



“Be Reconciled To God”

PASTORAL LETTER ON THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

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You’ve probably noticed: there’s a campaign going on. I’m running it together with the priests of the Diocese. We’re not trying to win your vote or to get you to buy anything. All we want to do is make available the mercy, peace, and joy the Lord gives us in the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

Nor did we hire an advertising agency to come up with a campaign slogan. Instead, we turned to St. Paul – because no one got the word out about Christ and His reconciling love better than he did. “Be reconciled to God!” Paul urges (II Corinthians 5:20). He wrote those words nearly 2,000 years ago. They are as true today as when he first penned them.

Think about your own experience. And think about the experience of family members, friends, and co-workers.

During the past year, we witnessed a near collapse of the economy. Many people lost their jobs and security. Many more lost money and possessions. And the year ahead looks daunting. For many people the foundation of their lives seemed to crumble. “The rules no longer work,” one man told me, “and I don’t know where to turn.” Some find themselves so far out on a financial limb they fear that they won’t scramble back to safety. They worry about their families and loved ones. Sadly, a few people have even decided that life without money and the things money buys is not worth living.

Deep down we all know that building our lives on what we own or think we own is a mistake. We are made for love. Without love, our lives make no sense. We have to find it somewhere, somehow. And we have to love in return, somewhere, somehow.

Or consider those who go about with a heavy burden of guilt in their hearts. Some try to tell us that religion invented guilt. That’s like saying the medical profession invented pain. Normally, guilt is a sign of an ailment in our heart of hearts. It’s what we should feel when we are on the outs with God and others, including spouses, friends, co-workers, and, even, our enemies. We should also experience guilt when we do things we know are wrong – no matter how clever our excuses might be. Try as we might, we can’t quite stop our minds and hearts from telling us that what the 10 Commandments teach us about right and wrong is true. After all, the Commandments are like the owner’s manual for our humanity – collectively and individually. More needs to be said about this.

But for now, let’s remember that the Sacrament of Penance is more than a painkiller for guilt. It addresses not

just the symptoms but, indeed, the underlying spiritual disease.

Today many people feel they are “out on a limb” not only financially but also personally, especially with regard to their Church. When they stopped practicing their faith, for whatever reason, they thought they’d never miss it. But it usually doesn’t work out that way. Because the heart of our faith is God’s forgiving, reconciling love. The Word proclaims that love. The Sacraments immerse us in that love. The community of believers supports us in shaping our lives according to it. It’s harder than we think to live without God’s love made tangible.

To some extent, all of us are “out on a limb,” even if we are striving to live our faith and grow in holiness. As the great Saints teach us, the more we grow in holiness, the more we sense our need for reconciliation. The truth is, we all stand in need of reconciliation with God and one

another. “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God,” St. Paul reminds us (Romans 3:23). St. John also tells us, “If we say, ‘we are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

So how does a “Lenten Confession Campaign” help? Why can’t we just trickle back to the Sacrament of Penance individually when we’re good and ready? Let’s begin with the simple fact that it’s the Sacrament of mercy, God’s mercy. That’s how we always experience God’s love – as mercy. God’s mercy isn’t a patronizing pat on the head. It is God’s gentle love that cleanses us from sin and enables us to set things right in our lives and in our relationships with others. The “others” include God Himself, fellow members of the



The Diocese of Bridgeport has been granted permission to use this painting throughout the Lenten Confession Campaign. This masterpiece by Rembrandt is based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The old man embraces and forgives his son, just as God forgives all those who repent through the Sacrament of Penance.

Church, and, indeed, everyone else whom we meet in the journey of life. This requires that we turn away from sinful, self-centered behavior which disrupts peace in our hearts and in the hearts of many others – more than we know.

But why have a Campaign? Because the Lord Jesus figured us out a long time ago. He knows it's easier for us to do this together than on our own. And the goal of this Sacrament of mercy isn't merely to feel good about oneself but, rather, to reestablish bonds of love and peace with God and one another as members of Christ's Body, the Church. For many, the Sacrament of Penance is the reentry point to the active practice of their faith. So it makes good sense to do this not as lone rangers but as members of the Lord's family of faith. We all need it. And there's strength in numbers.

That is why the priests of the Diocese of Bridgeport are more than ever at your service during Lent 2009. Every Tuesday in Lent from 7 until 9 p.m., in every parish of the Diocese, priests will be available to hear Confessions. Like St. Paul, they are there for you, carrying out "the ministry of reconciliation" (II Corinthians 5:18). We who are your priests consider it a privilege to be instruments of God's mercy in your lives. And we want, more than anything else, to renew the bonds of peace which sin disrupts. I am very grateful to my brother priests for their extraordinary generosity in making the Sacrament of Penance so abundantly available.

Let me speak personally about this. As priest and bishop, I am both confessor and penitent. To be a confessor is a humbling joyful experience. Unworthy as I am, I rejoice to be an effective instrument of the Lord's mercy. I say this because I also know how much I need the mercy I share with others. In fact, I have found that I can't really sustain my ministry without the Sacrament of Penance. I try to receive this Sacrament about twice a month – sometimes in the context of spiritual direction and, at other times, when I happen to see a light on outside a confessional. It makes me happy to see that light because I know it's burning for me. That little light hints at the radiant light of God's mercy available within. So I'm not asking you to do what I don't do myself. Instead, I'm inviting you to join me in the joy of being reconciled.

I'd also like to address a question many people have. Why confess to a priest? Isn't it enough to tell God we're sorry? Doesn't he know what we're thinking anyway? Of course, He does. In fact, God knows us better than we know ourselves. And that's just the point. When we confess, we grow in self knowledge. In a manner that utterly respects our dignity and privacy, the Sacrament of Penance allows the air and sunshine of God's mercy to make living contact with the sins we verbalize. Keeping our sins buried in our hearts only causes them to fester. At some point in our lives, we'll feel the need to confess them to someone. Building on this very human tendency, the Sacrament of Penance directs

us to confess them to a priest. Since he is ordained to act in the very Person of Christ, the priest can offer us sound guidance and forgiveness. For we priests, it is humbling to serve you in this way. It also renews in us the deepest ideals of our priesthood.

When I was a young priest, I wrote a doctoral dissertation on this very subject. It's called "Confession to God Alone in the Early Middle Ages." I won't bore you with the details, but I will tell you one of the conclusions of my research: confession of sin to a bishop or priest has always been a part of the Church's sacramental practice. Confession to God alone occurred when a penitent was prevented from receiving the sacrament, for whatever reason. Thank God, we're not in that situation.

And what about the "mechanics" of "going to confession"? If it's been a long time, you might not remember how to participate in this sacrament. That's why I asked the Knights of Columbus to help us. They have generously given the Diocese of Bridgeport 100,000 guides to the Sacrament of Penance which will be distributed in all parishes. These handy guides provide an examination of conscience and review step-by-step how to go to Confession. They aim to take away the mysteriousness of going to Confession without sacrificing any of its mystery. When we are truly confronted with God's reconciling love, we are all lost in wonder. We are in the presence of the greatest of all mysteries!

I'd like to add one more thing before concluding. It's about our young people. Last year, the Diocese mounted a successful campaign to attract teens and young people back to the Sacrament of Penance. I'm glad we did this and I hope that many young people will again make use of this Sacrament during the coming weeks of Lent. But the troubling fact remains that many of our young people seldom receive this Sacrament. Many make "First Penance" prior to First Communion and then don't receive the Sacrament of Penance again until they are being prepared for Confirmation. This is a serious error. Young people today face severe moral challenges, perhaps more than any previous generation. Yet, for most of them, the very Sacrament they need to overcome those challenges seems to be closed off. Parents who regularly receive the Sacrament of Penance and attend Mass each week without fail are the key to helping our young people to be formed in God's mercy. Let's be sure not to fail them.

So that's the sum and substance of our Penance Campaign. Once again I thank my brother priests for making it possible. I thank the Knights of Columbus not only for the guides but also for making possible the ads you've seen on billboards, in train stations, on buses, on TV and radio, and the Internet. But the best advertisement of all is a heart reconciled to God! That speaks volumes!

May you have a blessed Lent!