



DIOCESE OF PATERSON

Diocesan Center
777 Valley Road
Clifton, New Jersey 07013

Office of
THE BISHOP

(973) 777-8818 Fax (973) 777-8976

LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER

INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION: THE EMBRACE OF GOD'S MERCY

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

(Col 1:2)

[1] With the keen eye of a pastor and the skillful pen of a journalist, G. Jeffrey MacDonald has offered an unusual critique of religion in America. In his book, *Thieves in the Temple*, he surveys many of the Protestant mega-churches dotting our religious landscape today. He notes that their worship services, while including traditional forms of Christian worship, place a high priority on entertainment. Even their church structures resemble a multiplex theater or mall.

[2] MacDonald relates his own experience, attending Sunday worship at the Hope Community Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. At the beginning of the service, the words of Psalm 51, David's prayer of repentance, were projected on a large screen. Karaoke-style, the faithful sang the words to the tune of canned music booming over a state-of-the-art sound system. Bobbing their heads and tapping their feet, people swayed to the music and chanted, "I have sinned against you. I have done evil in your sight." For many, this was such an uplifting, exhilarating way to be absolved of one's sins.

[3] MacDonald saw this as "cause for serious concern." Why? Is not confession of one's sins part of the Christian experience? Yes, it is. But, confession, rightly understood, is part of the soul-wrenching experience of authentic repentance. Conversion is deeply personal. "The soul needs time to marinate in deep regret...American culture offers precious few opportunities to admit guilt...If the Church strips confession of its somberness, then Americans won't have anywhere left where they can grapple seriously with their need for repentance" (*Thieves in the Temple*, pg. 40).

[4] The New Testament sees the personal confession of one's sins as part of the process of repentance and conversion. In response to John the Baptist's preaching, the people who wish to receive his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins make a confession of their sins (cf. Mk 1:5). In exhorting the faithful to call in the elders of the church to anoint the sick, James, the "brother of the Lord" (cf. Mk 6:3), exhorts the faithful to confess their sins to the elders, that is, to the bishops or priests of the Church. (cf. Jm 5:14-17). As John reminds us, "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).

[5] In addressing the pastoral problems of the Church of Corinth, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Eucharist is the very Body and Blood of the Lord. He urges them to examine their consciences, warning them to refrain from receiving Holy Communion if they are in serious sin. He says, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily... eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:22,29).

[6] Paul's sobering words are a timely admonition. Some Catholics publicly promote actions contrary to the faith.

L E N T E N P A S T O R A L L E T T E R

Others adopt a life-style contrary to the demands that Jesus makes of his followers. Yet, neither group acknowledges any connection of their actions with the worthy reception of the Eucharist. But St. Paul did and so does the Church today. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion” (1385).

[7] From the beginning, the Church has included the confession of sins as an essential part of celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The *Didache*, the earliest catechism of the Church, gives a window on Church practice in 70 A.D. It urges Christians, “Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience... On the Lord’s Day, gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure” (*Didache* 4:14; 14:1). Following the teaching of St. Paul, the *Didache* recognized the connection of a good confession to the worthy reception of Holy Communion.

[8] Confession is never easy. It requires deep humility. For this reason, Tertullian, a Christian writer living at the end of the second century, urged Christians to move beyond any embarrassment in confessing their sins. He says, “Some flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day...like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians. Thus, they perish along with their own bashfulness” (Tertullian, *Repentance* 10:1).

[9] Similarly, Origen, one of the greatest theologians of the third century, noted the same human difficulty in making a confession of one’s sins. He taught that confession “albeit hard and laborious [obtains] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner . . . does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine” (Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4).

[10] Influenced by the individualism and subjectivism of our times, many people, and sometimes even faithful Catholics, say that there is no need of confession to a priest. God will forgive sins without the ministry of priests. Pope Francis responds to this tendency by giving voice to the sound teaching of the early Church Fathers. He notes, “Someone can say, ‘I confess my sins only to God.’...But our sins are also against our brothers, against the Church. This is why it is necessary to ask forgiveness of the Church and of our brothers, in the person of the priest” (Pope Francis, *General Audience*, February 19, 2014). The act of confession recognizes the true nature of sin as an offense against God and others.

[11] Sin is never just a personal matter between us and God. Every sin that we commit offends God and affects others. Every sin harms Christ’s Body, the Church. United to Christ, we are united with his Church. And, it is through the Church’s priests that God chooses not simply to forgive our sins but to give us the certainty that we are forgiven (cf. Pope Francis, *General Audience*, November 20, 2013).

[12] The Church has received her ministry of forgiving sins from the Lord himself. On Easter Sunday night, the Risen Jesus appeared to the Apostles locked behind closed doors. “Peace be with you,” he said. “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. After saying this, he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. For those whose sins you retain, they are retained’” (Jn 20:19-23).

[13] For the Church to exercise this apostolic ministry of forgiving sins, believers must first confess their sins. How could the judgment be made of either forgiving or retaining sins, unless the priest knows the sins? Accordingly, confession of sins, in one form or another, has *always* been a part of the Church’s ministry.

[14] In earliest centuries, those who lapsed into grave sins of apostasy, murder and adultery made a public confession of their sins. They were given long and severe penances to do before being readmitted to Holy Communion. The Fathers of the Church saw the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation by these penitents as “the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace” (Tertullian, *De Paenitentia*, 4, 2).

[15] The Church, conscious of her mission to forgive sins, has exercised her ministry of reconciliation according to the needs of the times. In the beginning, the very choice to be Christian meant a radical break from one’s former way of life and, in many instances, martyrdom. For this reason, the Church’s discipline in administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation entailed public confession and severe penances. Being a Christian was a life-and- death reality. As the persecutions ended, the Church mitigated her discipline. She made use of private confession as a mercy to penitents.

L E N T E N P A S T O R A L L E T T E R

[16] Not unexpectedly, over the years, the Church has been obliged to correct abuses. In the fifth century, Pope St. Leo the Great rebuked the bishops of Campania, Italy, for requiring a public confession of sins before receiving absolution. He wrote, “All that is necessary, however, is for the sinner to manifest his conscience *in a secret confession to the priests alone*...It is sufficient, therefore, to have first offered one’s confession to God, and then also to the priest, who acts as an intercessor for the transgressions of the penitents” (Pope St. Leo the Great, *Magna Indignatione*, March 6, 459).

[17] On his first visit to the United States, Pope St. John Paul II made a special point of reaffirming the Church’s ministry of reconciling sinners. He stressed the *personal* encounter with the merciful Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confession, he said, was not simply a way to keep alive a consciousness of sin, but the divine way which brings about, by the action of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, true conversion so necessary in our lives (cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of the United States*, October 5, 1979).

[18] A general confession of our sinfulness in a communal setting may make us feel good. But, it is naming specific sins that we have committed, asking for forgiveness and receiving absolution from the priest that leads to true conversion. So important is the individual’s confessing his or her sins to the priest, that Pope St. John Paul II said, “Individual and integral confession and absolution are the sole ordinary means by which the faithful, conscious of grave sin, are reconciled with God and the Church” (*Misericordia Dei*, April 7, 2002).

[19] In my pastoral letter *Reconciliation: Gift and Sacrament*, published on February 9, 2005, I explained, on the basis of Scripture, theology, history and spirituality, the present discipline of individual confession. Pope St. John Paul II was unambiguous in teaching that individual confession is the norm for the Universal Church. As bishop, entrusted with overseeing the proper administration of the sacraments in this local church, I emphasized that communal penance service with general absolution is *not a valid* form of celebrating the Sacrament of Penance in this diocese. The individual celebration of the sacrament is easily accessible throughout the diocese.

[20] It is opportune once again during Lent, especially in this Jubilee of Mercy, to reflect on the gift of individual confession. In every confession, the penitent must confess his or her sins with contrition and have a firm purpose of amendment. As St. John Bosco reminds us, “To draw fruit from this sacrament, it is not enough to go to confession frequently. One must also honestly strive to not sin.”

[21] The penitent must approach the priest *in private, individually and alone* and confess *all* mortal sins insofar as they can be recalled. If there are mortal sins, it is not enough simply to choose one or two. All mortal sins must be confessed. If there are no mortal sins, it is not enough simply to express in a general way one’s sinfulness. Some individual venial sin or sins must be named.

[22] *It is never permitted for a family or group of individuals to approach a priest and together make a general statement of sinfulness.* This does not constitute the sacrament. In fact, it robs the individual of the gift that the Church is so eager to offer: the gift of personal encounter with our merciful Lord and the grace of true repentance and conversion.

[23] In 1980, the Holy See called upon bishops to discontinue communal penance services where general absolution was given without individual confessions. Our priests have been faithful in their response to the Church’s direction. They have made themselves available to hear individual confessions and administer the Sacrament of Penance, as directed by the Church.

[24] Our priests’ participation in our *Welcome Home Initiative* is ample witness to their commitment to this sacrament. Beyond the times scheduled in their parishes for confessions and beyond the readiness to hear confessions when requested, they have been available for hours every Monday night during Lent for individual confessions. As a result, we have witnessed a reawakening of the rich treasure of individual confession.

[25] So important is going to confession that some of the holiest priests of the Church have spent hours in the confessional as missionaries of God’s mercy. St. Anthony of Padua was renowned for his preaching and miracles. Yet, he spent long hours hearing confessions. St. Philip Neri, a busy parish priest in Rome, spent every morning hearing confessions before continuing his work with youth in the afternoon. So famous was St. Jean Vianney that a new train station had to be built in his town of Ars so that people from all of France could go there to confess to this holy priest. Most recently, St. Padre Pio heard confessions for not less than 18 hours a day. There were always long lines awaiting him.

LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER

[26] When a person unburdens his or her sins to a priest in confession, a sacred trust is formed with a confidentiality greater than in any professional counseling situation. So sacred is the encounter between the priest and the penitent in private confession that the priest is bound to maintain the seal of confession even at the cost of his own life. St. John Nepomucene, confessor to the queen of Bohemia in the 14th century, was drowned by the king's order for refusing to divulge the contents of her confession.

[27] Everyone in the Church from the young person preparing to receive First Holy Communion to the pope himself needs to go to confession. As Pope Francis has said, "... [even] priests and bishops...have to go to confession. We are all sinners" (Pope Francis, *General Audience*, November 20, 2013). So important is individual confession that Pope Francis has spoken about it more than his predecessors. He himself goes at least twice a month.

[28] To those who have sinned grievously and contritely confess their sins to the priest, Jesus gives a new beginning. He restores the relationship with God lost by mortal sin. He welcomes them back to the communion of life first given in Baptism. As St. Ambrose says, "There are water and tears: the water of Baptism and the tears of repentance" (St. Ambrose, *Epistola*, 41, 12).

[29] To those who sin venially, the Lord gives a deepening of the grace of their Baptism. "In confession, through the freely bestowed action of divine Mercy, repentant sinners are justified, pardoned and sanctified and abandon their former selves to be re-clothed in the new" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Audience with Priests*, March 9, 2011). Every worthy confession draws us closer to God. We become more humble before God's goodness. His grace enlightens our intellect and strengthens our will so that we avoid evil and choose the good and thus make our soul a worthy dwelling place of God.

[30] During his public ministry, Jesus forgave the feisty Samaritan woman at the well, the paralytic on his bed and the extravagant woman who poured precious ointment all over his feet. With his dying breath, he forgave the repentant thief and his cruel executioners. Jesus never tired of forgiving others.

[31] In the hour of his Passion, at the very moment when Jesus most needed the human support of his friends, his apostles, save John the Beloved, deserted him. Peter, his chosen leader, sinned greatly by refusing to acknowledge that he even knew Jesus. Not once, but three times, he denied Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest. When Jesus passed him by, he looked at Peter with love and Peter repented. He broke down in tears. True conversion always begins with tears.

[32] Jesus never stops looking at us with love. Thus, it is always possible for us to be forgiven, no matter what our sins may be. His pierced heart is the fount of forgiveness. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Crucified and Risen Lord, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, continually offers us pardon and hope. Thus, in making a worthy confession, we find peace in the embrace of God's mercy.

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson, on Ash Wednesday,
the tenth day of February in the year of Our Lord, two thousand and sixteen.*



Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli,
S.T.D., S.S.L., D.D.
Bishop of Paterson



Sr. Joan Daniel Healy, S.C.C.
Chancellor