



Reconciliation: Gift and Sacrament



To the priests who share with me the ministry of shepherding God's people; to the deacons, my co-workers in building up the Body of Christ; to my brothers and sisters in consecrated life, living witnesses of the presence of the Kingdom of God among us; to all the faithful called to holiness, "grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1:2).

Reconciliation and the Ministry of Jesus

1 "The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News" (*Mk* 1:15). In Mark's gospel, these are the first words Jesus speaks in his public ministry. This is significant. The time of the Law is ending. The moment of grace has come. Jesus appears preaching in Galilee after the arrest of John the Baptist. He ends the centuries-long waiting for the coming of the Messiah. In the waters of the Jordan, he has already received the baptism of repentance at the hands of John the Baptist. Sinless, he joined himself to all sinners. He identified with those awaiting redemption. By his baptism, he made himself one with all of us estranged from God so that he could lead us back to the Father. As Irenaeus said, "He became what we are to make us what he is" (*Adversus Haereses*, Prologue to Book 5).

2 Jesus begins his preaching on a note familiar from the preaching of the Baptist (*Mt* 3:2). On the lips of John, the ancient prophets' call for conversion sounded with unusual clarity. John demanded the sinners to throw off their habits of sin, to bring forth righteous acts and to turn their hearts back to God. John demanded such conversion from all, the public sinner and the outwardly pious. Jesus repeats the same imperative, "Repent." But it is new. It is fresh. It is Spirit-filled. Unlike John, Jesus does not call for repentance as a preparation for the kingdom. No! Repentance is the effect of the kingdom already present.

3 Jesus' very first word is an announcement, not a demand. He inaugurates his ministry by proclaiming, "The time has come," literally, "the time has been filled up or completed." The years of promise and prophecy have come to an end. The appointed time, *kairos* — the decisive moment, the graced opportunity — is here. God is now acting. He is intervening in Jesus who ushers in the kingdom. The kingdom is coming as gift. And it evokes a response in all who receive it. Each individual is called to conversion and faith. That is why Jesus says, "Repent and believe the good news."

4 In Jesus' first proclamation, he lays the very foundation of the Christian life. First, the indicative, then the imperative. First, the fact. The Kingdom of God is here. God is bringing about the kingdom in the ministry of his Son. Then, the imperative to repent and believe. The gospel Jesus proclaims far surpasses the preaching of the Baptist. Jesus announces the kingdom is present. This is why conversion is possible. We can turn to God with our whole life because God is turning to us in Jesus. This is good news. God's grace in us grounds the possibility for our believing and turning from sin.

5 During his very brief public ministry, Jesus continually reaches out to sinners. In fact, two telling events frame his ministry. At the beginning, he meets Matthew seated in the customs house in Capernaum. This tax-collector is despised by his countrymen. Yet, Jesus calls him from the tax-collector's table to table-fellowship with him. In that personal exchange of friendship offered and received, Matthew comes to forgiveness. From the employ of the Roman emperor, he enters the service of genuine royalty. He follows Jesus with his life (cf *Mk* 2:13-17).

6 At the end of his public ministry, Jesus encounters another tax-collector. Jesus is passing through the oasis town of Jericho. He is on the Roman road at the point where it begins its ascent from the Judean desert to Jerusalem. He is just 23 miles away from his appointed destiny in the Holy City. The crowd presses in on him. The curious Zacchaeus scurries up a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus looks up at Zacchaeus, singles him out and invites himself to his house. Zacchaeus opens the door of his home to Jesus. And, in that offer of friendship and hospitality, Jesus welcomes him into the kingdom. Overjoyed



with the gift of salvation, the tax-collector repents of his past. Now a believer, he no longer takes from others, but freely gives even beyond what the law requires. (cf *Lk* 19:1-10).

7 When the enemies of Jesus complain that he is welcoming tax-collectors and sinners, Jesus announces in story form what he proclaimed in the first words of his ministry. He tells three parables that are rightly called, “the gospel within the gospel” (*Lk* 15). They teach the gift of grace being offered in Jesus. Jesus tells the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin to prepare for and climax in the most memorable parable ever told, the Prodigal Son. The most striking element in this entire story is the Father’s loving embrace of his sinful son: “... moved with pity, he ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly” (*Lk* 15:20-21). It is only after this welcome that the son confesses his sin. Here is the point of the parable and the preaching of Jesus. Grace precedes repentance. Confession of sin is the response of the heart that rests in the assurance of God’s love. As our Holy Father John Paul II has said, “Reconciliation is principally a gift of the heavenly Father” (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 5).



8 Again and again Jesus offers this gift to men and women. Jesus meets a woman at a well in Samaria. The midday sun is intense. Even more intense is the heated discussion between this woman and Jesus. The woman tells Jesus a half truth, “I have no husband” (*Jn* 4:17). Jesus takes it and turns it into a full confession of her sinful state. “You are right to say, ‘I have no husband’; for although you have had five, the one you have now is not your husband” (*Jn* 4:18). As the woman acknowledges the truth about herself, Jesus quenches her spiritual thirst with the gift of living water. He touches her heart with grace and she recognizes him as the Savior.

9 In forgiving sin, Jesus restores health as a sign of the grace he brings. To the paralytic carried by four men to him, Jesus first says, “My child, your sins are forgiven”; then he adds, “Pick up your stretcher and walk” (*Mk* 2:5.10). When he cures Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever, he rebukes the fever with the same word (*epitimaō* —“to rebuke,” “to command,” “to order”) he uses to cast out the demon from the possessed man in the synagogue of Capernaum (cf. *Lk* 4:35). By the power of his word, Jesus is breaking the devil’s hold on us. He has come to make us whole in body and spirit.

10 When Jesus’ ministry comes to an end, he offers the Father the perfect sacrifice of obedience on the cross. He continues to love in the face of hatred. He blesses when cursed. He forgives all of us who crucify him by our sins. Through his death and resurrection, the Father brings to completion his plan for our redemption. “He has taken us out of the power of darkness and created a place for us in the kingdom of the Son that he loves and in him, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins” (*Col* 1:13-14). When we fix our gaze on the crucified Jesus, we see reflected in his face the love of God who, “before the world was made, chose us ... in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence ...” (*Eph* 1:4). Nailed to the wood of the cross, Jesus imparts to all the gift of forgiveness, “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (*Lk* 23:34).

Reconciliation and the Ministry of the Church

11 The great gift of reconciliation that God accomplished in the Paschal Mystery, God has entrusted to the Church. As St. Paul says, “It is God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation” (*2 Cor* 5:19). “Everything that the Son of God did and taught for the reconciliation of the world we know not only from the history of his past actions, but we experience it also in the effectiveness of what he accomplishes in the present” (St. Leo the Great, *De Passione Domini*, 12).

12 The Church herself is the very sacrament of reconciliation. Her priests are the stewards of this great gift. On the night Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to the apostles. “He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven’” (*Jn* 20:22-23). Thus the Risen Lord hands on to the apostles and their successors on the power to forgive sins (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1444). In the 4th century, St. John Chrysostom recognized this gift given priests. He said, “Priests have received an authority which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels” (*The Priesthood*, 3:5).

13 “Over the centuries, the concrete form in which the Church has exercised this power received from the Lord has varied considerably” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1447). The present form of the sacrament of Penance traces its origins to the work of Irish missionaries in the 7th century. Before then, it was the custom to receive this sacrament just once in a lifetime and only after rigorous, public penance for the most serious sins such as idolatry, murder and adultery. The missionaries introduced the private practice of penance and opened the way for a more frequent use of this sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. We are now in a privileged moment of the Church’s life when we can avail ourselves of the grace of this sacrament and grow in our relationship with the Lord.

14 Today the Church sadly suffers not only a continued separation from other Christian communities but a painful division even among her own members (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 2). Ordained and non-ordained are not always united in vital mat-

ters of *doxa* and *praxis* (“doctrine” and “discipline”). But Christ wills his Church to be one. In his priestly prayer at the Last Supper, he prays, “Consecrate them in truth ... May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (*Jn* 17:17-21).

15 To this end, the Second Vatican Council taught that “all the bishops, in fact, have the obligation to foster and safeguard the unity of the faith and to uphold the discipline which is common to the whole Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). In light of this sacred trust handed to me as bishop of the Church of Paterson, I am offering these reflections on the origins of the sacrament of Reconciliation and on the present discipline of the Church which offers this great gift to us. I call all members of this particular Church to a greater unity with the whole Church committed to the pastoral ministry of our Holy Father John Paul II. I earnestly want all the faithful to understand more fully the gift given us in the sacrament of Penance as celebrated in the Church today. I hope that a deeper appreciation of this great gift leads all of us to a more frequent reception of this sacrament so that the Church of Paterson grows in holiness and good works.

Reconciliation and the Church's Present Practice

16 The celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation has developed since the Second Vatican Council. In the Church's present discipline, there are three ways of celebrating the sacrament. The ordinary form of reconciliation is the individual confessing before a priest and receiving absolution. At times, there are communal celebrations of reconciliation that include individual confession and individual absolution. Such celebrations help us realize the social effects of our sins as well as the sacrament's power to restore us to a greater unity within the Body of Christ. In each of these two ways of celebrating the sacrament, the penitent is given the opportunity to enter into a very personal, intimate moment of dialogue with the Lord.

17 There has come into practice in some places the custom of holding communal penance celebrations at which general absolution is granted without the individual confession of the penitent before the priest. This particular form of the sacrament is allowed in law under two precise conditions (Canon 961§ 1 of the *Code of Canon Law*). First, *the danger of death is imminent* and there is no time for individual confessions. Second, *a grave necessity exists* because individuals would be deprived of the sacrament for a long time. Lest there be confusion on such an important matter, our Holy Father clarified the law. He said, “it is never just a question of whether individuals can have their confession heard ‘in an appropriate way’ and ‘within an appropriate time’ because of the shortage of priests; this must be combined with the fact that the penitents would otherwise be forced to remain deprived of sacramental grace ‘for a long time’ through no fault of their own” (*Misericordia Dei*, 2, b). What the Holy Father says in this apostolic letter has the force of law for the Church (Canon 16).

18 The present discipline of the Church is meant to reawaken a discovery of the richness of this sacrament. In the area where we live, there are sufficient priests to accommodate the needs of the faithful. In those parishes where it is pastorally beneficial to hold communal celebrations of the sacrament, a wise planning of those celebrations can provide for individual confession and individual absolution. It is not left to the decision of the local pastor or the individual priest to grant general absolution. This is reserved solely to the bishop in light of his pastoral office (Canon 961§ 2). At times, a communal penance service takes place in which the number of faithful is so great that the priests in attendance cannot hear individual confessions in a reasonable time. ***Even in such a case, it is not permitted to grant general absolution in our diocese.*** The faithful can avail themselves of individual confession at regularly scheduled times in all our parishes. They also have the opportunity to call in advance to make an appointment with a priest for confession at a time convenient for them.

Reconciliation and the Pastoral Ministry

19 In every generation, the Church needs to adjust her pastoral outreach to meet the ever changing lifestyle of the faithful. Saturday afternoon confessions are no longer the only way to make available the sacrament of Penance. When the faithful come for marriage instruction, when they are preparing their children for Baptism, Penance, Eucharist, or Confirmation, these moments can become moments of grace by inviting them to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation. Parish missions in Advent and Lent and youth gatherings provide other occasions to invite people to make a good confession. Scheduling times for confessions on weekday evenings or even before the celebration of Mass promotes a more frequent use of the sacrament. And there are times such as on Good Friday and Holy Saturday when many long to receive the sacraments. At these moments, dedicated and zealous priests can make themselves available for individual confession for the good of the faithful.

20 For priests working alone and so often burdened by administration, the celebration of this sacrament can be an impetus to greater zeal as they truly become “dispensers of the mysteries of God” (*1 Cor* 4:1). Priests who themselves frequent the sacrament of Penance prepare themselves to be the best confessors, gentle and understanding of our fallen human nature. Parish priests can always look to St. John Marie Vianney. He was sent to Ars, a small, out of the way town in 19th century France. He spent 16 hours a day in the summer and 12 hours a day in the winter hearing confessions. So great was the effect of his ministry that the French rail system had to open a special office in Lyons to book tickets to Ars. As the Curé d'Ars himself once said to a priest distraught on the condition of his own parish, “Ars is no longer Ars.” Because of the wise use of confession, the people had changed for the better.

Reconciliation and the Penitent



21 Some question whether individual confession of sin is required for forgiveness. The Church teaches that acts of charity and self-denial, fasting and prayer, sharing in the Eucharist take away venial sins. Even so, the confession of venial sins not only makes us aware of sin in our lives but also makes us more receptive to the healing touch of Christ. For the forgiveness of mortal sins that result in the loss of sanctifying grace, the integral confession of those sins before a priest is required (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1456).

22 In confessing before the priest, the penitent truly stands before the Lord. Human and weak like every other member of the Church, the priest, nonetheless, stands before the faith community *in persona Christi*. By virtue of his sacred ordination, the priest is *alter Christus*. As such, the priest is called to be the face of the compassion of Christ. The penitent stands alone before the priest. In this encounter, the misery of the sinner meets the mercy of the Savior. Through the ministry of the priest, the penitent is restored to ecclesial communion and reconciled to God.

23 In each absolution given to an individual, there is repeated something that is a consistent part of God's granting forgiveness. Cain kills Abel. God speaks directly to Cain. He offers him protection as a sign of mercy and forgiveness (*Gen* 4:15-16). David commits adultery with Bathsheba. Then, to cover his sin, he murders her husband. God speaks directly to David through the prophet Nathan. When David acknowledges his crimes as sins against the Lord, God forgives him (*2 Sam* 12:1-15). To the Samaritan woman and the woman caught in adultery, to the paralytic and the good thief on Calvary, to each who stands before him contrite and humble apart from the many, Jesus gives the gift of divine forgiveness. In the ministry of Jesus, each time Jesus grants forgiveness, it is always to an individual.

24 In our day, there has been a lessening of the true understanding of sin as an offense against God and a flight from personal responsibility for one's actions. The examination of conscience we make before going to confession makes us face the truth about ourselves. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God (cf *Rm* 3:23-26). "If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth; but if we acknowledge our sins, then God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and purify us from everything that is wrong" (*1 Jn* 1:8-9). In fact, our very actions of contrition and penance, reparation and firm purpose of amendment are the working of God drawing us ever closer to himself. Even our willingness to do good is already God's doing (cf *Ph* 2:13).

25 "The time has come ... Repent and believe the Good News" (*Mk* 1:15.)

Jesus is speaking these words to each of us. He addresses us with the present imperative because our turning from sin and turning to God, our repentance and our faith, take place in the present and at every moment of our life. By regular, and even frequent, use of confession, our conversion deepens and our relationship with God becomes more intimate. How blessed we are to have the sacrament of Penance so available to us in our walk with God. When we choose to celebrate this sacrament, we choose to stand in honesty and truth before our all-merciful God. We enter the quiet sanctity of the sacrament of Reconciliation. We unburden our sins even as we are held in the loving embrace of God. And, by the power of the Holy Spirit working in the Church, we know the gift of grace that makes us God's children in Christ.

Through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Lord, may we grow in our appreciation and use of the sacrament of Penance so that we "draw ... joyfully from the springs of salvation" (*Is* 12:3).

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