

Pastoral Letter on Penance and Reconciliation

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“Lord, you are merciful to us all and hate nothing you have created. You overlook the sins of men to bring them to repentance. You are the Lord, Our God.”

This opening antiphon of the Mass for Ash Wednesday locates us at the center of God’s loving care. As we begin the season of Lent in our Jubilee Year, I wanted to share with all of you, my brothers and sisters in the Lord, some thoughts about this most wondrous sacrament of penance and reconciliation which Jesus Christ gave to His Church. It is my hope and my prayer that these few words might strike a chord in your heart so that you will treasure more and more this sacrament of God’s mercy. It is my deepest desire that all of us avail ourselves frequently of this sacrament and that it might have a renewal of esteem and of practice within our beloved Diocese in this fiftieth year of our existence as the Church here at Rockville Centre, the Church on Long Island.

The source and summit of the Church’s life is, of course, the Eucharist.

This is the most precious and awesome gift Jesus gave to His Church the night before he died, an action that the Church, born from the side of Christ on the cross, has celebrated from her very beginning and has preserved and passed on faithfully in every generation. Every other sacrament flows from the mystery of the Eucharist and, in a sense, finds its own meaning by a relationship of its mystery of God’s love bound up in and given shape by the Eucharist, the heart of the Church’s life.

The sacrament of penance and reconciliation has a deep and intimate connection to the Eucharist. It is the sacrament that invites us all to look at ourselves in our frailty and fragility and to measure our lives in the light of the overwhelming love that our God, “ever rich in mercy”, pours out through this sacrament.

To grasp this we must begin with the mystery that is the human person. Created in God’s image, “the man and the woman” reflect God’s creative love and have within themselves the freedom to choose and follow God in a friendship He offers to every human being. From the very beginning “the man and the woman” chose to exercise their freedom in ways that, in part, rejected God’s friendship. So deeply real was that rejection that the

very human condition into which each of us is born is marred and marked by an inclination which, without God's help, leads us inexorably toward death and destruction. Without God, we inevitably are at the mercy of our own worst appetites. Without God, we cannot understand or affirm the beauty of the created mystery of human life God has created. Without God, we can never realize His plan for us.

That plan of God from all eternity was a plan to save us from the misuse of our freedom without destroying our freedom. God so loves us that He desires that we choose to follow him, that we choose life, His life, as the measure of our lives and thus achieve the only true happiness that is ultimately satisfying, the happiness of friendship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ in the bond of love which is the gift of His Holy Spirit.

“For while we were still in our sin, God sent His Son born of a woman, born according to the law to redeem us from the law”. Paul says it so clearly. God “so loved the world that he sent His Son”. That Son, made one with us in all but sin, gave himself up totally and “became obedient unto death, death on a cross. **God raised Him up and gave him a name above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee in heaven and earth and under the earth should bend and every tongue proclaim Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father.**” In that salvific action which only God could have done, we find the road that leads to our forgiveness, our spiritual regeneration and our life in Christ. We could not redeem ourselves. Only God who is the source of life could regenerate life and give to human life a share in divine life.

To me the story that best illustrates this is what we have come to call the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32). In that moving story of love and reconciliation, we find ourselves, everyone of us, who stand ultimately before the Father, the Father who never stops loving us, never stops yearning for us, never ceases to offer us a heart ready to embrace, to forgive, to reconcile. Pope John Paul II wrote “The Prodigal Son is every human being, bewitched by the temptation to separate himself from his Father in order to lead his own independent existence...Like the Father in the parable, God looks out for the return of his child, embraces him when he arrives and orders the banquet of the new meeting with which the reconciliation is celebrated”. (RP 5)

The son has squandered his inheritance, indeed has squandered his very dignity of being the son of a loving Father, realizes he cannot reconstitute himself, cannot regain his

dignity, cannot become a son again by his own efforts. He must turn to his Father, the source of his life and seek from him the forgiveness which is the condition to regain his dignity, regain his sonship, regain his life. And what he discovers is what we too discover every time we turn to God and seek forgiveness through the sacrament of penance. God never turns us away. God always wants us back. God's love is so vast and so constant that he can do ought else but "put a ring on our finger, place a cloak on our shoulders, kiss and begin a celebration for we who were dead are now come to life, we who were lost are now found".

Jesus has ordained that this promise of the Father's merciful love and forgiveness should be guaranteed in the Church in and through the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. He has ordained those whom he instituted as the "leaders" (Luke 22:26) to have the power in His name to bind and loose and to them and to their successors, bishops and priests, has been passed on that role to be the ecclesial instruments bringing to every penitent who seeks forgiveness the sure and certain gift of pardon for sins, reconciliation to the Father and renewal of life in Christ Jesus and in the Church in that bond of love which is the Holy Spirit. The Church is the community of the reconciled, the community of communion, the renewed and revived Body of Christ.

In our world today there is tendency to forget about the reality of sin. I need not belabor the point. Many brighter and more profound than I have chronicled the demise of the sense of sin and, with it, the falling off from the practice of frequenting the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. I wish it were otherwise. I pray that this will change because ultimately this constant act of individual censorship by which we repress the acknowledgement of sin in our lives and pretend that "all is well" will destroy us. At the beginning, this misuse of our freedom might well fascinate and thrill us even as the prodigal son began by tasting with limitless license all the "joys" he could grab. But in time in every life a change comes about. It is more and more difficult to distract oneself in fleeting "joys". It is harder and harder to pretend that this is a meaningful life. We have to construct more and more illusions to protect our empty existence from the sheer reality of the void, the terrible void that is life lived for oneself, life lived without the friendship and love of God.

As I pray that this will change, I do so with great hope and great confidence. That hope springs first from the truth about the human heart. No matter how long and how

cleverly we might fool ourselves, deep down the human heart knows! The human heart can fool itself for only so long! The human heart, as Augustine so rightly said, is “restless” and it will remain “restless until it comes to rest in Thee, O God”. And there is the second and even more wondrous source for my hope and my confidence. The human heart has been made by God to be loved by God, to be in a mutual relationship of love and friendship that is made possible by Him who first loved us and gave himself up for us. As Pope Benedict has told us so wondrously in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, of all the titles we might have of God, the one HE wants us to know of him is that GOD IS LOVE.

So, my friends, let your conscience free. Let your heart roam toward the One who is calling you to be in love with Him as He is already in love with you. Let His love be the light that illumines the dark corners of your life not to punish you but to bring you to want to be rid of the darkness and, in sorrow for your sins, let His light banish the darkness of sin and death to bathe you in his own perfect light. All it takes is a sincere heart. All it takes is an upright conscience. All it takes is to say, like the prodigal son, “I know what I will do, “I will arise and go to my father and say to him, ‘Father I have sinned against heaven and before you...’” And you know what your father is already waiting to say to you! **“You were dead but now you are alive. You were lost but now you are found”.**

The Church is that father’s home on earth. Like him, in fidelity to him, the Church is waiting for you, yearning for you, eager to welcome you home by being the instrument of God’s love by reconciling you to Him and to the Church community through the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, the sacrament of divine mercy. The Church imitates the Father in this patient but constant longing for the forgiveness of every sinner. The Church imitates the Father in offering to every penitent that same embrace, that same pardon that same reconciliation that makes us once again sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in this community of communion. How can we not at this moment not praise God for so beautiful a sacrament, the sacrament that shows us God’s love as mercy, the sacrament that gives us back a restored humanity, that sacrament that makes us one with God and one with all our brothers and sisters in this Body of Christ which is our true home and the one place we always can find God’s life and love!

Pope Paul VI has told us priests that this is the most human of all the sacraments. He instructs us confessors that we are to conduct ourselves always in the confessional with

great sensitivity and delicacy, showing to the penitent the human face of Christ and using all our priestly skills to be an instrument whose every word and gesture communicates to the penitent that he or she is encountering Christ who is ever present, ever alive in the Church, Christ whose power renders this sacrament the potent and certain means of forgiveness of all our sins. I have never met a priest who does not want to act in Christ's name in this way as he administers the sacrament of reconciliation. **No Catholic need ever fear entering the confessional. No Catholic need ever wonder how she or he will be received by the priest.** We promise to be instruments of Christ's grace and faithful ministers of God's merciful love. For we too are sinners and we too frequent the sacrament of penance and we know first hand what it must be because we know first hand what it is in our own lives: the sacrament of God's merciful love.

Completely convinced as I am of the beauty and the awesome grace that this sacrament gives us, I, as your bishop, invite you in the name of Jesus Christ, to avail yourself more frequently of this sacrament. If you are guilty of serious, mortal sin, you cannot receive the Eucharist until you have confessed that sin and received sacramental absolution. If you need help in going to confession because you are unsure how to do it, the priest will help you so that you can confess all your sins and their frequency, knowing that the Lord forgives even "the hidden faults" we can neither know or remember.

But please come to the sacrament especially this Lent and experience the peace that comes from being bathed in God's merciful love. Pius XII confessed daily. Most priests I know confess at least once a month. There is nothing wrong in weekly confession for confession even of venial sins will bring you the grace of the sacrament, a grace that will bind you ever more deeply into the bond of God's love.

In conclusion I wish to call attention to certain practical steps that I would like followed in every parish to encourage the more frequent practice of sacramental confession. In doing this I must first of all thank from my heart all the priests of our diocese. I commend them to your prayer for their zeal in making themselves available to the People of God in this sacrament. I praise God for their kind and compassionate manner that shows to every penitent the human heart of Christ who loves us in this special sacrament of mercy.

The Church gives us several ways that we can celebrate the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. While there is no need ever for general absolution in the

current situation of our Diocese, I commend to my brother priests the various ways of celebrating the sacrament through penance services with individual confession as well as the traditional use of the confessional with both face to face and anonymous options.

In that spirit, I wish first to re-affirm the now good and holy tradition in our Diocese that the Monday of Holy Week be dedicated to the hearing of confessions in every parish of our Diocese from 3 to 9 pm. **I urge every Catholic in our Diocese to take advantage of this extraordinary action of grace which you can make your own in any and every parish of our Diocese.** If a priest is alone, he may have to excuse himself from the confessional for personal needs at certain intervals. Yet the spirit of fraternity that marks our presbyterate means that no pastor would overlook this communal sacerdotal action by which our Diocese is renewed during Holy Week.

Second, I thank the priests for the practice of having confessions available once a week usually for an hour before the first Vigil Mass on Saturday afternoon. By this letter I am asking every pastor, without exception, to establish at least one additional hour at a different time during the week when there will be a priest in the confessional to hear confessions. It may take some adjustment in a priest's busy schedule but we all should be willing to "re-prioritize" our time even if it means we cannot be present at some other parish activity. It may take time to find the right time but there should be a regular time known to the parishioners when they can expect to have a priest available. At first there may not be many who come. But be patient. Even if no one comes, it is not a "waste of the priest's time" to be in the confessional. With the Breviary, the rosary or spiritual reading, the priest can take advantage of the time when there are no penitents to pray for the people and be an example of devotion to the sacrament that will in time bring more and more persons to the sacrament.

Third I would suggest that we connect in our schedule and in our people's minds the sacrament of penance with the sacrament of the Eucharist. Many of our parishes have weekly adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I have seen this across the Diocese during our beautiful Eucharistic Congress last year. Perhaps it would be helpful to have the second weekly hour of confessions linked to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Prayer for vocations to priestly and consecrated life in the presence of the Lord redouble the commitment we have to living as a community of communion reconciled to God and to one

another. Another way to situate the sacrament of penance is to place it in connection with Mary, the Mother of God or with certain saints whose love and devotion to the sacrament was so manifest in their lives.

Above all, placing the sacrament of penance and reconciliation within the Word of God will enrich the lives of our people and lead them into a deeper grasp of how the message of Jesus in all its richness calls us to live his Word in every act and deed of our lives. **He who said “your sins are forgiven” to the woman caught in adultery is the one who tells us “Come, follow me” and bids us “Go forth into the world and make disciples of all nations”.**

The inner unity of the call of faith and the life of Christian love is sustained and built up by the sacrament of penance and reconciliation as part of the constellation of means that Christ has given to His Church which is herself the mysterious sacrament of the unity of God with us and of the unity of all humankind (cf. LG 1). As we celebrate our golden jubilee as a Diocese, may we be the instruments of Christ who reconciles the world to Himself and makes of us ministers of his reconciliation bearing to the world His pardon and His peace.

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Ash Wednesday