

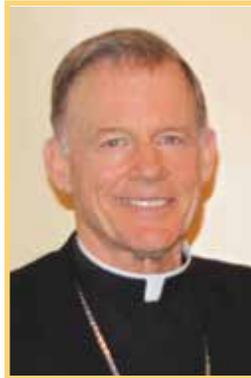
Abide in Christ

Say "I'm Sorry" during Lent

By MOST REVEREND JOHN C. WESTER, ARCHBISHOP OF SANTA FE

Quite a few years ago a JAL 747 landed short of the San Francisco International Airport runway and ended up in the bay. Fortunately, no lives were lost. What I remember most about that incident is that the CEO of Japan Airlines went on television and apologized for the accident. He then made a profound bow that underscored the sincerity of his apology. Back then, I wondered why he apologized. First of all, he wasn't flying the plane. Furthermore, I presume that the pilot did not land in the bay on purpose. And yet, the CEO was personally apologizing from the bottom of his heart. Contrast that apology with a rather common one in these modern times. Somebody makes a public comment about another person that is extremely hateful, disrespectful and damaging to that person's reputation. Then, when called on it, replies, "If he or she is so thin-skinned as to be bothered by my innocuous comment then I guess I apologize." Not quite the same, is it?

One could go a long time without hearing the words, "I'm sorry." I suppose there are many reasons for this. For one thing, most of our cars carry in the glove compartment an insurance company reminder not to admit fault if we have been in an accident but only to give our name, license number and insurance information. We live in a



Archbishop John C. Wester

litigious society and it may be that we are trained early on not to say, "I'm sorry." Another possible reason may be that we are more and more pressured to look good, to find our self-worth in our accomplishments and to defend our honor at all costs. Certainly this kind of thinking makes admitting fault and apologizing for such rather taboo. I think this last point hits the mark. Our society values

externals: how much money we have, what our titles are, how big a house we live in, how much power we have, how often we are "liked" on social media, how many people know about us, etc. Given this reality, it is far too dangerous to admit that I have sinned and even more dangerous to ask for forgiveness. It might lessen my perceived self-worth. Apologizing is seen as weakness when in fact it is a sign of real strength to admit our mistakes, apologize and become the better for it.

This modern mentality seems to extend to the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). Of course, there are sound spiritual reasons for receiving sacramental absolution, for telling God we are sorry and receiving his forgiveness. Yet, look at how few Catholics go to confession compared to the "old days." Why is this? I suppose the reasons are related to why we are so reticent to say we are sorry. To admit that

+ *...His* Mercy *endures forever.*

Psalm 136:1

I am a sinner is rather difficult when, as I have suggested, my self-worth comes from externals and from my own doing. We often make the mistake of thinking that God loves us because we are good. Father Michael Demkovich, OP, recently reminded me that according to St. Thomas Aquinas, the opposite is true: we are good because God loves us. Ah, there it is! When my dignity and worth come from God and his love for me then I more easily admit my sinfulness, my mistakes and my weaknesses, knowing that they do not lessen my self-worth because God never withdraws his love for me. Seeking forgiveness is the portal to growth, new life and a fuller expression of who I am. As a prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours has it, "Grant that where sin has abounded, grace may more abound, so that we can become holier through forgiveness and be more grateful to you." Saying "I am sorry" does not diminish me but rather it directs me back to the God whose love gives me my dignity and worth in the first place. We do not have to become perfect in order to gain God's love. He loves us from the first moment of our existence, in our mother's womb, even before we have done anything that makes us "worthy" of his love. Or, as St. Paul reminds us, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

Call to mind the episode in Luke's Gospel when a paralytic was lowered into a crowded house where Jesus was teaching so that he could be healed. Jesus, seeing their faith and knowing

their thoughts, said immediately, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." That lowering down, that humble expression of sorrow, that implied, "I am sorry", opened the floodgates of Christ's mercy and love. We can do the same this Lent by celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation and hearing Christ speak through the priest, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." We will not lose face, self-worth or esteem. Quite to the contrary, we will be the better for it and filled with a dignity that only God's love can give us.

Do you remember the 1970 movie, "Love Story", with Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal? One of its most famous lines was often quoted: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." Ryan O'Neal starred with Barbara Streisand two years later in the comedy, "What's Up, Doc?", in which Streisand bats her eyelashes at O'Neal and says, "Love means never having to say you're sorry." The latter responds, "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard." I agree! Love means you have to say you're sorry, over and over and over again. And it is love, especially God's love, that makes it possible to say those seldom heard words.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

+ John C. Wester

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