

We'll be celebrating the parish Lenten penance service this Friday night, so I thought I'd take the opportunity tonight to offer a word of encouragement to those of you who are planning to seek forgiveness for your sins before Easter this year.

I might preface this by clarifying an old concept you may have heard about at one time or another in your life. Were you ever told you had to make your Easter duty each year? Well, the duty still exists, and the whole thing started centuries ago when the Church was a bit different from the one we grew up in. Back in the old days the problem was that people weren't going to communion very much at all; they'd come to Mass, but the priest would go to communion for them. So the Church actually had to legislate that all Catholics should go to communion at least once a year, and it should be during the Easter season, the time when we celebrate the risen Christ who is present to us in the Bread and Wine. Then they said if some people were in serious sin, they would have to go to confession first. Well, Easter duty is still with us, but it's not so necessary since people now receive communion much more frequently than they used to. The Church does not legislate and never has legislated that everyone has to go to confession every year. That was only for those in serious sin.

Now you may think, "Gee, that sure lets me off the hook for this year, I can stay home Friday night and watch *Different Strokes*." Well, yes you can, but I wish you'd reconsider. Of all the seasons of the year, Lent is the best for making a good confession. Lent prepares us for celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ. We engage in penances each year to enjoy a personal experience of dying to our former selves and rising with Christ as new people on Easter. The whole point of going to confession in Lent, then, can be to ritualize that personal conversion of heart we pray for each year.

Now, I know, some of you say, "Well, I keep committing the same sins all the time; it's hard to break out of the habit." Sometimes we feel like the Israelites wandering in the desert. We don't know if we'll ever get out of the mess we've got ourselves into. Well, at its best, penance should help us to break out of those habits. We come to the sacrament with an intention to do our best to do better, and the priest prays that God will help us to do so. *The sac. itself fortifies us to break the old habits of sin.*

Today's first reading is Isaiah talking to those Israelites who spent all that time in the desert, wandering and wondering if they'd ever get out. He proclaims that now God is doing something new in the desert. He cuts a path there and lets rivers of water flow in. The wild beasts which terrorized the regions will now glorify God instead, because He has taken pity on His chosen ones.

I invite you, especially if you think there's a desert in your life, to consider the sacrament of penance this week. Lent is the time for us to open our hearts to the Lord so that rivers of life-giving water can flush out our deserts--rivers of reconciliation, rivers of peace.

Lent 5  
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