



RETREAT AT HONITON - TALK 2 - February 2026

Welcome back.

I want to look, in this second talk, about how we might prepare well for our sacramental encounter with the love of God.

For fifteen years I led an Anglican parish on the hill above Watford. We were opposite huge and growing Orthodox Synagogue and the Rabbi and I became friends – a friendship that has lasted now nearly forty years. The Synagogue was packed and every Saturday morning hundreds of observant Jews would file past our gate to worship. The men were in suits and their womenfolk were distinguished by the smartness of their dress. This was in some contrast to our efforts across the road where our menfolk were, at best, smart casual and our womenfolk considerably less fashion conscious. Rabbi Meir and I were reflecting on this one day, on the mutual corner of the street, he having finished his three hour shift and me about to set up for our Sabbath.

Normally our conversations went quite deep but on this particular day we skimmed the surface. I said how extraordinary it was to see the Jews passing our gate, dressed in their 'Sunday best' as it were while our folk had deeply imbibed the post 60s culture of not making any special effort, 'dressing up for God' as it were, as He loved us as we are.

The Rabbi replied that he would be more pleased if he thought his folk were dressing up for G-d rather than to impress one another.

You see, as laity, you just can't win !

In truth we both enjoyed our congregations. I stayed for fifteen years, Rabbi Meir for thirty seven.

But if I may labour the point just a little. While what matters, of course, is the heart and the heart's disposition, our outward disciplines often express and fashion that disposition too. Let me give another example – this time the priest.

In olden times, when I was young, the priest's vestments, often of beautiful and glorious embroidery, would be properly laid out before Mass and carefully returned to this position after Mass, both accompanied by prayer. The chalice would be fully dressed with all the symbolism of the Calvary, Corporal, Pall , Burse and Veil in season's colours.

This has been simplified in many places to wiping up cloth (purificator) and cardboard cover.

There are still some priests alive who can remember that the call of Vatican II for 'noble simplicity' was mistaken as a signal for wholesale iconoclasm as beautiful vestments were taken out and burnt and replaced by cheap, scruffy hopsack and what I call 'holy scribble'.

Does it matter? Wasn't the previous stuff just fussy distraction? You will not be astonished to find that I don't think it is as simple as that. Let me explain.

Over complication can act as a distraction.

Over simplification can rob the enterprise of the significance of its meaning.

What we do and how we approach these matters is a good indicator of what we truly think and believe.

So.....Let's take an example. Recently a friend of mine was awarded an OBE in the honours list. He was going to see the Queen and his family would come too. They made great preparations for the day and dressed very smartly and beautifully. The ceremony, when it came , was both solemn and joyful. Was this an over reaction to the honour and the royal presence? If it was, it was something that everybody going was also part of. People were dressed in their very best and so was the

Queen. You would not go in a t-shirt and jeans any more than you would have expected Her Majesty to officiate in a jumpsuit and tiara.

Well my point is a simple one and it is, as you will realise, not simply or solely about clothing or other externals. When we come to Mass or to Confession we are privileged to be coming into the presence not of some passing mortal sovereign but of the King of Kings, the One True and Eternal God. Should our preparation be any the less than the homage paid to a transient and mortal monarch?

Our demeanour is not false or contrived but born of a growing recognition of the enormity of what we here undertake. The outward physical marks of respect are good only insofar as they reflect the reverence of the heart.

In the case of the Sacraments, we do well to prepare and to prepare well. The congregation is not there to be entertained. It is not an audience that gives a review at the end of it. Rather we are there to be reviewed by God and take note of His Word.

If we are there, unprepared, and just wanting to be amused, engaged in a secular debate, aesthetically satisfied *etc.* then, however good the priest, the servers or the music may be, you will 'get' very little out of the service.

Mass, if it is to be fully participatory, will not be achieved by the historical nonsense of turning the altar round, setting up a tea trolley at the head of the nave or getting more laity to speak in the Mass or ritually applauding children but by regular and thorough preparation.

So....preparation.....

Of course there are times when we have made a real and obvious mess and we fly to the mercy seat for healing and reconciliation with little else on our minds but the immediate and presenting grief – and that is fine. But in most circumstances, within our spiritual discipline and rule of life, we have good time to prepare. So, I would suggest that, eg if we know we are going to Confession on the following Saturday, we include in our prayers, from Wednesday onward, a simple invocation of the Holy Spirit, asking Him to sift us and raise to our attention those ways, small and

great, in which we have wounded the love of God or failed to do what He has asked of us.

My experience is that there will come, after that and at any time, a trickle and sometimes a flood of remembrances of those griefs and failures and embarrassments. Have a little pocket notebook or somesuch and write them all down – in code if you must – so long as you remember the code. This does two things. First it means we don't rely on faulty or panicked memory later on. Second it means we can't avoid confessing them or let the confession wander into a general discussion of vague misdemeanours. It requires us to be specific and this is important. 'I am occasionally dishonest' can mean anything from 'I often exaggerate the size of the fish I caught when boasting to my mates' through to 'I have been regularly operating a financial fraud on my company' or 'I tell my wife I am working late whenever I am out with my mistress.' The wellspring may be the same but the wisdom involved in ghostly counsel, reparation and penitential purification and reconstruction and penance may not.

A wise priest is always troubled by a vague confession. He knows, with the great Saint, Gregory of Nazianzus, that 'What is not offered cannot be healed.' The truth, with no embroidery or circumlocution is what serves us best for, in the end, it is the truth that sets us free. So, don't leave the confessional half- confessed secretly thinking the daft thought that the Lord is fooled by our circumlocution – HE ALREADY KNOWS – HE'S JUST WAITING FOR US TO COME CLEAN- or that the priest isn't alert to the evasions and omissions.

The other thing about being specific is that it assists the Confessor in his guidance to you. You wouldn't go to your GP and simply say, 'I'm not feeling very well' and expect him to diagnose and prescribe on the basis of that account. If he did then you would not really want him as your doctor.

The Holy Spirit will, if asked, raise all these things to your attention and help you come clean before God. Sometimes he gets a helping hand. A dear friend in my last congregation approached me the week after I had preached on Confession. 'Father, I went home last week and thought about your words and then I tried to recall what I might have done wrong in my life. I honestly couldn't think of anything.'

I repeated St John's line, 'He who says he is without in is a liar' but then, thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit I remembered a much higher authority for my friend.

I told him to go home and ask his wife to make a list for him.

The following week he passed me sheepishly at the church door and said simply, 'Point taken, Father, Point taken'. He later pitched up in the box.

Not everyone has the courage to ask their nearest and dearest for help but it is a powerful exercise. Not least because some of our bad habits are so ingrained that we are no longer able to see them. I often think of Jesus' parable about the man with a log in his eye trying to take out the other guy's speck. It is absurd.

Who is like that? Well quite a lot of us actually. The offending log, unremoved becomes **who I am** and people identify me by it. Here comes old Rob 'LOG IN'. I affirm my identity. I've had it so long that it is now me and I respond, I AM WHO I AM - take it or leave it. I am who I am - like God - I don't need to change. See where this leads as that log, the once impediment to seeing clearly has, over the years, become a much treasured and highly polished piece of furniture.

LOG IN - LOG OUT - LOGOS. (That's a Greek joke)

How often do I need to go to Confession? There is no hard and fast rule though certainly whenever the Lord prompts you to. It would be difficult to imagine a serious spiritual rule of life that envisaged less than four times a year. The reason is simple and health giving and born of experience. Sin is a burden and its capacity for slowing our pilgrimage, turning us away from the path cannot be exaggerated. It weighs us down and, in the end , inertia and the deadly sloth overtake us.

Why would anyone want to carry that foul burden round unnecessarily ?

I am reminded of the story of the Prince Regent's (the future George IV) first encounter with his future wife in the arranged royal marriage, Caroline of Brunswick. Caroline was not noted for her hygiene. Priny was a well laundered dandy. As this sophisticated beau met this 'poubelle', he uttered the one cry 'POUAGH' and fled to the other side of the great meeting room to apply his nosegay. She stank but apparently, until then, unaware of it.

The truth is that Sin stinks and if we insist on consistently shovelling it into the increasingly weighty burden of a sack on our back, then more fools us. It all needs to be laid at the foot of the Cross of Jesus. When you come to understand it in such plain and unvarnished terms, only a madman would want to carry a sack of sin's stinking crap round on his back. Only a fool avoids the sacramental shower to get himself cleaned up and ready to go.

How do we know what to confess? There are plenty of booklets, manuals, suggestive lists etc. These include, of course, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and the check list of the Virtues and the Vices.

One of the best ways we can, for example, 'up our game' in the spiritual Olympics is to look at the areas of our sinning and to identify the Vices that most regularly beset us and then concentrate on cultivating the opposite virtue. If we simply go around focussing on the areas of failure, our Vices, we will become obsessed with controlling and eliminating them BUT.... That means paying them even more attention. The upshot of this is, all too often, a fascination with the negative and a swift return to succumbing to its eloquent persuasion. The merit of concentrating on the opposing Virtue is that its focus is both elsewhere, elevating and positive.

To quote the late great St Bing of Crosby:

'You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between.'

NOW.....

Let me now turn briefly to the dynamic of the Sacrament. What is going on 'in the box'.

First of all the Confessor should, himself be fully prepared as he is to be Christ's instrument in nursing the presenting penitent back to health.

As the penitent enters the box, he is entering into the closest of Communion with the Godhead. He is about to lay bare his soul before

the One who has known him since before he was created.
Hiding or obfuscation is not an option.

He enters to share with the Confessor who is, himself a penitent.

He enters a moment out of time, kneeling before the God of Grace, aware of the nature of his sins and how grievously he has wounded the loving heart of God. We are to come with no presumption of Mercy, for that would be to understate the magnitude of what we seek and make us indifferent to the transformative power at work here. But we are to come with a living hope in that possibility of absolution because of the Blood of Christ shed for us on the Cross.

I always begin with a simple prayer after the declaration of the Trinity.

'In the Name of....

May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may confess your sins, lay them at the foot of the Cross of Jesus and receive the liberating mercy of his Blood shed for you. Amen.'

The Penitent then makes confession. This is not discursive but a simple, unvarnished and clear declaration of his faults and failures.

The Confessor is then necessarily in deep concentration in two directions. With one ear he is listening carefully to the grief of the penitent and, as doctor of the soul, analysing the symptoms that lead to diagnosis and spiritual prescription. With the other ear he is tuning in to the counsel of the Holy Ghost to affirm, correct or modify that guidance with the divine wisdom.

Nowhere, in the sacramental life of the Church, is there more tangible awareness of the reality of the dynamic of the Divine Presence, the closeness of God to His people.

The alert Confessor will find himself given words to say that he had no previous awareness of and Penance that applies peculiarly to the healing of that particular penitent.

The Penance is both a gift and a joy.

The Absolution, an outpouring of undeserved and gratefully received mercy. The subsequent sense of glorious liberation is, in my experience, unique to the confessional.

It is my practice to conclude our time together with a humble request,
'Go in peace and pray for me a sinner.'

This is not intended as a showy piety but rather a necessary reminder of the reality of the common humanity and solidarity of Priest and Penitent before the saving Cross of Christ.

Lastly but not least.....Penance.

In the good old days these were serious impositions. For example a confessor might well instruct his penitent to go on a Crusade or redistribute his ill gotten wealth. None of this namby-pamby nonsense of 'one Hail Mary and thanks for dropping by.'

I have to be frank and say that, this is not boasting you understand, the best and biggest penance I ever got was to re-read the Acts of the Apostles. It was a couple of hours of sheer joy in reconnecting with the faith and dynamic of the Early Church.

Penance historically is both punitive and educative and formational and foundational. It's a bit like the imposition you might have got at school for whatever naughtiness you might have committed or homework eaten by the proverbial dog.

Prefects used to set essays like – 1000 words on the inside of a ping pong ball. Punishing -certainly. Reformative – not at all.

We changed all that at our school to make the punishment also into a means of augmenting instruction. Doing the 18th Century? Write an essay on the Hanoverian succession. An imposition, surely, but an educative one. We are not here to waste one another's time with useless exercises. Time is all we have and wasting it is not a Christian option.

So the Penance ought to have something above and beyond the immediate call of duty and be both a work of thanksgiving and a joy that builds into the soul. Finding a penance that fits the 'crime' as it were is no different from a doctor prescribing helpful medicine. Take one aspirin may deal with a small headache. It is useless for a migraine never mind a brain tumour.

0. Theological Virtues:

- **Faith:** A deep trust in God and belief in His promises. It is foundational to the Christian life and is essential for salvation (Ephesians 2:8).
- **Hope:** The confident expectation of God's promises and the assurance of eternal life. It provides strength during trials and challenges.
- **Charity (Love):** The greatest of the virtues, as stated in 1 Corinthians 13:13. It involves selfless, sacrificial love for God and others, embodying the essence of Christian ethics.

The Seven Deadly Sins

Pride: An excessive belief in one's abilities, leading to disdain for others.

Greed: An insatiable desire for material wealth. At the expense of others.

Wrath: Intense anger and hatred, leading to violence or revenge.

Envy: Jealousy towards others' traits, status, or possessions, resentment.

Lust: An intense longing, particularly for sexual desires.

Gluttony: Overindulgence in food, drink, or other pleasures, wastefulness.

Sloth: A lack of effort or care leading to neglect of duties.