

Homily: 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent 2016: Cycle A: Is 11: 1-10; Ps. 72; Rom 15: 4-9; Mt 3: 1-12

“Transformation in Christ and the Gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation”

1. In the Gospel today, what is St. John the Baptist’s message to the people of his time and for all time? 3 R’s! Not reading, writing and arithmetic (ha-ha), but **REPENTANCE- REFORM- RENEWAL**. He challenges the Pharisees and us to show good spiritual fruit in our lives. Where is the evidence of a purpose of amendment? To turn away from the old life of sin to a new life of virtue in Christ. An old spiritual maxim is “*the road to Hell is paved with good intentions.*” We must **do the good** not simply **think about the good!** Advent is a good time to look at this and to make some necessary spiritual adjustments, so we can make continual progress on the path of goodness in the Lord.
2. For this **transformation in Christ** to occur, we need lots of the virtue of **patience and the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit** which we hear about in the 1<sup>st</sup> reading from the prophet Isaiah: *wisdom, knowledge, understanding, fear of the Lord, piety, counsel and fortitude*. Pray for this on a daily basis. Remember this transformation in holiness does not happen immediately when we desire it but happens over time, although for it to occur we must desire and passionately seek the Lord and His will in all areas of our life. Also not settling for spiritual mediocrity which is our natural tendency as human beings because **becoming holy in the Lord is hard but worthwhile work!** Why doesn’t it happen immediately? Well, because we all suffer from the effects of **original sin**. *Our minds are darkened, our wills are weakened, and our hearts are hardened, in a way that the Lord did not originally intend when He created the human race. We also tend to focus on the passing things we see, even if they are sinful and bad for us.* **Fortunately the eternal Son of God came to earth to become one of us, which we will celebrate at Christmas, to save us from this sad reality.** We now have the opportunity because of the Incarnation of Christ, and His subsequent Passion, Death and Resurrection, to be created anew in Him - if only we turn to Him in love. **Growing in holiness is a life-long process**, but each day

we must “fight the good fight” against the powers of darkness, our weak nature, and death; otherwise we will slip backwards toward the eternal darkness; Jesus thus gave us **the Sacrament of Confession** specifically to help us in the daily fight against sin and evil, both in terms of healing and strength - we need to receive it frequently and devoutly in order to make steady progress in holiness.

3. On Sunday we will have **the Advent Penance Service** here at St. Thomas at 4 pm with 5 priests hearing individual Confessions. Confession can help us so much: both in terms of forgiveness and healing from past sins as well as receiving divine strength to avoid similar sins in the future. Some people struggle with going to Confession: **first** you have people who maybe are not fully repentant for their serious sins, meaning right now they have no intention of changing their patterns of behavior - they must pray for divine enlightenment to see in a deeper way how horrible sin is, especially serious or mortal sin; **second** you have individuals who were not raised Catholic, but who converted later in life and who maybe have always struggled with going to individual Confession because they did not grow up with it. But by not going they weigh down their souls and lose an opportunity to grow closer to God since Jesus is the one who set up the Sacrament and asks us to go - *see John 20:20-22* and like all things in life the more we go the easier it usually becomes; **third** you have individuals who don't go much, or at all, because they never really received a great moral and spiritual formation in the Catholic faith and so really don't know what sin is and what it is not. Ignorance in this case is not bliss. I encourage anyone who is afraid of Confession because of lack of knowledge to do some research- reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, especially the 3<sup>rd</sup> part on morality*, looking over the nice examination of conscience in the bulletin today, and don't be afraid to ask questions- *why is that a sin, Father?* Or if you need help with your act of contrition, I will help you any way I can – you can also say it in your own words; **fourth** you have pious Catholics who are not committing any serious sins, but who struggle with habitual venial sins and so get frustrated and don't go to Confession much because as one person told me years ago, *“I don't want to say the same thing over and over again*

- *God gets sick of hearing me.*” Well my response to that is: *neither God, nor me as a priest who represents Him, gets tired of helping* - remember sometimes we struggle with the same things to teach us **patience** and possibly God allows these struggles so we don’t fall into worst sins. Confession can help in this regard to give us additional strength and eventually to overcome our weakness. **Fifth** you have a group who doesn’t go to Confession because “back in the day” a priest was Fr. Cranky or Fr. Impatient (a priest who said: *you did what??!!* to scare the other penitents away since he didn’t like hearing Confessions and so they went to the other priest at the parish), or Fr. Scary (true story about the boxer priest and my priest friend’s mom in Pittsburgh), or a priest was mean to you, or even sadly gave you wrong advice or false Catholic teaching, or the priest caused scandal because of his own bad life and turned out to be not a very good priest - **as a side note:** remember God works through the priest whether he is holy or not as long as he says the right prayer of absolution at minimum, but pray for us priests to be holy as it is much better in Confession that way!!! I would encourage anyone in this last boat to give it another try. **Try not to be anxious, the Confessional is not meant to be a torture chamber as Pope Francis pointed out recently, but the place of God’s mercy and forgiveness and healing, the place of reconciliation with God and neighbor in the depths of our soul.** The only one we hurt is ourselves - when we don’t enter the Sacrament of Mercy, the encounter of God’s personal love for each of us- one on one- as Pope St John Paul II mentioned to a group of young Catholics as the primary reason why we go to Confession in an individual way and in privacy, so we are not put on public display in our sins and weaknesses. **It is truly the Sacrament of Mercy and Love - not fear & dread.** Take advantage of this Sunday afternoon to unburden your souls and prepare your heart for Christmas day, especially if it has been a while. You are also always welcome to make an individual appointment with me to hear your Confession if you don’t want to feel rushed in any way, especially if it has been many years since your last confession. Feel free to write some things down if that helps you to remember and feel less anxious. I’m here to help as well as all the priests who will be coming here on Sunday afternoon.☺ God bless you.