

Day 32

# PILGRIMAGE OF GRACE

RECONCILIATION



## From Reconciliation and Penance by St. Pope John Paul II

### "Whose Sins You Shall Forgive"

29. The books of the Old and New Testament provide us with the first and fundamental fact concerning the Lord's mercy and forgiveness. In the Psalms and in the preaching of the prophets, the name merciful is perhaps the one most often given to the Lord, in contrast to the persistent cliché whereby the God of the Old Testament is presented above all as severe and vengeful. Thus in the Psalms there is a long sapiential passage drawing from the Exodus tradition, which recalls God's kindly action in the midst of his people. This action, though represented in an anthropomorphic way, is perhaps one of the most eloquent Old Testament proclamations of the divine mercy. Suffice it to quote the verse: "Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often, and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again."(157)

In the fullness of time the Son of God, coming as the lamb who takes away and bears upon himself the sin of the world appears as the one who has the power both to judge(159) and to forgive sins,(160) and who has come not to condemn but to forgive and save.(161)

Now this power to "forgive sins" Jesus confers through the Holy Spirit upon ordinary men, themselves subject to the snare of sin, namely his apostles: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."(162) This is one of the most awe-inspiring innovations of the Gospel! He confers this power on the apostles also as something which they can transmit-as the church has understood it from the beginning-to their successors, charged by the same apostles with the mission and responsibility of continuing their work as proclaimers of the Gospel and ministers of Christ's redemptive work.

Here there is seen in all its grandeur the figure of the minister of the sacrament of penance who by very ancient custom is called the confessor.

Just as at the altar where he celebrates the eucharist and just as in each one of the sacraments, so the priest, as the minister of penance, acts "in persona Christi" The Christ whom he makes present and who accomplishes the mystery of the forgiveness of sins is the Christ who appears as the brother of man,(163) the merciful high priest, faithful and compassionate,(164) the shepherd intent on finding the lost sheep,(165) the physician who heals and comforts,(166) the one master who teaches the truth and reveals the ways of God,(167) the judge of the living and the dead,(168) who judges according to the truth and not according to appearances.(169)

This is undoubtedly the most difficult and sensitive, the most exhausting and demanding ministry of the priest, but also one of the most beautiful and consoling. Precisely for this reason and with awareness also of the strong recommendation of the synod, I will never grow weary of exhorting my brothers, the bishops and priests, to the faithful and diligent performance of ministry.(170) Before the consciences of the faithful, who open up to him with a mixture of fear and trust, the confessor is called to a lofty task which is one of service and penance and human reconciliation. It is a task of learning the weaknesses and falls of those faithful people, assessing their desire for renewal and their efforts to achieve it, discerning the action of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, imparting to them a forgiveness which God alone can grant, "celebrating" their reconciliation with the Father, portrayed in the parable of the prodigal son, reinstating these redeemed sinners in the ecclesial community with their brothers and sisters, and paternally admonishing these penitents with a firm, encouraging and friendly "Do not sin again."(171)

For the effective performance of this ministry, the confessor must necessarily have human qualities of prudence, discretion, discernment and a firmness tempered by gentleness and kindness. He must likewise have a serious and careful preparation, not fragmentary but complete and harmonious, in the different branches of theology, pedagogy and psychology, in the methodology of dialogue and above all in a living and communicable knowledge of the word of God. But it is even more necessary that he should live an intense and genuine spiritual life. In order to lead others along the path of Christian perfection the minister of penance himself must first travel this path. More by actions than by long speeches he must give proof of real experience of lived prayer, the practice of the theological and moral virtues of the Gospel, faithful obedience to the will of God, love of the church and docility to her magisterium.

All this fund of human gifts, Christian virtues and pastoral capabilities has to be worked for and is only acquired with effort. Every priest must be trained for the ministry of sacramental penance from his years in the seminary, not only through the study of dogmatic, moral, spiritual and pastoral theology (which are simply parts of a whole), but also through the study of the human sciences, training in dialogue and especially in how to deal with people in the pastoral context. He must then be guided and looked after in his first activities. He must always ensure his own improvement and updating by means of permanent study. What a wealth of grace, true life and spiritual radiation would be poured out on the church if every priest were careful never to miss through negligence or various excuses the appointment with the faithful in the confessional and if he were even more careful never to go to it unprepared or lacking the necessary human qualities and spiritual and pastoral preparation!

In this regard I cannot but recall with devout admiration those extraordinary apostles of the confessional such as St. John Nepomucene, St. John Vianney, St. Joseph Cafasso and St. Leopold of Castelnuovo, to mention only the best-known confessors whom the church has added to the list of her saints. But I also wish to pay homage to the innumerable host of holy and almost always anonymous confessors to whom is owed the salvation of so many souls who have been helped by them in conversion, in the struggle against sin and temptation, in spiritual progress and, in a word, in achieving holiness. I do not hesitate to say that even the great canonized saints are generally the fruit of those confessionals, and not only the saints but also the spiritual patrimony of the church and the flowering of a civilization permeated with the Christian spirit! Praise then to this silent army of our brothers who have served well and serve each day the cause of reconciliation through the ministry of sacramental penance!

### **The Sacrament of Forgiveness**

30. From the revelation of the value of this ministry and power to forgive sins, conferred by Christ on the apostles and their successors, there developed in the church an awareness of the sign of forgiveness, conferred through the sacrament of penance. It is the certainty that the Lord Jesus himself instituted and entrusted to the church-as a gift of his goodness and loving kindness(172) to be offered to all-a special sacrament for the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism.

The practice of this sacrament, as regards its celebration and form, has undergone a long process of development as is attested to by the most ancient sacramentaries, the documents of councils and episcopal synods, the preaching of the fathers and the

teaching of the doctors of the church. But with regard to the substance of the sacrament there has always remained firm and unchanged in the consciousness of the church the certainty that, by the will of Christ, forgiveness is offered to each individual by means of sacramental absolution given by the ministers of penance. It is a certainty reaffirmed with particular vigor both by the Council of Trent(173) and by the Second Vatican Council: "Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offenses committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example and by prayer works for their conversion."(174) And as an essential element of faith concerning the value and purpose of penance it must be reaffirmed that our savior Jesus Christ instituted in his church the sacrament of penance so that the faithful who have fallen into sin after baptism might receive grace and be reconciled with God (175)

The church's faith in this sacrament involves certain other fundamental truths which cannot be disregarded. The sacramental rite of penance, in its evolution and variation of actual forms, has always preserved and highlighted these truths. When it recommended a reform of this rite, the Second Vatican Council intended to ensure that it would express these truths even more clearly,(176) and this has come about with the new Rite of Penance.(177) For the latter has made its own the whole of the teaching brought together by the Council of Trent, transferring it from its particular historical context (that of a resolute effort to clarify doctrine in the face of the serious deviations from the church's genuine teaching), in order to translate it faithfully into terms more in keeping with the context of our own time.

### **Some Fundamental Convictions**

The truths mentioned above, powerfully and clearly confirmed by the synod and contained in the propositions, can be summarized in the following convictions of faith, to which are connected all the other affirmations of the Catholic doctrine on the sacrament of penance.

**I.** The first conviction is that for a Christian the sacrament of penance is the primary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sin committed after baptism. Certainly the Savior and his salvific action are not so bound to a sacramental sign as to be unable in any period or area of the history of salvation to work outside and above the sacraments. But in the school of faith we learn that the same Savior desired and provided that the simple and precious sacraments of faith would ordinarily be the effective means through which his redemptive power passes and

operates. It would therefore be foolish, as well as presumptuous, to wish arbitrarily to disregard the means of grace and salvation which the Lord has provided and, in the specific case, to claim to receive forgiveness while doing without the sacrament which was instituted by Christ precisely for forgiveness. The renewal of the rites carried out after the council does not sanction any illusion or alteration in this direction. According to the church's intention, it was and is meant to stir up in each one of us a new impulse toward the renewal of our interior attitude; toward a deeper understanding of the nature of the sacrament of penance; toward a reception of the sacrament which is more filled with faith, not anxious but trusting; toward a more frequent celebration of the sacrament which is seen to be completely filled with the Lord's merciful love.

**II.** The second conviction concerns the function of the sacrament of penance for those who have recourse to it. According to the most ancient traditional idea, the sacrament is a kind of judicial action; but this takes place before a tribunal of mercy rather than of strict and rigorous justice, which is comparable to human tribunals only by analogy namely insofar as sinners reveal their sins and their condition as creatures subject to sin; they commit themselves to renouncing and combating sin; accept the punishment (sacramental penance) which the confessor imposes on them and receive absolution from him.

But as it reflects on the function of this sacrament, the church's consciousness discerns in it, over and above the character of judgment in the sense just mentioned, a healing of a medicinal character. And this is linked to the fact that the Gospel frequently presents Christ as healer,(179) while his redemptive work is often called, from Christian antiquity, *medicina salutis*. "I wish to heal, not accuse," St. Augustine said, referring to the exercise of the pastoral activity regarding penance,(180) and it is thanks to the medicine of confession that the experience of sin does not degenerate into despair.(181) The Rite of Penance alludes to this healing aspect of the sacrament,(182) to which modern man is perhaps more sensitive, seeing as he does in sin the element of error but even more the element of weakness and human frailty.

Whether as a tribunal of mercy or a place of spiritual healing, under both aspects the sacrament requires a knowledge of the sinner's heart in order to be able to judge and absolve, to cure and heal. Precisely for this reason the sacrament involves on the part of the penitent a sincere and complete confession of sins. This therefore has a *raison d'être* not only inspired by ascetical purposes (as an exercise of humility and mortification), but one that is inherent in the very nature of the sacrament.

**III.** The third conviction, which is one that I wish to emphasize, concerns the realities or parts which make up the sacramental sign of forgiveness and reconciliation. Some of these realities are acts of the penitent, of varying importance but each indispensable either for the validity, the completeness or the fruitfulness of the sign.

First of all, an indispensable condition is the rectitude and clarity of the penitent's conscience. People cannot come to true and genuine repentance until they realize that sin is contrary to the ethical norm written in their inmost being;(183) until they admit that they have had a personal and responsible experience of this contrast; until they say not only that "sin exists" but also "I have sinned"; until they admit that sin has introduced a division into their consciences which then pervades their whole being and separates them from God and from their brothers and sisters. The sacramental sign of this clarity of conscience is the act traditionally called the examination of conscience, an act that must never be one of anxious psychological introspection, but a sincere and calm comparison with the interior moral law, with the evangelical norms proposed by the church, with Jesus Christ himself, who is our teacher and model of life, and with the heavenly Father, who calls us to goodness and perfection.(184)

But the essential act of penance, on the part of the penitent, is contrition, a clear and decisive rejection of the sin committed, together with a resolution not to commit it again,(185) out of the love which one has for God and which is reborn with repentance. Understood in this way, contrition is therefore the beginning and the heart of conversion, of that evangelical metanoia which brings the person back to God like the prodigal son returning to his father, and which has in the sacrament of penance its visible sign and which perfects attrition. Hence "upon this contrition of heart depends the truth of penance."(186)

While reiterating everything that the church, inspired by God's word, teaches about contrition, I particularly wish to emphasize here just one aspect of this doctrine. It is one that should be better known and considered. Conversion and contrition are often considered under the aspect of the undeniable demands which they involve and under the aspect of the mortification which they impose for the purpose of bringing about a radical change of life. But we all too well to recall and emphasize the fact that contrition and conversion are even more a drawing near to the holiness of God, a rediscovery of one's true identity, which has been upset and disturbed by sin, a liberation in the very depth of self and thus a regaining of lost joy, the joy of being saved,(187) which the majority of people in our time are no longer capable of experiencing.

We therefore understand why, from the earliest Christian times, in line with the apostles and with Christ, the church has included in the sacramental sign of penance the confession of sins. This latter takes on such importance that for centuries the usual name of the sacrament has been and still is that of confession. The confession of sins is required, first of all, because the sinner must be known by the person who in the sacrament exercises the role of judge. He has to evaluate both the seriousness of the sins and the repentance of the penitent; he also exercises the role of the healer and must acquaint himself with the condition of the sick person in order to treat and heal him. But the individual confession also has the value of a sign: a sign of the meeting of the sinner with the mediation of the church in the person of the minister, a sign of the person's revealing of self as a sinner in the sight of God and the church, of facing his own sinful condition in the eyes of God. The confession of sins therefore cannot be reduced to a mere attempt at psychological self-liberation even though it corresponds to that legitimate and natural need, inherent in the human heart, to open oneself to another. It is a liturgical act, solemn in its dramatic nature, yet humble and sober in the grandeur of its meaning. It is the act of the prodigal son who returns to his Father and is welcomed by him with the kiss of peace. It is an act of honesty and courage. It is an act of entrusting oneself, beyond sin, to the mercy that forgives. (188) Thus we understand why the confession of sins must ordinarily be individual not collective, just as sin is a deeply personal matter. But at the same time this confession in a way forces sin out of the secret of the heart and thus out of the area of pure individuality, emphasizing its social character as well, for through the minister of penance it is the ecclesial community, which has been wounded by sin, that welcomes anew the repentant and forgiven sinner.

The other essential stage of the sacrament of penance this time along to the confessor as judge and healer, a figure of God the Father welcoming and forgiving the one who returns: This is the absolution. The words which express it and the gestures that accompany it in the old and in the new Rite of Penance are significantly simple in their grandeur. The sacramental formula "I absolve you" and the imposition of the hand and the Sign of the Cross made over the penitent show that at this moment the contrite and converted sinner comes into contact with the power and mercy of God. It is the moment at which, in response to the penitent, the Trinity becomes present in order to blot out sin and restore innocence. And the saving power of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus is also imparted to the penitent as the "mercy stronger than sin and offense," as I defined it in my encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*. God is always the one who is principally offended by sin—"Tibi soli peccavi!"—and God alone can forgive. Hence the absolution that the priest, the minister of forgiveness, though himself a sinner, grants to the penitent is the effective sign of the intervention

of the Father in every absolution and the sign of the "resurrection" from "spiritual death" which is renewed each time that the sacrament of penance is administered. Only faith can give us certainty that at that moment every sin is forgiven and blotted out by the mysterious intervention of the Savior.

Satisfaction is the final act which crowns the sacramental sign of penance. In some countries the act which the forgiven and absolved penitent agrees to perform after receiving absolution is called precisely the penance. What is the meaning of this satisfaction that one makes or the penance that one performs? Certainly it is not a price that one pays for the sin absolved and for the forgiveness obtained: No human price can match what is obtained, which is the fruit of Christ's precious blood. Acts of satisfaction-which, while remaining simple and humble, should be made to express more clearly all that they signify-mean a number of valuable things: They are the sign of the personal commitment that the Christian has made to God in the sacrament to begin a new life (and therefore they should not be reduced to mere formulas to be recited, but should consist of acts of worship, charity, mercy or reparation). They include the idea that the pardoned sinner is able to join his own physical and spiritual mortification-which has been sought after or at least accepted-to the passion of Jesus, who has obtained the forgiveness for him. They remind us that even after absolution there remains in the Christian a dark area due to the wound of sin, to the imperfection of love in repentance, to the weakening of the spiritual faculties. It is an area in which there still operates an infectious source of sin which must always be fought with mortification and penance. This is the meaning of the humble but sincere act of satisfaction.(189)

**IV.** There remains to be made a brief mention of other important convictions about the sacrament of penance.

First of all, it must be emphasized that nothing is more personal and intimate than this sacrament, in which the sinner stands alone before God with his sin, repentance and trust. No one can repent in his place or ask forgiveness in his name. There is a certain solitude of the sinner in his sin, and this can be seen dramatically represented in Cain with sin "crouching at his door," as the Book of Genesis says so effectively, and with the distinctive mark on his forehead;(190) in David, admonished by the prophet Nathan;(191) or in the prodigal son when he realizes the condition to which he has reduced himself by staying away from his father and decides to return to him.(192) Everything takes place between the individual alone and God. But at the same time one cannot deny the social nature of this sacrament, in which the whole church-militant, suffering and glorious in heaven- comes to the aid of the penitent



and welcomes him again into her bosom, especially as it was the whole church which had been offended and wounded by his sin. As the minister of penance, the priest by virtue of his sacred office appears as the witness and representative of this ecclesial nature of the sacrament. The individual nature and ecclesial nature are two complementary aspects of the sacrament which the progressive reform of the Rite of Penance, especially that contained in the *Ordo Paenitentiae* promulgated by Paul VI, has sought to emphasize and to make more meaningful in its celebration.

V. Second, it must be emphasized that the most precious result of the forgiveness obtained in the sacrament of penance consists in reconciliation with God, which takes place in the inmost heart of the son who was lost and found again, which every penitent is. But it has to be added that this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations which repair the breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his own true identity. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way attacked and wounded. He is reconciled with the church. He is reconciled with all creation.

As a result of an awareness of this, at the end of the celebration there arises in the penitent a sense of gratitude to God for the gift of divine mercy received, and the church invites the penitent to have this sense of gratitude.

Every confessional is a special and blessed place from which, with divisions wiped away, there is born new and uncontaminated a reconciled individual—a reconciled world!

**VI.** Last, I particularly wish to speak of one final consideration, one which concerns all of us priests, who are the ministers of the sacrament of penance.(193) The priest's celebration of the eucharist and administration of the other sacraments, his pastoral zeal, his relationship with the faithful his communion with his brother priests, his collaboration with his bishop, his life of prayer—in a word, the whole of his priestly existence, suffers an inexorable decline if by negligence or for some other reason he fails to receive the sacrament of penance at regular intervals and in a spirit of genuine faith and devotion. If a priest were no longer to go to confession or properly confess his sins, his priestly being and his priestly action would feel its effects very soon and this would also be noticed by the community of which he was the pastor.

But I also add that even in order to be a good and effective minister of penance the priest needs to have recourse to the source of grace and holiness present in this sacrament We priests, on the basis of our personal experience, can certainly say that

the more careful we are to receive the sacrament of penance and to approach it frequently and with good dispositions, the better we fulfill our own ministry as confessors and ensure that our penitents benefit from it. And on the other hand, this ministry would lose much of its effectiveness if in some way we were to stop being good penitents. Such is the internal logic of this great sacrament. It invites all of us priests of Christ to pay renewed attention to our personal confession.

Personal experience in its turn becomes and must become today an incentive for the diligent, regular, patient and fervent exercise of the sacred ministry of penance, to which we are committed by the very fact of our priesthood and our vocation as pastors and servants of our brothers and sisters. Also with this present exhortation I therefore address an earnest invitation to all the priests of the world, especially to my brothers in the episcopacy and to pastors of souls, an invitation to make every effort to encourage the faithful to make use of this sacrament. I urge them to use all possible and suitable means to ensure that the greatest possible number of our brothers and sisters receive the "grace that has been given to us" through penance for the reconciliation of every soul and of the whole world with God in Christ.

