



Bishop Guy's Chronicle

Your sins, your many sins are forgiven...

A few months after being ordained a priest, I began my ministry of confession in the great basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré during the summer season. It was and always will be one of the privileged places where priests can discover the inestimable value of this magnificent ministry and gift entrusted to them at the time of their priestly ordination.

During our years of dedication to the ministry of reconciliation and penance at the shrine, my confreres and I had many opportunities to see the hand of God working mysteriously in the hearts of those who came to the confessional with faith and humility.

In just a few minutes, after confessing their sins or the sorrows that weighed heavily on their consciences, the hearts of the pilgrims were sometimes relieved, sometimes healed, and sometimes even radically transformed by the providential action of the Holy Spirit which was admirably manifested in this sacrament still so poorly understood by so many priests and faithful.

How many times have I had the opportunity for growth by listening to so many humble confessions of faith in God's infinite mercy. Some people, without knowing it, provoked my admiration when they confessed with such abandonment and trust in his mercy. Sometimes I wanted to remember all the words they had said so that I could later use them as a model for my own confession. Unfortunately for me, because of the grace inherent in the Sacrament of Forgiveness which often makes us forget everything we have just heard in confessional secrecy, the memory was no longer there.

Others gave me unspeakable spiritual joy when they finally found peace and deep joy after so many years of suffering or being away from the Church for all sorts of reasons. How many wept with joy after having been listened to without being judged by the confessor and after hearing the soothing and sanctifying words: "I now absolve you of all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." As I write these lines, this thought alone gives me divine joy once again. What an incredible gift we, the successors of the apostles, received at our priestly ordination and which we have the grace to give back to so many broken hearts and crushed by life's trials and sufferings. True invention of God's fatherly heart to relieve and heal our poor hearts imprisoned in our human darkness.

Without breaking the confessional secret, God forbid, I would like to share with you some experiences that have led penitents to great spiritual changes in their lives.

In my first year as a priest, a young lady came to the confessional one day. She was pregnant and simply asked for a blessing for the health of her unborn child. I then made a beautiful prayer to wrap her and her child in peace and divine joy and ask God to preserve them from all harm. In conclusion, I begged for the grace of a healthy delivery, without too much pain, and for her child to be in perfect health.

When the blessing was over, she stood up gently and thanked me sincerely for the blessing. No doubt prompted by the Spirit, I immediately replied, "Forgive me, madam, but you have forgotten something very important!" "Really," she said. "And what have I forgotten?" "To make a good confession before returning home. Why not take advantage of your stay here to start afresh from this experience that you might not have the chance to do often at home?"

Immediately, the young woman burst out laughing. She exclaimed: "Oh, Father, you really have a good sense of humour!" I then asked her a second question, "And why do you consider me to have a good sense of humour, dear lady?" She simply replied with a serious expression, "But because I don't have any sins, Father." "Oh," I said. "And how unlucky you are, dear lady!" "Unlucky?" she said. "And why am I so unlucky?" "Because on the one hand you show me that you love Jesus by coming to ask Him for a blessing, and on the other hand you say that you have no sin." "And so," replied the young woman, "how do you relate the two?" "Well, answer this question after reflecting for a few moments: Why would the Son of God, whom you claim to truly love, have decided to descend from heaven to become one of us, he who has been sitting in the sublime glory of his Father since the beginning of time? Why would he have freely accepted to undergo fatigue, pain and suffering of his Passion which finally led him to a horrible and ignominious death on the Cross? Answer me."

The woman was speechless, looked down, without being able to say a word for countless seconds. Then, she looked up at me with the radiant expression of a child who had just discovered a precious treasure. She smiled and said, "To forgive my sins?" "Exactly!" I said to her "To forgive your sins, mine and those of all humanity, without exception. But unfortunately, because you have just confessed to me that you have no sins, you are saying to Jesus, and with the utmost seriousness, 'Lord, you know that I love you; but because I have no sin, I don't really need you! Instead, go and help or save those who have sin!'"

She suddenly looked sad and became silent. She suddenly realized the absurdity of her statement. At last, she realized that she had unconsciously turned her back on Jesus for many years in making such a foolish assertion. Then she asked me a question, "But

Father, could you then help me to see my sins? I don't want to be cut off from the saving love of Jesus!" "Certainly, dear friend," I replied. "Do you know God's commandments?" "The what?" she said to me. "God's commandments? Do we still have to believe in those ancient laws?" "Well, yes," I said to her. "These are perpetual words that God said in the Old Testament, words that will never be abolished. Listen carefully to what Jesus said when He came to earth, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets: I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill.'" (Matthew 5:17)

"Fulfilment," I explained to her, means that Jesus came to give us new strength to be able to follow the commandments with joy and serenity. This is the coming of his Spirit within us that gives us a real "boost" of divine love. Our human love then takes an extraordinary expansion and becomes capable of observing the commandments without them being a burden. Moreover, whoever lives and is nourished by this divine love through moments of prayer that he spends with God every day, I would say that he no longer even needs to observe the nine last commandments. Why is that? Because if you observe the first one with all your heart, your only desire will be to always remain in God and to be united to Him in everything. And the consequence of this all-divine relationship that the believer now has with Him in his heart will lead him to desire more and more to always want to please God, to want to do His will in everything. Exactly like true lovers who often show their love by wishing to please the other rather than seeking to do their own will."

Thus, I said to her, "Whoever loves God with all his heart and his neighbour as himself, would not want to commit murder, adultery, impurity, theft, lies, disrespect for his parents, etc. He who is truly imbued with the love of God will receive it as a new strength to overcome and resist all these temptations, and divine love will henceforth become his only guide and landmark for his moral and spiritual conduct."

After explaining these heavenly mysteries to her and naming the Ten Commandments one after the other, the woman candidly confessed to me, "Father, I have committed all these sins hundreds of times, except for killing someone! I have just felt for the first time that I really need to be forgiven by Jesus, and need to be saved by Him."

Because I had some free time, I decided to continue my teaching, because her heart was very open to my words. I then spoke to her about the seven deadly sins, explaining that they were not mortal sins, but that these sins were "important" as the etymology of the Latin word suggests, and that they should be avoided at all costs, for otherwise they could very well become sins that lead to the death of the soul by cutting us off from the sanctifying grace of God. For example, the anger that we tolerate without making any effort to overcome can lead us to hatred, which in turn can lead to the murder. The same applies to each of the other deadly sins.

And if we lose the sanctifying grace of God by tolerating our vices without wanting to recognize or change them, it is impossible to become saints. We are left on our own. Then I named the seven deadly sins to the young woman, one by one, showing her that these sins were not only limited to the material level, but also extended to the spiritual level: gluttony, for example, is not limited to food. It can also be represented as an unhealthy curiosity, a kind of spiritual gluttony that can cause a lot of trouble and problems later on.

After hearing my words, she shed a tear and said to me, "Father, I have committed all these faults a thousand times. Will you ask Jesus to forgive me for all these sins?" "Of course," I said. With great pleasure and with a joy difficult to explain in mere words, I gave her absolution for her sins. It seemed as though I felt the joy that God Himself felt in forgiving her for all her sins. This young woman left with such profound joy that to this day, I am convinced that she no longer felt the weight of the baby she was carrying in her womb. And because of this, I received a part of this divine joy in my heart.

How great is the sacrament of forgiveness! It conceals torrents of unsuspected graces, capable of transforming the human heart in just a few moments. The confessor must begin by listening to the person who comes before him; listening without judging him; listening patiently like a doctor, to give him exactly the right treatment that will heal and deeply relieve him. But once this stage is over, his final role will consist in symbolically opening wide his fatherly arms, his arms which will in reality become those of our heavenly Father who wishes to embrace his child at the very moment when the words of absolution are expressed. It seems to me that, at this very moment, the heavenly Father is again and again telling us, each time and with ever overflowing affection, the very words that Jesus once said to Simon the Pharisee about the sinner who had poured an expensive and fragrant perfume on his feet: "Your sins, your many sins, are forgiven, for you have shown much love." (Luke 7:47)