

Reconcile to the divine within

By Father Joseph Breighner

Early in Lent a saintly, elderly nun asked me if I would hear her confession. I told her I would be honored to do that. She prefaced her confession, however, by saying: "Father Joe, for the life of me I can't think of anything I've done wrong."

I replied: "Sister, I've never had that problem."

Lent is a time to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, what we popularly call confession. It is an opportunity to let go of the baggage that weighs our spirits down, and to allow God's life to flow more fully in us and through us.

During Lent, I was privileged to join four of my brother priests for a celebration of reconciliation - a penance service - for the retired sisters and staff at Villa Assumpta. The opening prayer of that service is worth repeating and meditating on.

Create a clean heart in me, O God. Dust off the unmindful activity that constantly collects there. De-clutter my heart from harsh judgments and negativity. Wash away my resistance to working through difficult relationships. Rinse off my unloving so the beauty of my generous and kind heart can shine forth. Remove whatever keeps me from following in your compassionate footsteps. Amen.

There are so many wonderful messages in that prayer. A clean heart doesn't just mean a heart free from sin, but a heart that is open to all the ways that God can enter our lives. Most of us have lives filled with unmindful activity. We just go through life on automatic. So many sights and sounds bombard our senses from television, computers, magazines and newspapers. Without mindfulness - a mind that is fully aware of God's constant presence - we simply become zombies, molded by our culture and by our culture's values.

And don't we all need to be decluttered from harsh judgments and negativity? As I've said so often in this column, we so easily identify with our egos - our mind-body entities - and forget entirely the deeper reality that we are also spirit. In fact, we

carry within us the Spirit of God. It's that presence of God within us that needs to be nourished with God's word and the body and blood of Christ.

Our human minds are programmed to be negative. Next to judging and beating ourselves up in our own minds, we love to judge and blame others. Most of our newscasts and talk shows are negative. Lent is a time to de-clutter and minimize our exposure to the media. Just be mindful that we are inhaling negativity in so many forms from our media. We deserve to treat ourselves better, and to take time for silence, for noticing beauty, inner peace and joy. The Kingdom of God really is within us, as Jesus said, but most of us are pulled out of ourselves looking for happiness and fulfillment in the world - a world which can never deliver such happiness. As one mystic put it: "For every ounce of pleasure we take from the world, we get a pound of pain."

My favorite line from the prayer, perhaps, is about rinsing off unloving so the beauty of a generous and kind heart can shine through.

We are made in God's image and likeness. We are by God's design made to be loving. We are literally made of love since we are made in the divine image of God who is love. And yet our culture would have us forget who we are. So would the devil. His whispering temptation got Adam and Eve to doubt God. Satan would do the same in our culture.

You and I are, by design, kind, good, loving, forgiving, generous and courageous. Sin is forgetting who we are. Lent is a time to be reconciled to God, reconciled to the divine within all of us. All we have to do is confess, to let go of what is not of God, and allow God to shine through our lives.

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