

Pastoral Letter on Penance

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1. When our Lord Jesus appears to the Disciples for the first time on the day of His Resurrection from the dead, His greeting to them is a greeting of peace.¹ As we live in the turmoil of our daily existence, we come to know more and more the deepest value of that peace. We pray for so many things in our lives. Many of us pray for things that are passing, for gifts that will decay, for opportunities that are fleeting and have no lasting value. Through the Sacrament of Penance we are reminded that one of the greatest gifts that God gives us is the gift of peace. It is so fitting then that there is a greeting of peace during the Mass and that the priest and people exchange that greeting during the Eucharist. This greeting finds its way into the very form of sacramental absolution at the end of our confession.²

2. To be at peace with God and with our neighbor is the ultimate good. That is what we will have in heaven. It is there where we will be able to enjoy the peace which the world cannot give, a peace which implies forgiveness, acceptance, presence and love. The Sacrament of Penance is a foretaste of the coming of that peace. When we confess our sins and faults to the best of our ability, conscious of our sinfulness and asking God for the grace to sin no more, He gives us that peace, a foretaste of the peace that is eternal life. It is for all these reasons that the Sacrament of Penance is so very important in our lives. Especially in today's world when so many people seek the help of counselors and psychiatrists and psychologists to cope with life's burdens, Jesus is willing to give us the deepest peace of all through His pardon and His love and it is in this sacrament of His extraordinary forgiveness that we find the greatest avenue to peace on this earth.

3. Ever since the publication of the pastoral letter on the Holy Eucharist, All Praise and All Thanksgiving, on Holy Thursday of 1994, I have been praying and reflecting on the need to write a pastoral also on the subject of the Sacrament of Penance. I truly believe that it is vital for our spiritual health and well-being that we Catholics renew our understanding of this great sacrament of healing and that we place this wondrous gift of God in the context of our spiritual lives and of our daily continuing journey to the Lord, that life-long pilgrimage to the glory of God's Kingdom.

4. One of the most critical weaknesses of our society is that we seem to have lost the understanding of evil. It is all too possible to lose our sense of sin in a world like ours which seems able to rationalize everything. Like the little child in the comics who constantly proclaims innocence by saying "No, I didn't do it" or "Yes, but I couldn't help it," our society tries to escape responsibility for its actions and omissions and even at times to deny that there is any standard by which good or evil, truth or falsehood can be measured at all.³ For that reason, we must constantly go back to the Word of God, to the Scriptures where sin and evil are faced clearly and fearlessly and where we find an authentic measure of reality which does not hesitate to judge the good and the bad of our lives. Saint John in his first epistle speaks to us plainly: "If we say, we are free of the guilt of sin, we deceive ourselves; the truth is not to be found in us. But if we acknowledge our sins, he who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. If we say, we have never sinned, we make him a liar and his word finds no place in us."⁴

5. There is a clear call to penance throughout the pages of the New Testament. Even from the very beginning of the proclamation of John the Baptizer, God calls His people to repent.⁵ It is this repentance, this turning away from sin, this radical reorientation of our whole life, which brings us closer to God and to that peace which alone He can give.

6. People sometimes use the image of the "slippery slope" to describe at times how we can slide quickly from one vision of reality to another, never fully realizing the steps that we have taken and never appreciating how

far we have come from the original perception with which we began. I am afraid that this is true with the question of sin in the world today. The media, print, television and radio, tend constantly to undermine the whole notion of the possibility of sin or evil. They excuse the sinner, they belittle the fault that is committed and often, by treating it with humor, they make it appear as if there is no objective morality or immorality in the actions of our lives.6

7. For us Christians, the antidote for such a slippery slope is to look upon the Cross where Jesus hangs in reparation for our sins and where, at the Father's awesome command, He offers up His very life in atonement for the sins of all humanity.7 As we reflect in this pastoral letter on the question of sin, we must keep that image before our eyes.8 If there were no sin, there would have been no need for redemption. If there were no sin, the cross would have been absolute foolishness. If there were no sin, then there was no need for Jesus to come and teach us how to be holy. He would never have had to shed His Blood to win for us salvation.

8. We know that there is sin in the world. It is something of which we are conscious even from our childhood. As they reach the age of reason, children already have a sense of right and wrong. They understand when they "have been bad;" they sense the need for reconciliation. From the children in our own family we learn that this need to say "I'm sorry" and "I was bad" is also part of the growing maturity of an individual. We know when we have done wrong. Sometimes, unfortunately, as we grow into adult life, we are so adept in developing rationalizations for our sinfulness that we can almost live our lives as if there were no sin or evil or immorality. It is possible for each one of us to deceive himself or herself and therefore to lose that sense of the reality of sin which is so important for the healthy life of our souls and for our growth towards our eternal happiness.

9. It is important for our own psychological well-being that each one of us understand that there is sin and evil in the world. We must recognize that we are not perfect people, that we can hurt others and ourselves by our actions and our words, by what we do and by what we fail to do for others. There are some grave sins that we seem to recognize almost instinctively. These are the crimes against innocent life, such as murder or abortion or unjust war. We all recognize that it is a grave evil to take an innocent human life.9 We tend to find excuses. In the case of abortion, some good people convince themselves that the life which is destroyed is not human, although medical evidence and scientific research seem to go so clearly against that view. To lie, to cheat, to violate the rights of others, all these and so many more things are beneath the dignity of a man or a woman created for everlasting happiness in the very image and likeness of God. For that reason we must never lose our sense of right and wrong, our understanding that when we violate the right, we commit sin.10

10. Thus it was because of the sin of people like us, that the Lord Jesus was sent into the world. In the strict etymological sense of the word, Jesus came to redeem us.11 In the Greek the word means that He came to buy us back. He bought us back from the evil one who had taken control of our lives because of our sins. He restored us to friendship with His Almighty Father; He made us one again with God. He is the one who atoned for our sins and renews us in grace through His suffering and death on the cross. How could we not have an understanding of sin if we have an understanding of Jesus' death on the cross. He died that He might conquer sin and death. He makes this clear so many times in the Gospels. Saint Paul speaks of this so forcefully as do the other writers of the epistles of the New Testament.12

11. The gift that Jesus won on the cross is our freedom and our salvation. In the early Church there were some who felt that forgiveness from sin was to be a one-time gift offered at a single occasion, or that if a Christian fell into sin after having received Baptism, that man or woman was doomed forever. It was indeed once thought that just one serious sin after Baptism would break the contract which a man or woman made with God and that it would lead the sinner into eternal damnation. The Church in the development of its dogma began to see more clearly the wonderful Providence of God working through our human weakness. The history of the Sacrament of Penance is a fascinating one and the theological understanding which accompanies it has developed carefully, considering and evaluating many views and opinions besides those which have been officially canonized in the teaching of the Church.13

12. The Sacrament of Penance, established by the Lord during His public ministry and confirmed at His Ascension and by the coming of the Holy Spirit, is given us not just for one act of merciful forgiveness but can be repeated whenever there is true sorrow and true repentance for our sins. We who are sinful people can appreciate the overwhelming generosity of our God who gives us a chance time after time to turn back to Him and fill our lives with His love.¹⁴ If He would forgive us only once, how many of us would have to remain outside the embrace of His love. When Peter, trying to understand the forgiveness of Christ, asks if He should forgive His enemy seven times, Jesus responded that he should do it seventy times seven times,¹⁵ by that reply indicating that there is no limit to God's forgiveness, as there should be no limit to our willingness to forgive our neighbor for anything that he or she does to us. The Sacrament of Penance is truly a wonderful instrument of holiness for us since it not only frees us from our own sins but challenges us to have the same kind of compassion and forgiveness to those who sin against us.

13. The National Catechetical Directory puts it clearly: ". . . (I)n a world where alienation and loneliness seem to be the norm, it is an expression of one's Christian faith to forgive others and seek forgiveness when necessary."¹⁶In the Lord's Prayer itself, we place a condition on our request for Divine Mercy by making it contingent on our own gift of forgiveness to those who may have offended us, for do we not say, following the words of Jesus, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us?" That surely conditions our asking God to forgive us by making it clear that His forgiveness may be measured by our own forgiveness of our neighbor. The Directory reminds us: "Everyone needs this Sacrament, for we are all sinners, not just those seriously estranged from God and the Church, and we all find here an opportunity to confront our sinfulness, acknowledge our need for conversion, seek pardon and peace, and celebrate our union with the healing, merciful Christ and His Church."¹⁷

14. All this should make it evident that sin and forgiveness are elements on the journey through this world to the next. There is sin in the world. It is the result of our weakened human nature but it happens through our own free will. When we sin, we offend against the covenant that each of us has with Almighty God and we need to ask God's forgiveness. Just as the little child who has been disobedient comes to his parent and begs another chance, so we must be humble enough to become like children and come to our Heavenly Father and ask Him for that second chance at grace. From the teaching of the Church and from the wonderful lessons of the Scriptures, we know that a second chance is always there as long as we recognize our sinfulness and are determined with God's help to avoid sin in the future.

15. I have a great devotion to the Divine Mercy. This devotion has been given new visibility in the Church through the revelation to a Polish Nun, recently beatified, in the first half of this century. The revelations of the Lord to Blessed Faustina Kowalska, while obviously only private revelations, are offered as a special grace for the good of the people of this special time and age. The story of the life of Blessed Faustina underlines the wonderful desire of Jesus to be present in His mercy to all the human race. It is His mercy that we receive in the Sacrament of Penance, this mercy which brings us peace and which helps us to live as good and holy men and women, realizing our responsibilities and yet empowered to accept them and to carry them out in a difficult world. Every one of the sacraments is in a special way a presentation of the mercy of Jesus, but the Sacrament of Mercy itself must be the Sacrament of Penance.¹⁸

16. It is through this Sacrament that we are reconciled to the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit as our sins are washed away and we are made new again in the fullness of grace to enjoy the peace and calm of God's grace. We cannot live without God. This we know from reflecting on our life, as every fiber of our being calls out to God to be our loving Father and our constant friend. Our world is so crowded with challenges and problems and difficulties -- and with our sins and weaknesses -- that we need to find the embrace of a loving God Who will bring us from the evils that surround us into the safe haven of everlasting life. If we have turned away from Him by sin, as alas we so often do, we need once again to be reconciled with Him. This reconciliation takes place in the Sacrament of Penance in a most personal and powerful way to give us the grace to start anew and to live our lives over again in the love and the power of our Almighty God.

17. There is great value in calling on the Lord's mercy and forgiveness frequently during our day. The short prayers and aspirations we learned as children, "My Jesus, Mercy," "Lord have mercy" and the like, are healthy reminders to us that we are a people who need God's loving care. Even at the beginning of every Mass we find a penitential rite. It is not part of the Sacrament of Penance nor does it forgive us from our serious sin, but like every act of goodness and grace, it helps to pardon the minor faults, the venial sins of our lives.

18. In this penitential rite we prepare our minds to hear the Word of God in the readings of the liturgy and prepare our hearts to accept His Living Word in the Eucharist at the Communion.¹⁹ There is a great fittingness in this act of penance beginning the Eucharistic celebration. Like the sign of using the holy water as we enter the Church, it is a sign of purification to make us aware that we should not enter God's house carrying the marks of our own sinfulness. At the very beginning of Mass, then, we celebrate this brief penitential rite recognizing the reality of sin in our lives and asking God's forgiveness.

19. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a volume which I have urged every Catholic home to possess and to use as a document of faith, there is a beautiful treatment of the great Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The Catechism describes how the new life received at Baptism has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature. It reminds us that the concupiscence which remains in each one of us may lead us to use that precious gift of freedom which God has given us to move away from His Loving Will and commit sin.²⁰

20. We know that only God can forgive sin. But by virtue of His divine authority, Jesus Christ our Lord has given this power to men to exercise in His Name. The Catechism of the Catholic Church goes on to teach us that reconciliation with Christ and reconciliation with the Church, with God's people, with our brothers and sisters who are fellow journeyers on the way to the Lord, are the two roads which we must walk in a parallel way. From the solemn words of Christ to Simon Peter, "I will give you the keys to 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,"²¹ it is clear that God will welcome back those whom the Church welcomes into this communion of reconciliation. As the Catechism points out: "Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God."²²

21. The Sacrament of Penance is God's gift to all of us. Every man and woman who has fallen into grave sin after Baptism has lost the birthright to heaven and at the same time they have offended against the communion that should exist among the members of the Church.²³ The Sacrament of Penance gives them the opportunity to repent and to recover the grace of justification. As the words of the absolution indicate, it is through the ministry of the Church that God is asked to grant us pardon and peace, counting on the merits of the Resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ Who reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.²⁴

22. The Greeks used the word metanoia to symbolize the kind of contrition and turning away from sin which the Lord asks us to bring to this Sacrament. Metanoia describes a profound change in the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge and arrange one's life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in His Son in the last days and given to us in abundance. The genuineness of our penance depends on this heartfelt contrition, since conversion should affect a person from within so that it might progressively enlighten him or her and render them continually more like Christ.²⁵ This is so often presented to us in the New Testament, especially in Hebrews 1:2 and Colossians 1:19.

23. In the Sacrament of Penance each of us sinners is asked to place ourselves in God's presence, to acknowledge our sinfulness, and to confess our sins. This confession of sins is an essential part of the Sacrament of Penance.²⁶ It is clear and has been so for centuries that the Church requires that all mortal sins of which we are conscious must be recounted by us in confession, even if they are just the thoughts of our heart such as hatred or envy or things of that nature. These latter sins, the psychologists tell us, can be even more

damaging to the sinner since they can turn his heart into a dark and loathing cancer which may cause more pain to the soul than actions committed openly.

24. The essential elements of the Sacrament of Penance are contrition, confession, absolution ²⁷ and satisfaction.²⁸ The National Catechetical Directory outlines these steps toward peace and forgiveness.²⁹ It must always begin, of course, with that heart-felt sorrow and turning from sin as an offense against God, with a firm intention of sinning no more. Without this, confession is merely an empty procedure, a going through the motions without reality, and even worse, a "playing games" with God. Our contrition must express "a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge and arrange one's whole life to conform more with Christ's values."³⁰

25. It may be good for us to go over briefly what is required for a good confession, since for some, if not for many, the practice of confession has fallen into a lack of use which can be harmful to our spiritual lives and to our quest for peace. The confession should begin with a word of welcome and encouragement from the priest followed by our acknowledgement of God's goodness and our sinfulness.³¹ There are many formulas that may be used to express this plea of our heart and the priest-confessor will be helpful. After that, the priest may read some Scripture so that we may be reminded of God's goodness, His forgiveness and His power to heal. Our sins are then confessed, as far as we remember them, making sure that any grave sin is placed openly on the table so that it may be judged and that we may receive some good counsel and advice from the confessor.

26. When we have completed our confession, the priest will give us some advice, depending on what we have said to him and how he sees our need at that moment. He should never become annoyed or angry with us because our offense is not against him but against God, Who is loving and forgiving and full of joy at our return to grace. The priest might ask us some questions to make sure that he understands the state of our soul. Once he has completed his words of counsel, he will ask us to express our sorrow ³² and then he will impose a penance upon us. The penance can vary from a certain number of prayers that he will ask us to offer or some action that might be more specifically aimed at our own needs at the moment.³³ We accept the penance and we should strive to fulfill it within a reasonable time. At the end of all this, the priest will give us the absolution and we can give thanks and praise to God's mercy in a short invocation. After that the priest will let us go in peace and we will be free.³⁴

27. I have described an individual penance service in the paragraph above but, of course, it is much desired that when possible we might also celebrate communal penance services, joining with our neighbors and friends in asking God's forgiveness.³⁵ This service, which should be offered from time to time in all our parishes, gives a clear example of our repairing the breach of love not only between ourselves and God but between ourselves and our neighbors. This common penance service must always have an opportunity for individual confession so that we may receive advice and the absolution of the priest, but it may include a common examination of conscience and other prayers. These will strengthen and fortify us at the moment of receiving the Sacrament and will put us more in the frame of mind that we need to gain the most grace and the most peace from this special moment.

28. What a great blessing the Sacrament of Penance is for the priest confessor! I so much regret that there are less opportunities for priests to hear confessions in the Church of today. I am convinced that one of the reasons that priests have difficulties with their vocations in our present society is that they no longer hear as many confessions as they did in the past. Hearing confessions gives a priest the enormous blessing of learning the courage, the faithfulness and the goodness of people. As the priest listens to the struggles of men and women his own age and both older and younger, as he becomes more aware of their faith and courage in facing the hardships and difficulties of life, he has to become more convinced of his own vocation and more ready to accept the crosses that are part of his own life. I have never come out of a confessional or a room of reconciliation when I did not emerge more conscious of the presence of God in the world and more aware of His love and His grace and His wondrous power which makes itself so evident in the lives of His people. May the Lord give the grace of more frequent confession to all our people so that our priests may once again have

this special gift of learning the deepest needs and longings of their flock as they see the powerful mercy of God making itself present in their daily struggles.

29. In the spring of 1989, our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, wrote to the priests of the world in his usual Holy Thursday letter.³⁶ At this time he celebrated with us the anniversary of the death of Saint John Vianney and reminded us of the wonderful devotion to the confessional that this great patron saint of parish priests manifested so well. The Holy Father found the secret of the holiness of John Vianney in his devotion to the Sacrament of Penance. What a challenge that is for us priests, what a great opportunity for growth in holiness as we serve our people in this most excellent and necessary manner, bringing them back to the grace of the Lord and guiding them more deeply into the mystery of His Passion and His Love.

30. We have spoken about the Sacrament of Penance as a necessity for those in serious sin and such it is. There is also great value in confession by those who are living a life of holiness and grace. No one safely can be his or her own guide in the ways of the Spirit. We all face the danger of deceiving ourselves about our progress or our lack of it. The great saints have spoken so wisely about the need of a spiritual director. Saint Teresa of Avila, herself so wise in the matters of the spirit, always sought a wise confessor for the guidance of her own progress toward grace. And so it is for all of us, on our way to the fulfillment of God's Will for our journey through this vale of tears, that we be wise and prudent enough to choose someone who may help us on the journey and guide us along the road.

31. A spiritual director will not make decisions for us. We have to do that ourselves. And yet such a person who is trained in spiritual direction may challenge us to reflect on what God is saying to us in our lives or call us to reflect more deeply on our strengths and weaknesses and on how we are responding to the moments of grace that God sends into our lives. A good spiritual director is an enormous grace. For some the roles of spiritual director and confessor can be united in one individual. Others prefer a spiritual director who is not one's regular confessor. I thank God that many people in this local Church, priests, religious and lay, have been trained in the work of spiritual direction.

32. I want to come back to the question of frequent confession here. The law of the Church insists that we are bound faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year after we have attained the age of discretion.³⁷ Therefore, we satisfy our "legal" obligation by confessing our sins only once a year. However, to remain in serious sin and away from the ability to receive the blessed Eucharist must be a difficult burden in anyone's life. Therefore, it is earnestly recommended that every man and woman develop the practice of receiving the Sacrament of Penance frequently during the year so that he or she may be freed from serious sin and be able thus to receive the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

33. We know that anyone who is aware of having committed a grave sin may not receive Holy Communion, even if he or she experiences deep contrition, without having first received absolution in the Sacrament of Penance.³⁸ This is true unless the person has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession, a situation which does not apply in the area of the Archdiocese of Newark.

34. There is no need to receive the Sacrament of Penance for lesser sins or venial sins. On the other hand, as was said above, frequent confession even for venial sins, is also a graced exercise in humility and in the desire to grow in holiness.³⁹ It also gives a regular confessor an opportunity to help the penitent reflect on his or her life and to make recommendations with regard to an even more profound conversion in our lives. How I would love to see every Catholic going to confession several times a year at the very least and indeed whenever the presence of grave sin in their lives impeded their reception of the Eucharist at Mass. The Lord has given us this great Sacrament of Penance not that it may be a barrier to our growth and holiness, but, on the contrary, that it might be the door through which we make our peace with God and through that become more settled on our road to everlasting life. Saint Augustine tells us that the beginning of good works is the confession of evil works. It is this which gives us the grace to grow in grace itself.

35. The decline in the use of the Sacrament of Penance seems often to be matched by the increase in the use of therapy, professional counselling and tranquilizing drugs in our society. These latter obviously have their proper place in the treatment and alleviation of mental problems and the management of stressful situations or even occupations. They can never give us the peace of the Lord's forgiveness and the grace to live our lives, even courageously, in His Love. That is the gift which God offers freely, readily and abundantly through the great sacrament through which we are reconciled to Himself and given the gift of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of our sins. How much I pray that this wonderful gift of God's merciful love might be a constant friend on our journey through life and an ever present source of joy and strength. We are all sinners and all have need of God's mercy. Let us pray for each other so we may appreciate the gift of God through which time and time again He offers us another chance at holiness.

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Sacred Heart Cathedral
The Solemnity of Pentecost, 1995

Pastoral Guidelines

As has been customary at the conclusion of our reflection, I should like to add a number of practical pastoral instructions or to reiterate some which have clearly been part of the normative practice of this local Church.

A. I would like to reaffirm the instruction which I gave several years ago to the parishes of the Archdiocese of Newark with regard to the scheduling of the Sacrament of Penance and Holy Eucharist. It is the norm in this Archdiocese that children should receive the Sacrament of Penance before they receive their First Communion.⁴⁰ As I indicated above, youngsters develop a sense of right and wrong very early in their lives and it is that sense which we must understand and foster so that they may form a good and solid conscience in the living of their lives. To the objection that young children might not yet understand the notion of sin and evil, I would respond that in that case they are even less likely to understand the more difficult notion of the true presence of Jesus in the blessed Eucharist under the form of bread and wine. I appreciate the fact that parents sometimes are unwilling to have their children receive the Sacrament of Penance in the first or second grade of elementary school but prefer that they wait until a later age. In those circumstances, the reception of First Holy Communion should also be delayed until that later age after the reception of the Sacrament of Penance. This is to be the normative practice in the Archdiocese of Newark and exceptions from it should be sought from the Regional Bishop in each area.

B. On a number of occasions I have communicated with the pastors of the archdiocese concerning the question of general absolution. There is surely a place for the exercise of general absolution in the Church and I can conceive of special moments when in a situation of dire emergency it could be fittingly given in this country. However, because of the availability of priest confessors and the relatively small area of this Archdiocese, there is no justification for the granting of general absolution in any of the parishes of this local Church. Any exceptions to this general rule should be sought directly from the Archbishop.⁴¹ It is good also that the faithful be reminded that if ever they do receive general absolution, they are required to confess any grave sins at the next opportunity of receiving sacramental penance through ordinary individual confession.⁴²

C. It is important that the options be preserved for the freedom of our people in this most personal of sacramental encounters. There are many reasons to recommend the opportunity of face to face confession, and I trust that this is being made possible in all of our parishes. At the same time, the ability of our people to choose either this kind of encounter or one where their privacy and confidentiality is totally preserved must always be guaranteed.⁴³ The opportunity both for face to face confession and for confession through a more anonymous instrumentality is mandated in this local Church as it is in the Universal Church.⁴⁴ The opportunity to choose

should also be granted to children as they are prepared for their first confession. They, too, are to be offered the opportunity to confess either face to face or in the total anonymity of a screen.

D. In light of recent court decisions here in New Jersey, I want to affirm again the absolute confidentiality of the Sacrament of Penance. As I wrote at the time of the legislative hearings on this subject, the priest confessor is always bound by the seal of confession never to reveal anything that is told to him by the penitent in the sacrament.⁴⁵ This is a most grave responsibility and holy priests over the centuries have even offered up their lives rather than violate their obligation. As the National Catechetical Directory reminds us: "secrecy is essential for safeguarding the Sacrament; both penitent and sacrament are protected by the priest's obligation to maintain secrecy. The penitent ought to exercise prudent care in speaking about his or her own confession."⁴⁶

E. As the shortages in priestly vocations often limit the numbers of priests assigned in each parish and as the need to serve in a growing multitude of responsibilities is faced by all our priests in pastoral ministry, there may be a temptation to cut down on the ordinary times in which the faithful are invited to approach the Sacrament of Penance. I would call on all our priests to resist that temptation. I would rather that a pastor would share other responsibilities with dedicated lay and religious leaders in the parish and always guarantee sufficient access to this sacrament on the part of the people of God.⁴⁷

F. Obviously any Catholic has the right to have his or her confession heard whenever they would reasonably request this, but it is not pastorally proper to insist that the faithful make such an individual request. Times for confessions should be published and faithfully adhered to by the priests of the parish and those times must be adequate and chosen with an eye to the best convenience of the parishioner.⁴⁸ There will be periods when a priest confessor will sit alone in a confessional, practicing a difficult patience as he waits for penitents to come, but the grace the Lord will give such a confessor who dedicates time to be available for this wondrous work will more than recompense his inconvenience. As he waits in the seat of God's Mercy, that mercy will be ever more abundant to him personally and the grace of such constancy may well be used by God to bring the faithful more often to the use of this great sacrament.

Notes

1. John 20:19-21. "On the evening of that first day of the week, even though the disciples had locked the doors of the place where they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them. 'Peace be with you,' he said. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. At the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced. 'Peace be with you,' he said again."

2. Rite of Penance 46: ". . . through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

3. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today, December 2, 1984, AAS 77 (1985) 257-267, Reconciliatio et poenitentia 18: "Thus on the basis of certain affirmations of psychology, concern to avoid creating feelings of guilt or to place limits on freedom leads to a refusal ever to admit any shortcoming. Through an undue extrapolation of the criteria of the science of sociology, it finally happens \rightarrow as I have already said \rightarrow that all failings are blamed upon society, and the individual is declared innocent of them. Again, a certain cultural anthropology so emphasizes the undeniable environmental and historical conditioning and influences which act upon man, that it reduces his responsibility to the point of not acknowledging his ability to perform truly human acts and therefore his ability to sin."

4. 1 John 2:8-10.

5. Matthew 3:1-2: "When John the Baptizer made his appearance as a preacher in the desert of Judea, this was his theme: 'Reform your lives! The reign of God is at hand.'"
6. See John Paul II, Encyclical Letter to All Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching, August 6, 1993, AAS 85 (1993) 1133-1228, Veritatis Splendor Chapter II, Section III.
7. United States Catholic Conference, Catechism of the Catholic Church (English Edition), (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994), 623: "By his loving obedience to the Father, 'unto death, even death on a cross' (Phil 2:8), Jesus fulfills the atoning mission (cf. Isa 53:10) of the suffering Servant, who will 'make many righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities' (Isa 53:11, cf. Roman 5:19)."
8. Sacramentary, Good Friday: Celebration of the Lord's Passion, Veneration of the Cross: "This is the wood of the cross, on which hung the Savior of the world. Come, let us worship." See John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Mercy of God, November 30, 1980, AAS 73 (1981) Dives in misericordia 8: "Christ's messianic program, the program of mercy, becomes the program of his people, the program of the Church. At its very center there is always the cross, for it is in the cross that the revelation of merciful love attains its culmination."
9. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter to All the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women Religious, Lay Faithful and All People of Good Will on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, March 25, 1995, AAS 87 (1995) 401-522, Evangelium Vitae.
10. Reconciliatio et paenitentia 18: "The restoration of a proper sense of sin is the first way of facing the grave spiritual crisis looming over man today. But the sense of sin can only be restored through a clear reminder of the unchangeable principles of reason and faith which the moral teaching of the Church has always upheld."
11. Catechism of the Catholic Church 622: "The redemption won by Christ consists in this that he came 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mt 20:28), that is, he 'loved [his own] to the end' (Jn 13:1), so that they might be 'ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [their] fathers.' (1 Pet 1:18)"
12. Catechism of the Catholic Church 601: "The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of 'the righteous one, my Servant' as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin. Citing a confession of faith that he himself had 'received,' St. Paul professes that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.' In particular Jesus' redemptive death fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering Servant. Indeed Jesus himself explained the meaning of His life and death in the light of God's suffering Servant. After his Resurrection He gave this interpretation of the Scriptures to the disciples at Emmaus, and then to the apostles."
13. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 1447 for a concise explanation of the history of Penance.
14. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1446: "Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them the Sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification."
15. Matthew 18:21-22: "Peter came up and asked Jesus, 'Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?' 'No,' Jesus replied, 'not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times.'"
16. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for the United States 125.
17. National Catechetical Directory 125.

18. Dives in misericordia 13: "The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer and when she brings people close to the sources of the Savior's mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser. Of great significance in this area is constant meditation on the word of God and above all conscious and mature participation in the eucharist and in the Sacrament of Penance or reconciliation."

19. Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, General Instruction of the Roman Missal, April 6, 1969, 24: "The parts preceding the liturgy of the word, namely, the entrance song, the greeting, the penitential rite, Kyrie, Gloria, and opening prayer or collect, have the character of a beginning, introduction, and preparation. The purpose of these rites is that the faithful coming together take on the form of a community and prepare themselves to listen to God's Word and celebrate the eucharist properly."

20. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1426: "Nevertheless the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life."

21. Matthew 16:19.

22. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1445: "The words bind and loose mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his."

23. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter to Bishops, Priests and Religious, to the Sons and Daughters of the Church and to All People of Good Will at the Beginning of His Pontifical Ministry, March 4, 1979, AAS 71 (1979) 257-324, *Redemptor hominis* 20.

24. Rite of Penance 46: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." See also Rite of Penance 19: "The form of absolution . . . underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church."

25. Rite of Penance 6a: "The genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition. For conversion should affect a person from within so that it may progressively enlighten him and render him continually more like Christ."

26. Rite of Penance 7a: "To obtain the saving remedy of the Sacrament of Penance, according to the plan of our merciful God, the faithful must confess to a priest each and every grave sin which they remember upon the examination of their conscience." See Catechism of the Catholic Church 1456: "Confession to a priest is an essential part of the Sacrament of Penance: 'All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly.'" (Council of Trent, Denzinger-Schonmetzer 1680). See also canon 988, 1: "Each of Christ's faithful are bound to confess, in kind and number, all grave sins committed after baptism, of which after careful examination of conscience he or she is aware, which have not yet been directly pardoned by the keys of the Church, and which have not been confessed in an individual confession."

27. Canon 959: "In the Sacrament of Penance the faithful who confess their sins to a lawful minister, are sorry for those sins and have a purpose of amendment, receive from God, through the absolution given by that

minister, forgiveness of sins they have committed after baptism, and at the same time they are reconciled with the Church, which by sinning they wounded."

28. Canon 981: "The confessor is to impose salutary and appropriate penances, in proportion to the kind and number of sins confessed, taking into account, however, the condition of the penitent. The penitent is bound personally to fulfill these penances."

29. National Catechetical Directory 124: "The sacrament's traditional and essential elements are contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction."

30. Rite of Penance 6a.

31. Rite of Penance 41: "When the penitent comes to confess his sins, the priest welcomes him warmly and greets him with kindness. Then the penitent makes the sign of the cross which the priest may make also. (Then) the priest invites the penitent to have trust in God . . ."

32. Rite of Penance 19: "After this (confession of sins) the penitent manifests his contrition and resolution to begin a new life by means of prayer for God's pardon. It is desirable that this prayer should be based on the words of Scripture." See also Rite of Penance 45: "The priest then asks the penitent to express his sorrow, which the penitent may do in these or similar words: My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy."

33. Rite of Penance 18: "This act of penance may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service of one's neighbor and words of mercy. This will underline the fact that sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect."

34. Rite of Penance 20: "After receiving pardon for his sins the penitent praises the mercy of God and gives him thanks in a short invocation taken from scripture. Then the priest tells him to go in peace."

35. Rite of Penance 22: "Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The faithful listen together to the word of God, which proclaims his mercy and invites them to conversion; at the same time they examine the conformity of their lives with that word of God and help each other through common prayer. After each person has confessed his sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son."

36. John Paul II, Letter to All Priests on Holy Thursday of 1989, AAS 81 (1989), 1030-1038.

37. Canon 989: "After having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year."

38. Canon 916: "A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or to receive the Body of the Lord without prior sacramental confession unless a grave reason is present and there is no opportunity of confessing; in this case the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible."

39. Rite of Penance 7b: "Moreover, 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." See John Paul II, Allocution, January 30, 1981, AAS 73 (1981) 204. See also canon 988, 2: "It is recommended that Christ's faithful confess also venial sins."

40. Canon 914: "It is the responsibility, in the first place, of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as of the pastor to see that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession; it is also for the pastor to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not reached the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed." See Catechism of the Catholic Church 1457: "Children must go to the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time." See also Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, General Catechetical Directory, April 11, 1971, AAS 64 (1972) 175-176, Addendum 5; Sacred Congregations for the Clergy and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Joint Declaration, May 24, 1973, AAS 65 (1973) 410, Sanctus Pontifex.

41. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1483: "The diocesan bishop is the judge of whether or not the conditions required for general absolution exist." See canon 961, 2: "It is for the diocesan bishop to judge whether the conditions required in 1 n.2 are present; mindful of the criteria agreed with the other members of the bishops' conference, he can determine the cases of such necessity." See also Paul VI, Allocution, April 20, 1978, AAS 70 (1978) 328-332; John Paul II, Allocution, January 30, 1981, AAS 73 (1981) 201-204.

42. Canon 962, 1: "For a member of Christ's faithful to benefit validly from a sacramental absolution given to a number of people simultaneously, it is required not only that he or she be properly disposed, but be also at the same time personally resolved to confess in due time each of the grave sins which cannot for the moment be thus confessed. 2: Christ's faithful are to be instructed about the requirements set out in 1, as far as possible even on the occasion of general absolution being received. An exhortation that each person should make an act of contrition is to precede a general absolution, even in the case of danger of death if there is time." See also canon 963: "Without prejudice to the obligation mentioned in c. 989, a person whose grave sins are forgiven by a general absolution, is as soon as possible, when the opportunity occurs, to make an individual confession before receiving another general absolution, unless a just reason intervenes."

43. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, Newsletter, December 1974: It is "considered desirable that small chapels or rooms for reconciliation be provided in which penitents might choose to confess their sins through an informal face to face exchange with the priest. . . . It would also be regarded as desirable that such chapels or rooms be designed to afford the option of the penitent's kneeling at the fixed confessional grille in the usual way, but in every case the freedom of the penitent is to be respected." See also Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, Environment and Art in Catholic Worship 81: "A room or rooms for the reconciliation of individual penitents may be located near the baptismal area (when that is at the entrance) or in another place . . . offering the penitent a choice between face to face encounter or the anonymity provided by a screen, with nothing superfluous beyond a simple cross, table and bible."

44. See canon 964.

45. Rite of Penance 10d: "As the minister of God the confessor comes to know the secrets of another's conscience, and he is bound to keep the sacramental seal of confession absolutely inviolate." See canon 983, 1: "The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore, it is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason." See also canon 1388 regarding the automatic excommunication of the confessor for the violation of the seal.

46. National Catechetical Directory 124.

47. Reconciliatio et paenitentia 29 and 33: "Just as at the altar where he celebrates the Eucharist and just as in each one of the Sacraments, so the priest, as minister of Penance, acts 'in persona Christi.' . . . This is undoubtedly the most difficult and sensitive, the most exhausting and demanding ministry of the priest, but also one of the most beautiful and consoling. Precisely for the reason and with awareness of the strong

recommendation of the Synod, I will never grow weary of exhorting my brothers, the Bishops and priests, to the faithful and diligent performance of this ministry." See also Paul VI, Allocution, April 20, 1978, AAS 70 (1978) 328-332.

48. Rite of Penance 13: "The reconciliation of penitents may be celebrated at any time on any day, but it is desirable that the faithful know the day and time at which the priest is available for this ministry. They should be encouraged to approach the Sacrament of Penance at times which Mass is not being celebrated and especially during the scheduled periods." See canon 986, 1: "All to whom the care of souls is committed by reason of an office are obliged to provide that the confessions of the faithful entrusted to their care be heard when they reasonably ask to be heard and that the opportunity be given to them to come to individual confession on days and hours set for their convenience."

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