

Pastoral Letter – Lent 2007 The Sacrament of Penance

Introduction

As many of you many know, St. Jude Parish in Mifflintown is in the midst of plans to build a new church in order to have sufficient space for the people who attend Mass each week. As a new pastor, never could I have imagined that building a church would be one of my responsibilities. Yet, while the planning and meeting is a long process, the development of ideas for the church proper, the nave, sanctuary, baptismal font, etc., has truly been fairly easy – with one exception: the confessional.

What should a confessional look like? With revisions in liturgy since the days of the confessional “box,” with current issues regarding the protection of youth who meet alone and one-on-one with the priest – what should the confessional look like? This has been the most difficult part of plans for St. Jude’s new church. But it has also caused me to do some reflection and thought on the Sacrament of Penance: its purpose, role, function and use. With the season of Lent now upon us – a season of conversion and repentance – I share my reflections and thoughts on the Sacrament of Reconciliation with you hoping that, together, we can grow in our understanding and love for this Sacrament of God’s Love and Mercy.

What is Penance?

First, what is Confession or Reconciliation or Penance? According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic...has willed that His Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, His work of healing and salvation, even among her own members” (CCC 1421). “Those who approach the Sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion” (*Lumen Gentium* 11.2).

The Sacrament actually has many names (cf CCC 1423-4):

- the Sacrament of Conversion: because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father (cf Mk 1:15; Lk 15:18) from whom one has strayed by sin.
- the Sacrament of Penance: since it consecrates the Christian sinner’s personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.
- the Sacrament of Confession: since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a “confession” – acknowledgment and praise – of the holiness of God and of His mercy toward sinful man.
- the Sacrament of Forgiveness: since by the priest’s sacramental absolution God grants the penitent “pardon and peace” (formula of absolution).
- the Sacrament of Reconciliation: because it imparts to the sinner the life of God who reconciles: “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). He who lives by God’s merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord’s call: “Go; first be reconciled to your brother” (Mt 5:24)..

Our celebration of Penance is, then, first an expression of inner conversion. Why is conversion so important? What motives are there for us to come to conversion? We will be far happier and fulfilled in our state in life (marriage, religious, single, priest) and so will those with whom we deal daily if we come to conversion (Dubay 60). Secondly, by our profound conversion we “prove real love and offer to one another a daily example of eternal impact...This is real love, not in mere words, but in action (62). Lastly, we should strive for conversion in our lives because “in everything we do in this life, we are making ourselves the kind of persons we shall be for all eternity: loving or hateful, egocentric or outgoing, fulfilled or frustrated, beautiful or ugly, ecstatically delighted or utterly miserable...It would be nonsensical to give up even one degree of endless delight for a thousand paltry pleasures in this life, here one moment and gone the next. The Master put it perfectly: ‘What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul (Mt 16:26)’ (Dubay 65).

Penance and Conversion

Conversion is the central and core aspect of why we would celebrate Reconciliation – because we desire to become holy as we are called to be holy. We desire to return once more to the baptismal grace, to the Sanctifying Grace, first given us at Baptism and renewed each time we make an integral confession and receive absolution in the Sacrament.

Confession is a “special means [Christ gave to us] to help us to die to sin...if we use this gift well, the reign of sin will be progressively weakened in our souls...” (Marmion 113). The Church recommends to us that we celebrate this Sacrament frequently. Even the great saints, like St. Charles Borromeo, Blessed Theresa of Calcutta and Servant of God Pope John Paul II practiced frequent confession. “In face of the divine purity their hearts felt the constant need of being washed in the blood of the Lamb” (113).

In this Season of Lent, especially, I recommend that we all develop the practice of frequent confession. When we confess only at intervals of many weeks, or even many months, we are wanting in supernatural prudence and grace. By confessing only at rare intervals we sacrifice the precious graces of sanctification and we expose ourselves to grave danger of falling into a state of tepidity – of being half-hearted or lukewarm in our lives of faith (113).

How to Celebrate the Sacrament Well

What are the important things for us to remember when we celebrate the Sacrament of Penance? First, that in the Sacrament the “Blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from sin” (1 Jn 1:7). If we have lost Sanctifying Grace (that which makes us holy and pleasing to God) by a grave sin, this grace, as well as charity, are restored to us by the pardon of the priest. If our friendship with God has not been broken off (venial sin), we receive an increase⁴ of Grace from the Lord at the same time as the venial sin is forgiven. This pardon and gift of Grace, which are the fruits of the merits of Jesus Christ, are given to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit (113-4).

To celebrate the Sacrament well, our inner dispositions play an essential role in how God shares with us His supernatural life and grace. Why? Because, in accordance with Christ’s will and the nature of the Sacrament itself, grace, in regenerating and sanctifying the soul, is grafted on to the

acts of the sinner, that is to say to the confession of faults made in the hope of forgiveness; to our detestation of sin with a firm purpose of amendment; and to our willingness to carry out the penitential exercises imposed by the Church in performing our assigned penance. These acts are called confession, contrition and satisfaction. Together with the absolution of the priest, they are, through the celebration of the Sacrament, the means of destroying sin in us and of giving us God's grace (114).

Pitfalls

Unfortunately, we frequently carry out these acts in an imperfect manner with the result that the sacrament does not communicate to the soul the abundance of fruit which we would expect. The explanation why so little profit is often drawn from the celebration of the Sacrament lies in the defect of our dispositions. There are, it seems, two causes which might explain this unfruitfulness. First, there could be a defect in the confession of our sins. Second, it may be that the firm purpose of amendment is not maintained with sufficient vigor. As regards a defect in confession of sin, we know that the Sacrament gives us God's mercy and forgiveness. But, we also have our own part to play. On the cross, our Lord gave himself to the Father together with all of our sins: "The Lord has laid upon Himself the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:6). He was the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1:29). Christ saw each of our sins and, in order to save us, He took upon Himself all the same, all the pain which our sins merited (115).

In Penance, Christ leaves to us a part of feeling that we are burdened with our sins, our ingritudes and our miseries. The reality of our sin must weigh on our conscience and our confession must be sorrowful. We must, as members of Christ's Body, unite the humiliation of our voluntary confession with the outrages endured by Christ in His Passion. We must share the sentiments of His Sacred Heart so that the greatness of His death for us can purify our souls (115).

In the second place, confession may bear little fruit, because the purpose of amendment is not maintained in sufficient vigor in our daily life. When we have acknowledged our guilt it is important to maintain a great desire not to give in again to the sins or to anything which is displeasing to God. If we really wish our confession to contribute to our progress in perfection, we must try to utilize all the riches of grace the Sacrament gives. To do this, we need to keep present in our mind the firm resolution not to sin again. But often, when the confession is over we forget about contrition and the purpose of amendment, and continue to act as we did before (116)

For us to experience true conversion in our lives we need to rely not only on God's mercy and grace, but we must cooperate with it. Both are absolutely indispensable if we want to grow in holiness. There seems to be in our day a remarkable resistance to going to confession regularly. Sometimes, even if we do confess regularly, there may appear to be a lack of notable improvement in our daily lives. We confess over and over but there seems to be little effect on our lives. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we either do not celebrate the Sacrament regularly, or we do so with a lack of effort at real conversion, or we may receive the Sacrament in a routine, mediocre or sloppy manner (Dubay 110).

Thus, as we prepare once more for our yearly celebration of Lent and time of conversion, I propose to you ways that we should prepare to receive the Sacrament of Penance so that we might receive from it greater fruit. First would be our outlook on the Sacrament. Remember that in Confession we must not emphasize the guilt – it is not for mere feelings or mistakes. Simply feeling impatient or angry or envious are not sins, because there is no free will in a mere feeling. We cannot usually control our emotions, at least completely. Yet, what we do need to confess to the priest are things that we can control but do not: raising our voice, snapping at another, overeating, gossiping, harshness, knowingly to linger on immodest television scenes or media photos (110).

What to (and not to) Confess

We need not confess ordinary forgetfulness and mistakes: for example, forgetting on a Friday in Lent and eating meat. Nor should someone confined to bed due to illness confess missing Mass on Sunday. You see, sometimes confessing non-guilt items can distract us from what we can and should correct: real guilt, real sins. Merely confessing guilty deeds or omissions is not enough, however. Some people seem to assume that the routine mentioning of faults in the Sacrament of Penance without a serious intention to stop them is sufficient. It is not. We must have, as we have said above, a first purpose of amendment, a genuine sorrow, a sincere contrition. Without these there is no true conversion (110-1).

We might ask ourselves a practical question here. What if I'm not sure whether I gave in with my will to being impatient, or I'm doubtful as regards overeating whether I was aware at the time that it was too much? When we are not sure of guilt, the doubt should be briefly mentioned in our confession: for example, I *may* have been partially guilty in showing anger, or I may have been slow in turning away from an unchaste scene on television. So, the main element in preparing to receive the Sacrament of Penance is genuine sorry, the firm commitment to change, to take concrete steps to correct what I'm confessing: "Go and sin no more" (111-2)

So, ordinarily the Sacrament is not intended to be a counseling session about difficult human relations. The priest will certainly offer brief advice on how to avoid a given sin. "But interrelational problems usually should be discussed outside of the confessional setting. People who want to be healed of their guild should not be kept waiting at length for non-sacramental reasons" (112).

Why Don't People go to Confession Any More?

Like so many priests, I note that there is an alarming increase in the numbers of the faithful who seldom or never go to confession (and this is nothing unique to Lewistown). The reason is most likely not that we are holier than people of previous generations. Likely explanations might be (1) a loss of the sense of sin; (2) doctrinal confusion; (3) the widespread and unmet need for conversion in our lives (112).

We also need to examine a problem about which some people complain. Some people take undue amounts of time in what they have to say to the priest in confession. To some people this may appear to be much ado about nothing. To others it might seem simply that the priest does

not want to stay in the confessional all day. However, in a parish like ours of some 600 families, if even a small percentage of them went to confession regularly as we ought, we would be overwhelmed by the many ours spent in the confessional, even if people only take 3 or 5 minutes to say what could be said in a minute or two. At the same time, others are kept in the line waiting much longer than is necessary. Some people, perhaps more than we suspect, avoid the confessional because of the long delays others unnecessarily cause. One woman once told me that she does not go to confession for this reason (113-4).

Remembering several of the great confessors of the Church, the Curé of Ars St. John Vianney and Padre Pio, both were able to come to the aid of untold thousands of sinners because they told their penitents to be brief. The long lines would otherwise have been impossible. “Imagine the Curé of Ars on an average day beginning at one in the morning and sitting all day in his tiny confessional box for 13 or 14 hours, as inconsiderate people kept others waiting as they narrated details unnecessary for the confession of their own sins, let alone trying to confess those [sins] of others. He did not allow it” (114-5).

In a healthy parish there should be many confessions throughout a year. Brevity of the penitents is, thus, of crucial importance if this sacrament is to be received as it ought. Thus, allow me to explain and aid you in celebrating confession that (1) we may be brief and yet accurate in confession; (2) give examples of being clear and yet brief; (3) and share reasons for being brief (115).

There are truly 4 guidelines. First, confess your guilt, not just feelings or mistakes. Second, avoid mentioning the failings and faults of others, for example, the other person’s part in an argument, what they did or said that triggered my outburst of anger. There are always two sides to every conflict – let your adversary confess their own sins. Thirdly, confess only the essentials of the sin, not a history of what took place, not unnecessary details. Lastly, do not repeat two or three times what has already been said well once. If something is not clear, the priest will ask you about it (115).

Examples of Brevity in Confessing Specific Sins

Note that these examples do not express feelings but rather what I have done, acts of the will, things I could have chosen to avoid but did not: “I showed impatience...I gossiped...I showed grouchiness...I was harsh, not gentle...I ate too much...I was lazy...I wasted time with TV...I watched immodest scenes deliberately...we used contraceptives...I masturbated...” For mortal sins the number of times must be mentioned, as Jesus himself implied. In sins against chastity we should add whether we are single or married or a priest/religious. These examples make it clear that a completely correct confession can ordinarily be done in a minute or two – or even less. I presume, of course, that the sinner has first spent enough time examining their conscience, so that when they enter the confessional they will know what to confess and how to be brief (115-6).

Why Should We Be Brief?

Notice that the reasons here are not for the benefit of the priest, but that of the person going to confession and for the many others who have need of the priest's services in the Sacrament and in the many other diverse pastoral duties. In our busy world today, every worthy business tries to minimize the amount of time people must wait for services. We are angry when we have to wait too long in line at the grocery store or at PENNDOT. We all have many important things to do besides waiting in line unnecessarily. Brevity is being considerate of others and their needs, just as we would like them to do so toward us. Additionally, in getting our sins sacramentally absolved, there is a special urgency that we not keep others from receiving this Sacrament due to my actions. Then, if we focus on our own sins, rather than on those with whom we live or work, we are more likely to correct our sins, to face our real guilt more honestly and then do something effective about it. On the other hand, when we speak much about the faults of others, we tend to minimize our own defects and faults (116-7).

Can't Father just tell the person to be brief? Yes, certainly. But the priest is trying to be gentle, and there are many people who are greatly offended even by a gentle admonition. Some may even decide not to go to confession again if the priest suggests they are taking too much time. It is therefore must better for me to write a pastoral letter addressing the issue, then there is less danger of someone feeling hurt by a kindly individual request (117).

Another advantage is that a brief confession gives the priest a bit of time to offer needed advice about correcting the faults that have been mentioned. When the penitent talks much, it exerts a pressure on the priest to omit what he should say to them. The pressure refers both to the long line of others who may be waiting to celebrate the Sacrament, and to the other ways priests are expected to serve the parish every day (117).

Lastly, in a lively parish like ours, where your priests are responsible for two counties of the 15-county diocese, there is a whole list of other time-consuming duties which we must care for, in addition to hearing confessions and to celebrating daily Mass. Among these demands on the priest are: preparing homilies and other instructions, lectures and talks...visiting the sick in their homes, hospitals and nursing homes and offering them the Sacraments...caring for meetings and other appointments of a dozen different types...attending meetings of parish organizations and services in addition to those concerned with diocesan commitments...marriage preparation and instruction classes...our own continuing studies...just as a medical doctor must do if he is to remain competent in his field...caring for funeral preparations and Masses (and conducting the cemetery services and attending the family luncheon afterwards)...letters to answer, not to mention phone calls and emails at any time of the day and night...our own personal prayer life and the Liturgy of the Hours, meditation/contemplation, spiritual reading (these alone can take 2 or 3 hours of each day). In all these duties we are simply obeying the Gospel and the mind of the Church. Do not forget that it is this kind of shepherd who does immeasurably more good for his flock, than the one who gives little or no time to a deepening intimacy with the Trinity. In view of all this, it is easy to see the need for brevity in the confessional or in other consultations and telephone calls (117-8).

Frequency of Confession

The official law of the Church, found in Canon Law, states, “The faithful who have reached the age of discretion are obliged to confess their sins (if grave) at least once a year” (989). However, we should remember that the Church’s law on how often to receive the Sacrament of Penance is a minimum. When deciding how often to receive the Sacrament, we do well to remember that the best way to determine how often to go is a simple one: we should go to Confession whenever we need God’s grace and mercy and love. For most of us, monthly confession would be a good practice. However, I would suggest that, at a minimum, we go to confession during Advent, during Lent and sometime over the summer. This might be a good starting point toward a more frequent reception of Penance (Dubay 119).

Conclusion

Confession is the Sacrament that enables us to recognize our faults, realize that we are creatures (not God), and experience God’s infinite love and mercy. It is not a Sacrament of which we should be afraid, but one that we should desire to celebrate as often as needed – that we could come to an awareness of our own sinfulness, our need for mercy, and God’s great love for us.

In the approaching season of Lent, I encourage each of us to review our own celebration of Penance: do we receive it often enough, do we celebrate it well, is there a firm purpose of amendment and conversion, do I have the right attitude toward the Sacrament?

I pray that, on reflection, prayer and with a more frequent celebration of the Sacrament, we will come to appreciate all the more the great gift Jesus gave us when He gave us the Sacrament of Penance.

With assurances of special remembrance in my prayers and voluntary sacrifices during this Lenten season, I am,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Rev. John Bateman
Pastor