

**GOD'S MERCY  
AND THE  
SACRAMENT OF PENANCE**

*Lent provides us an opportunity to experience  
God's mercy and forgiveness*

A Pastoral Letter  
to the  
Clergy, Religious and Laity  
of the  
Archdiocese of Washington

**BY  
MOST REVEREND DONALD W. WUERL, S.T.D.  
ARCHBISHOP OF WASHINGTON**

Grace and peace to all of you in Christ.

## **Introduction**

Some time ago as I was standing in line at the airport a young man about 35 years old asked me if I could explain something to him. He claimed that he had more or less been raised as a Catholic and that Catholics "do something that helps them get rid of all the excess baggage they carry around so that they can start again brand new." I said I assumed that he was talking about the sacrament of Confession. His reply was that he knew we had something like that; he just did not know how to use it. He had never been properly instructed nor had he participated in this "Catholic way of getting rid of excess baggage."

The young man at the airport is not alone. All of us at times carry a great deal of "baggage" that we would like to unload. Despite our best intentions, each of us has experienced personal failure. My hope is that all Catholics properly understand the nature and importance of the sacrament of Confession, and this letter invites us to reflect on the great gift of reconciliation. It is directed in a special way to those who do not know much about the sacrament of Confession or who have drifted away from its use. For that reason I hope that all of us would consider sharing this letter and its invitation with those whom we think might benefit from it. In this way, each of us can become an evangelist for the forgiveness of Christ and a witness to God's wondrous mercy.

My invitation to every Catholic in this Archdiocese is to join in a Lenten spiritual journey to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation or, as we have traditionally said, "go to Confession," preferably during the season of Lent.

## **Root of Sin**

Why is it so difficult at times to be good and to do what is right? Even though we may have good intentions, why do we often find ourselves doing what we know we should not do or failing to do the good we know we ought to do? These perplexing questions arise from our awareness that a part of us is determined to do good while at the same time an element within us continually turns away from the good we know we can do.

In the seventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul describes this situation while writing about what we call the human condition. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me" (Rom 7:15-20).

Saint Paul's cry from the heart is something each of us has experienced. Why is it that we have the best of intentions, sincerely make new year's resolutions, firmly renew our aspirations, sometimes every day, and then allow the worst in us to come out?

We can find an explanation in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. A description of this seemingly relentless and endless struggle between good and evil is described in the imagery of the serpent tempting Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit. God said, "You

may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gn 2:16-17). The tempter, however, said, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gn 3:4-5).

Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. They chose their own desires over God's will and plan. This teaching, whatever the imagery, is very clear. Sin entered the world through the decision of a human being to choose self over God and God's plan. God is not responsible for the evil in the world.

### **...And Alienation**

At the same time the harmony of creation was destroyed. If we continue to read the book of Genesis, we see how Adam and Eve became aware of their sin and were filled with shame before God - hiding from him rather than seeking his face. This was not the way it was meant to be. Once sin entered into life and into our world, harmony with God was shattered and the whole network of relationships with each other and our world began to unravel - from the Genesis account of Cain's murder of Abel to the utter confusion at the Tower of Babel. This first sinful action - this fundamental breakdown - we call original sin. It results in what we call the human condition.

Each one of us is an heir to Adam and Eve. We are members of the human family. We trace our lineage back to this couple and their failure to respect God's law, will and plan. The actions that they took shattered God's created harmony not only for them but also for us. Their sin is reflected in us and is mirrored in our daily life. This helps to explain why it is so difficult to do good, to do what we know we should do.

### **Traces of Original Sin**

Saint Paul describes the consequences of original sin within us as a struggle between the old and new person. The old person is interested only in the selfish man or woman who dwells within each of us. The life of the new person, baptized and alive in God's grace, is directed to God, Christ and our neighbors. This struggle deep within our human nature has continued from the time of Adam and Eve's sin. Our baptism washes away original sin but its effects still remain.

### **New Life in Christ**

Yet we are not lost. We are not left to our own devices. Saint Paul, writing to the Corinthians, reminds us that just as in Adam sin was introduced into the world and, through sin, death and all of its consequences; so, too, grace and new creation come to us in Christ. Just as death came through a human being, so, too, the resurrection of the dead came through a human being. As in Adam all people die, so in Christ all shall be brought to life - a fullness of life, a new creation already beginning in us through grace (cf. 1 Cor 15).

This is the message we proclaim when we face the mystery of sin, the reality of original sin and the problems of the human condition that lead us to personal sin. Just as Adam brought sin, death, disharmony, confusion, disruption and struggle into our lives, so too

now Christ, the new Adam, gives us grace, redemption, new life and salvation. It is in Jesus Christ that we now find the beginnings of the new creation. He leads us back to the Father, overcomes the tragic alienation of sin and restores harmony. Jesus gives us newness of life in grace that begins to restore our relationship with God which will lead to full communion with God in glory. It is for this reason that we identify Christ as the new Adam. Grace is the beginning of a new creation for all of those baptized into Christ.

When we face daily frustrations and struggle to be good, we need to recall the teaching of the Church that we have the power to triumph over sin because we have Christ's grace within us. We have the capacity to be victorious, but we must face it every day with our Lord and Savior, the new Adam, Jesus Christ.

### **By Your Holy Cross**

In one of the most familiar and cherished forms of the Way of the Cross, we find this invitation to prayer: "We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you." The people reply, "Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world." In this brief invitatory and response, Saint Alphonsus Liguori captures the essence of the article of the Creed which proclaims that Jesus Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried."

The central role of Christ's cross and resurrection in the good news that the apostles preached is evident. There is much more to this statement of faith than the simple recognition that Christ died. If by his cross Christ had not redeemed us, his death would have had little meaning. It is with the eyes of faith that the apostles and every believer after them gazes on the cross and sees much more than just the instrument on which Jesus hung until he died.

Jesus became the new Passover, the unique and final sacrifice by which God's saving plan was accomplished "once for all" by the redemptive death of his son Jesus Christ. In God's holy plan it was determined that the Word of God, made flesh in Jesus Christ, would be the expiatory sacrifice that would take away the sins of the world. In fact we continue at the celebration of every Eucharist, in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, to proclaim before we receive the Body and Blood of Christ: "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

The Catholic faith teaches that Jesus truly saved us by deeds performed in his human nature, by his obedient love and by his patient endurance, as well as by offering his life as "a ransom for the many" (Mt 20:28). It was in his humanity that Jesus took on our sin and by dying atoned for it. The tragic consequences of Adam's sin could have no other remedy than the merit of the one mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ, who reconciled us to God in his own blood.

As the Church has consistently taught, it is Jesus who merited our justification by his most holy Passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* confirms that Christ's death is "both the *paschal sacrifice* that accomplishes the definitive redemption of men...and the *sacrifice of the new covenant*, which restores man to communion with God..." (613).

## **...You Have Redeemed the World**

The sufferings of Jesus and the glory of his resurrection are inseparably joined in the paschal mystery. The preface for Easter proclaims, "By dying he destroyed our death and by rising he restored us to life." The Father saved us not only by delivering up his Son for us but also by raising him from the dead (cf. 1 Pt 1:3-5). It is for this reason that we say the cross of Christ points towards and is fulfilled in the resurrection. The paschal mystery includes both the death and the resurrection, both the expiation and the glorification, both the dying and the rising to new life.

In a very graphic way the Stations of the Cross depict the power of sin. Jesus accepted the cross and took on our sins. Spiritual tradition tells us that Jesus fell three times under the weight of the cross and got up each time to continue his sorrowful way to Calvary, the crucifixion and our redemption.

Each of us bears the weight of crosses we fashion with our own sins, and without God's grace we would never be able to get back up after each fall. Only the grace of God's forgiveness extends the helping hand that lifts us from our failure, fault and sin and allows us to continue our journey to God.

In baptism all sin is wiped away. Original sin with which we are born and any personal sin we might have committed are removed by the saving waters of baptism. Yet our experience is that even after baptism our human condition is marred with countless personal sins and failings that challenge even our best intentions. We do not "live happily ever after." That only happens in fiction or fairy tales. Once again, though, God does not leave us to our own failures.

## **Forgiveness of Sins**

The Church believes in the forgiveness of sins. Not only did Jesus die to wash away all sin and not only in his public life did he forgive sin, but after his resurrection Jesus also extended to his Church the power to apply the redemption won on the cross and the authority to forgive sin.

The Catechism points out that our faith in the forgiveness of sins is tied in with faith in the Holy Spirit, the Church and the communion of saints. "It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his apostles that the risen Christ conferred on them his own divine power to forgive sins: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (976).

This power to forgive sins is often referred to as the "power of the keys." Saint Augustine pointed out that the Church "has received the keys of the kingdom of heaven so that, in her, sins may be forgiven through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit's action. In this Church, the soul dead through sin comes back to life in order to live with Christ, whose grace has saved us" (Sermon 214).

## Sacrament of Penance

After baptism, where do we find such forgiveness? Who can remove sin and wipe away our failures? In the sacrament of Penance we meet Christ in his Church ready and eager to absolve and restore us to new life. The graces of Christ are conferred in the sacraments by means of visible signs - signs which are acts of worship, symbols of the grace conferred and the recognizable gestures through which the Lord confers his gifts. Forgiveness of sins and the restoration of baptismal graces are also attached to an outward sign.

What leads a person to the sacrament of Penance is a sense of sorrow for what one has done. The motivation may be out of love for God or even fear of the consequences of having offended God. Whatever the motive, contrition is the beginning of forgiveness of sin. The sinner must come to God by way of repentance.

There can be no forgiveness of sin if we do not have sorrow at least to the extent that we regret it, resolve not to repeat it and intend to turn back to God. Our sorrow for wrong we have done should lead us to the sacrament of Penance. As Pope John Paul II teaches in his exhortation on reconciliation and penance, a worthy reception of the sacrament is "the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of sins committed after baptism... It would be foolish as well as presumptuous...to claim to receive forgiveness while doing without the sacrament which was instituted by Christ precisely for forgiveness" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 31).

True sorrow for sin implies a firm resolve not to fall back into it. While we cannot be certain that we will not sin again, our present resolve must be honest and realistic. We must want to change, to be faithful to the Lord, to take steps to make faithfulness possible. Christ's forgiveness always calls for such a commitment: "Go and do not sin again" (Jn 8:11).

As the Catechism reminds us: "For this reason conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation" (1440). Here we find the elements of a true confession: contrition, confession of sins, firm purpose of amendment, absolution and satisfaction.

## Confession

In the sacrament of Penance the sinner comes before Christ in his Church in the person of the priest who hears the sins, imposes a penance and absolves the sinner in the name and power of Christ.

The Catechism teaches us that "confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance..." (1456). There is a comforting simplicity to confession. With sincere contrition we need only open our hearts to the priest, recount our failings and ask for forgiveness. What follows is one of those moments in the life of the Church when the awesome power of Jesus Christ is most clearly and directly felt. In the name of the Church and Jesus Christ, the priest absolves the penitent from sin. At the heart of confession is the momentous action of absolution that only a priest can grant by invoking the authority of the Church and acting in the person of Jesus Christ.

Fully conscious that only God forgives sins, we bring our failings to the Church because Jesus imparted to his apostles his own power to forgive sins. In doing this Jesus gave to his Church the authority to restore and reconcile the sinner with God and also the ecclesial community, the Church. This ecclesial dimension is expressed most forcefully in Christ's words to Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).

The sacrament of Penance is an unusual tribunal. The guilty party, the penitent, accuses oneself and approaches the Lord in sorrow, admitting guilt before his representative. It is in place of Christ that the priest hears the confession of guilt; the words spoken to him are therefore guarded by the most solemn obligation of complete confidentiality. It is in the name of Christ that the priest pronounces the Savior's mercy: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

### **Penance**

To complete the process a penance is imposed on the penitent. We must make satisfaction for our sin, not that we are capable of truly satisfying God for the evil we have done. Nonetheless, we must undertake some action or prayer that will express our desire to make amends and to repair something of the disorder our sinful actions have brought into the world.

The penance given in the earlier days of the Church was often rather severe. Today the penance is usually the recitation of specified prayers or some act of kindness towards another. In the Rite of Penance we are reminded that "The kind and extent of the satisfaction should be suited to the personal condition of each penitent so that each one may restore the order which he disturbed and through the corresponding remedy be cured of the sickness from which he suffered. Therefore, it is necessary that the act of penance really be a remedy for sin and a help to renewal of life" (*Introduction*).

In the simple actions of contrition, confession, absolution and satisfaction we are restored to a whole new life. It remains one of the great marvels of God's love that God would make forgiveness so readily available to each of us.

### **Never Failing Love**

The sacrament, as the Catechism notes, is known by many names. Sometimes "it is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversation ..." (1423). But it is also better known as the sacrament of Penance "since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance and satisfaction" (1423).

For many of us it still continues to be known as the sacrament of Confession "since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament" (1424). At the same time the Catechism reminds us that it is called the sacrament of forgiveness "since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent 'pardon and peace'"

(1424). Finally it is also called the sacrament of Reconciliation because it reconciles sinners to God and then to each other (1425).

The sacrament of Reconciliation is the story of God's love that never turns away from us. It endures even our shortsightedness and selfishness. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, God waits, watches and hopes for our return every time we walk away. Like the son in the parable, all we need do to return to our Father is to recognize our wrong and seek God's love. Jesus continues to speak to us of our noble calling to holiness and of his loving forgiveness. He offers us reconciliation if we ask for it.

### **Our Continuing Conversion**

The Catechism reminds us that the sacrament of Reconciliation must be seen within the context of conversion. "Jesus calls to conversion. This call is an essential part of the proclamation of the kingdom..." (1427). And even if our conversion is ongoing and only partial, we are still subject to the effort that will some day reach completion. The Catechism points out that after he denied his Master three times Saint Peter's conversion "bears witness" to Jesus' infinite mercy (1429).

The importance of the sacrament of Penance is that it really does restore and renew our baptismal holiness. A Catholic who has committed grave sin is obliged to ask forgiveness for it in this sacrament. Once we do this and receive sacramental absolution, we are restored again to holiness - to an innocence before God. So powerful is the grace of this sacrament that the Rite of Penance reminds us that "frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly" (Introduction, 7).

Today the sacrament of Reconciliation finds its usual expression in two forms: the rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents and the rite for reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution.

The first rite is the most familiar form of penance and usually takes place in the private confessional or reconciliation room at the church. Yet even in this "private" form of confession, the social and communal element is still expressed since the priest represents the Church in the act of reconciliation.

A second form, sometimes referred to as a communal penance service and often celebrated in Advent and Lent in preparation for the great feasts of Christmas and Easter, consists essentially in a communal celebration of the word in preparation for confession which is then administered in the form of private, individual confession. Communal celebration shows more clearly both the social impact and the common experience of sin and the ecclesial nature of penance and reconciliation. It should not be confused with general absolution which is reserved for special circumstances.

## **Pastoral Program**

In order to concentrate on our personal reconciliation with God and the Church through the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance, I am proposing the following pastoral program that has two components: one educational and the other sacramental.

To the secretariat for education, I am entrusting the task of developing religious education materials to be used in all of the religious education programs of the archdiocese. A special effort will be made to enhance the educational program of adults, young adults and youth with regard to the sacrament of Penance.

Among the items to be produced in conjunction with the secretariat for pastoral ministry and social concerns is a small, user-friendly brochure that can be distributed to all of the faithful. This will highlight how one goes to Confession and contain the Act of Contrition on a detachable page of the brochure for those who may wish to keep it with them.

Any form of the Act of Contrition is a powerful prayer and we should use it frequently. It is not just for Confession. It is a prayer that we need to say every day with humility and gratitude as we regularly place ourselves before a loving and merciful God.

Once the brochure on the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance is completed and distributed throughout the parishes and our archdiocesan website, I hope everyone will feel free to take copies of it and share it with members of your household, friends and particularly those with whom we would like to share this good news of Christ's mercy available to us in Confession.

### **...By Instruction**

As a part of the educational component of our pastoral program I am also asking the secretariat for education to work with the secretariat for pastoral life to prepare a series of homiletic resources that can be used by the priests especially during the Sundays of Lent. Since this is a special time of intense concentration on sacramental reconciliation, it seems appropriate for all priests to review with our faithful the teaching of the Church on reconciliation and to renew our understanding of the importance of this sacrament and the need all of us have to receive it.

### **By the Grace of the Sacrament**

We lead by example. By frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance, priests become a living sermon on the importance of the sacrament to the faithful. I remember being strongly impressed when, as a young person, I heard one of our parish priests speak about his going to confession - with regularity.

In order to highlight both the importance of the sacrament of Penance and its availability especially in the coming Lenten season, every pastor is asked to review the parish confession schedule to ensure the adequate availability of the sacrament of Penance to the faithful. I am also asking the deans to work with the priests of their respective deaneries so that we can provide a series of deanery-wide reconciliation services to which the faithful of

the deanery will be invited and at which I will join a large number of our priests in hearing confessions.

In addition, during this Lenten season, beginning with the Wednesday of the first week of Lent until the Wednesday of Holy Week, priests will be available in every church throughout the Archdiocese from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. in order to hear confessions. The name given to this pastoral initiative is "The Light Is On For You," highlighting that the light will be on churches throughout the Archdiocese as a beacon of hope, reconciliation, and absolution.

Such an archdiocesan-wide concerted effort at sacramental Reconciliation has two obvious positive benefits: the administration of the sacraments to those who come to the penance services and the public witness to the importance of this sacrament.

To facilitate this effort I have asked the secretariat for pastoral life to work with the College of Deans to see that appropriate and useful material is made available to the parishes in anticipation of these deanery-wide reconciliation services.

### **Conclusion**

As we complete these thoughts on the sacrament of Penance, we might well reflect that the deepest spiritual joy each of us can sense is the freedom from whatever would separate us from God and the restoration of our friendship with so loving and merciful a Father who receives each of us with all the forgiveness and love lavished on the prodigal son. Renewed, refreshed and reconciled in this sacrament, we who have sinned become a "new creation." Once more we are made new. It is this newness of spirit and soul that I hope all of us experience this Lent.

Faithfully in Christ,

(Most Reverend) Donald W. Wuerl  
Archbishop of Washington

January 8, 2007  
Baptism of the Lord