

Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician

Pastoral Letter on Penance

Most Rev. Robert J. Carlson
Bishop of Saginaw

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Second Edition

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To the people of the Catholic Diocese of Saginaw:

As you begin to read this pastoral letter on Penance, I want to say a few words by way of introduction.

One of the major purposes of the letter is the attempt to move us away from a guilt-centered notion of sin and the sacrament: sin means that we feel guilty, that God is angry, and the sacrament of Penance is about softening our guilt and God's anger. I want to move us toward a different notion of sin: sin means that something is deeply wounded in us, that we have weakened or ruptured our relationship with God, and the sacrament of Penance is where God's desire to heal our relationship meets our desire to be healed.

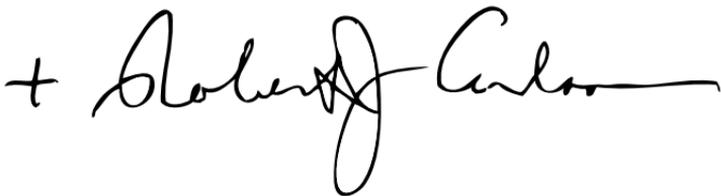
The first section of the letter, on sinfulness, is primarily about helping us grow in our knowledge of how sin works in our lives. In approaching the sacrament of Penance, I think that many people don't make the crucial distinction between sinful actions and the basic attitudes of heart at the root of those sinful actions. Because we don't make this distinction we don't celebrate the sacrament as fruitfully as we might. We confess the same sinful actions over and over and we don't seem to make any progress in our lives. We conclude that the sacrament isn't doing anything and, out of frustration, we stop coming. But perhaps we aren't making progress because we are dealing with the fruit and not getting to the root of the sinful actions. Through this letter I want to issue an invitation: let the Lord's healing love penetrate to the roots of sin in your life!

The sections on Jesus as healer and the Church's task of continuing Jesus' mission address some of the structures of unbelief that prevent people from celebrating the sacrament regularly.

Sometimes a part of our heart doesn't really believe in Jesus' desire to heal us. Other times we don't really believe in the role that our faith plays in that healing. Sometimes a part of our heart doesn't believe that our physical presence at the sacramental encounter with Jesus matters: it can happen wherever and whenever and however we want. Other times we don't believe in the role played by the sacramental minister, the priest, in the healing encounter. I think we can let Scripture be our guide in overcoming those barriers of unbelief. As each layer of unbelief is overcome we will be led more deeply into the fullness of the Church's sacramental tradition.

Finally the letter is punctuated by meditation points. These are not just an afterthought! The meditation points are there to engage your heart, not only your head, in reflecting on the sacrament of Penance. Rather than just reading the letter and thinking about the Lord, the meditation points will allow us to pray with the "text" of our own hearts and lives, and then draw near to the Lord to experience his healing love.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol followed by the name "Robert J. Carlson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

*+ Most Rev. Robert J. Carlson, Bishop of Saginaw
January 25, 2008, Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul*

INTRODUCTION

Jesus said to them again, “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 20:21-3)

Jesus Christ is the great physician — the Divine Physician — of body and soul.

In his Incarnation Jesus reached out, by word and deed, to heal those with illnesses of the body and sicknesses of the soul.¹ In his Passion, Death and Resurrection he conquered sin and death, and became the source of ultimate healing for all. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave the Apostles a share in his very life, so that the healing power of his words and deeds might continue to be present to the world through them. And through the sacraments Jesus himself continues to be present in every time and place, healing us and drawing us into the communion that he shares with the Father and the Spirit.

Today, I want to proclaim again this mystery: the Holy Spirit gives the Church a share in the healing mission of Jesus Christ. The Church exercises that mission in a special way through the sacraments, the words and deeds by which Jesus himself continues to be present among us with his healing and strengthening power.

Christ is at work in each of the sacraments. He personally addresses every sinner: ‘My son [my daughter], your sins are forgiven.’ He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them. (CCC, 1484)

Therefore, I want to issue this invitation to the faithful of the Diocese of Saginaw, and to all people of good will: through the Sacrament of Penance Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician, invites us to a healing that brings reconciliation and communion — with the Triune God, with each other, and with ourselves in our inmost being.² I earnestly desire that the faithful of the Diocese of Saginaw, and through them every person, should come to know the particularity and depth of God's healing love for them, a healing love that is offered in a special way through the Sacrament of Penance.

The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. (CCC, 1421)

MEDITATION: ‘BEHOLD THE PIERCED ONE’

The human heart is converted by looking upon him whom our sins have pierced. (CCC, 1432; see Jn 19:37, Zech 12:10)

By contemplating the cross we can come to a greater understanding of the wonder of God’s love for us, especially of His ardent desire to heal us. The cross reveals to us both God’s character and the human situation.

To understand how the cross is a revelation of God’s character, we can ask: who must God the Father be “who so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... that the world might be saved through him”? (Jn 3:16-17) And we can ask: who is the God revealed to us in Jesus, who willingly endured suffering for the sake of our salvation? The face of God revealed on the cross is a face of mercy, “the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and Redeemer.”³

To understand how the cross reveals the human situation, we can ask: who must we be such that this — the cross — was necessary for our salvation? The situation must be dire if something as drastic as the cross was needed for our rescue. We can also think about situations in which we sacrificed one thing for the sake of something that was even more valuable to us and, from that experience, ask: who must we be such that God deemed us worth the price of the cross? God must value us greatly to be willing to sacrifice so much for our sake.

The cross reveals the merciful face of God, the gravity of the human situation, and the glory of the human creature’s worth.

In quiet reflection ask: How do I sense my worth in God’s sight? When I look upon the cross of Jesus, what do I notice?

“[I]f self-knowledge and the thought of sin are not seasoned with remembrance of the blood and hope for mercy, the result is bound to be confusion.” (St. Catherine of Siena)

PART 1: SINS AND SINFULNESS

Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners. (Mark 2:17)

Symptoms of a Soul-Sick World

On the level of society, the family and the individual, many signs tell us that something is not right with our world. War and crimes of violence, both far and near, continue to dominate our headlines. Misuse of the human body in a variety of forms has become widespread: drug and alcohol abuse, the use of the human body to sell goods, the ever expanding traffic in pornography. Suicide, divorce and abortion continue to be both cause and symptom of the disintegration of family life. These and many other realities of contemporary life are symptoms, signs of a soul-sickness that afflicts the world and each of us who are in it.

Communion and Isolation

The eyes of faith discern a common pattern in these symptoms: alienation that results in the loneliness of isolation. The bonds of communion between persons are pulled apart; the bonds that unite society into one body are frayed and broken.

To the Christian believer this should come as no surprise. God, who is a communion of persons, has made us in his image and likeness. Our communion with each other is a sign of the communion of the Trinity, and a foretaste of our sharing that communion in Heaven.⁴ Knowing that sin pulls us away from the truth of our being, we might have guessed that all sin would draw us away from communion and into isolation. Every sin — not only those we think of as social, but also those we tend to think of as purely individual — pulls us away from our call to communion with God

and each other, and pulls us into the loneliness of isolation.

Who among us has not tasted the peace that comes from living in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters? In a moment of contented stillness here and there, or in a day when everything has gone just right, we have all caught glimpses of the joy for which we were created. But who among us has not also tasted the anguish and recrimination that come from broken promises, selfishness and fear? There is a longing in the human heart for the joy, peace, and serenity of communion. There is a corresponding ache in the human heart when that communion is lacking.

Inwardly Divided

And yet the irony is that it is our own attitudes and actions that lead to our heartache!

Consider a simple analogy: on the physical level we all say that we want good health. But how easily we find ourselves pulled away from the exercise and healthy eating that are needed to achieve and maintain good health! We want — and yet we do not really want — physical health. So, too, in the spiritual life: we say that we want the peace, joy, and serenity that come from communion with God and each other. Yet how easily we find ourselves pulled into attitudes and actions that destroy the possibility of genuine communion! We say that we want — and yet our actions show that we do not really want — spiritual health.

How well this situation was described by Saint Paul when he said:

What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate ... I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want ... 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 7:15,19 22)

It is not, in the first place, a matter of chastising ourselves for acting badly. It is first a matter of admitting the fact that we are inwardly divided.⁵ In addition to the forgiveness of our sins this interior division needs healing if we are to be made wholly well. “[I]t is quite natural, when we start thinking about morality, to begin with the first thing, with social relations. For one thing, the results of bad morality in that sphere are so obvious and press on us every day: war and poverty and graft and lies and shoddy work ... But though it is natural to begin with all that, if our thinking about morality stops there, we might just as well have not thought at all. Unless we go on to the second thing — the tidying up inside each human being — we are only deceiving ourselves.”⁶

Getting to the Roots of Sin

In order to move to this second level, and understand the soul-sickness that afflicts the world and ourselves more fully, we must grasp a crucial distinction. We must distinguish between the sinful actions that lead us to isolation and the attitudes of heart behind our actions; we must distinguish between the deeds that harm our relationship with God, others, and self, and the structures of unbelief that motivate our deeds. In a word, we must distinguish between our sins and our sinfulness, and then bring both into the sacrament of Penance. “What we tend to do when we go to confession is confess our sins — but not the root of the sin. So our sins are forgiven, but what caused us to sin has not been healed. We think that the sin is what the problem is. But it’s not. The problem is what’s been building up in us in terms of our attitudes, our habits, our weakness, our human condition, that needs regular infusions of God’s grace. We need to look deeper, asking the Holy Spirit, “Come in.

Probe my heart. Reveal to me what the real problems are. What are the things that lead to sin? What are the attitudes? Where do I need mercy most? Where do I need healing? What are the things in me at a deep level that need to be healed?"⁷

[B]y reason of her essential mission, the church feels an obligation to go to the roots of that original wound of sin in order to bring healing. (John Paul II, Reconciliation and Penance,#4)

Misdirected Desires

As we probe more deeply into the roots of sin in our lives not only do we find that we are inwardly divided, we also find that we are tempted. In addition to the weakness inherited as part of our fallen human nature, there is a force of evil at work in the world and in our own hearts. Besides being interiorly divided we are under attack by this enemy of human nature, who is stronger than our human capacity. Every human person is susceptible to the wiles of the tempter, who wills our destruction and fears our surrender to God.

One important strategy by which we are tempted involves the misdirection of our desires. This happens when our words and actions express our desires, but in ways that cannot possibly satisfy us, and in ways that ultimately lead to greater isolation from God and each other. For example, children sometimes behave badly — not because they want to be bad, but because they are hungry for attention. Their behavior does gain them attention, but it is not the attention they desired! Sometimes children behave well — not because they want to be good, but because they crave affirmation. Their behavior does win them affirmation, but it is not the unconditional affirmation they desired.

As we grow older we engage in the same patterns of behavior. Al-

though our strategies become more subtle, the fruits are the same. So we are tempted to engage in gossip, and we do — not because we want to gossip but because we want to create a special sense of belonging to an “in-group.” And our gossiping does create a kind of in-group. But it is a diminished sense of community and we never feel really secure in it. Or we are tempted to use drugs and alcohol, and we do — not because we want the drugs and alcohol but because we want to dull the pains of our life and feel good for a while. And the drugs and alcohol do dull the pains of life and create a temporary high. But they don’t bring us more fully alive in any deep or lasting sense. Or we are tempted to view pornography, and we do — not because we want to view pornography but because we desire intimacy with another human being. And viewing pornography does bring a kind of intimacy. But it is not an intimacy that really satisfies our soul.

Even the good and helpful things we do are often not rooted in the desire to do good but in the desire to earn recognition and gain affirmation, or to win the approval and love of others. Those good deeds do earn recognition and approval for us. But somehow our hearts remain restless. We have not really satisfied the desires of our heart.

Sometimes the actions themselves are a problem and sometimes the actions themselves are commendable. But how often do both good and sinful actions spring from inner attitudes that need healing? When they do, our action produces fruit that fails to satisfy. We need to discern what is good and what is sinful in our attitudes, not only in our actions, in order to embrace what is good and reject what is evil right from the start. Then our deeds will bear fruit that satisfies the deep desires of our heart.

Exposing the Root

As we learn to recognize what is good and what is sinful in our attitudes we have an opportunity and a choice. We can let the healing touch of Christ penetrate our inner attitudes — the desires, fears, shames, and griefs in our lives — or we can attempt to manage those inner attitudes ourselves. If we choose the path of surrender to Christ, letting his love become the source of our actions, he will draw us into closer communion with himself and each other. This is the beginning of the path to Heaven! If we choose the path of self-reliance, we will gradually be overwhelmed as our actions and attitudes draw us into the growing spiral of isolation. This is the beginning of the path to Hell.

What we need, then, is to expose the root of our sinfulness, not only the fruit, to the healing touch of Christ. Every gardener knows that if we treat only the flower and neglect the root, the weeds that plague our garden will keep coming back. Every physician knows that if we treat only the symptoms of illness and neglect to discover and treat the underlying causes, the patient's ailment may return again and again. The same is true of the spiritual life. The attitudes of our minds and the habits of our hearts are the roots of sinful actions; alienation and isolation are the fruit that comes naturally from a bad root.⁸

True repentance involves not only an admission of wrong-doing, in which we confess that things are not right and that our own free decisions are (at least partly) responsible for the state of things. True repentance also involves a willingness and a desire to unlearn the habits that led up to and came from the wrong decisions. The habits and attitudes and wounds that are the root of our actions need the healing hand of God just as much as our sinful actions need forgiveness. We can explicitly name the wounded attitudes and desires of our heart when we ask God to heal us in

the sacrament of Penance.

When we surrender a struggle to God in the sacrament of Penance he brings healing to the wound, and we cannot be tempted there in the same way again. Confession, not only of our sins but of our sinfulness, brings healing to the woundedness of spirit that we experience as part of our fallen nature and as a consequence of living in a state of spiritual warfare. The healing that flows from the sacrament equips us to grow in wholeness and in holiness, and in wisdom to resist the temptations of the evil one.

Members of One Body

Finally, we need to realize that our sins are not just individual, a matter of a purely private choice. Just as the attitudes of our heart and thoughts of our mind naturally flow outward in actions, so also do our individual actions naturally flow outward and affect others.

No one wishing to investigate the mystery of sin can ignore this link between causes and effect...Since by sinning man refuses to submit to God, his internal balance is destroyed and it is precisely within himself that contradictions and conflicts arise. Wounded in this way, man almost inevitably causes damage to the fabric of his relationship with others and with the created world. (John Paul II, Reconciliation and Penance, #15)

Experience tells us that an illness afflicting one part of the body will affect other parts of the body as well. So, too, any sin or weakness or temptation in one part of the Body of Christ will affect other members of the Body as well. “[B]y virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual’s sin in some way affects others...Consequently one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul

that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.”⁹ On the one hand the problems of the world are greater than any one of us can account for; on the other hand the root of the problem lies within each of us.

What Can We Do?

So what can we do? Admitting that we are inwardly divided, confronting the misdirection of our desires toward what does not truly satisfy, and facing squarely the consequences of our brokenness for the world, what can we hope for?

It is precisely here that our faith gives us direction. Each time we celebrate the Mass we bring the brokenness and sinfulness of our lives and of the world with us. In the Penitential Rite we confess, both to God and to our brothers and sisters, that we have sinned through our own fault, and we ask the Lord to have mercy on us. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer we ask that our trespasses be forgiven. Before we receive Holy Communion we echo the words of the Roman Centurion and confess that we are not worthy to receive the Lord. But we confess our brokenness and sinfulness with utter confidence that the Lord can and will “only say the word and we shall be healed.”

So our greatest prayer, the Eucharist, teaches us that we can present ourselves to Jesus. He can and wants to forgive our sins. But over and above that he can and wants to heal the ways of thinking and feeling that underlie our sinful actions. Jesus wants us to receive his love so intimately and completely that the attitudes,

desires and virtues of his heart become the attitudes, desires and virtues of ours. The sacrament of Penance is a privileged place in which we cry out to Jesus, the divine physician, to be our healer.

If we say “We are without sin,” we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. (1 John 1: 8-9)

**MEDITATION:
LORD, MAKE ME WANT!**

Bend my heart to your will and not to love of gain. (Ps 119:36)

“Sin is precisely this: that I do not want what God wants. And I can’t see how this opposition on my part could be broken. I can’t see how this prison wall which holds me captive could be pierced through... I know precisely what I ought to do. You’ve often told me yourself, the priest has told me, I have told myself. This, then, is not what is lacking. The will is lacking: the being able to want. There is a will in me that wants, and there is another will in me (the same one!) that does not want. ‘I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do...for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ (Romans 7) Thus it is that I am rent apart in my innermost will, and the same thing in me that wants is precisely what does not want. And this is why I cry out to from the depths of my Prison of Unwilling: Make Me Want!” (Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar)

Spend some quiet moments alone reflecting on your interior experience: What are the desires and attitudes that motivate my actions? Where do I most desire Jesus’ healing love?

PART 2: JESUS THE HEALER

You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. (Mt. 1: 21)

The Gospels give abundant witness to Jesus' ability to heal those in need. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke Jesus' public ministry begins with acts of healing. Whether of an unclean spirit, of an ailing body, or both, healing is not just one among many aspects of Jesus' mission; it is the fundamental pattern behind his every word and deed.

Jesus' healing mission reaches its climax in the events of the Paschal Mystery — his Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Every healing that he accomplished during his earthly ministry is fundamentally oriented toward his final and definitive victory over sin and death. Each healing episode is a twofold sign for us: a sign that his victory over sin and death is already at work in the world, and a sign that he wants us to share in his victory through the healing of our bodies and souls.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. (Jn 3:14-15)

The Healing of the Paralytic

Among all the stories of healing told in the Gospels the healing of the paralytic¹⁰ stands out as a high point and a prototype because of the way it combines physical healing and the forgiveness of sins.

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it became known that he was at home. Many gathered together so that there

was no longer room for them, not even around the door; and he preached the word to them. They came bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they opened up the roof above him. After they had broken through, they let down the mat on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?" Jesus immediately knew in his mind what they were thinking to themselves, so he said, "Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" — he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home." He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this." (Mk 2:1-12)

More than any other healing episode this one makes the total character of Jesus' healing mission clear: whether we are afflicted with infirmities of the body or sicknesses of the soul or both at once, he came to make us whole. And in his Crucifixion and Resurrection we see that the healing he offers is neither temporary nor partial, but complete and opening up into life eternal.

Different facets of Jesus' healing mission are illuminated by the various healing stories contained in the Gospels. Among those facets there are a few points that I would like to emphasize for us today, so that we might be drawn more readily to the sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which we are invited to share in the definitive victory of the Paschal Mystery.

Jesus' Desire to Heal

First: Jesus desires to bring healing. This principle is made abundantly clear in the story of the cleansing of a leper.¹¹

A leper came to him (and kneeling down) begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.
(Mk 1: 40-42)

The fact that Jesus' desire to heal extends to the forgiveness of sins is shown—much to the amazement of those present—in the healing of the paralytic, as well as in the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears.¹² In these stories Jesus exemplifies the words of St. John Vianney, "God is quicker to forgive than a mother to snatch her child from the fire."

Do we believe that Jesus desires our healing? Or do we stay away from the sacrament of Penance because we are not sure that Jesus really wants to forgive our sins? We must let our hearts be converted by the testimony of the Gospels: Jesus' desire to heal knows no limits. His Passion, which includes his willingness to forgive even those who crucified him, bears supreme witness to his desire to forgive. Believing this, let us be drawn to the sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which our desire to be healed meets Jesus' desire to heal us.

The Role of Faith in Healing

Second: Faith plays a pivotal role in healing. To the centurion who asked for the healing of his servant Jesus said: *You may go; as you have believed, let it be done for you.* (Mt 8: 13) To the woman with a hemorrhage who reached out to touch his cloak Jesus said:

Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction. (Mk 5: 34) To the blind man who wanted to see Jesus said: *Have sight; your faith has saved you.* (Lk 18:42)

Again and again in the Gospel stories of healing Jesus emphasizes the role of faith. We are even told that Jesus “was not able to perform any mighty deed” in his home town of Nazareth “because of their lack of faith.” (Mk 6:5; Mt 13:58) But this raises a difficulty, or at least a question, for many people: why should healing depend on faith? Doesn’t that limit the power of God? It is important to pause for a moment, so that we can understand the role that faith plays in healing.

Consider the parable of the prodigal son. The father was always waiting for his son to return so they might be reconciled to each other. But the father could not make his son return. Or consider the unfolding of Jesus’ passion. Both Judas and Peter betrayed the Lord. But they still had a choice to make about how to handle their failure. Jesus would not force them to repent, nor would he force them to accept his mercy.

We find ourselves in the same situation as the prodigal son: we, too, have left our home and squandered our inheritance. We find ourselves in the same situation as Judas and Peter: we, too, have betrayed the Lord. But reconciliation is still possible. Even so radical betrayal as Judas’ can be forgiven. We cannot change the fact that we have left our home and squandered our inheritance; we cannot change the fact that we have betrayed the Lord. But, although we cannot change the past, we can still turn to the Lord for healing in the present.

This is precisely where faith comes into the healing process. Sometimes we think that if we just try harder we can make everything all right. But this deadly attitude focuses our hope on our-

selves, on our own will-power and works. If we rely on ourselves for the forgiveness and healing we need we will find only what Judas found: despair. Faith calls us to trust in Jesus' love precisely where we cannot give ourselves the forgiveness that we long for, hope for, and need. The inability to forgive ourselves needs to be acknowledged and, in faith, brought to Jesus. Then the anguish that flows from the wound of self-sufficiency — from believing that we can and must fix ourselves — can be healed through his merciful love. It is precisely here that we can let the words of an ancient hymn become the prayer of our own hearts: *Jesus free me from the unhappy prison where sin holds me captive, Release me from the misery of my self-made aloneness.*

Jesus is always ready to heal. But he will not force himself upon us. Faith bids us to turn our wounds toward him. Faith bids us to accept the healing he offers.

But why do we need to confess our sins out loud to a priest? Doesn't Jesus already know what we've done? Yes — he knows better than we do! We confess our sins, in words, to a priest, for the same reason that we tell all our symptoms to a physician: so that he can help us to understand the medicine we need, and what it will do for us. We confess our sins out loud to priest so that we will know all that Christ has to heal, and how he will go about doing it.¹³

“[F]or if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know.” (CCC 1456)

Finally, we confess our sins to a priest so that we can not only know the forgiveness of Jesus with our minds and hearts, but actually hear his words of forgiveness addressed to us individually. Anyone who has ever longed to hear words of forgiveness — from a parent, a child, a spouse, or a friend — knows that the actual

words have a healing power of their own. When the priest pronounces the words of absolution, it is Jesus Christ himself who speaks to us, saying: "I absolve you of all your sins...go in peace." If I avoid the discomfort involved in confessing my sins out loud to a priest, I also miss the opportunity to hear those healing words of reconciliation addressed directly to me.

Do we believe that our faith, and the expression of it in outward signs, plays a vital role in the forgiveness of sins? Or do we stay away from the Sacrament of Penance because we think that God will heal us without any sign of our consent? We must let our hearts be converted by the witness of the Gospels: our expression of faith is essential to healing, because it allows us to turn our wounds toward Jesus, the divine physician, and accept the healing he offers. Believing this, let us be drawn to the Sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which we exercise our faith in Jesus' desire to heal us, and allow him to perform mighty deeds in our own lives.

The Power of Jesus' Physical Presence

Third: Jesus' physical presence is powerful. On the one hand Jesus is God, and no one has to wait for God to be present. But on the other hand the Gospels testify to a remarkable fact: people waited for Jesus to come to them, and his physical presence made a difference. Blind Bartimaeus and the Leper waited for Jesus to draw near to them and, when he did, they seized the opportunity to ask him for healing. The centurion and the paralytic went looking for Jesus and, when they found him, they asked for his help. Time and again the Gospel stories confront us with this conundrum: Jesus is fully God, unlimited by time and place; yet he is also fully man, and his physical presence to people makes a difference.

Perhaps the most startling account of the power of Jesus' physical presence is in the story of the woman afflicted with a hemorrhage:¹⁴

A woman suffering hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the tassel on his cloak. She said to herself, "If only I can touch his cloak, I shall be cured." Jesus turned around and saw her; and said, "Courage, daughter! Your faith has saved you." And from that hour the woman was cured. (Mt 9:20-23)

Through all of history God the Son was always and everywhere present to the world. Yet by his Incarnation he became present to the world in a whole new way. He showed his desire to meet us in the flesh. And many Gospel stories tell us how he chose to heal through sensible signs.¹⁵ Then he gave us the sacraments so that we might continue to know his healing touch not only with our hearts and minds but also through sights and sounds, through things to smell and touch and taste; not only as a distant and ever-receding memory, but as an ever-present reality. The same Jesus who physically walked upon the earth, who was seen and touched by his contemporaries, is present to us through the sensible signs of the sacraments — through water and oil in baptism, under the form of bread and wine in the Eucharist, and through the ministry of the priest in the sacrament of reconciliation — so that people in every time and place might continue to know the healing power of his presence.

Do we believe in the power of Jesus' physical reality, present to us in the Eucharist¹⁶ and mediated to us through the other sacraments, or are we scandalized by this particularity? Do we stay away from the Sacrament of Penance because we are not fully convinced that Jesus continues to bring the power of his presence into the particularities of our own time and place? We must let our hearts be converted by the witness of the Gospels: Jesus desires to be present in the particularities of time and place because it is

there that we can turn to him, touch him and be healed. Believing this let us be drawn to the sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which our desire to touch him and be healed meets his desire to touch and heal us in the particularities of our own life.

A River of Mercy

The healing power of forgiveness flows from the Paschal Mystery. The unconditional sacrifice of the Cross has become the wellspring of unconditional mercy. The purpose of drawing our attention to these three themes from the healing stories in the Gospels—Jesus’ desire to heal, the role of faith in healing, and the power of Jesus’ physical presence—has been to focus us on some aspects of our faith that can help us have access to the river of mercy that flows continuously from the pierced side of Christ.

Jesus means in Hebrew: “God saves.” At the annunciation, the angel Gabriel gave him the name Jesus as his proper name, which expresses both his identity and his mission. Since God alone can forgive sins, it is God who, in Jesus his eternal Son made man, will save his people from their sins. (CCC 430)

MEDITATION:

“WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?”

As he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.” And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, “Son of David, have pity on me.” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.” He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.” Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way. (Mk 10: 46-52)

So often, when we read this passage, we focus on Bartimaeus’ desire to be healed. And that is an important feature of the episode! But if we focus only on Bartimaeus’ desire we can miss something important: Jesus’ desire. Jesus desires this conversation with Bartimaeus. He wants to meet Bartimaeus heart to heart. He wants to hear the deepest cry of Bartimaeus’ heart, and to grant Bartimaeus the healing he so longs for.

This conversation of Jesus with Bartimaeus is not only an event that occurred long ago. Jesus longs to repeat this conversation with each of us. He wants to speak with us heart to heart. He wants to hear the deepest cry of our hearts and grant us the healing that we so desire.

Through the sacrament of reconciliation Jesus’ voice echoes down through the ages saying “Call them to me.” In his sacramental presence through the priest Jesus repeats his question to us: “What do you want me to do for you?” When we have unburdened our hearts we will hear him speak again, saying to us “Go in peace, your faith has made you well.”

In quiet solitude, reflect on the experience of Jesus calling you to him. What do you want him to do for you?

PART 3: THE CHURCH CONTINUES JESUS' MISSION

The Lord wills that his disciples possess a tremendous power: that his lowly servants accomplish in his name all that he did when he was on earth. (St. Ambrose; CCC 983)

The Mission of the Twelve

In addition to the healings carried out by Jesus himself, the Gospels also testify abundantly to Jesus' intention to share his healing mission with the Apostles. Each of the Synoptic Gospels affirms that Jesus intended to make his power to heal body and soul present to the world through the Apostles:

Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness... "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons." (Mt 10:1,8)

He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits... They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (Mk 6:7, 13)

He summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (the sick). Then they set out and went from village to village proclaiming the good news and curing diseases everywhere. (Lk 9:1-2,6)

In all of these accounts we must note that Jesus empowered the Apostles to carry out acts that he himself had performed: the healing of unclean spirits and the healing of ailing bodies. This was

a first installment or foretaste of the commissioning they would receive in full measure at Pentecost.

From its beginning, then, the mission of the Twelve was an extension of the healing mission of Jesus himself. And just as his physical presence made a difference in the lives of those he touched, so their physical presence made a difference as well.

The Gospel of Matthew clearly indicates that Jesus' intention to share his healing mission with the Apostles would include the ministry of forgiving sins.

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)

Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Mt. 18:18)

These words find their fulfillment in the Gospel of John:

Jesus said to them again, "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 20:21-3)

The Holy Spirit, The Church, and the Forgiveness of Sins

Having declared his intention to extend his healing mission through the Apostles, and having given them a foretaste of their share in that mission during his earthly ministry, Jesus brought his pledge to fulfillment by sending the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles

after his earthly ministry was concluded. After they receive the Holy Spirit the words of the Apostles take their pattern from the words of Christ.¹⁷ After they receive the Holy Spirit the deeds of the Apostles take their pattern from the deeds of Christ.¹⁸ Through the Apostles, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus himself continues to be present in every time and place.

Do we believe that Jesus himself could heal body and soul, but forget that a share in his healing mission was granted to the Apostles? Likewise, do we believe that Jesus himself can forgive sins, but stay away from the Sacrament of Penance because we do not believe that he gave the Apostles the power to forgive sins in his name? Then we must let our hearts be converted by the witness of the Gospels: Jesus gave a share in his healing mission—including the forgiveness of sins — to the Apostles and, through them, to the Apostolic Church descended from them. “[B]y virtue of his divine authority, he gives this power to men to exercise in his name.”(CCC, 1441) Believing this, let us be drawn to the sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which the healing and forgiving power of Jesus himself is extended to us through the ministry of the Apostolic Church.

Christ has willed that in her prayer and life and action his whole Church should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood. But he entrusted the exercise of the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the “ministry of reconciliation.” The apostle is sent out “on behalf of Christ” with “God making his appeal” through him and pleading: “Be reconciled to God.” (CCC, 1442)

CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENT

Because Penance, as an extension of the healing mission of Christ, has been entrusted to the sacramental ministry of the Church, it is important that we follow the teaching of the Church regarding its celebration. There are two points in particular that I want to call to our attention and reaffirm.

First, with regard to the form in which the sacrament is celebrated: while there are three Rites for the celebrating the Sacrament of Penance, Rites I and II, with individual confession and absolution, are the only forms intended for ordinary use.¹ Every other sacrament is received individually — this mirrors Jesus' way of dealing with people. Moreover, anyone who has ever said something they wished they could take back knows that words have a power of their own. And anyone who has ever longed to hear words of contrition or forgiveness from a parent, a child, a spouse or a friend also knows that words can have a healing power of their own. Individual confession gives us a chance to use the power of words to express our sorrow, and to receive that same power through hearing the words of absolution. Therefore, along with the Holy Father, I ask the faithful “to be vigilant with regard to the sacrament of Reconciliation, and to limit the practice of general absolution exclusively to the cases permitted,”² namely: when there is danger of death through an imminent life-threatening situation, or when penitents would be without sacramental grace or unable to receive Holy Communion for the significant time of at least one month.³

Second, with regard to the age at which the sacrament is first celebrated: children should receive the Sacrament of Pen-

ance before they receive their First Holy Communion.⁴ Of course no second grader can fully understand the meaning of the healing offered in the Sacrament of Penance. But if full understanding were a condition for right reception of the sacraments, none of us would ever receive Baptism or the Eucharist either! Children develop a sense of right and wrong long before second grade; their capacity to understand right and wrong, and the healing offered by the sacrament, will continue to deepen and grow well into their adult years. Their lack of full understanding does not mean that second graders should not receive the sacraments. It means that we must offer catechesis that meets them where they are, and that grows in sophistication as they do. If it is true that no one will ever receive any sacraments if they must fully understand them in order to receive them, it is also true that people will eventually stop believing in the sacraments altogether if they never grow beyond the level of understanding they had when they first received a particular sacrament. Therefore I ask teachers of the faith to offer catechesis that matches a child's initial capacity to understand the sacrament of Penance, and that also meets their continuing needs as they continue to grow physically, mentally, psychologically and spiritually.

1. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, #21.

2. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, #21

3. USCCB, complementary norm to Canon 961, par.2, 1988.

4. CCC, 1457

PART 4: CONCLUSION

The church carries on the proclamation of reconciliation which Christ himself caused to echo through the villages of Galilee and all Palestine and does not cease to invite all humanity to be converted and believe in the good news. She speaks in the name of Christ, making her own the appeal of St. Paul... “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (John Paul II, Reconciliation and Penance, #10)

We long for mercy and, in Christ, God shows us compassion. We thirst for communion with God and, in Christ, we see that God thirsts for communion with us.

The Sacrament of Penance is a continuation of the healing mission of Jesus himself. The Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, carries this mission to every time and place through her bishops and priests.

By whatever name one wishes to call it — Confession, Penance, Reconciliation — and in all the varying forms it has assumed throughout the ages, the underlying reality of this sacrament remains the same: it is the privileged way in which our desire to be healed meets God’s desire to heal us.

Therefore, I want to issue this invitation to the people of the Catholic Diocese of Saginaw, and to all people of good will: come to the sacrament of Penance. Come to know the particularity and depth of God’s healing love for you. Come to meet Christ, the Divine Physician, and receive the healing love he offers.

NOTES

1. See Mark 2 and Luke 4, where Jesus' public ministry begins with healing episodes.
2. See CCC 1468-9.
3. Dives in misericordia, #13.
4. CCC, 1878.
5. "To acknowledge one's sin, indeed—penetrating still more deeply into the consideration of one's own personhood—to recognize oneself as being a sinner, capable of sin and inclined to commit sin, is the essential first step in returning to God." Reconciliation and Penance, #13.
6. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 71-2.
7. Vinny Flynn, "A Spiritual Maintenance Agreement," pp. 15-16 (in 101 Inspirational Stories of the Sacrament of Reconciliation).
8. See Mt. 10: 18-19; Mk. 7:21-23; Mt. 12: 33-35.
9. Reconciliation and Penance, #16.
10. Mt 9: 1-8; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:18-26.
11. Mt 8:1-4; Mk 1:40-42.
12. Lk 7: 36-50.
13. Dr. Scott Hahn, *The Healing Power of Confession*
14. Mt. 9: 20-23; Mk 5: 25-34; Lk 8: 43-48.
15. For example see Mk 7: 31-35, the healing of a deaf man, and Jn 9: 1-7, the healing of a man born blind.
16. Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 46
17. Compare Jesus' ability to understand the significance of the Scriptures, and to open the eyes of others to understanding the significance of Scriptures, in Lk 24 with Peter's ability to understand the significance of the Scriptures, and to open the eyes of others to understanding the significance of Scriptures, in his speech in Acts 2.
18. Compare the healing of the paralytic in Acts 3 with the cleansing of the leper in Mt 8/Mk1 and the healing of the man blind from birth in Jn 9. Compare the account of Peter's shadow in Acts 5 with the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage in Mt 9/Mk 5/Lk 8.

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