

THAT UNWORTHY FEELING

(Msgr. McHenry was away last weekend. Here is a homily on the Sunday readings from another time.)

Periodically, a question will arise about the topic of excommunication and who is excommunicated and for what? In the Code of Canon Law that was revised in 1983, there are a handful of things for which a person may be excommunicated. One would be laying violent hands on the Pope; another would be the desecration of the Blessed Sacrament. A third would be the procuring of an abortion knowingly, willfully and wholeheartedly with no mitigating circumstances. Most who have abortions do not know this but that is how serious a matter the Church sees this. Excommunicated does not mean unforgivable. It means that something has been done that is so destructive of the Body of Christ that the person doing this has alienated themselves from and broken faith with the community of believers.

Two other instances where excommunication would come into play would be if a priest were to violate the seal of confession and reveal the contents of a person's confession. Or, if a priest were to attempt to absolve another person with whom he has engaged in serious sin—thief or sexual congress or murder—he would be excommunicated. In each case the violation of the community's faith would be so severe that the offending priest would have cut himself off from those who believe.

There is something else that the priest may not do when it comes to the sacrament of reconciliation. The priest may not absolve himself of any sin. This does not have to do with excommunication but with the sanctity of the seal of confession. I must admit that the thought had crossed my mind and even before I was ordained I remember thinking that that would be pretty cool to absolve yourself. You can see the obvious problems. The priest too, as penitent, must kneel before another priest and confess his sins as everyone does. But there is something in us as human beings that always tries to mitigate our sins. We rationalize them. We come up with excuses and try to explain them away. We justify them in our own minds. We rely on extenuating circumstances. We say to ourselves: "It's no big deal." We say that even when we know better.

I have gone through various stages and phases in my own life. I know exactly what Isaiah is saying when he says: "I am a man of unclean lips," whose mouth needs to be purified. I know Paul's heart in his zealous anger where he passed judgment on others and felt very justified in doing whatever he could to bring them down. I know Peter's sense of instant unworthiness that drops him to his knees in the boat, saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Do you think that Jesus does not know Paul's vicious streak? Or Peter's flawed impetuosity? And yet, despite these things he chooses them and calls them to be his apostles. Who else does he have to call? Who else can he get to send? All there are are sinners. Jesus may be offended by their sin but he does not dwell on it. Instead he offers what we truly need and can't give ourselves—forgiveness. There are certain things in life that people cannot do by themselves. One is to make love and another is to be forgiven.

When you feel unworthy, what do you do? Do you go to Christ? You cannot undo what you have done. Nor can I. But you can be forgiven, as have I. Jesus wants to rely on you and on me. He does not want us to pretend that we are sin free and he doesn't want us to discount ourselves because we have sinned. Maybe even because we have sinned gravely. What he wants is for us to meet him in the sacrament in honesty and humility.

Jesus does not want Peter or Paul to feel unworthy. He wants them to feel forgiven, set free, loved. And Jesus wants to hear from them what Isaiah said, "Here I am, send me." Have you ever, for any reason, said those words to the Lord? "Lord, here I am send me?" When there is that difficult family situation do you turn to the Lord and say, "Send me?" When the workplace loses its humanity and you wonder how can it be changed or challenged, do you ever say, "Here, send me?" When sacrifices are needed in the family without which the center may not hold, do you go to the Lord and say, "Here I am Lord send me?" And if you have, how is it going? And if you have not, ask yourself why not. Is there no situation, no relationship, no cause for which the Lord may be able to rely on you to be the one? Might the Lord be waiting, despite your past sins, for you to say what these others have said? "Here I am, Lord, send me."