

Last Lent, in the first wave of COVID, Pope Francis preached this homily in his chapel at his residence, Casa Santa Marta. I think it bears repeating as it will simply be impossible for many priests to hear everyone's confession before Christmas. And I would ask those of you who come regularly to step back for this month of December, and allow those who come less frequently to have the opportunity to confess this Advent season. Here is the Pope's homily:

When I read or listen to this passage of the Prophet Hosea, which we heard in the First reading: "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God," when I hear it, there comes to mind a song that Carlo Buti sang 75 years ago, and that Italian families in Buenos Aires loved to listen to: "Return to your Papa. He will sing a lullaby again to you." Return: but it's your Papa who asks you to return. God is your Papa; he isn't a judge; He is your Papa: Return home, listen, come." And that memory – I was a small boy – brings me immediately to the Papa of chapter 15 of Luke, that Father of whom it says: "While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him," that son who had gone away with all the money and had squandered it. However, if he saw him from afar, it's because he was waiting for him. He would go up to the terrace – how many times a day! – during the days and days, months, years, perhaps, waiting for his son. He saw him from afar. Return to your Papa, return to your Father. He is waiting for you. It's God's tenderness that speaks to us, especially in Lent. It's the time to enter into ourselves and remember the Father and return to Papa.

"No, Father, I'm ashamed to return because....You know Father, I have made so many....., I've done a lot...." What does the Lord say? "Return, I will heal your faithlessness; I will love you freely, for my anger has turned from you. I will be as dew to you; you shall blossom as a lily; you shall strike root as a tree of Lebanon." Return to your Father who waits for you. The God of tenderness will heal us; He will heal us of the many, many wounds of life and of the many awful things we've done. Everyone has their own!

However, think of this: to return to God is to return to an embrace, to the Father's embrace. And think of the other promise that Isaiah makes: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." He is able to transform us, He is able to change our heart, but it's necessary to take the first step: to return. It's not to go to God, no, it's to return home.

"And Lent always points to this conversion of heart that, in the Christian custom, is embodied in the Sacrament of Confession. It's the moment to – I don't know if to 'adjust accounts,' I don't like that – but to let God whiten us, God purify us, God embrace us.

"I know that many of you go to confession for Easter to meet with God again. However many will say to me today: "But, Father, where can I find a priest, a confessor, because one can't leave home? And I want to make peace with the Lord, I want Him to embrace me, that my Papa embrace me...What can I do if I can't find a priest?" Do what the Catechism says; it's very clear: if you don't find a priest to hear your Confession, talk with God. He is your Father, and tell Him the truth. "Lord, I've done this, and that, and that....I'm sorry," and ask Him for forgiveness with all your heart, with the Act of Contrition and promise Him: "Afterwards I will go to Confession, but forgive me now." And you will return to God's grace immediately. As the Catechism teaches, you yourself can approach God's forgiveness without having a priest at hand. Think: it's the

moment! And this is the right moment, the opportune moment. An Act of Contrition well made, and so our soul will become white as snow. It would be good if today this 'return' resounded in our ears, "return to your Papa, return to your Father." He is waiting for you and He will celebrate you. (March 20,2020)

Thanks for your patience with the limited number of priests.....and pray for vocations.

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