

Catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

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"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). By reflecting on that familiar passage, we can begin to grasp the significance of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

God's Plan of Salvation Through Jesus

Recall first the context of God's decision to send his Son. Seeing his beloved human race fall into sin, which leads to death and eternal loss, and knowing that human beings were utterly incapable of saving themselves, the Triune God responded with a merciful plan of salvation.

God first paved the way to salvation through the law and the prophets of the Old Testament. As the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer puts it: "And when through disobedience [man] had lost your friendship, / you did not abandon him to the domain of death. / For you came in mercy to the aid of all, / so that those who seek might find you. Time and again you offered them covenants / and through the prophets / taught them to look forward to salvation" (The Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition [Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2011], 657).

Then, when the time was fulfilled, the astounding gift was given. The second Person of the Trinity, the Eternal Word, entered his own creation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit he took on flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and became one of us. Again, we read in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer: "And you so loved the world, Father most holy, / that in the fullness of time / you sent your Only Begotten Son to be our Savior. / Made incarnate by the Holy Spirit / and born of the Virgin Mary, / he shared our human nature / in all things but sin" (*Roman Missal*, 657). Thus, the Son, while remaining divine, became man—a perfectly obedient man—in Jesus Christ in order to fulfill the mission entrusted to him by the Father.

A familiar Christmas hymn wonderfully expresses the Lord's humility in coming as he did to offer himself for our salvation:

Why lies He in such mean estate,

Where ox and ass are feeding?

Good Christians, fear, for sinners here

The silent Word is pleading.

Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,

The cross be borne for me, for you.

Hail, hail the Word made flesh,

The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Now let's recall the life Jesus lived among us. He preached the Kingdom of God and bore witness to it with great compassion and powerful signs. He urged his hearers to repent and believe the Good News of salvation. By remaining true to the Father's will through terrible suffering and even death itself, he won our salvation. For Jesus' death was overcome by his resurrection: "God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:24). Now ascended into heaven, he blesses us through the sacraments of the Church and sustains us with the Father's gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus empowers us to remain faithful through the trials of this life so that we will be able to enter his completed Kingdom and share in divine intimacy and joyful resurrection life forever.

We Can Receive the Gift of Salvation Only If We Cooperate with God's Grace

Filled with the Holy Spirit, the newly bold St. Peter announced God's plan of salvation in the very first Christian sermon on Pentecost Sunday. His hearers' hearts were moved, so they asked, "What are we to do, my brothers?" And Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit." He exhorted them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 2:37-38, 40). Peter's words apply to us and to people of every age. He is teaching that our eternal salvation depends on how we respond to God's gracious offer.

God arranged this merciful plan of salvation because he "so loved the world." The Son, who is God incarnate, so loved the world that he laid down his life to save us. And the Holy Spirit, who is also divine, loves us so much that he transforms us from within and abides with us.

*The Father so loved
the world that he
sent his only Son,
despite knowing all
he would have to
endure.*

In short, the Triune God does not want us to perish but to have eternal life, so he graciously offers us the gift of salvation. But salvation is not automatic. It is possible to miss out. Indeed, the same Lord who pours out his blood on the Cross for us so that we can be saved makes it clear that some will miss out: "Many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough" (Lk 13:24). He indicates that among the lost will be some who, despite considering themselves upright, failed to minister to his needs in the least of his brothers and sisters (see Mt 25:41-46). Jesus even says that many who claim to have acted in his name failed to do the Father's will and thus will be unable to enter the Kingdom (see Mt 7:21-23).

The gift of salvation is just that—a gift. Yet it requires our free cooperation. Just as God freely offers us the gift of salvation, so we must freely respond. As C.S. Lewis explains through the senior devil Screwtape, "Merely to override a human will . . . would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo." The Lord's desire is to elicit our free, loving response of faith to his loving initiative.

The Gift of Baptism Is the First Stage of Our Cooperation

Our decision to repent, believe, and be baptized is the beginning of our loving response. Of course, most of us were baptized as infants and could do little more than sleep or yawn or perhaps cry as someone else pronounced baptismal vows on our behalf. But now we are able to respond, and we must endorse those vows by committing ourselves to live holy Christian lives.

Baptism is meant to be a complete break from sin. We participate in the Death of Christ

so that we may also share his resurrection life. St. Paul explains: "We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death" (Rom 6:3). And Paul adds: "We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection" (Rom 6:4-5).

Paul goes on to urge us to remain true to our baptismal commitment. He explains that our sinful selves were "crucified with [Christ]" (Rom 6:6) and that we must think of ourselves as being "dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11).

The Gift of Forgiveness After Baptism: Cooperation Through Penance and Reconciliation

Baptism should mark an end of sin for us, but let's face it. We are weak and do not always stay true to our baptismal promises. We do not always hold fast to grace. We do not always say no to sin. Yet God's love for us is so deep that he makes provision even for the sins we commit after we are baptized.

The Lord does not do this by turning a blind eye to sin as an indulgent parent might do, for the Holy One demands holiness. Peter makes this clear in an exhortation: "As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, 'Be holy because I [am] holy'" (1 Pt 1:15-16). But the Lord doesn't just *demand* holiness. He *empowers* us to be holy by making forgiveness available to us through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and by giving us the Holy Spirit.

What cooperation is required of us to receive the forgiveness Jesus offers? We must humbly admit our sins and turn to the Lord. St. John beautifully explains: "If we say, 'We are without sin,' we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing" (1 Jn 1:8-9).

It is, of course, best to avoid sin entirely. But our loving Savior understands our weakness and has made wonderful provision for it. Again, John says: "My children, I am writing this to you so that you may not commit sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:1-2).

To receive the Lord's forgiveness, we must go to a priest and confess our grave sins in kind and number, as the Council of Trent teaches. This means that we must honestly tell the priest, without including needless details, any mortal, or deadly, sins we have committed and how often we have committed them. Of course, the Lord does not ask the impossible. Rather, he asks for a pure heart. Those who cannot recall all of their mortal sins need only tell what they do remember as well as they can.

Questions About the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

Have you ever wondered why it is necessary to identify one's sins, since God already knows them? Part of the answer is that the inspired Word of God urges us to do so: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (Jas 5:16). But there are also other reasons. If we fail to do this and ask God's forgiveness only in a general way or only in our own hearts, it is easy for us to rationalize. It is easy for us to convince ourselves that some sins are really not sins after all.

The requirement to reflect specifically on our thoughts, words, and deeds in light of the revealed truth about sin helps us avoid such rationalization. True enough, even thinking about telling our sins to another human being can seem intimidating and

unpleasant. But priests are sinners, too, and they generally strive to embody the Lord's kindness. Often one's experience in the confessional is surprisingly easy and consoling.

Even if the experience of confessing is unpleasant, the blessings we receive are completely out of proportion to that unpleasantness. For God's gift to us when we sincerely confess our grave sins is to wipe them away, restore us to life, and open to us the doors of his Kingdom. Paul's words apply here: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us" (Rom 8:18). For, as Paul also says, the Father "delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13-14).

Have you ever wondered why it is necessary to go to a priest? It is important to bear in mind that when people commit mortal sins, they alienate themselves from Christ. They deliberately do what they know in their hearts to be gravely wrong and incompatible with true friendship with him. Although mortal sinners who have not renounced the faith do still believe, their faith is dead. They are still members of the Body of Christ, but by their grave sins they have turned themselves into dead members. Before they can receive Holy Communion, they need to be reintroduced into Christ's life, as he so deeply desires. Just as they received that life when a minister representing Christ and his Church baptized them, so too do they receive the restoration of that life when a minister ordained to act in the person of Christ and his Church absolves their sins.

The point is beautifully illustrated in the very institution of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [Jesus] said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." (Jn 20:19-23)

Jesus clearly entrusts his gift of forgiveness to his Church. And the Church's priests, acting in the person of Jesus, are prepared to forgive any sins whatsoever in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation when they are sincerely confessed by a penitent with a firm purpose of amendment.

"What about venial sins?" you might ask. Unlike mortal sins, venial sins do not take away the sanctifying grace we receive at Baptism. They do not make us dead members of Christ. And no amount of venial sins can ever add up to a single mortal sin. Nevertheless, someone who sins venially finds it far easier to sin mortally. For example, a boy who disobeys his parents' directive not to spend time with a delinquent friend commits a venial sin, but he may then find himself tempted to participate in activities he knows to be gravely wrong.

It is good to confess venial sins. Of course, venial sins can also be forgiven in other ways, including through the devout reception of the Eucharist. Still, conscientious Catholics who have no mortal sins find in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation the grace they need to keep sin out of their lives and to grow in holiness. It is very helpful to develop the habit of frequent confession, and going once a month is by no means too often. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, "Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit" (*Catechism of the*

Catholic Church [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana (LEV)–USCCB, 2000], no. 1458).

Unmasking False Peace to Receive the Sacrament of Mercy

Jesus loves every single person who ever lived and will not willingly lose anyone. So, at great cost to himself, he makes salvation available to everyone. But he never imposes it on anyone. Rather, he instituted the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation to offer us opportunities to freely turn back to him when we have foolishly turned away.

We can easily convince ourselves, even as we stray from the Lord, that all is well, for we naturally want to be at peace with ourselves. And to admit that all is not well causes great interior turmoil. So, we rationalize. This means settling for a false peace. The prophet Jeremiah warns against this when he rebukes those who say "'Peace, peace,' . . . though there is no peace" (Jer 6:14). The worst thing is to be in mortal sin and, because you don't want to experience interior turmoil, to try to convince yourself that you're not really in trouble. That's like having cancer and not wanting to go to the doctor, because you don't want to hear bad news.

The prophets, Apostles, and saints throughout the ages, filled with the Holy Spirit and love of neighbor, have mercifully shaken up those who are trapped in false peace. Those models of holiness knew that the eternal salvation of their hearers is at stake. False peace will eventually be unmasked, and the saints know that it is far better for the mask to be removed now—when we are able to receive the forgiveness Jesus so graciously offers in this sacrament of mercy—than when it is too late. When the veil of false peace is finally lifted from those who are lost, they have no peace at all. But we can find true peace now in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. That peace reaches deeper than any suffering and comes to full fruition in the joyful resurrection life of the Kingdom.

Jesus has a wonderful personal touch that he uses to encourage people to turn to him. For he is really interested in people—really interested in you and me. He does all he can to appeal to our hearts when we are lost. He even associates with sinners. When challenged about this, he says that it is the sick who need a doctor, and he urges his critics to understand that God wants heartfelt mercy and not just external performances: "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Mt 9:13).

Jesus also appeals to the hearts of his hearers through parables. To encourage those who have strayed to return, he tells the story of the loving shepherd in search of his lost sheep. On finding it, the shepherd "sets it on his shoulders with great joy" (Lk: 15:5) and even gathers his friends together to rejoice with him. It's hard to imagine a greater encouragement for the lost than Jesus' concluding words in this parable: "I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance" (Lk 15:7).

Jesus' words and deeds reflect the teaching we just considered. When, for example, the diminutive Zacchaeus climbs a tree in order to see Jesus, the Lord encourages him to repent by honoring him. He says, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house" (Lk 19:5). When Zacchaeus responds with joy and repents, Jesus explains that "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10).

Such moments of grace are not limited to the events recounted in the Gospel. Even now Jesus offers his grace. Even now he reaches out to the lost. Even now he desires to bring forgiveness and joy to the repentant sinner. Since so much is at stake, and our Lord's tender love for us is so deep, we have every reason to search deeply into our own hearts and see what we should bring to the Lord in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

It is essential to ask ourselves: "Is it possible that I'm in mortal sin and won't be able to enter into the Kingdom the way I am?" If we have rationalized our sins and become blind to them, we need only turn to the Lord and sincerely ask him to reveal them to us. Jesus will show us what we need to see about our life with great gentleness and compassion. He wants to help us out of such a dreadful situation and lead us to everlasting life.

If, after such an examination of conscience, we avail ourselves of the great Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, we can be confident that our merciful Lord will forgive our sins and restore us to life. He will give us the grace we need to change whatever we need to change so that we can stay in friendship with him. He will set us on the joyful path to his Kingdom, where we will drink in his goodness and kindness forever.

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