

Column032220

Companions on the Journey

March 22, 2020

Dear Friends,

I wrote this column some nine years ago but want to give it a reprise as I am returning from the Holy Land. The occasion was Forty Hours where we had exposition of the Blessed Sacrament through the night.

It was about 1:45 AM, early Tuesday morning. I was sitting on the bench in the back of the Mary Chapel. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed in the Monstrance with a simple but elegant flower arrangement on either side of the Monstrance and two lighted candles. I had been there since a bit before one o'clock and it was very quiet and very peaceful. It was a time of simple prayer. But at 1:45 as I looked up from my rosary, there was, on the right side of the chapel, a mom with her son maybe eight years old and a young couple sitting next to each other on the left side of chapel. Five people in the middle of the night in prayer before Our Lord present sacramentally.

I just want you to try to get that mental picture for a moment. None of us "had" to be there. Each of us made a sacrifice to be there at that time of the morning. There was love present there. There was connectedness with the God of all life in that moment. There was an interconnectedness among the five of us in the chapel at that moment. I will remember that scene when I am confronted and bombarded by the seamy side of the Church, with the scandals and deception and ugliness. For the Church encompasses all of that—and more, much, much more. Christ has founded the Church and it is founded on the apostles all of whom were sinners. Some of their sin was small and a lot of it was big. There was betrayal and denial and fear and violence right from the beginning of all of this. But there was also fidelity and love and compassion and loyalty and simplicity from the beginning too.

Christ was perfect. We have been baptized into Christ. We are the Body of Christ. We want ourselves to be perfect too. But we are not perfect. Never have been. Never will be. Otherwise there would have been no reason to establish a sacrament of forgiveness. You and I are sinners. We are the Church and we are sinners too. That is all that the Lord has to work with. So he picks his priests from among sinful humanity to be the ones who mete out his mercy and forgiveness in the sacrament of Reconciliation. I know that the vast majority of priests are very conscious of their own sinfulness and their own need for forgiveness even as they extend their hands in absolution over each penitent.

I also know that many Catholics hold back from this sacrament precisely because they know that the priest is sinner. But ask yourself, who else does the Lord have? There is no community of sinless people to choose from. There is just the existing community of believers. And somehow we have to make it work. We have such a need as human beings to hear the Lord's word of forgiveness so that we can know we are forgiven and not just hope for forgiveness. The Lord himself lives in us and in the Church. His mercy and love are profoundly present there. And that is why that simple scene from Tuesday morning will stay in my mind and remind me that there is hope and goodness and sacrificial love here too—and more of that than anything else, especially sin. It's just that sin likes to get the attention—and it so often does. It just really isn't the whole story. As a matter of fact, it isn't the story at all. God's love is. So we must seek moments where we may find it.

Peace,

Msgr. McHenry