

God's Gift of Forgiveness

A Pastoral Exhortation on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

"Peace be with you!" With these words, the Risen Lord greeted his frightened Apostles in the Upper Room on the day of his Resurrection. They were troubled, anxious, and fearful—much like each one of us at some point in our lives. Christ repeated the words, "Peace be with you." But then he added, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them" (Jn 20:19-23).

What an extraordinary gift! The Risen Lord was proclaiming that all the suffering he had just endured was in order to make available the gifts of salvation and forgiveness. He wanted the Apostles to receive these gifts. He wanted them to become apostles of this forgiveness to others.

In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, also called confession, we meet the Lord, who wants to grant forgiveness and the grace to live a renewed life in him. In this sacrament, he prepares us to receive him free from serious sin, with a lively faith, earnest hope, and sacrificial love in the Eucharist. The Church sees confession as so important that she requires that every Catholic go at least once a year.¹ The Church also encourages frequent confession in order to grow closer to Christ Jesus and his Body, the Church. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we seek forgiveness and repentance, let go of patterns

of sin, grow in the life of virtue, and witness to a joyful conversion. Since the graces of the sacrament are so similar to the purpose of the New Evangelization, Pope Benedict XVI has said, "The New Evangelization . . . begins in the confessional!"²

We bishops and priests are eager to help you if you experience difficulty, hesitation, or uncertainty about approaching the Lord in this sacrament. If you have not received this healing sacrament in a long time, we are ready to



welcome you. We, whom Christ has ordained to minister this forgiveness in his name, are also approaching this sacrament, as both penitents and ministers, throughout our lives and at this special moment of grace during Lent. We want to offer ourselves to you as forgiven sinners seeking to serve in the Lord's name.

During Lent—in addition to the various penitential services during which individual confession takes place—we bishops and priests will be making ourselves available often for the individual celebration of this sacrament. We pray that through the work of the Holy Spirit, all Catholics—clergy and laity—will respond to the call of the New Evangelization to encounter Christ in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Come to the Lord and experience the extraordinary grace of his forgiveness!

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1457-1458.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Annual Course on the Internal Forum Organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120309_penitenzieria-apostolica_en.html.

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