

The Sacrament Reconciliation: Confronting Sin & Finding Redemption

One of the unfortunate things with sin is that it can easily get out of control and impact so many other people. One thing leads to another; or the sins of someone in later years cause another person to make poor choices as well. But far greater than the power of sin is the power of hope and love; which also do so much to transform a soul.

Today, Shaka Senghor is a motivational speaker, a mentor, an MIT Media Fellow alum, a best-selling author of *Writing My Wrongs: Life Death and Redemption in an American Prison*. Not too long ago, however, Senghor was still an inmate serving a 40-year sentence for second-degree murder.

The Detroit native was just 19 years old on the night that changed his and another young man's life forever. Paranoid after being the victim of a shooting himself, Senghor believed the young man (whose real name he keeps private out of respect for the victim's family) was a threat to his life. In reality, Senghor was the threat, and, in a drug deal gone bad, he shot and killed his victim after an argument.

In his memoir, Senghor shared that he was often physically assaulted by his mother for small infractions. Those beatings caused him to feel rejected and unloved by her. At 11 years old, his parents split, and though he remained in a good relationship with his father, his anger and feelings of abandonment by his parents only grew. His honor roll grades began to drop. After his mother threatened to kick him out of the house for bad behavior, he decided to leave on his own and eventually got involved in selling drugs at 14 years old.

"Day by day, we were all being stripped of our morals," he wrote of the impact of the harsh environment he'd become a part of as a drug dealer, as compared to the respectful way his family had raised him. Due to his mother's rejection and the life of a criminal he was leading, Senghor began to wrestle with feelings of worthlessness, and even planned his own suicide. The thought of his 2-year-old nephew who lived with him finding his lifeless body was the only thing that stopped him. But his pain didn't go away.

By the time he was 19, confronting an unhappy customer with the gun he'd carried ever since he had been shot two years earlier, Senghor was so full of anger, sadness and hurt that he took another man's life without thinking twice. It would be 5 years before he began to accept the full weight of what he'd done that night.

While in prison, Senghor received a letter from his victim's godmother, asking him why he'd killed her godson. Riddled with guilt, Senghor began to use writing as a way to deal with his emotions. "Saying I am sorry for robbing you and your family of your life seems too small a gesture," Senghor wrote in a letter to his victim five years into his sentence. "I wish I could restore your life."

He also wrote back to the godmother, apologizing for what he'd done. Senghor first learned of the healing power of forgiveness two weeks later when she responded to

him, telling him that she forgave him and that he should seek God's forgiveness, as well.

"I took her words to heart," he said. But "it would be five [more] years before I reached the point when I could truly forgive myself."

The godmother's forgiveness opened up for Senghor a healing he had never known. As he explains in *Writing My Wrongs*, he was able to examine the failings of people in his childhood--the physical and emotional abuse, and rejection that led to his deep-seated sense of anger and abandonment and his suicide plans. Through years of processing his emotions about what people had done to harm him and the harm he had done to others, he was finally able to let it all go.

He began to turn his life around while still incarcerated, becoming a mentor to other inmates and encouraging them in their journeys to change their lives for the better. In 2010, after nearly two decades in prison and several years in solitary confinement, Senghor was released from prison and ever since has been on a mission to mentor other young men to avoid the traps that ensnared him. He also works to end mass incarceration in America through his non-profit organization, *Beyond Prisons*.

I have no idea if he is Catholic or not, but when we celebrate confession, like he did, we look sin straight on and confront it. We own up to what we've done. And hopefully we don't keep beating ourselves up, but rather can "go in peace" as the priest says to us, knowing that we are forgiven because also looking sin straight on with us is our Lord who stands with us, and died for us. And, hopefully like Senghor, we are transformed to become better people and to use the grace God gives us to change and help others to as well.

This Monday, as a parish we'll have our parish reconciliation service for Lent. I also hear confessions every Saturday, having added a half hour back at the start of the pandemic and opted to keep it that way permanently now. As we celebrate the sacrament, we encounter Jesus who is there to ease our pain. That's why He died for us. So as you make an examination of conscience and prepare to celebrate the sacrament, turn it all over to God. Don't fear holding anything back, but just be liberated.

Also, as you prepare for confession and even make a daily Act of Contrition, do a good examination of conscience. Think "outside the box" in terms of how you are living your faith and reflecting it to others from family to coworkers to people you meet. Find some time for silence and meditation to think. Sometimes it's easier to realize when we've say, lied, used some bad language, or looked at something inappropriate. But maybe if we look deeper, we can see perhaps times we could have been a better parent or spouse; or could have been less of a gossip, or that we've been too mean to a coworker or neighbor. Think about too what lead you, or leads you to do certain sins; some behavior is learned; other times it's a response to stress or other things we need to address in life. Remember, we examine our conscience not to feel shame, but because we want to become better, much like the woman at the well who encounters Jesus who

talks to her and helps her to acknowledge her sins, and then she rejoices crying out to come see a man who told me everything I've ever done (John 4:29).

And then, take Shaka's advice and forgive yourself. You don't have to bring up sins that you've already confessed. Remember God's love is unconditional. Nothing will separate us from that love. Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is ourself, and sometimes others do not forgive us or bring up the past. Remember though Jesus' words to Peter, to forgive 70 times 7, and that no matter what it is that has happened, God's love is always here for you.

Lastly though, confession helps you to become better. As we say in the Act of Contrition we try to avoid the "near occasion" of sin. We learn from our mistakes. We are filled with grace and hopefully use that to better love people and achieve greater unity in the body of Christ which sin disrupts.

The cross reminds us of how ugly sin is. There is no getting around it. And we have to confront it. It hurts us and others. But as we will sing come Easter, this is the feast of victory for our Lord, Alleluia. Jesus triumphs over sin forever. So take His hand and experience His mercy through this beautiful sacrament by trusting that He will lead us to victory, by honestly looking at where we have been, but also looking with Jesus at where we are going - namely towards heaven, trusting that His mercy will see us through our journey.

God's blessings to you on your Lenten journey,

Fr. Paul