

“On the day of salvation I helped you.” (2 Cor 6:1)

Brothers and sisters, I would like to make a bold assertion: true penance always brings joy.

Most of us think of penance as bothersome. We generally look at penance and imagine it from negative perspective: to do penance is to deprive ourselves of things we usually like doing, or consuming. So, we think of penance as a total of minuses: minus chocolate, minus that delectable gossiping, minus speaking to folks on social media, and so on and so forth.

I won't deny that there's some denial in penance. But that's only one side of the coin.

We should also look at the other side: penance means freedom, penance means liberation. All of us are creatures of habit. And we have good and bad habits (what folks used to call “virtues” and “vices”). Now, the problem with bad habits and vices is that they can become so ingrained in us that we become addicted. We get addicted to smoking, to drink, to drugs, to overeating, to pornography—all of the burdensome and sometimes lethal diseases that people go to 12-step meetings for. But we can also get addicted to other things: to the gym, to gossiping, to TV, to social media, to looking at ourselves in the mirror, to getting angry or sad... Most of these things are good in the first place, in small doses. They give us a certain amount of pleasure or thrill. But then we slowly become enslaved; we lose our freedom. And then, we lose one of the most precious gifts that God wants for us: joy. We get worried about things, we need a new quick fix, we start measuring out our time in a selfish way so that we can serve our new master, whatever the bad habit is. It can actually become some kind of cult or worship. Of course, we would never think of it that way, but it can even take on a sort of religious dimension, because a vice become an addiction can really become the center of our day and our concerns. When will I meet Janie to share this new secret with her? When will I go to the gym to show off my new equipment? When will I get home so I can secretly indulge in a creamy cake or a long, strong drink? These disordered attachments can turn into idolatry: I trade the living God for a dead thing; I trade the great Creator for a mere creature.

Well, brothers and sisters, the good news is: God wants us to be free! He wants us to be cheerful and full of joy! Of course, fighting full-fledged addictions often requires professional help, both medical and spiritual. But disordered attachments, vices, bad habits, things that give us a quick fix and then so much guilt... Isn't it just great when we get rid of those? We may have to fight a tough battle to get free, but it is just so rewarding, so uplifting, when we do experience that freedom. And if we fall in battle, as we always do, we can stand up again and go on leading the good fight, the battle for freedom and joy, with the help of God's grace.

This is what our ashes stand for: I want to fight the good battle! This is what these nice purple crosses stand for on our houses, in our neighborhoods: you know what, neighbors? I

am a sinner, like everyone else. But right now, I'm fighting for my freedom. Some people put bumper stickers on their cars to remind us of our troops fighting abroad: likewise, these purple crosses are a reminder that all of us are invited in the battle for freedom, both personal and as a society. These purple crosses should signify hope: hope that we can be freed from bad habits and sin, and even from addictions. There are so many desperate people around us, brothers and sisters, in the struggle against addictions. This is not magic, of course. I'm not claiming that you can get off an addiction just by clicking your fingers. You need the grace of God and a lot of personal effort. But as Catholics, our message to the world should be joyful and hopeful: you can be free!

And one wonderful way of becoming freer and freer is the sacrament of reconciliation, or confession. Brothers and sisters, I see so many people coming up for communion at Mass, and that's so great! But I see so few people coming to confession, and that's so sad! The American Dental Association says you should go to the dentist twice a year. Well, analogically, you should go to confession at least twice a year, to get rid of that spiritual plaque that's building up! Confession is such a wonderfully healing experience. It gives us hope, along the way, that even though we stumble and fall, God is always by our side. This is what God says to us: "On the day of salvation I helped you!... Behold, now is the day of salvation!"

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