

## SIN, FORGIVENESS, AND THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE PART 1: SIN

“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.’ The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of the fruit and ate it; and she also gave some of the fruit to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Genesis 3:4-7).

As mentioned in last week’s column, I will focus my reflections throughout the season of Lent on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation in the hope that this will help renew our celebration of this vital sacrament here at St. Boniface by renewing our appreciation of its liberating power. In order to appreciate how liberating going to confession can be, we first need to understand that from which it liberates us. We need to understand sin.

We don’t talk a lot about sin these days, because it has become something of a dirty word. In our postmodern age, in which the cultural elite tell us that the ultimate moral imperative is unbridled self-determination and the only moral law is “Thou shalt not hurt other people’s feelings,” the only serious sin is to suggest that the actions people are doing in their quest to realize themselves by fulfilling their every desire are wrong. If one commits this sin, no matter how small or unintended the infraction, then you are cast out from the community, cut off from even basic social interaction, like employment, and forced to fend for yourself in the wasteland with other ignorant, hateful bigots, like Christians. In this new world order, the only chance for forgiveness is public confession and total renunciation of your backward and hurtful views, complete with copious public penance, like large donations to social action groups promoting the very thing that you dared to say was wrong, and even then you will always bear the scarlet letter of your crime against humanity.

In such a world, is it any wonder that people hesitate to talk about sin? Even in the Catholic Church, many priests, deacons, and other faith leaders have bought into the false ideology mentioned above, or have become so frightened of the prospect of public backlash that they avoid teaching the subject of sin altogether. Combined with a loss of respect for traditional public institutions in general, and the Catholic Church specifically, these problems have gutted our celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Without an understanding of sin, why would I need a savior? And if I don’t need a savior, why do I need Christ? And if I don’t need Christ, I certainly don’t need to go to church or to confess my sins to a priest. The first essential step toward combating the false worldview above and renewing confession is to renew an authentic understanding and genuine sense of sin, a task I will attempt to undertake in next week’s column.