



Catholic Church and School

Why were all these people going to the desert? It had to be uncomfortable in the desert. I was visiting out west one time, and I was in a desert area. It was 110 degrees. It was hot! People told me "Oh, that's okay, it's a 'dry' heat." I said, "It was 110 degrees. It was hot! 110 degrees is 110 degrees!"

Why were all these people going to the desert? John was not much to look at. He wasn't flashy or sophisticated or a sharp-dressed man. It says he wore camel's hair clothing.

The people didn't go for the food. He ate locusts and honey. I always wondered if he dipped the locusts in the honey first before eating them. I think I would have skipped the locusts. I would have been like Winnie the Pooh and just stuck with the honey.

Why were they going? To be hot and uncomfortable, to look at a mangy, unattractive man and to eat honey coated locusts? Why did they go? They were going for an extreme makeover.

We see many people get makeovers today in television shows like "Extreme Makeover" and "The Biggest Loser". Even talk-shows insert makeovers by selecting audience members to go backstage and come out at the end of the show totally transformed. Shows use everything from hair styling to clothes styling, and cosmetics to cosmetic surgery to dieting. While these makeovers are entertaining, they are only temporary. They are only superficial. They only change the external, outside appearance. For the people going to John the Baptist, it was not what they could see, but what they could not see that caused them to go. What they sought was inside themselves. It was in their hearts and souls that needed a makeover. It was repentance.

In the Gospel it says: John the Baptist called people to "repentance for the forgiveness of sins". The basic meaning of repentance is to "change one's mind". It basically means to change one's way of thinking, and thus change one's life. It can also be translated to "reform one's life".

Repentance involves three parts:

1. Acknowledging past sins and admitting our guilt;
2. Being Sorry for and Hating our sins;
3. Promising to avoid sin and doing penance to help apologize for sins.

These three parts of repentance – the very same repentance that John the Baptist preached – are exactly the same as in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Repentance in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is like those people going out to the desert 2,000 years ago with John the Baptist.

1. Examination of Conscience

We prepare for Reconciliation with an examination of conscience. That is the first part of repentance: Recalling past sins and admitting our guilt. It should be possible to come up with some list of our sins and if you have any trouble ask the people around you. Ask those that you live with and work with. I'm sure they can help you out. We're often very good at seeing other people's sins.

2. Act of Contrition

After confessing our sins to the priest, we make an Act of Contrition. "Contrition" means to be sorry. That is the second part of repentance: Being sorry for and hating our sins. This can be difficult because we're never absolutely sure if we are really sorry and can promise to avoid sin.

We actually grow to love our sins. Sins can be very tempting and pleasing to us, that's the nature of sin. We get comfortable with our sins, they may even seem necessary to us. Sometimes we hold onto sin like a two-year-old clutching a favorite Teddy Bear getting ready to go to sleep at night. We spend years rationalizing and justifying our sins.

We say, "That's just the way that I am." That's a very dangerous statement. Saying "that's just the way I am" is like saying "I've stopped changing." The only time that you and I stop changing is when we're dead. So saying, "That's just the way I am" is kind of like saying "I'm already dead."

Think of being sorry and hating sin in terms of pressing a button. If you could press a button to stop sinning, would you do it? If you could press a button to stop gossiping or cursing or lying would you do it? If you could press a button to start forgiving and being more patient would you do it? If you answer, "Yes" then that is sufficient to be sorry for your sins and promising to avoid them.

3. Penance

The third part of repentance is to accept a penance, a way of apologizing for sins, a way of inviting change into your life. Then the priest gives us absolution. But when we hear those priests say, "I absolve you from your sins" we hear in their human voices, not the voice of John the Baptist crying out, but the voice Jesus Himself. Jesus Himself of Whom John says elsewhere, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Consider an extreme makeover for yourself sometime during this Advent season. Consider going into the desert like the people in the Gospel by going to the confessional.

Come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation sometime before Christmas in order to "Prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight His paths". We will host a Penance Service here at St. Anthony's on Tuesday evening at 7:00pm in the church.

Coming to confession may be a little uncomfortable but I promise you that once inside it won't be 110 degrees, the priest won't be wearing camel's hair, and last but not least - there won't be any locusts.

*Fr. David Ruppert at St. Anthony de Padua Church, South Bend, Indiana
2nd Sunday of Advent, 2011*