

Pastoral Letter on the Mystery (Sacrament) of Penance

What is it that drives a spouse to cheat or a man or woman to become chemically dependent? Why does one person gamble and lose the savings he and his wife put aside for their children? How do some get addicted to pornography? Why do those who fall from the state of grace take so long to be reconciled with God? How can we harm the ones we love in ways that we can never imagine and are so very hard to heal? It is obvious that we are people who need Christ. But where can we find Him? How can we meet Him after failing Him?

As Catholics, we believe that the most real and profound meeting with Christ takes place in the Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church, and the Mysteries that help us most in our daily struggle against sin, addiction, bad habits, bad attitudes, and destructive behavior are those of Penance (Confession) and the Holy Eucharist. In my first pastoral letter to you I focused on the Eucharist, Christ's great gift for the Church. This year I want to reflect with you on the Mystery of Penance.

Real people make up the Catholic Church. We are not a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners. Jesus was sent to save us from our sins, so the Heavenly Father understands our daily struggle. He calls us each day to turn from the habits of sin and selfishness to, as Saint Peter said, a life-giving repentance (Acts 11:18).

Quiet prayer, retreats, spiritual counseling, frequent Communion, good friendships, and warm family ties all have their positive influence on us, and are ways we have at our disposal to lead us closer to God. But the Mystery of Penance, with its hidden grace and source of holiness, is often overlooked. Much more than an Easter Duty, by merely following Church law and attending once a year, Penance can be celebrated frequently. The whole power of the Mystery

of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with Him in an intimate friendship. Much more than just about God punishing evil and encouraging good, Penance is our desire to meet Christ through our human weakness and draw us closer to Him. Thus, in this Pastoral Letter, knowing fully well that there are some who think that Confession no longer meets the needs of real people today, I hope to encourage those who have stayed away from this Mystery to take a second look; and for those who partake often, to strengthen their resolve in order to take full advantage of this graced opportunity for conversion and personal renewal.

Pope Benedict's recent words, from the heart of a pastor, have referred to the Mystery of Penance in this way:

"Experiencing the Lord's tenderness and forgiveness, penitents are more easily persuaded to recognize the gravity of sin, and more determined to avoid it in order to remain and grow in a renewed friendship with Him." (February 19, 2007 Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary)

Through this Mystery, imbued with Christ's mercy, there is no better way of drawing us closer to Him. Thus, we can be counseled, challenged, confronted, comforted, pardoned and strengthened in a way that enables us to enjoy a loving, warm and personal relationship with Christ, and then bring His love and mercy to those with whom we share our lives, since we cannot give to others what we do not first possess. The Mystery of Penance is thus a *direct* and *personal* experience of His mercy, and those who do not partake of this Mystery are missing an integral part of their relationship with Christ.

It is not uncommon to hear that some Catholics have put off Confession for years. Perhaps pride, arrogance or certain fears get in the way, or perhaps unwillingness to take a closer look at self. Some may see Confession as an outdated expression of piety that is no longer relevant. Others may avoid Confession because they have not yet found the right priest or are too proud to face another person and confess. Some think they ought to confess directly to God and forget the "middleman", or mistakenly feel that a communal penance service suffices

and thus they do not need individual confession. Whatever the reason, faith is a real gift, and we ought to do all we can to nurture this gift. We cannot and should not be discouraged from individually approaching this expression of God's mercy in a mature manner, thus fulfilling our responsibility to our own spiritual lives: to confess our sins, receive absolution, make amends and to live lives that progressively move us closer and closer to Christ.

The Mystery of Penance is made up of four parts: **First**, there is the examination of conscience. Because the conscience is our most secret core and sanctuary (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC n 1795), we should daily explore those things that weaken our relationship with Christ. Our conscience alone, however, is not enough to make us aware of our sin. We also need sound advice from trusted family members and friends. Likewise, the teachings of the Church are indispensable in helping us discern the truth about ourselves. Taken together, our own examination of conscience and the teachings of the Church, we begin our preparation for Penance with an ardent desire to acknowledge honestly whatever blocks our relationship with God or hinders us from a deeper union with Him.

The **second** part of the Mystery of Penance is to reveal (confess) this examination of conscience to the priest. Our Catholic faith teaches us that the confession of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with ourselves, others and God (CCC 1455). The more honest we are, the more we will receive the direction and help we need. The Mystery of Penance is not a courtroom where the guilty stand to be accused; it is a doctor's office where one freely acknowledges sinful patterns in order to find healing, pardon and peace.

Comparable to going to a doctor's office, leaving out important symptoms (sins) that affect us, will keep us from getting the proper diagnosis, treatment and care that we need. Thus, by

acknowledging our sinful patterns, we can find healing, pardon and peace in our heart. *God* does not need our honesty. As a loving Father, He can read our hearts and already knows our sin. But by being honest with ourselves (and our confessor) we are able to accept accountability for our actions and begin the spiritual and emotional healing that facilitates reconciliation with God and His Church and therefore enables us to appreciate the gift of absolution.

The **third** part of the Mystery of Penance is the giving of spiritual guidance by the priest. Often a forgotten element of Penance, this spiritual guidance goes back to the early Church when the disciples of Christ actually sought out a person to be their spiritual guide, a mentor who prepared them for Baptism and was their sponsor in the faith. Later, the great Fathers of the Church, especially the Desert Fathers, urged those baptized who wanted to live a more faithful life, to seek out a spiritual father and to confess their thoughts and sins to that person so as to draw close to Christ in the spiritual life. Penance is not only about our sins and what we do wrong, but also about what we do right and how we can better live our lives. Thus, the brief conversation with a priest can help us continue our progress in the spiritual life.

The guidance of the priest thus takes the form of not only advice and counsel, but what is called a *salutary penance*, salutary meaning health giving. This penance is a request of the priest to the penitent to help him or her turn away from sin and toward the virtues. This may be prayer, an act of restitution, or some discipline, which enables the penitent to improve in the spiritual life. Although Confession is not a counseling session, the brief advice and encouragement of the priest is an important part of this Mystery.

The **fourth** element of the Mystery of Penance consists of the penitent's expression of sorrow, the resolve to do better and is culminated by the absolution given by the priest. These

elements are the very heart and essence of the meaning of Penance. This personal expression of the penitent, along with the absolution by the priest, who acts in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, is what makes the Mystery of Penance such a great gift, willed by Christ Himself.

In summary, the Mystery of Penance includes an examination of conscience, the confession of sin, the spiritual guidance and salutary penance given by a priest, as well as contrition, new resolve and **absolution**, which makes this Mystery a real encounter with Christ Himself.

How important is the role of the priest in bringing others to this grace? He is in a privileged position to do this. It is assumed, nonetheless, that he himself has been, and continues to be, like the one he absolves, a sincere penitent. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes him in this way:

The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant. The minister of this sacrament should unite himself to the intention and charity of Christ. He should have a proven knowledge of Christian behavior, experience of human affairs, respect and sensitivity toward the one who has fallen; he must love the truth, be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church, and lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy. (n 1466)

What an awesome privilege and responsibility placed in the priest's hands. It inspires us to pray that they may be able to dispense such a task in the name of Christ. A priest is most a priest when he hears confessions, because it is his *humanity* that Christ employs to reconcile a penitent. His demeanor, love for the Gospel and the Church, and inner disposition of welcome assists the Holy Spirit in reconciling the penitent.

We know from the Sacred Scriptures that Christ gave to the apostles, and thus to their successors, the bishops and priests, the honor and responsibility to bear this "gift" of absolution and pardon to those who seek it. From the Gospel of John, Jesus said:

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit.

Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." (Jn 20:21-21)

Additionally, in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus said:

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Mt 16:17-19)

When we celebrate the Mystery of Penance, we are close to the very mind and heart of Christ Himself who gave this gift to His Church for our benefit.

Lastly, mention should be made of the Seal of Confession, an important aspect of the Mystery of Penance. It is described in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in this way:

Given the delicacy and greatness of this ministry (of the priest) and the respect due to persons, the Church declares that every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents' lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the "sacramental seal," because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains "sealed" by the sacrament. (n 1467)

Penitents' secrets may not be revealed for any reason. Their confidentiality is *never* to be broken, and priests know the seriousness of this obligation. By virtue of the confession, they bind the priest confessor to secrecy. This gives penitents the confidence to speak candidly and to trust that they will be respected.

During the 1970's many Catholics were abandoning the practice of individual confessions. A non-believing psychoanalyst once told a priest, "thank you for the business!" What a pity for Catholics to discount or devalue a profound and time-tested spiritual practice, one that has its beginnings with Christ Himself, and then have non-believers tell us what a great gift it is! We ought to appreciate this gift first and foremost, as the early Christians cherished it. The

Mystery of Penance continues to be the best possible means to help us grow in virtue and holiness, and arm us with the spiritual strength needed for the Christian struggle.

When was the last time you went to Confession? Is it an outmoded and antiquated practice, or a graced opportunity given to us for deeper communion with Christ?

In the Maronite Church priests, religious and the lay faithful are accustomed to seeking holiness through the Mystery of Penance. This is clear from the life of Her saints. Likewise, Holy Saturday, traditionally a day of reconciliation and pardon in the Maronite Tradition, prepares us for Easter because peace with God and with others comes from the pardon and peace that we receive when our sins are forgiven. Thus frequenting the Mystery of Penance makes every day for us a Holy Saturday as we live between the sorrow and shame of Good Friday and the joy and hope of Easter Sunday.

I pray that everyone will take the necessary steps to benefit from the Mystery of Penance and seek God's help in the struggle against sin. We don't have to do it alone. God gave us the Mystery of Penance for a reason. Some of us are broken, destructive of self and others, hypocritical, arrogant and selfish. Some are easily addicted. Others mistakenly believe that they have no sins to confess. God knows we need help, and loves us enough to bring His healing power to His Church today through the Mysteries of Eucharist and Penance. We Catholics are familiar with Christ's true presence in the Eucharist, yet we miss His awesome, yet different, presence in the Mystery of Penance.

I hope this reflection on the often-times-neglected Mystery of Penance will encourage you to reach out once again and to receive the gift awaiting you. May the prayer of Mary, Mother of

God, be with us, and may the words of Jesus, “Child your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5), have a more personal meaning for all of us.

How to prepare for the Mystery of Penance, seven simple tips:

1. Pray and examine your conscience, especially with regard to how you are with yourself, with others and with God. Use the Commandments, the teachings of the Church, the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5 thru 7 or Part 3 of *The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. These are some of the ways to keep yourself honest.
2. Enter into the Mystery of Penance willing to confess your sins and to mention that which is bothering you, big or small, and what hinders you from going deeper in your relationship with God.
3. Ask the priest for an appointment, or when you see him ask if he has a few minutes at that time to hear your confession, or go to the scheduled time in your parish or any parish for confession.
4. Begin your confession saying, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned, it has been (how long?) since my last confession.” Then recall your sins and whatever harms your relationship with God.
5. Let the grace of the Holy Spirit guide you, be as honest as you can. Listen to the brief counsel of the priest. If there is anything else that you want to discuss, mention it at that time.
6. The priest will give a salutary penance and invite you to pray the Act of Contrition (see below). As you pray this prayer, the priest will pray a prayer of absolution and then invite you to go in peace.
7. Make the sign of the cross and go to some place quiet to reflect on the counsel given and fulfill the salutary penance. Pray a silent prayer of thanks to God and put into practice a new resolve to live more faithfully to Christ.

This simple rite is to be carried out in a profoundly human way. In reality, both priest and penitent are penitents! All of us are penitents, yet we joyfully recognize God’s merciful love and are willing to celebrate it. The Holy Spirit is our comforter and guide in all that we need to make a good confession. Mary, the Mother of God, is always our helper in time of need.

Act of Contrition:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.

(Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church)