

SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH + YORKVILLE

April 7, 2024

Newsletter no. 212

This Sunday's Gospel, which tells of Jesus' appearance to his disciples on the evening of the day of his resurrection, recounts his words to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." Over the course of Lent, until we stopped for Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, our newsletters were devoted to a discussion of the sacrament of reconciliation, otherwise known as confession or penance, whose special purpose is the forgiveness of sins. With this newsletter we can resume that discussion.

By the time that we left off two weeks ago, we had seen how the New Testament seemed not to allow the forgiveness of serious sins that were committed after baptism (less serious, or venial, sins could always be forgiven by prayer and the performance of good works). Then, in the middle of the second century, the possibility of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the forgiveness of serious sins committed after baptism became available; however, it was accompanied by the obligation to perform a harsh and lengthy public penance, and there was no second opportunity for forgiveness. This regimen continued until the seventh century, when the frequent confession of one's sins, which was practiced by British and Irish monks, was introduced by them into continental Europe. For several centuries this new and more merciful approach to the sacrament of reconciliation coexisted with its older and more rigorous counterpart, until finally by the late Middle Ages the newer approach completely replaced the older one.

One of the innovations of the British and Irish monks, along with the idea of frequent confession itself, was the so-called penitential books, which were used by priests who heard confessions and which gave advice about how to deal with the sins that were mentioned in confession. What sort of penance, in other words, should be imposed for a given sin? Thus, in the penitential books, sins were placed in different categories, such as avarice or gluttony or fornication, and then broken down into their different manifestations and described in detail, accompanied by the penance that was appropriate for each manifestation. Among the sins that were included were some that we would never think of including today, like drinking water contaminated by a dead animal. The persons committing the sins were categorized as well, whether bishops or priests or deacons or monks or nuns or lay men or women or children. Although the penance that was imposed for serious sins was not necessarily intended to be a public humiliation, it was nonetheless usually extremely rigorous, often involving years of fasting on bread and water. (For those who want to know more about this fascinating aspect of the history of penance, the classic text, first published in 1938 and available online, is *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, by John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer.)

Penitential books ultimately fell into disuse, but the need for priests to be educated about the sins that they listened to while hearing confession continued. A substantial part of Thomas Aquinas's most famous work, his monumental *Summa Theologiae*, written in the 1270s, is devoted to the moral questions that priests would have to confront in the confessional and may even have been written with those priests in mind. It would not be too much to say that what we know today as moral theology—the study of living a virtuous Christian life and of navigating amidst the seductions of vice—sprang from Thomas's influential *Summa* and, before that, from the thousands of anonymous priests who read the penitential books, listened patiently to others' sins and, perhaps, reflected on their own.

There will be more on the sacrament of reconciliation in next week's newsletter.

Father Boniface

Mass intentions for the period from April 6th to 14th

Saturday-Sunday, April 6th-7th

4:00 pm: Jimmy Quinn (D)
8:00 am: Megan, Matt, Sarah and Ryan (L)
10:00 am (German): Adeline Dory (D)
12:00 noon: Ximena Rodorigo (D)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Edna Stori (D)
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners

Monday, April 8th (The Feast of the Annunciation)

7:00 am: Alan Tays (D)
12:15 pm: In Thanksgiving to God

Tuesday, April 9th

7:00 am: Patricia Camilleri (D)
9:00 am (School Mass):
12:15 pm: Andrzej Biakocerkiewickz (D), Month's Mind

Wednesday, April 10th

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Claire Elias (D)

Thursday, April 11th

7:00 am: Susan Jane Montafia (D)
12:15 pm: William Bellion (D)

Friday, April 12th

7:00 am: Fanny, Julio and Milton Ronquillo (D)
12:15 pm: Jacqueline ("Jackie") Ludorf (D)

Saturday, April 13th

8:00 am: Amy Li (D)
12:15 pm: George A. Konow (D), Month's Mind
4:00 pm: José Aragones (D)

Sunday, April 14th

8:00 am: Virginia Taylor (D)
10:00 am: James Patrick O'Brian (D)
12:00 noon: Susan Miller (D)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Valarie Kurcz (D)
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners