

March 13, 2016 The Mercy of Christ Homily:

Brothers and sisters, perhaps some of you may remember the Swedish born actress, Ingrid Bergman, who enjoyed a distinguished career in film. Indeed, she earned the coveted Academy award for best actress in one of her films. In 1950, while making a movie in Italy, she became romantically involved with the film's director, Roberto Rossellini, a married man. Ingrid, herself, was married and the mother of one child, a daughter. When the news leaked out of her pregnancy, she paid a heavy price. The tabloids had a field day. Reporters took an unseemly delight in exposing the moral weakness of an attractive and very popular actress. She was publicly denounced on the floor of the U.S. Senate. Given the harsh reaction to her extramarital affair, she was compelled to live in Europe for years. She was shown no mercy. She was labeled a home-wrecker and a harlot. Her marriage ended, as did that of her lover. As people are wont to say today, "She was in a bad place"!

In the film version of the scene of the woman taken in adultery, directed by the fabled Franco Zeffirelli, the adulterous woman (played perfectly by the Italian actress, Claudia Cardinale), is brought before Jesus. Half-naked, she is publicly exposed and ordered to "stand in the middle"(Jn.8:3). She is understandably petrified of an ugly, horrific death and, what's more, is subjected to shame, embarrassment and humiliation. In the scene, the anguished look on the face of the actress is moving and unforgettable.

Those responsible for creating this spectacle, the Pharisees and the scribes, had an ulterior motive. They wished to discredit Jesus and destroy his reputation among the people. The woman's sin provided them with a perfect trap in which to catch Jesus. "They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him" (Jn.8:6).

In the Law of Moses, adultery is a capital sin, and deserving of the most severe of punishments. It is likened to a cancer in the body of the Jewish people. Extermination (death by stoning) is the preferred option. Nevertheless, Jesus is gentle and treats the fallen women with compassion and mercy. He wishes to rehabilitate her and restore her to society.

What lessons can we derive from today's gospel? First, God is patient. Pope Francis writes, "God's face is the face of a merciful Father who is always patient. He always has patience, patience with us. He understands us, he waits for us. He does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to him with a contrite heart". Second, the words of Our Lord, "Let he who is without sin, be the first to cast a stone at her" (Jn.8:7), remind us that at one time or another we have all violated the laws of God. Recall the words of the evangelist, John: "If we say, 'We are without sin', we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us". (1 Jn1:8) Third, we must call upon Jesus for help... not to judge, not to be severe and not to be self-righteous. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy". (Mt. 5:7) Fourth, we can sometimes be afraid of admitting all the mess and evil within us. We fear the consequences: a loss of self-respect, a negative reaction from our peers and exclusion from our circle of friends.

May God give us courage in admitting our personal failings! And may we all avail ourselves of the tribunal of God's mercy in the Sacrament of Penance.

Amen!