

Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A – March 22, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 900 words

“With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption”, we repeated with the Psalm in today’s Mass. Our readings today talk about the Spirit who dwells in us and makes us spiritually alive, or who brings us to life again when we were formerly dead. Even the story of Lazarus teaches us a similar theme: his resuscitation teaches us about what Jesus does for us spiritually whenever we have sinned and died spiritually, but then repented.

One of the things I have had to refine over the years is how to teach about mortal and venial sin to people who desire to become Catholic. For those of us who were always Catholic, perhaps it’s kind of something we just “get”; although, that is not always the case either. We all have a learning curve: we must all form our consciences. But this can especially be the case for those who come from a tradition that does not make such distinctions.

It’s an important distinction, though, found in scripture: St. John said that not all sin was deadly – which is to say, mortal.¹ Some sin is venial, a word that means “light”. Venial sin offends God for sure: we should not do it. It does not destroy our relationship with him, though; no – but it does weaken it. Whereas some sin is more serious or grave; it is deadly, it is mortal. Mortal sin cuts us off from God’s divine life – it separates us from him.

We know that, in order to be guilty of a mortal sin, our moral act must fulfill three conditions: 1) it involves a serious or grave matter; 2) we have sufficient knowledge of that; and 3) we nevertheless consent to it with sufficient freedom. The simple way I summarize it is, “It’s serious, you know it, and you do it anyway”. If all three conditions apply, one is guilty of having committed a mortal sin – and thereby becomes spiritually dead.

The big hangup for many, though, is the question of what “serious” or “grave matter” is. How do we know? Well, I say that there are three sources of knowledge for this. One is intuition. No one ever had to tell you that it was seriously wrong to kill an innocent person. No one ever had to tell you that it was seriously wrong to perjure yourself. There are many such examples – all part of the natural law, hard-wired into our minds and hearts.

But we are fallen creatures, prone to error. We can never fully trust ourselves. We need a higher authority to guide us, especially if we will reach our high calling. So intuition is never enough; in fact, certain factors could contribute to our having some distortions in what we intuit as right and wrong. So there are two other sources we must consider – and to which we must submit our intellect and will – in order to form our consciences aright.

The second source of knowledge of what is grave or serious matter, then, is Sacred Scripture. And here, it is enough to focus on the New Testament. We have the homilies of Jesus – for example, the passage in the Sermon on the Mount about how lust is tantamount to adultery:² rather serious. Or the so-called “lists” of St. Paul – in at least three places³ in his letters, he tells us about grave sins that would keep us from entering God’s Kingdom.

The third source of the knowledge of what is grave or serious matter is the Church’s official teaching – the Magisterium. This includes her laws. Christ gave the Church legislative power: “whatever you bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven”.⁴ Thus there are the “precepts of the Church”, which bind us under pain of grave sin.¹ One of those is to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. Another is to observe the days of penance.

¹ 1 John 5:16-17.

² Matthew 5:28.

³ See 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, and Ephesians 5:5, for example.

⁴ Matthew 16:19.

Apart from laws, however, I think a great example of how the Magisterium “fills in the gaps”, as it were, otherwise left by our imperfect intuition and even after we have gotten to know the scriptures, is with the Church’s teaching on euthanasia. It’s a serious or grave matter, to be sure. Left to intuition alone, however, we might fall prey to a misguided compassion. And there are no scripture passages that really clearly speak on this topic, either.

Intuition, scripture, and magisterium are the three places we can look to know what grave matter is – and so avoid implicating ourselves in mortal sin and thereby separating ourselves from God. Obviously, I have tried to keep this all family-friendly and have left out various details or examples one could give. The take-away, though, is that we must form our consciences aright! To do so, we need to know where to look – we need to know “the sources”.

Whenever we go to confession with mortal sin on our soul, we are like Lazarus dead in the tomb. And Jesus – receiving our contrition, looking with compassion on us, desiring to save us – cries out, “Lazarus, come out!” He revives us, restores us to the divine life. Sure, from there we must go back to the trials of life and eventually face physical death, like Lazarus had to do after being revived. But at least then, we have the hope of eternal life.

Yes, “With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption”!

ⁱ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 2041-2043. Many traditional lists also mention keeping the Church’s laws on marriage.