

Second Sunday of Lent—Year A—March 12, 2017

01. In today's Gospel, we hear Matthew's account of the dramatic story of Jesus' Transfiguration. The word transfiguration itself means—a **complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state**. And this is exactly what is depicted in today's Gospel, as Luke gives us a preview of the glorious, cosmic transformation that will soon be accomplished by the **Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ**.
02. One of the things that has been haunting me about my experience of priesthood so far has been my suspicion that (for some) the Sacraments have ceased to be a **transformative encounter with God**, and have become **MERE cultural rites of passage** — and that the experience of the Sacraments have become rather routine and mundane.
03. Even as a priest (and even though I've only been ordained a short time) — I sometimes find myself fighting the temptation to think of the Sacraments as just another routine part of my ministry. But if the Sacraments have become routine for us and have ceased to be transformative encounters with God — both the clergy and the people of God need to ask ourselves why. Because the Sacraments are **THE PRIMARY means** God has chosen to transform our souls into this **more beautiful and spiritual state** that Jesus Himself gives us a glimpse of in today's Gospel.
04. Because, with the Sacraments, God Himself has transformed things that we use all the time—things like water, wine, bread, and oil—and made them into the means of **our own transformation**. And every encounter with a Sacrament is an encounter with God Himself, and an opportunity for change — because God doesn't only change the elements we use in the Sacraments, **God changes us** by the power of the Sacrament itself.
05. And change is what the Season of Lent is really all about. Because Lent is not just about giving something up — Lent is a **PROFOUND invitation** to reflect on the person **we have become and the person we are becoming**. Because sin is not only about what we do and don't do — sin is about **who we are and who we are becoming**. Just as virtue is not just about what we do, but about what kind of person we have become.
06. This being the season of Lent, I wanted to talk about one Sacrament in particular that has the power to transform us and to change our lives — the Sacrament of Confession. Because, as one who has been on both sides of

the fence now, **as a confessee, and a confessor**, I truly see how this great Sacrament can transform our lives through the power of God's Mercy.

07. As a confessee, like many of you, I did my first Confession in grade school — but it was my second Confession, the one which I made in high school, that forever changed me. Unlike my first Confession, during my second Confession in high school, I was brutally honest with myself and my confessor — and at the moment of absolution, I had a profound experience of God's mercy and forgiveness.
08. I didn't see anything, but I distinctly felt the sensation of light coming down upon me and my sins being **completely wiped away** through the power of the Cross. And so, in an instant, I felt the power of **God's Mercy, God's total forgiveness** in a way that was undeniable to me.
09. This experience left me in a state of awe — for what an amazing thing it is to have all your sins completely wiped away in an instant through the words of absolution from a priest. It was almost as if I had gone back in time, and had never committed those sins — almost as if they had never happened. The priest was able to do something for me that **no doctor, no psychologist, no counselor could ever do** — give me God's unconditional pardon and forgiveness for my sins. Since then, frequent Confession has been a major part of my life.
10. And now, as a priest, as a confessor — I am once again in a state of awe with regards to the beauty and power of Confession — having fallen in love with this Sacrament all over again — because when people come to me with their sins, with their **deepest, darkest secrets** — it is truly a **sacred moment, a sacred trust, and a sacred privilege** — a privilege that puts me in a state of awe, because in NO WAY have I merited this honour — but it's only because of God's **enormous** generosity, that I have been allowed to participate in His saving work in this way. In fact, when someone confesses their sins to me, there is no room **whatsoever for judgment of any kind** — because I am filled with a sense of awe and gratitude that God allows men, and even more so, that God allows **ME**, to be instruments of His Mercy in this way.
11. It may be a humbling experience for the person coming to me — but, as a priest hearing Confession, it's an even more humbling experience for **me** — because, who I am to be given this most sacred trust of hearing people's **deepest, darkest secrets** — to be honoured with that kind of information — and to offer them God's forgiveness and mercy? Because, again, to hear the

sins of a penitent is an **enormous** privilege, and a sacred trust, that God in His infinite Mercy and generosity has given to men ordained to the priesthood.

12. When people come to me in Confession with **their sins, their secrets, and their shame** — it's almost as sacred a moment as when I'm behind the altar consecrating bread and wine. Because the sins and secrets people bring to me in Confession are like the bread and wine brought to the priest at the altar — and through the power of the Sacrament, through the power of God's Mercy, these sins are transformed into **pure grace** — just as the bread and wine are transformed into the **Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ**.
13. And, in reality, the bigger the sin, and the worse the shame brought to Confession, the greater the grace that results from it. And even if you come to Confession, not sure **how sorry you really are** — but you sincerely **WANT to be sorry**—that's enough. The Lord takes whatever we have to offer and transforms it into pure grace.
14. And when people come to me in Confession, pouring their hearts out, holding nothing back and sharing with me the darkness and ugliness of their sins — I often say to them: that was a beautiful confession. Because I truly believe that the uglier the sins brought to the Sacrament, the more beautiful the Confession. And if that's my attitude, how much more is that God's attitude?
15. And so, when people come to Confession, no matter how long it's been, or how great their sins, it's an occasion **for awe, for gratitude, and for rejoicing** — both for the confessee **and the confessor** — because, in Confession, God not only changes us — He changes **our darkness into light, our vices into virtues, our guilt and shame into innocence, dignity and freedom**.
16. And when someone comes to me and says, it's been **10, 20, or even 25** years since their last Confession — my reaction is one of great joy — so imagine **how much more God is rejoicing**. Because God doesn't look at the fact that it took a person so long to get to Confession — God is rejoicing that the person is receiving the Sacrament **NOW**.
17. And it's the same when someone comes to Confession frequently — my reaction is also one of great joy — so again, imagine how much more God is rejoicing. Because even though all the penitent sees is the fact that they keep committing the same sins over and over again — **all I see** is that they keep **repenting over and over again**. And if that's all I see — how much

more does God see that. Because even though that person may feel like they're back again with the same old sins — God doesn't look at the fact that they're **sinning again** — God looks at the fact that they are **repenting again** — and this too is an occasion for great rejoicing.

18. I remember someone once saying to me that: ***we're only as sick as our secrets***. And isn't it true that our secrets make us dysfunctional — that our secrets have the power to hold us captive and prevent us from **changing, growing, and moving forward** — that our secrets weigh us down with the burden of **shame, guilt, and regret**. But God, in His infinite Mercy, has given us the perfect remedy for this condition.
19. Because I wasn't exaggerating when I said that going to Confession is like going back in time — because the forgiveness God grants to us through the Sacrament is **so total, and so absolute**, that it's almost as if we had **never committed the sin in the first place** — and in some ways, it's even better than that.
20. And I can think of no better remedy for **shame, guilt, and regret** than Confession. Because when we bring our deepest, darkest secrets into the light of Christ's transfigured and resurrected glory, we are freed from the power and burden of **shame, guilt, and regret**.
21. One of the things that has become really clear to me, both from my own sinfulness, and from hearing Confessions, is how sin itself is truly a sickness and a disease. A disease that makes the most well-intentioned, well-meaning person behave completely out of character — a disease that impairs our judgment and weakens our resolve to do good — a disease that blinds us to the truth of what we are doing and who we have become. And none of us are immune to this disease — we are all vulnerable — rich and poor, young and old alike.
22. And so, my attitude in Confession is always one of **compassion** — compassion for someone who has fallen victim to the disease of sin—and is in need of healing. And if that's my attitude, how much more is that **God's attitude**. Because just as we **wouldn't** judge and condemn someone for having cancer — so too we **shouldn't** judge and condemn someone for falling into sin. In fact, the greater a person's sinfulness, the greater should be our compassion for them.
23. And this is why God Himself has such compassion for the sinner — and why Jesus referred to Himself as the doctor Who came to **heal us and free us**

from the sickness of sin. And this is why we need to come to the Sacraments frequently — because the Church is not **a museum for saints, it's a hospital for sinners.**

24. The other day someone was apologizing for pestering me about Confession. And my response to them (and what I say to all of you today) is — **never apologize for pestering a priest for Confession—whether it's been a month, a year, 30 years, or even a day since your last Confession** — never apologize for pestering us for the Sacrament. In fact, I urge you to **pester us to death for Confession.** Because it is our **sacred duty** — **and if we fail to oblige you, the guilt of your sins is upon us.** Furthermore, the Sacrament of Confession is one of the greatest gifts God has given to His Church — and if every baptized Catholic in the world went to Confession frequently—**the entire Church would be transformed overnight.**
25. I can't promise you that you will never have a bad experience in Confession with a priest whose gifts may not be in this area of ministry. I remember one time when I had to excuse myself and leave the confessional right in the middle of the Sacrament because the priest was being exceptionally difficult and judgmental. But what I can promise you is that each and every time you go to Confession — God is rejoicing. Rejoicing because you have not let your sinfulness defeat you — rejoicing because He desires nothing more than to offer His mercy to those who need it and those who seek it — rejoicing because **EACH time we come to the Sacrament** is an opportunity for Him to change our lives and to transform us into the person we were meant to be. **Amen.**