

Pardon and Peace

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YEAR OF FAITH²⁰¹²₂₀₁₃

YEAR OF FAITH
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***“Pour out your hearts before him,
for God is our refuge.”*** Psalm 62:9

Introduction

As the Church prepared to celebrate the beginning of the Third Millennium of the Christian faith, Pope John Paul II asked the faithful to reflect personally and deeply on the meaning of the Good News of salvation, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As St. Mark tells us, Jesus began his public ministry with the words: “The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel!” (Mark 1:15).

We know that the promised coming of the reign of God was fulfilled in the weakness of the Cross. Through the sacrifice of his life at Golgotha, the Son of God redeemed us from the power of sin and death. When he appeared to his apostles after his resurrection, he gave them his own Spirit through whom the work of redemption would continue until his return at the end of time.

The mission of the Spirit of God in our midst, then, is intimately tied to receiving the Father’s mercy through the saving sacrifice of Jesus. The Holy Spirit continues to proclaim the mercy of God and invite us to reconciliation throughout the ages of the Church.

This personal invitation to mercy takes concrete form in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Not only does Jesus invite each of us to repentance and a new life, but he makes it possible to achieve them through his grace freely given through this healing gift. So powerful is this sacrament that we are returned to the innocence of Baptism and given a chance to begin anew in our following of the Risen Lord, stronger because of his gracious mercy. This door to new life is open to all who sincerely wish to “reform their lives and believe in the Gospel.”

Through this booklet, you are invited to a deeper appreciation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the life of the Church. The booklet shares the beautiful teaching of our faith as expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and also the reflections of members of the diocese, both laity and clergy. It also offers some practical suggestions for a sincere and profound celebration of this healing sacrament so that it truly becomes an individual encounter with the Merciful Christ, our Redeemer.

Human history and the nightly news provide us with many examples of the brokenness and sin of our world; we know sin reaches into our own hearts as well. As people of faith, this awareness prompts us to turn all the more confidently to Christ, our great High Priest, who invites us *“to approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and favor and to find help in time of need”* (Hebrews 4:16).

What is the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is surely among the greatest gifts that Christ has given to his Church. Through Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, we have received new life in Christ and are joined as one, all of us *“incorporated”* as members of his Body. But we carry this treasure *“in earthen vessels”* (II Corinthians 4:7), still subject to suffering, weakness, death – and to sin. We can turn away from love of God and love of one another, making free choices that are contrary to the way of the Lord. Indeed, this freedom is both our dignity and our vulnerability in a world wounded by sin.

Jesus, the Divine Healer of both soul and body, comes to our assistance in this need. In the power of his Spirit, Jesus continues his work of healing and salvation through his Church.

The Second Vatican Council summarized the Church’s faith regarding this sacrament in these words:

Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion. (Lumen Gentium 11, §2)

This brief sentence instructs us that this sacrament is about God’s forgiveness and mercy, sharing with us His unfailing love even in our sin, and allowing us to begin anew. It also reminds us that our sins are never purely private matters, but always involve a rupture in our relationship with God and with others. The condition of our relationship with God affects how we treat others, and vice versa. As St. John writes: *“One who has no love for the brother or sister he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: whoever loves God must also love his brother and sister”* (I John 4:20-21).

What is this Sacrament Called?

As the *Catechism* notes, this sacrament is known by various names, expressing different facets of its rich meaning. It is called the sacrament of **conversion**, for through accepting its grace we change the course of our lives and are turned once more towards God. It is also called the sacrament of **Penance**, since it consecrates our journey back to God through our renewed willing embrace of the ways of holiness. It is also known as the sacrament of **confession**, related to that important aspect of the sacrament whereby we name and take responsibility for our own choices in actions, attitudes, and omissions that have distanced us from God; further, it is also a "confession" or proclamation of our trust in God's mercy. It is called the sacrament of **forgiveness**, since it is through the priest's sacramental absolution that God truly grants his "pardon and peace" to the person, imparting his forgiveness and re-establishing the bond that we have broken by sin.

Another common name currently used is the sacrament of **Reconciliation**, which celebrates the outcome of the journey of repentance back to God's love, both for us and for others. As *Lumen Gentium* taught, through this sacrament, we are reconciled not only with God but also with our sisters and brothers in Christ. As our whole physical body is weakened by a particular illness we might suffer, so the mystical Body of Christ is weakened by the sin among its members; and as our whole physical body is strengthened by regaining health, so each individual member's reconciliation in the Church is a source of strength and healing for the whole mystical Body. *"Just as each of us has one body with many members ... so we too, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another"* (Romans 12:4-5).

Where Does this Sacrament Come From?

In truth, the sacrament of Reconciliation comes from the very heart of God's love and mercy. God's merciful love was revealed perfectly in the Paschal Mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. On the Cross we see not only the unfathomable consequences of what humanity's rejection of God's love leads to, but also the unimaginable mercy and faithfulness of God. In the sacrifice of his own life for our forgiveness, Jesus takes every human "No!" to God's saving plan and transforms it into a divine-human "Yes!" of obedience, trust, and love.

St. John presents the scene of Jesus' death in light of this mystery: *"When Jesus took the wine, he said, 'Now it is finished.' Then he bowed his head, and delivered over his spirit"* (John 19:30). This giving of his Spirit on the Cross was the return of his Father's love to him, and the gift of this love to the world. It is by the same Spirit that the Apostles are entrusted with the message of reconciliation and forgiveness by the Risen Christ on that first Easter night: *"Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound'"* (John 20:22f). As Jesus reconciled us through the human nature he took from Mary his mother, so he continues to work among us through human means that communicate the grace and healing of redemption.

Our first and definitive sharing in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection is our Baptism. Through this sacrament, we die to our old selves and rise again into the life of Christ (see Romans 6:3-11). Baptism removes both original sin (that wound in our fallen nature which has weakened us so that we are prone to sin and death) and any actual sins that may be present (as when an adult is baptized, for instance).

We know well that we do not remain in this state of union with God's love. We remain pilgrims in this life, and baptismal grace has not finally abolished human frailty, weakness, and our inclination to sin (which Catholic tradition calls "concupiscence") as we struggle towards holiness in following Jesus. The Lord never abandons us in this struggle of Christian life, but rather invites us constantly to be renewed by his Grace.

What is the History of this Sacrament?

Though Jesus gave this gift to his Church from the very beginning, the Church's understanding of it has developed, and the rituals by which it is celebrated have changed over time. In the early days of the Church, the emphasis on the radical newness of Baptism led some to the mistaken idea that anyone who sinned after Baptism was lost. Thus, some people delayed Baptism until they were on their death-beds: an unfortunate and risky approach that was clearly not effective in bringing God's mercy to those in need.

The Church understood that post-baptismal forgiveness was possible, though it was initially celebrated in the public “order of penitents,” whereby Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after Baptism (such as idolatry, murder, or adultery) undertook a very rigorous discipline. These penitents did public penance, sometimes for several years, before reconciliation with the Church. To this form of reconciliation with God and the Church (which was certainly life-changing) one was only rarely admitted and, in some areas, only once in a lifetime.

During the seventh century, Irish missionaries brought an idea from the monastic tradition of the Eastern Christian churches to continental Europe. A part of the spiritual exercises of monastery life was the “Chapter of Faults,” in which the monks would reveal their sins and failures to the abbot, who would give each of his monks some penance to do to help perfect them in the spiritual life.

Gradually this approach became customary, and the “private” practice of penance, without the need for public and prolonged acts of penitence before reconciliation, developed as the normal ritual form for this sacrament. We continue to come privately to a confessor as often as necessary, reveal our sins, accept a medicinal penance, express our sorrow for our sins, and accept the mercy of God in absolution. Though the form of celebration of the sacrament has changed, the encounter of the merciful Christ with each repentant person remains the common and unchanging core of this gift.

What are the Parts of the Celebration of this Sacrament?

The sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick are sacraments of healing, restoring us to the life of Christ and opening to us the endless horizons of eternal life. Like all the sacraments, they are a part of the Church’s liturgy. As liturgy, they are public actions of the Church, in which the Body of Christ, Head and members, offers praise and worship to the Father in the Holy Spirit. The liturgy draws us into the very inner life of the Triune God, an endless perfect communion of love.

When we think of “liturgy,” many people think of the Eucharist, and rightly so, for it is the greatest of the sacraments. But Reconciliation,

too, signifies and makes present the saving love of Jesus.

Jesus' call to renewal is first of all an interior call. That is, Jesus does not merely invite us to certain outward works of penitence, to "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification. His call goes much deeper: he invites us to change our hearts; that is, to interior conversion. Such a conversion radically reorients our whole life back to God. Without this, penitential works remain exterior, empty and lifeless. With interior conversion, however, comes the urge to express our sorrow and trust in God's goodness and mercy through visible, concrete signs. These exterior signs may take many forms: fasting, prayer, almsgiving are the preeminent ones, and when undertaken with faith and prudence, they are laudable ways to bring the new life of Christ into our daily routines, and the Church constantly shares the mercy and love of God with all.

But reconciliation is always a gift in which God takes the initiative. It is he who has forgiven us in Christ; it is he who invites us to conversion; and it is he who shares mercy without measure in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is vital that we foster in ourselves the virtues of honesty and humility, whereby we truthfully name the ways our choices depart from the will of God, and come with humble confidence to ask his forgiveness.

From this discussion, it is evident that there are four parts to the sacrament of Reconciliation:

1) Contrition: this is sorrow for sin. Contrition arises spontaneously in us as the work of conscience. When we realize that we have made choices that are opposed to God's love for ourselves or for others, and we are sorry that we have done so because we have offended God, who loves us so much, we are contrite. There is another kind of sorrow for sin called "attrition." This is sorrow that arises, not from love for God, but from fear of punishment. Attrition can dispose us to accept God's mercy in Reconciliation, and it is sufficient for receiving forgiveness through the celebration of the sacrament, but attrition alone without the sacramental celebration of Reconciliation does not forgive sin.

There can be no reconciliation if there is no sorrow for sin. As we understand from human experiences, refusing to ask forgiveness from another precludes reconciliation with that person by our own choice not to seek it.

Confessors presume that the person coming to Reconciliation is in some way sorry; otherwise they would not be there at all. The penitent's Act of Contrition is a part of the celebration of this sacrament. It is to be a sincere, personal expression of sorrow to God, speaking from our hearts, and not merely a prayer hurriedly and mechanically recited. *This graced moment of sacramental encounter with Christ ought not ever to be hurried.* Here, life can begin anew for us, and yet we can too easily miss the opportunity to be truly changed if we do not embrace with care the grace offered by Jesus.

The act of contrition also expresses one's "firm purpose of amendment." This is the intention not to sin in the future, and to avoid those circumstances, situations, and behaviors that we know from experience often lead us into sin. To confess one's sins when we deliberately intend to commit them again means that one is not truly sorry for them, and thus forgiveness is not possible. However, the Church is realistic about our human weakness, and we often foresee that it is likely that we will sin again. Confession and contrition does not guarantee that we will not fall into sin in the future; indeed, Christ left us this sacrament precisely because he knew that we would sin. But it does require that we have the intention and authentic desire to change our lives – that we want to follow Christ.

2) Confession: this is the statement of one's sins. One is to make a full confession of truly serious sins, in number and kind, which are recalled after a sincere examination of conscience (see below). This confession of sin is to express a deep, sincere, humble review of our life since the last celebration of Reconciliation. It is to include both sins of commission (what I have chosen to say, think, or do that is contrary to God's will) and also sins of omission (good that I ought to have done but chose not to do). [*See below for further discussion of sin.*]

There is a distinction made between mortal ("serious," "grave") sin and venial sin. A sin is mortal if it meets three requirements:

- 1) it is done with **full knowledge** of the gravity of what is being chosen;
AND
- 2) it is done with **full freedom and consent of the will**;
AND
- 3) it is a **serious matter**.

If one or more of these requirements is lacking, it is a venial sin (*Catechism*, n. 1862). Only the penitent, and God, can truly know whether full knowledge and consent were present. Confession “in number and kind” (what kind of thing was done, and how often) is required only for mortal sin, though it is a helpful practice to confess venial sins in this way as well, to become more sensitive to the opportunities for grace in our lives.

No mention need ever be made of sins already validly forgiven in Reconciliation. No matter how many or great they were, God’s mercy is always greater. Forgiving ourselves may take time, but we have no reason to love ourselves less than God does! God has truly “*cast into the depths of the sea all our sins*” (Micah 7:19), redeeming us through the death and resurrection of his Son.

Sometimes, people find that they confess the same sins repeatedly, struggling with particular habits of behavior. Even though they intend to change, such habits can be very difficult to break. Yet experience shows that faithful and frequent confession of those sins does, in fact, gradually weaken their hold in our lives. Pope Benedict XVI put it very well when talking to a group of First Communion students soon after he became Pope; he noted that we clean our homes regularly, even though it remains the same rooms, the same furnishings, and the same dirt, so that we can live in a neat and orderly way; and it is the same with the cleaning of our souls in Reconciliation.

3) Penance: the confessor assigns a penance to the person before granting absolution. The penance is in no way a punishment; rather, it is medicinal, a means of healing the past and beginning discipleship anew in a holy way. It helps to redress some of the harm done by the person’s sins, concretely or spiritually. The penance is often a prayer or a Scripture reading, though it may be a specific action, voluntary self-denial, and above all the patient acceptance of the Cross we must all bear. Accepting the penance is one way for the person to manifest a firm purpose of amendment, the willingness to change. If it is something the person sincerely believes cannot be done, he or she can tell the confessor, who can assign a different penance.

4) Absolution: the confessor, who is a bishop or priest with faculties to absolve sin in the name of the Church, extends his hand and prays the

beautiful prayer of absolution. Through this prayer, Christ truly imparts his mercy through the priest, who acts in the person of Christ in this sacrament. God, who is rich in mercy, has reconciled the world to himself through the Paschal Mystery of his Son; through his Church, in the power of the Spirit, this work of reconciliation and healing becomes real for this person, here and now, as he or she is made new once again in Christ Jesus.

It is well to note that the sacrament of Reconciliation is protected by **“the seal of confession.”** This means that no confessor may ever reveal anything about what is brought to the sacrament in such a way that there is even a risk of revealing the identity of a penitent. Anyone who may overhear another’s confession is also bound by the obligation to preserve secrecy. This is so that everyone may freely approach this great gift of healing without fear.

What Ever Happened to Sin?

Sin can be easily defined as “any thought, word, or deed contrary to the law of God.” But recognizing our own sinfulness can be much harder than an abstract definition. And that makes the mature celebration of Reconciliation harder, too.

Many people of all faith traditions agree that our modern world has largely lost an authentic sense of sin. Social customs and norms have changed so drastically, and continue to change so rapidly, that people often express their confusion about what is right and wrong anymore.

“The sense of sin” is closely linked to holiness. Sin is always a choice for something less than the good God desires for us. Sin is a flight from truth, a running away from the full, rich reality of God’s loving plan. Thus in saying we have lost a sense of sin, we really mean that we have lost sight of the goodness God wills for his world, and for each person made in the divine image. In other words, to recognize what is false, we need to know what is true.

Our relationship with God is a living, dynamic reality. Like any friendship with another, it is never really the same from one day to the next. Thus, our way of approaching Reconciliation must also develop and grow. As we become more adept at seeing the goodness, truth and love that

God offers us, we will also become more clear about sin and evil. Hopefully, an individual's experience of Reconciliation will reflect a growth in maturity of understanding and relationship with God. If we still confess the same way as we did in grade school, or if we come only out of a sense of duty or to please or impress someone else, we may be limiting what God can do in our lives; there is much room for growth and a much greater encounter with the Living Christ.

Sin is not comprised only of what we have done wrong according to the Ten Commandments. These remain an essential point of reference, but they represent somewhat minimal standards of Christian life. The Gospel message is not a negative call simply to avoid sin - hard as that may be at times! Rather, *the Gospel is an invitation into an ever fuller participation in the new life of Christ* - a life of holiness, of service, of solidarity, of concern for the poor, the weak, the outcast, the stranger, the grieving, the difficult - a life which sees and serves Christ in all.

In the story of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), Jesus clearly and dramatically teaches us that the separation of the "sheep" and the "goats" - those called to eternal life and those excluded - is based on how well we have responded to the invitation to love the least of our brothers and sisters. Though they may not have violated the strict letter of the Law, those on the King's left are contrasted with the "just" for their failure to respond to the human needs of those right around them. They have failed to love as God loves.

So, despite the changes in our world, God's loving plan stands firm. Whatever free choices we make to frustrate the fulfillment of this loving plan for ourselves or for others are sin. The more customs and habits depart from the ways of the Lord, the more our consciences can be misinformed or blunted by habits of sin, both within us and around us.

In other words, the best way to understand sin is perhaps not to make a list of particular things that are labeled as such, but to grow in holiness and understanding of what it is that Christ really invites us to in calling us to the life and mission of his Church. As we form our consciences according to the mind of Christ and the mind of the Church in all the richness of the vision of the Gospel, we will see why sin matters; not because it "hurts God" (which is actually not possible for us to do), but because it frustrates our own growth towards the fullness of life Jesus

came to bring, and hurts others in his Body. We are in this Body together, across all boundaries of race, class, education, social status, or ability; and all are loved by Jesus, who calls us to love one another as he has loved us (see John 15:9).

Do You Need A New Approach?

Jesus calls us to share in his saving work of healing and mercy. We might do well to approach the sacrament of Reconciliation with a new attitude. Perhaps we can ask ourselves, not: "How bad have I been?" but rather, "***How good could I be if I was more open to the fullness of God's grace?***"

This question becomes a way to put serious time and reflection into a sincere examination of conscience. Reconciliation is, as noted, the call from God to truly change our lives, to turn once again wholly to the Lord. Even though we know that we will need to turn again and again to his mercy, especially for particular sins, we also know that this desire to change is central to actually working at change.

There are many ways to do an examination of conscience. The Ten Commandments still remain an excellent point of reference, as we look beyond their literal requirement and consider their deeper, positive call to life with God. Other forms are readily available in spiritual books. Perhaps a simple form might be reflection on the following three questions:

- 1) In my heart of hearts, what kind of person do I really want to be?
- 2) What kind of person does Jesus want me to be?
- 3) Where do my goals, desires, choices, attitudes, habits, or actions conflict with Christ's plan for me?

The answers to 3), sincerely considered, become the material for confession. A more detailed form of the examination of conscience, based on the Ten Commandments, is found later in this booklet.

A healthy examination of conscience will find trends of sinfulness and distance from God. Honesty and humility are important: we must not gloss over or lightly dismiss our sins, but neither do we need to confess temptations, unintentional errors, or things which have happened

beyond our control (for instance, missing Mass due to serious illness is not a sin). The sacrament of Reconciliation, while it involves counsel and guidance in our journey of faith, is not the same as spiritual direction. A more lengthy and detailed discussion of one's spiritual journey is better pursued in that setting, which may include Reconciliation as a part of the time together when one's spiritual director is a confessor. Further, while confessors take note of the person's psychological life, the sacrament of Reconciliation is not counseling or therapy. It is rather the healing encounter of a sinful person with the infinite mercy of God.

The Church requires that each person who has reached the age of reason must confess all serious sins at least once a year. However, frequent celebration of this sacrament is recommended - not as a mere habit or routine "to be on the safe side," but as a sincere desire to grow ever closer to Christ. As a source of grace, the sacrament is a great help to spiritual maturity and growth when celebrated worthily.

The custom has developed – in part by the way people have been instructed – of confessing once or at most twice a year - before Christmas and Easter. While this is certainly good in itself, sin does not follow the calendar so closely. Reconciliation is available throughout the year, and it is wise to approach this sacrament based on mature awareness of one's need for forgiveness rather than simply by the calendar.

The Forms of the Rite of Penance

The Rite of Penance describes three rites for celebrating Reconciliation: the Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents; the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution; and the Rite for Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution. The first is the familiar individual confession celebrated privately between priest and penitent. The second is often celebrated in parishes during Advent and Lent, with the opportunity for individual confessions as part of the ceremony. The third is envisioned by the Church to be used in exceptional circumstances and is not an alternative to individual confession and absolution.

Even the individual celebration of Reconciliation is a liturgical action which in some way involves the entire Church, through its

representative, the confessor. Further, it can foster the penitent's awareness of the effects upon others of his or her sinful choices. As noted above, the person is reconciled with God and also with the Church; this two-fold healing of relationships is part of every celebration of this sacrament, no matter how it is celebrated.

The "communal Reconciliation service" celebrated in common can highlight our relationships in the Body of Christ and our responsibilities to others in an even stronger way. By coming together to ask the Lord's mercy, we acknowledge that we are a people beloved of God and redeemed by Christ, who calls us to compassion and concern for one another. Often such services allow for a more developed presentation of the meaning of reconciliation in the life of the Church and the life of the individual person, and can help counter the isolation and individualism that is so much a part of our culture today. The service is meant to help prepare the participants to prayerfully celebrate the individual encounter with the mercy of the Lord Jesus in their private confessions. Each one prays for the others, that all may experience the love and freedom of the sacrament.

"Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary way the faithful who are aware of serious sin are reconciled with God and with the Church" (Code of Canon Law, c. 960; rite of Penance, 31). However, if there is genuine physical or moral impossibility for a person to celebrate Reconciliation in this way, the Church understands that reconciliation may take place in other ways (see c. 960).

The rite of general confession and absolution is reserved for particular emergency circumstances that may arise in the life of the universal Church. In addition to cases where there is danger of death, other instances arise, as in mission territories, when there are simply not enough confessors available to hear the individual confessions of each person within a reasonable time, with the result that the persons would be deprived of the grace of the sacrament for a long time through no fault of their own. However, "general absolution is not lawful, when confessors are available, for the sole reason of the large number of penitents, as may be on the occasion of some major feast or pilgrimage" (Rite of Penance, 31; Code of Canon Law, c. 961).

In particular instances when general absolution has been imparted, the valid reception of this absolution requires on the part of the penitent that he or she be suitably disposed (that is, truly sorry for sin and desirous of reconciliation with God and the Church, ideally making an Act of Contrition) and that he or she ***“at the same time intend to confess individually the serious sins which at present cannot be so confessed”*** (c. 962, §1). Thus, when one has received general absolution for serious sin, one is also bound to ***“approach individual confession as soon as there is an opportunity to do so before receiving another general absolution, unless a just cause intervenes”*** (c. 963).

All that being said, it is clear that general confession and absolution is in no way an alternative substitute for individual confession and absolution. It is rather a provision of the Church so that circumstances beyond individuals' control do not deprive them of sacramental grace.

The Church's insistence upon individual confession and absolution expresses several important truths. First, God invites us to true responsibility for our actions and true freedom through his forgiveness. Naming our sins to another person brings them out of the darkness and confusion of our own perceptions and fears, and allows us to gain control over them and a certain objective viewpoint on them. This naming of sin in confession is psychologically healthy as well as spiritually valuable. It prevents self-deception, assures us of our own sorrow, and strengthens our resolve to change and embrace anew the way of the Lord. Further, it allows the confessor to give specific counsel and direction, and perhaps to correct some misunderstandings about the requirements of the Gospel and the range of God's mercy. It assists in assigning a penance that is truly meaningful and appropriate for the individual's needs. And most importantly, it allows for the profound encounter of the individual person with Christ, a right that both of them have for intimate conversation with one another in this graced moment of mercy and peace. This one-on-one celebration of Christ's mercy resists the trend of depersonalization so common in our world, where we can feel sometimes that we are not important, that no one will take the time to listen to us, or that we have nothing important to say.

Jesus does not look upon us as a vast, faceless crowd. As St. Augustine said, "God loves all of us as if there was only one of us." The individual celebration of Reconciliation is the strong preference of the Church

because it allows us to experience the words of God's mercy and love directed precisely to each of us, for our particular sins, assured that God has heard and forgives me.

In his first encyclical, Pope John Paul II explained this idea in these words:

"In faithfully observing the centuries-old practice of the Sacrament of Penance - the practice of individual confession with a personal act of sorrow and the intention to amend and make satisfaction - the Church is therefore defending the human soul's individual right: man's right to a more personal encounter with the crucified forgiving Christ, with Christ saying, through the minister of the sacrament of Reconciliation: 'Your sins are forgiven;' 'Go, and do not sin again.' As is evident, this is also a right on Christ's part with regard to every human being redeemed by him: his right to meet each one of us in that key moment in the soul's life constituted by the moment of conversion and forgiveness" (Redemptor Hominis, 20).

An Examination of Conscience

I. I am the Lord, your God. You shall have no gods before me.

Have I put something or someone in my life ahead of God: money; drugs or alcohol; work; a relationship; leisure activities; TV; etc.? Have I tried to compromise my faith, thinking God should understand? Have I presumed on God's mercy in doing things I know are wrong? This Commandment is a positive invitation to a relationship of faith, hope, and love with God; have I been lukewarm or indifferent towards God? Have I dabbled in the occult, satanism, magic or superstition? Have I committed sacrilege?

II. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Do I use the names of God and Jesus as curse-words? Do I otherwise swear or use improper or coarse language? Do I pray with reflection and devotion, and take my religious obligations seriously? Do I curse other people, either aloud or in my mind?

III. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

Do I participate in Mass on all Sundays and the holy days of obligation? Am I truly reverent, prayerful, and attentive while there? Do I refrain

from unnecessary work on Sundays, leaving time for family, friends, and charitable works? Do I allow myself the relaxation of body and mind needed for good balance in my life? Do I view time as "mine," or as a gift from God to be used to glorify Him? Do I fail to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to pray and do good works?

IV. Honor your father and your mother.

Do I show proper respect for and obedience to my parents? Do I show proper respect to those in authority, both in the Church and in society? Do I pray for my parents, whether they are alive or deceased? Do I visit the elderly, the lonely, and the sick?

V. You shall not kill.

Have I been responsible for the taking of innocent human life, either directly or through intentional cooperation in taking life? Do I show due reverence for all human life in my thoughts, actions, and attitudes? Do I take risks with my life or health, or with that of others, at work, at home, while driving, or in other activities? Have I been violent or abusive, either in words or in actions? Do I grow angry and hold grudges? Do I "kill" others' time, reputation, or confidence? Do I care properly for my health as a gift from God? Do I work to defend life and take opportunities to serve the needs of others?

VI. You shall not commit adultery.

Have I abused God's gift of sexuality through its use outside of the marriage covenant, through adultery, fornication, masturbation, or activities which naturally lead to intercourse? Have I deliberately fostered lust in thought, language, use of television, movies, pornographic literature or pictures, or other media? Have I been closed to the possibility of new life in married love through the use of contraception? If married, have I shown proper respect to my spouse as a whole person? Have I fulfilled my responsibilities as a parent, looking after the welfare of my children spiritually, socially, physically, and emotionally?

VII. You shall not steal.

Have I taken things to which I have no right? Have I failed to give a day's work for a day's wage, or in other ways chosen to ignore the obligations of justice? As an employer, have I paid a just wage? Have I been honest in paying debts and taxes? Have I been wasteful and careless with the goods of the earth?

VIII. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Have I been guilty of lying, in order to deceive another, to make myself look good, or to avoid responsibility for my actions? Have I been guilty of rash judgments about others? Do I gossip and expose the faults (real or imagined) of others? Have I harmed another's reputation? Have I failed to stand up for others who were being unjustly condemned?

IX. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

X. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Have I been jealous of the relationships and goods of others? Have I fostered envy or greed in myself or others? Have I looked at others with lust or been angry at the good fortune of others? Have I taken opportunities to encourage others?

This suggested examination of conscience is meant only as a guide to prompt deeper personal reflection. It is by no means an exhaustive list of possible sins.

The Act of Contrition

There are many forms of an Act of Contrition. Far more important than a specific formula, of course, is that it be a sincere expression of sorrow to God from one's heart. If you are not sure of the words, you may read the prayer, or express your sorrow in your own words. Three of the more common forms follow:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell; but most of all because they have offended you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life. Amen.

O my God, I am sorry for all my sins, because they displease you who are all good and deserving of all my love. With your help, I will sin no more. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Conclusion

The Letter to the Hebrews sums up well the extraordinary gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation when it exhorts us:

We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. Let us hold fast to our profession of faith. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and favor and to find help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

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.