

REFLECTIONS ON GOD'S MERCY
AND
OUR FORGIVENESS

The Light is Always On!

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

BY
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Grace and peace to you in Christ!

Introduction

Only in storybooks do people “live happily ever after.” The much more sobering and sad fact of real life is that we all make mistakes. We are capable of wonderfully good actions, yet we know that we also sin. The Church speaks to us of our noble calling to holiness, but also of Jesus’ loving forgiveness.

The annual Lenten season begins with the familiar rite of Ash Wednesday, its call to “turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel” and the prayer that this time of repentance bring us the blessing of God’s forgiveness.

The Light is Always On

In preparation for Lent last year, I wrote a pastoral letter entitled, *God’s Mercy and the Sacrament of Penance*, in which I reflected on the value of confession and encouraged all of the faithful in the Archdiocese of Washington “to join in a Lenten spiritual journey to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation.” It is my hope that this Lent will provide another opportunity to consider more closely the sacrament of penance, to contemplate the merciful love of God, and to receive his healing forgiveness in confession.

It gives me great joy, then, to announce that we will renew *The Light Is On For You* this Lent. As was done last year, all priests are invited to participate in this pastoral initiative. On Wednesday evenings, beginning with the first week of Lent, February 13, 2008, until the Wednesday of Holy Week, a priest will be available for confessions in every church throughout the archdiocese. This year, following the discussion at Priest Council, the decision was made to set the time for confessions on those Wednesdays from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Struggle Within Us

In a well-known passage of Scripture, Saint Paul cries out to the Lord, “What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate...I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my

members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" (Rom 7:15, 22-23).

It is here, in the reality of our common human condition, that any reflection on God's mercy must begin. As I remarked in the pastoral letter last year, "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?"

The reason is found in original sin, which acts like "another law at war" within us and which colors everything we do. It has been noted that the doctrine of original sin is the only teaching you can prove by the daily newspaper. Its harmful effects are visible everywhere, in the world around us and in our own hearts. While baptism cleanses us from the stain of original sin, it does not preserve us from its effects throughout our lives. We continue to strive for goodness, the struggle for holiness that marks the life of every disciple of the Lord.

New Life in Christ

The Good News of Jesus Christ is precisely that we do not endure this struggle alone, but rather with a Redeemer who pours his love into our hearts so that we may be brought to a fullness of life, a new creation already beginning in us through grace (cf. 1 Cor 15). As I commented last year, "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."

Last year I pointed out that

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.

We know that only God has the power to forgive sins, but it was Jesus Christ, God and man, who entrusted to his Apostles the administration of that grace. We cannot presume to know God's reasons, but perhaps he chose to use human instruments so that we would receive not only forgiveness, but also the assurance of that forgiveness by hearing it from the lips of someone acting in the person of Christ. As Jesus declared to Saint Peter: "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 16:19).

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).

Before offering absolution, the priest imposes a penance which is suited to the person and the nature of the sins committed. This penance is certainly not understood to achieve our forgiveness or to offer adequate satisfaction to God for the sins we have committed; it is a token of our sorrow and a remedy in our own soul for the disorders caused by sin (cf. CCC 1459).

Many Faces of Confession

Last year the pastoral letter launched both an archdiocesan-wide emphasis on religious education regarding sacramental confession as well as a pastoral initiative entitled *The Light Is On For You*. After hearing from the faithful across the archdiocese and in consultation with our priests, it is evident that the initiative was pastorally fruitful and that hundreds or thousands of people experienced the joy of returning to the sacrament of reconciliation, many of whom had not been to confession for decades. In many parishes each successive Wednesday brought more people to church for reconciliation, and in some cases during Wednesday of Holy Week priests heard confessions for three, four or five hours. One pastor observed that "this program awakened a hunger for the sacrament" in his parishioners, prompting him to expand times for confessions on other days and year-round. When asked if they would recommend the initiative again this year, almost eight in ten priests answered in the affirmative.

Many of these priests tried to encapsulate why they thought *The Light Is On For You* was so pastorally fruitful. Above all, of course, like any pastoral effort it was the Spirit who moved hearts to conversion and who poured his forgiveness and his love into countless souls across the archdiocese. In addition, as the Catechism notes and as I recalled last year, the sacrament responds to deep human yearnings which are beautifully conveyed by its various names.

Sometimes it is called the *sacrament of conversion* because it “makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion” (CCC 1423). It was clear last year that the public nature of this initiative, from billboards to Metro posters, brought Christ’s call to conversion to so many individuals in our area. One downtown priest noted that many penitents attributed their confession to the visibility of *The Light Is On For You*. “By simply extending that unique invitation,” this priest commented, “their hearts had been touched. In the voice of the Church, they heard the voice of the Father Himself saying, ‘Come back home.’ And they came!”

The sacrament is also called the *sacrament of penance* because it consecrates a person’s conversion, penance and satisfaction. One of the purposes of the initiative last year was to convey both the need and the beauty of the sacrament, as well as to catechize people on how to examine their conscience and to receive the sacrament fruitfully. In this way their steps of conversion and penance were made explicit and consecrated in the grace of the sacrament. One large suburban parish had growing numbers for confession each week, partly due to the pastor’s memorable and warm invitation to his parishioners: “If you are still a little frightened, anxious or nervous about receiving the sacrament please do not worry; the priests will gladly walk you through the process. Come and celebrate with your parish priest the great gift of God’s compassion.”

One of the most common names for the sacrament is simply *confession* because disclosure of one’s sins to a priest is an essential part of it. While this self-disclosure can be difficult, it can also be profoundly liberating as we acknowledge our sins and as we resolve out loud to avoid them, through grace, in the future. One priest remarked, “I cannot understand why people choose to walk a life that is less than alive when all it takes is the courage to say, ‘Bless me Father, for I have sinned.’” Confession does take courage, but what an extraordinary reward!

Another name is the *sacrament of forgiveness* which refers to its greatest effect, the pardon of our sins and the gift of the Lord's peace. When a pastor narrated his own conversion story to his people, and said that in receiving this sacrament "a great burden was lifted" from his shoulders, it resonated with many of his people. We all need forgiveness since we have all sinned, and the guilt that we bear begins to accumulate and to weigh us down. The sacrament of forgiveness is the Lord's gift to "all who labor and are heavy laden" and to whom he promises rest. "Take my yoke upon you," Jesus says, "and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Mt 11:28-30).

Finally, the Catechism reminds us that this gift from God is also called the *sacrament of reconciliation* since it reconciles sinners to God and to each other in the ecclesial community. Echoing Saint Paul's words to the Corinthians, one priest simply stated that "ours is a ministry of reconciliation." To be reconciled means not only to ask for pardon; it means hearing that the pardon is given. The reconciliation which a priest is asked to mediate, both in the name of God and in the name of the Church, includes both the admission of guilt on the part of the penitent and the audible forgiveness on the part of the priest. In this sacrament we enjoy the explicit confirmation of forgiveness, suited perfectly to our own human desire for reconciliation, and an enduring proof of God's unfathomable love for each of his children.

Spiritual Healing

The most important blessing of *The Light Is On For You*, then, has been the spiritual healing and sacramental forgiveness of so many people across the archdiocese. However, this pastoral program has also highlighted the sacrament of confession in a public way and given an important witness to our neighbors about the importance of God and our need for his help and his mercy. If this pastoral initiative can enkindle in some a renewed desire to seek the Lord who is the only answer to their silent yearnings, then I believe it will have been a success.

The specific time, Wednesday, 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., might not be ideal for every parish. In the discussion at Priest Council, however, it was recognized that the ability to advertise this pastoral program across the whole archdiocese requires some uniformity in scheduling.

In this way persons who have been away and are encouraged to come back to the sacrament will know it is available anywhere throughout the archdiocese on every Wednesday evening. Of course, each parish is free to offer the sacrament additionally at other hours throughout the week.

In anticipation of Lent appropriate and useful materials will be made available to all the parishes. Among these resources will be religious education supplements, homiletic aids, and the helpful brochure widely distributed last Lent which includes a guide to going to Confession and a detachable Act of Contrition.

God's Gift of Reconciliation

Apart from the Eucharist, there simply is no greater gift that the Church can give her people than the gift of reconciliation since, as I wrote in the pastoral letter, "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.'"

As we together enter the recollection of Lent and approach the joy of Easter, may this be a time of interior renewal for each of us and for the archdiocese as a whole, a renewal that will be deepened to the extent that we commit ourselves to God's mercy and to the reconciliation that we all desire and need.

With every good wish and a pledge of prayers for all the clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Archdiocese of Washington, I am

Faithfully in Christ,

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Archbishop of Washington

January 1, 2008
Mary, Mother of God