

Don't put the focus on what's wrong

There's a story told of a priest celebrating an anniversary. A politician had been scheduled to give the opening remarks, but the politician didn't show up. Instead, the priest thought he would begin himself.

He said: "When I first came to this parish I had a terrible impression of the parish from the first confession I heard. I thought this must be a terrible parish. This guy had done everything. He had stolen, taken drugs, had affairs, lied to the police and on and on. I thought everyone here might be like him. But I was wrong. You are all such wonderful people."

Just then the politician arrived. He began: "I'm sorry I'm late. I'm sorry I missed Father's opening remarks. You know, I'll never forget Father's first day in the parish. I was the first person to go to confession to him!"

Now that's not a true story. But it's not a bad joke!

I tell the story because it helps to highlight why there is a confessional seal. The seal of confession means that no priest can ever divulge anything he hears in confession. The confessional is a sacred space. Only the God, the priest, and the penitent are involved.

While I love celebrating all the sacraments, next to the Eucharist, I love celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation. It's a place where I feel honored that people trust me with their burdens so that I can share with them God's forgiveness and healing.

In truth most of the hours of my day are spent listening to other people's problems. I have worn the cartilage in my listening ear down because of hours on the phone. No, it's not the sacrament of reconciliation, but it is a privileged place. It's a sacred space.

As we all know from the media, while personal confession of sins is down, confession of other people's sins is up! On a personal level we call it gossip. Here secrets are not always kept. I believe it was St. Augustine who was credited with saying that, "Telling a secret is really telling the whole world, one person at a time."

In addition, all the tabloids and magazines that I see at check-out lines seem to be filled with other peoples sins – who’s having an affair, who’s getting divorced, who’s gaining weight (a sin in our society) and on and on. Apparently we feel better knowing that someone else is doing worse. “At least I didn’t do that!” we can self-righteously say.

Focusing even momentarily on the sins of others is like a drug. It may give us a “high,” a momentary thrill of indignation or self-righteousness, but it wears off.

Mostly, I think, we do confess other people’s sins so we can feel better. But it’s an illusory victory.

Years ago someone was sharing with me a juicy piece of gossip. The person asked me, “Do you want to know who it was?” I replied, “No.” The person seemed shocked. But I have no interest in what’s wrong with other people. There’s way too much that’s wrong with me. For all I know the story may have been about me!

The old saying is true, “When you point a finger at someone else, there are four fingers pointing back at you.”

Back in 2002 when I had the strokes in my eyes, and in 2008, when I had the blood clots in my lungs, people would often seek to “comfort” me by telling me stories of people who were even worse off. But I found no comfort in my misery knowing someone else was more miserable.

What does help us in life? The four-part program that I suggested for Lent is a four-part program that we can hopefully practice for life. Step one, as soon as you find yourself thinking self-blaming thoughts, self-critical thoughts, let them go. Step two, throughout the day, give yourself love and approval. Again and again, even hundreds of times, as you walk, drive, jog, etc., keep repeating, “I give myself love and approval.” As I have said before the self-loving voice is the voice of the Christ within you giving you love.

Step three, as soon as you catch yourself thinking blaming or critical thoughts of others, let those thoughts go. Release them. Step four, send to others in your life – friends, neighbors, co-workers, “enemies,” etc. – send them love and approval.

When we confess our sins sacramentally, we release them in order to be filled with Christ's love and forgiveness. We can do something similar to that moment by moment, giving our negative and critical thoughts and feelings to the Christ within, and allowing this same Christ, moment by moment, to speak love and forgiveness to ourselves and to others.

Focusing on what's wrong - in ourselves or others, never helps. Allowing God's love to come to us, and to come to others through us, does help. Who needs to focus on our failings when we are surrounded and filled with Divine Love?