for the better. We give up things. We do more for others – all to show sorrow for our sins and to seek God’s grace to do better.

This year’s Lent begins with yesterday’s disturbing report from a Catholic lay panel about the sex abuse crisis in the church. The report is significant because it summarizes the history of priests abusing minors in the United States over the past 50 years. This is the first collection of surveys done by individual dioceses. The numbers show over 10,000 allegations of sexual abuse of minors committed by over 4,000 priests. The church has paid over \$600 million in settlements nationwide. Advocates for victims say those numbers are underreported because they come from dioceses, not from victims. In truth, as the crisis was unfolding over the past two years, we heard that about 1% of priests were being accused. Small as that percentage is, even a single case is one too many. But the new numbers show that 4% of priests were accused.

Things have improved: More than 80% of the alleged abuses took place between the 1960s to the 1980s. Bishops have removed from service any priest credibly accused of even a single instance of abuse. The bishops promise better support to victims, and they encourage victims who have not yet spoken up to do so.

If Lent is a season for sinners, the Catholic Church has begun it with a fitting sense of shame and sorrow. We need someone to save us. We need Jesus more than ever.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Christians love this verse because it packs an entire creed into one statement. It announces that Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead. It tells us our responsibilities: to believe this in the heart and to confess it to others. And it makes this pledge: We will be saved.

During holy week, when we celebrate the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we confess our faith in the one who saves us from our sins. Throughout this Lent, let us accept the mantle of penance. Let us make our homes a better place to live, our offices a more noble place to work, our schools a more loving place to learn, and our church a more honest place for repentance.