

Occasionally I receive a request from an individual who is working the recovery program for addiction to alcohol or other chemical substance, popularly known as Alcoholic Anonymous or simply "AA" to do a "Fifth Step" with them. The fifth of the twelve steps involves, "admitting to God, ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." In practice it is the same as the confession of sins in the Sacrament of Penance. Step five follows step four, in which the addict "makes a searching and fearless moral inventory" which, in its turn, flows from step three, "made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him.*" In these "Fifth Steps" I've sat and listened to these brothers and sisters fearlessly relate their journey to addiction; the lies, broken promises, and the consequent effects their choices have had on their lives and relationships to God, spouse (if they have one), family, co-workers, community, and ultimately to their real or true self. Along with the story of brokenness has also come the story of their "awakening" to divine grace and their new found resolve as they set out to "work" their program of life-long recovery. Reflecting on these experiences, I, in turn, have asked myself; how honest and truthful am I about the attitudes and actions that motivate my life? What is my image and experience of God? Is it a relationship based on fear, of keeping a list of laws, dos and don'ts, so to gain reward and avoid punishment? Or is it one based on love, living consciously in the presence of God, speaking and acting out of that presence, doing good and avoiding evil not for reward or out of fear of punishment, but simply and profoundly knowing I am loved by God and in love with God? How willing am I to abandon myself to the grace of God? If I choose to accept God's grace, how would my life be different than it is now? Do I have the courage to take such a radical step as my brother or sister has done?

Today's readings function much like the Twelve Steps in their challenge to us. Today's first reading from the historical book of Second Chronicles details, like the story of the addict, Israel's history of "infidelity to infidelity" eventually leading to the "hitting bottom" in exile in Babylon, a nation crushed and imprisoned. Today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians speaks to God's intervention in the face of our human sinfulness. "God who is rich in mercy because of the great love he had

for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” (Eph. 2:4) This “grace” the Gospel proclaims is a person, Jesus. Like the bronze serpent raised up on a pole, symbol of Israel’s collective sin in the desert, so too, Jesus will he be raised up on a pole, a cross, as both the symbol of the depths of human rejection of God through sin, but most importantly, the symbol of God’s unconditional self-emptying love even to death, the means to eternal life and on-going reconciliation. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

This weekend we celebrate the second of the three rites of Scrutiny with our Elect and Candidates preparing for the Easter sacraments. While they are the focus of these rites, the rite is a call for each of us to “scrutinize” our lives. Like the “Fourth Step” of the Twelve Steps of AA, the Scrutinies invite us to take a “searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves”; an honest, truthful look at the attitudes, motives and actions that are the real “stuff” of our daily lives and the effects these have on our relationship to God and others, and then do our own “Fifth Step” through a humble confession in the Sacrament of Penance of “the exact nature of our wrongs” and so become “entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character” through grace.

Henri Nouwen a great spiritual writer of the last century sums up today’s liturgy best as he writes: [*Jesus says to each of us*] “*come back to me—not once, not twice, but always again. You are my child. How can you ever doubt that I will embrace you again, hold you against my breast, kiss you and let my hands run through your hair? I am your God—the God of mercy and compassion, the God of pardon and love, the God of tenderness and care. Please do not say that I have given up on you, that I cannot stand you anymore, that there is no way back. ...Do not condemn yourself. Do not reject yourself. Let my love touch the deepest most hidden corners of your heart. ...Let my mouth come close to your ear and say to you, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you.’”*