

# Talking Points for Catechesis on Confession & Homily Ideas for the Sundays of Lent

(A supplemental resource to *God's Gift of Forgiveness: A Pastoral Exhortation on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation* and *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [November 2012])

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At least three things have to happen for our people to rediscover the beauty and power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. First, they need to regain an awareness of the destructive power of sin. Second, they need to recover a healthy sense of their own sinfulness. Third, they need to attain a clear vision of the tangible benefits that come from experiencing the healing and strengthening power of God's mercy in this Sacrament. Throughout Lent, we can weave these themes into our preaching, teaching, and parish programming, especially in preparation for Lenten reconciliation services.

We can communicate the destructive power of sin by using real examples that point out the suffering that evil causes:

- The suffering of women after they have an abortion;
- The suffering of children forced into military service in Africa;
- The suffering of women and children victimized by human trafficking;
- The suffering experienced by young people who are seduced by hedonism, especially on college campuses;
- The suffering of the elderly and physically-challenged, who are considered worthless;
- The suffering that leads people to commit suicide;
- And, the less dramatic but equally real suffering caused by daily infidelity, dishonesty, irresponsibility, and prejudice in our own neighborhoods.

Talking about these realities is not resorting to a fear-based preaching of the Gospel: Evil is real and it destroys, and every sin is a participation in evil. We can picture what sin does to our souls by looking at the scourged, abused, and crucified body of Christ hanging from the Cross.

We can communicate the reality of our own sinfulness simply by acknowledging we are all sinners in need of God's mercy and by mentioning the kinds of sinful behavior that today's society ignores, but that the conscience will still register (with the Holy Spirit's help) if given a slight nudge.

- Present sin (both sins of commission and sins of omission) as ugly manifestations of selfishness that inhibit the flow of God's grace in our lives, rather than random dos-and-don'ts. This helps take away some of the off-putting theological baggage of the word "sin."
- Excellent lists of common sins can be found in the [Catechism's explanation of the Ten Commandments](#), as well as the various aids for examining one's conscience (like those on the [USCCB website](#), the [Laudate App for Android and iPhone](#), and the [Confession App](#)).

It is also effective in this regard to use the power of contrast: talk about virtuous action as the ideal we ought to be striving for, referring to the lives of the saints, the works of mercy or the happiness that comes from self-sacrifice instead of self-indulgence.

To communicate the benefits of the Sacrament, it helps to explain that God himself gave us confession because he knew both that we would need it (he is not surprised by our sins and weaknesses) and also that it would be good for us to experience God's mercy in a real time and place, through a human instrument.

- Illustrations from the lives of the great confessors—St. John Vianney, St. Pio di Pietralcina, St. Alphonsus Liguori—and from the revelations Jesus gave to the Church through St. Margaret Mary Alacoque and St. Faustina Kowalska can stir up a powerful desire to plug into this source of spiritual renewal, energy, and warmth.
- Refer to the downloadable one-page USCCB Guide to Confession, examinations of conscience for children and adults, for married and single persons, and other helpful resources [here](#).

Reading 1 Dt 26:4-10 *Moses reminds the Israelites of God's faithfulness in bringing them to the Promised Land*  
Responsorial Psalm Ps 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15 *God Protects all who call upon him*  
Reading 2 Rom 10:8-13 *The Lord came to save all who believe in Him*  
Gospel Lk 4: 1-13 *Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness*

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### **One possible lesson:**

Jesus' temptation in the desert teaches us what sin is—disobeying God and refusing to embrace his will because we don't trust him. Each of the devil's temptations tries to get Jesus to stop trusting his Father and so veer off the path of his Father's will.

### **Possible illustrations:**

1. Read and explain Catechism #397 (Adam's sin and all subsequent sins consist in a lack of trust in God's goodness and disobedience towards him.)
2. Show how at the root of every sin is a failure to trust God, maybe using examples of sins against life. (Abortion fails to trust that every new life is a wise gift from God; euthanasia fails to trust in God's promise that suffering [the cross] has meaning; sexual promiscuity fails to trust that God has a beautiful plan for sexuality that requires virtue on our part.)
3. Show why it's hard for us to trust God (and so why we are vulnerable to temptation): We are gun-shy because people we have trusted have betrayed us.

### **Possible applications:**

1. To resist temptation, we need to strengthen our trust—we do that as Jesus did, by feeding our souls on God's Word (Jesus quotes Scripture to combat the devil).
  - Promote the Lenten liturgies and activities in the parish that will help parishioners explore and go deeper into God's Word.
2. To resist temptation, we need to tap into Christ's own strength, the strength he shows in today's Gospel.
  - Encourage use of Confession to tap into Christ's strength and so resist temptation in the future.

### **Second possible lesson:**

Show how Jesus' temptations reveal the three basic "root sins" that we all struggle with:

- sensuality (basing our life's meaning on pleasure and comfort)
- pride (basing our life's meaning on achievements/power)
- vanity (basing our life's meaning on what other people think of us)

Point out that Jesus resists them all because he is basing his life's meaning on the only solid foundation: communion with his Father's will (you can call it friendship with Christ, a relationship with God).

### **Possible illustrations:**

1. You could use the Three P's to expose these idols which lead us into sin: Pleasure, Power, Popularity.
2. Refer to your favorite saint or the parish's patron saint and an anecdote about how that saint gave up one of the three P's to follow Christ.
3. Use *The Lord of the Rings* (Gollum for Pleasure, Saruman for Power, Shelob for Vanity [spinning webs to trap other people]).

### **Possible applications:**

1. Humility is the antidote to each of the three root sins—like Jesus, we have to make God's will our highest priority, so that we aren't seduced by temptations.
2. Link this to the Our Father (Thy Will Be Done) before Communion, and encourage parishioners to pray the Our Father three times a day during Lent (either before each meal, or morning, noon and night).
3. Encourage use of Confession to exercise humility and tap into God's strength.

# Homily Ideas for the Second Sunday of Lent, Year C      Lectionary: 27

Reading 1 Gen 15:5-12, 17-18 *God enters into a covenant with Abram*

Responsorial Psalm Ps 27:1, 7-8, 8-9, 13-14 *Have trust in the Lord*

Reading 2 Phil 3:17-4:1 *Our citizenship is in heaven, so stand firm in the Lord*

Gospel Lk 9:28b-36 *The Transfiguration*

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## **One Possible lesson:**

God doesn't wait until we are perfect before he reaches out to us:

- Peter, James and John were falling asleep—so normal, but God revealed his glory ...
- Same with Abraham.
- They were just doing the best they could under the circumstances – and that was enough for God  
God wants us to discover him, his goodness, his love; he looks for ways to reveal himself to us all the time.

## **Possible illustrations:**

1. Use your favorite convert story and show how God's transforming grace arrived long before the person was "perfect." (For convert stories, see [www.chnetwork.org](http://www.chnetwork.org).)
2. Use an image of a seed: each of us has the seed of a saint deep in our soul, planted by God. God is constantly working to make that seed grow; he believes in us, is committed to us. The seed may be buried, but it still has the potential to become something wonderful and fruitful.
3. Use the example of Blessed Mother Teresa embracing those whom the world considered worthless—a reflection of God's love for us.
4. Quote from Pope Benedict's first homily in St. Peter's Square: "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."
5. Quote from Catechism #1: "... at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength."

## **Possible applications:**

1. We never need to wonder if we are "good enough" to enter into relationship with God: he loves us as we are, fully.
2. This is why the Church is pro-life: Abortion and euthanasia assume lives are worthwhile only if people live up to arbitrary standards of excellence; for God, excellence comes simply from being created in his image.

3. This is why his forgiveness is always guaranteed: if we are sorry, he will forgive us—it's that simple, and the Sacrament of Confession proves it. The Sacrament says: "I love you, no matter what!"

## **Second possible lesson:**

God is faithful to us, even when we are not faithful to him:

- Show how God's plan of salvation, fulfilled in Christ and the Church, reaches all the way back to Abraham, Moses, and Elijah.
- Point out how in each period of history in the OT, God's people rebelled against him, but God still followed through.
- He will still follow through on his commitment to us even when we mess up, sin, and rebel.

## **Possible illustrations:**

1. Use a personal anecdote when you experienced God's unfailing and personal commitment to you, no matter what.
2. Use the example of the Curé of Ars, who used to read people's souls in the confessional: he could tell them the sins they had forgotten or didn't want to confess. This shows how God knows our misery, and for this reason is eager to shower his grace on us.
3. Read a couple of passages from the *Diary* of St. Faustina (e.g., # 1073) and explain the meaning of mercy: in Latin *miseri-cordia* = take our miseries into his heart.

## **Possible applications:**

1. Use the example of St. Maria Goretti appearing to her murderer (Alessandro Serenelli) in prison, when he was going crazy, and administering mercy to him (info here: [www.mariagoretti.org/alessandrobio.htm](http://www.mariagoretti.org/alessandrobio.htm)).
2. We never have to feel alone—no matter what we may have done or suffered, God never gives up on us: we can always find him here in the Tabernacle (encourage visits to the Eucharist and adoration).
3. Encourage Confession—giving God a chance to show his fidelity.
4. Encourage putting a crucifix on one's bedroom wall, in the living room as a reminder of God's faithfulness: no matter what we may do to him, he will still love us.

Reading 1 Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15 *Moses encounters the burning bush and speaks with God*

Responsorial Psalm Ps 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11 *The Lord is unsurpassing in kindness and mercy*

Reading 2 1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12 *Recalling the fate of Israelites in Egypt who disobeyed the Lord*

Gospel Lk 13:1-9 *Although God is patient and merciful, we must repent for the time of judgment may be at hand*

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### **One Possible lesson:**

Life has a purpose, but we are free to live according to that purpose or not, and God respects that freedom. The disasters St. Luke refers to (fall of the tower, massacre in the temple) simply show—according to Jesus—that all of us will eventually die, our lives will come to an end. Jesus wants us to think about that, so that we will choose to live our few years of life well: growing in our friendship with him, building his Kingdom. Our lives are the time Jesus gives us to “bear fruit”—to love God and neighbor, not to live in self-indulgence and self-centeredness. We can only achieve true happiness now and in eternity if we live according to God’s purpose.

### **Possible illustrations:**

1. Use St. Francis Borgia’s experience of seeing the decayed body of the Spanish Empress Isabella—this woke him up, and made him realize that he needed to choose to serve an everlasting kingdom.
2. Use the example of Pope Alexander VIII, who asked the great artist Bernini to make a mini-sculpture of a coffin for him, right after he was elected pope. He kept the coffin sculpture on his desk to remind him that his time as pope would come to an end, and he would have to come before God to explain himself.
3. Point out that Christ’s call to repentance stems from his love: he is reminding us that we have a purpose, just like the fig tree has a purpose, to bear fruits of happiness and virtue now and forever, and we are truly free to choose to do so or not—time is a great gift.

### **Possible applications:**

1. Maybe we have already repented, but maybe someone we know needs some encouragement so that they can find the strength to leave the dead-end road of sin and enter the path of life: reach out to them this week, not harshly, but lovingly. (Invite them to come to the parish mission, or the parish penitential day.)
2. Repentance is an ongoing thing: we have to keep taking steps along the path of life, of Christian life. We are pilgrims.

3. Confession and frequent Communion are concrete steps.
4. Let’s memorize the Psalm response from today (“The Lord is kind and merciful”), and repeat it, prayerfully, like the refrain of a song, all week long (maybe instead of listening to the radio in the car.) Let’s give God’s living Word a chance to really penetrate our hearts, the way good fertilizer penetrates the soil and helps trees bear fruit.

### **Second possible lesson:**

Life, existence itself, is a gift from God: God wants us to exist, to live, to thrive. God reveals his name to Moses: I am who am; I am existence itself. God is the only infinite and self-sufficient being; he gives life and existence to all other things. Jesus calls us to repent, so that sin, which obstructs our happiness, can be rooted out.

### **Possible illustrations:**

1. Talk about some of the wonders of creation to show God’s generosity and magnificence. (See Fr. Spitzer’s videos and writings for ideas: <http://magisreasonfaith.org>.)
2. Quote Mother Teresa’s speech at the National Prayer breakfast, begging America not to abort babies, but to give them to her instead. Life is a precious gift!
3. Use the example of how a child with a disability transformed a whole family’s life—every life is precious!
4. Use the example of Louis Zamperini’s survival in the Pacific after being shot down during WWII – especially his experience of the doldrums (L. Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*, pp 165-167).

### **Possible applications:**

1. Take time alone with God each day—take off your shoes and approach the fire of his love (his Word) to give him a chance to reveal his name to you.
2. Support the parish pro-life activities: Every life is precious! Spread the message.
3. Take some extra family time this week: just to be together and enjoy the gift of life, to stop taking it for granted.



# Homily Ideas for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C    Lectionary: 33

Reading 1 Jos 5:9a, 10-12 *The Lord feeds his people with the produce of Canaan, no longer giving them Manna*  
Responsorial Psalm Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7 *Glorify the Lord for his goodness and protectiveness*  
Reading 2 2 Cor 5:17-21 *Be reconciled to God who entrusts us with the mission of reconciliation*  
Gospel Lk 15:1-3, 11-32 *The parable of the Prodigal Son*

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## **One Possible lesson:**

God's main characteristic is mercy: Mercy is loving someone when they don't deserve it, and that's what God did for us from the beginning. We didn't "deserve" to be created, but he loved us into being; we didn't "deserve" to be redeemed, but he loved us too much not to come and rescue us from sin. When we accept God's mercy, we really get a fresh start ("new creation" in Second Reading). Through friendship with Christ (Joshua's name means "Jesus"), we can all enter the Promised Land of eternal life—getting a reward that none of us really "deserves."

## **Possible illustrations:**

1. Explain why "mercy-killing" (euthanasia) is actually just the opposite of real mercy—maybe using one of the many harrowing stories of euthanasia promoters (like the one from the *London Times* in January 2010 where a gentleman proposed setting up Euthanasia Booths on street corners so all the old people could just get rid of themselves and the nuisance they cause to society).
2. Show how abortion is also just the opposite of true compassion: it treats three human beings (mother, father, and baby) as hopeless; instead of redeeming life, it destroys life.
3. Emphasize all the details of the encounter between the Father and the sons in the parable: Father comes out to meet both sons, not waiting for them to come to him; Father gives back full dignity (shoes, ring, robe) to the son who had so terribly insulted him; Father saw the prodigal son coming from a long way off—he was waiting longingly, hoping, thinking of his lost son. Father celebrates at our presence with him, not at our "being perfect": he just wants to be with us.

## **Possible applications:**

1. We may be like the younger son – we may need to come and receive God's mercy in Confession, and start again.
2. We may have a hardened, judgmental heart, like the older son, and we may need to ask for the grace to be forgiving and merciful—especially during Communion.
3. Thank God for his mercy.
4. Reach out to someone who is like the younger son, lost and suffering and in need of renewed hope—

reach out this week and encourage them to come back to the Father's house.

5. Obtain a plenary indulgence for the souls in purgatory—a great act of mercy.
6. Review the works of mercy and invite parishioners to engage in them individually or through parish programs.

## **Second possible lesson:**

Christians can always be joyful: Link to "Laetare Sunday" and the rose colored vestments. Joy (St. Thomas tells us) is spiritual pleasure. Pleasure is the feeling of satisfaction we get when we possess something good (a brownie). Joy is the pleasure that comes from possessing spiritual goods, the greatest of which is the knowledge that God loves us, no matter what (the lesson of the parable).

## **Possible illustrations:**

1. Use your favorite example from Bl. Pope John Paul II—his contagious joy.
2. Use the example of Servant of God Cardinal Ngyuen van Thuan, in communist prisons, converting his guards with his contagious joy (van Thuan, *Five Loaves and Two Fish*).
3. Use the example of the nuns of Compiègne, guillotined during the French Revolution—going to their deaths singing the *Salve Regina*.
4. Use the example of St. Lawrence the Deacon converting his guard (St. Romanus) while awaiting his execution.
5. Use the example of Bl. Mother Teresa's smile, iconic and universally known, which made her so beautiful: it was a virtuous joy, because she felt a lot of darkness.

## **Possible applications:**

1. To cultivate this joy, we have to keep a deep awareness of God's love fresh in our heart—we can only do that through daily personal prayer (share good resources that can help that).
2. Explain Confession as the Sacrament of Rediscovered Joy—because it is direct contact with the love and goodness of God.

# Homily Ideas for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C      Lectionary: 36

Reading 1 Is 43:16-21 *The Lord provides for his people*

Responsorial Psalm Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6 *The Lord rescues us from our difficulties and provides for us*

Reading 2 Phil 3:8-14 *Everything else is rubbish compared to the supreme joy of knowing Christ*

Gospel Jn 8:1-11 *To the woman caught in adultery Jesus says "Neither do I condemn you"*

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## **Some Possible lessons:**

God always gives us another chance:

- Jesus doesn't pretend that this woman didn't sin.
- He never ignores sin—because sin truly is evil.
- But his goodness is much more powerful. And so he can handle our sins, forgive them, and give us another chance.
- Notice that he did that not just for the woman, but for the others, the Pharisees—their sins were just as real, but less public. But Jesus shows them that he knows those sins too, and he still gives another chance.

## **Possible illustrations:**

1. Use the image from St. Margaret Mary and the Sacred Heart—that all the sins of the world, compared to Christ's burning love, are only like a drop of water thrown into a blazing furnace. (St. Faustina has a similar image, of a twig being thrown into a blazing furnace).
2. Tell the story of St. Peter and "Quo vadis?"
3. Point out that St. Paul, who now "considers everything as rubbish" compared to Christ (Second Reading) was also a second-chance Christian (his conversion on the road to Damascus). We ALL are! God loves that—he loves having chances to show us his mercy.
4. Show how sins against life directly contradict this characteristic of God.

## **Possible applications:**

1. We need to let God give us a second chance: forgive ourselves, be humble, accept his forgiveness in Confession.
2. We need to give others a second chance—learn to condemn the sin, but not the sinner, as Jesus did.
3. We need to accept our need for mercy—none of us are free from sin and selfishness; and that's okay: God can handle it.
4. Every day is a "second chance"—a chance to trust God, to do his will, to follow the example and teaching of Christ.
5. We need to tell others, who are without hope, that they can have a fresh start in Jesus—who can you tell this week?

## **Second possible lesson:**

God can free us from our past:

- He did this with Israel, liberating them miraculously from Egypt.
- He did this with the adulterous woman, and with all her accusers, giving them all a fresh start, not ignoring their sins, but overcoming them with the miracle of his all-powerful love.

## **Possible illustrations:**

1. Tell the story of Bernard Nathanson, who committed so much evil as an abortionist, and yet discovered the love of God even so (see his book, *The Hand of God*).
2. Use the image of Robert DeNiro climbing the waterfall in the famous movie "The Mission." The net full of all his weapons and armor—symbols of his arrogant and violent past, and how by deciding to follow God's call, he is freed from that burden.
3. Use the example of Watergate burglar Chuck Colson—from prisoner to prison-minister.
4. The marble decoration of the interior of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—stunningly beautiful—was all taken from the ruins of the ancient Roman palaces. God can redeem our past and make it into something beautiful.

## **Possible applications:**

1. We have to confess our sins for them to be forgiven.
2. We can be instruments of this liberation by believing in people, giving them second chances, supporting their efforts to reform.
3. Visit the sick and the imprisoned.
4. Not be afraid to cut away whatever needs to be cut away: a destructive relationship, an addiction. Find the help we need to make the change we need.
5. Let God into our present, through daily prayer, so that he can redeem our past.