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print version of Forgiveness

How much do we *cherish* God's forgiveness? That question has two sides, as Luke reminds us through the story of a sinful woman's extravagant act of both penance and celebration (Luke 7:36-50). Do we approach God with deep sorrow and repentance for our sin, and do we savor heartfelt joy at God's wonderful forgiveness?

Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), SACRAMENT OF PENANCE, 1647, 46" x 70". Duke of Sutherland Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland. Photograph Copyright Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland.

Cherishing God's Forgiveness

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S*acrament of Penance* is titled for the Roman Catholic sacrament (today called Reconciliation) that involves sincere repentance, personal confession, and glad receipt of God's forgiveness. It depicts the moment that Jesus pardons the sinful woman (Luke 7:50).

Nicolas Poussin, a French artist working in Rome, painted the seven Roman Catholic sacraments twice in his lifetime. This painting is part of a second series commissioned by Seigneur de Chantelou in Paris. Ironically the artist never viewed all seven paintings together, as we see them displayed today in one room of the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. Poussin sent the pieces individually as he finished them to his patron, Chantelou, who revealed each one separately while the others remained behind a curtain. Poussin approved of this method of viewing, and he wrote: "seeing them all together would fill the mind too much all at once." The total graciousness of God, glimpsed through these seven images, overwhelms our hearts and minds!

The event occurs around a foreshortened rectangular table with a pair of gray marble ionic columns between pink marble pilasters opening into a dark courtyard area in the back. A great triclinium surrounds the table on three sides and the guests lean on large white pillows (much as scholars believe a first century meal would be eaten). There are nine servants for eight guests. This is the home of Simon the Pharisee, a wealthy man! He is having his feet washed on the right side of the painting.

On the opposite side of the composition, the woman washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Simon sits up and turns at the waist to listen and understand Jesus' conversation with the woman. Poussin changes the story: in the biblical text, Jesus discusses the woman's acts (bathing his feet, wiping his feet with her hair, kissing his feet, anointing his feet with ointment) directly with Simon (7:44-46). In *Sacrament of Penance*, Jesus, as a priest, blesses and forgives the woman as she leans over his feet.

The artist invites us, like Simon the Pharisee, to observe Jesus and to wonder how much we cherish God's forgiveness.