

Fr. Roger J. Landry
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“Enrolling in the School of the Saints”

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Pope John Paul II, NMI 37

- I am also asking for renewed pastoral courage in ensuring that the day-to-day teaching of Christian communities persuasively and effectively presents the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- We need to make every effort to face the crisis of "the sense of sin" apparent in today's culture.
- But I am even more insistent in calling for a rediscovery of Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself.
- It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance, which for the faithful is "the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism."
- When the 1984 Synod addressed the problem, the crisis of the Sacrament was there for all to see, especially in some parts of the world. The causes of the crisis have not disappeared in the brief span of time since then.
- It is probably necessary that Pastors should arm themselves with more confidence, creativity and perseverance in presenting it and leading people to appreciate it.
- Dear brothers in the priesthood, we must not give in to passing crises! The Lord's gifts — and the Sacraments are among the most precious — come from the One who well knows the human heart and is the Lord of history.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

1. There's a story of St. Damian of Molokai. Most of us, I think, are familiar with who he was. He was a Belgian missionary in Honolulu, which even in the mid-1800s was not a bad place to be a missionary. But on one of the smaller islands, there was a leper colony and they needed a priest. Fr. Damian volunteered to go. He knew upon leaving that he would never be able to return. He knew upon leaving that the chances were high that he, too, would contract leprosy. Life in the community of lepers itself was very hard. But do you know what he considered his heaviest Cross? It wasn't the lack of help from others for the poor lepers, even among the other missionaries. It wasn't the suffering he himself began to experience when he contracted leprosy and parts of his body became numb and started to be eaten away by the bacteria. It wasn't even the calumny of others who said that he had caught leprosy because of sexual immorality. His heaviest Cross, according to his own testimony, was the impossibility of regular confession, since no other priest could come upon the island of Molokai. With all his suffering, the worst for him was the impossibility of frequent confession. He used to row out on a boat to the ships that were bringing supplies to the island — the ships couldn't dock out of fear of being contaminated by the disease — he would shout on up asking if there were a priest on-board. Many times there weren't. Other times there was. Damian of course was not permitted to enter the ship, but he would shout out his confession in Latin, or in French, or in his native Dutch, whatever the priest happened to speak. In his words, "That sacramental absolution meant more to me than the tea, tobacco, clothing, food, or letters being brought ashore."
2. Is it any wonder that our Lord gave us this sacrament as one of his first gifts after his resurrection? The ten apostles were huddled together out of fear in the Upper Room where just three days earlier Jesus had given them His Body and Blood for the first time in Holy Communion. Jesus walked through the closed doors and his first words to them — words that he had died to say to them, words he had risen to say to them — were "Peace be with you!" They didn't get it. Just like they didn't want to believe Mary Magdalene when she said that she had seen Jesus earlier that morning, just like they were reluctant to

believe the disciples from Emmaus earlier that evening, the apostles thought Jesus was a ghost. So he repeated himself, "Peace be with you!" Jesus had come down from heaven and had given his life to give them — to give us — peace, a peace the world cannot give and a peace the world cannot take away. He had said before his death, "Not as the world gives peace do I give it." Peace for Jesus was not the absence of war and international conflict, but peace with God through the forgiveness of sin. Without this peace, no other type of peace is possible, because sin destroys peace.

3. Jesus said to the apostles, "Just as the Father sent me, so I send you" (John 20:19). Why had the Father sent Jesus? He sent him ultimately to save us from our sins — and the consequence of our sins, death — by his life, passion, death and resurrection. "Just as the Father sent me [to forgive sins], so I send you!" In the first thing he did on the day he rose from the dead, Jesus was going to send out the apostles to forgive sins in his name. But no one can forgive sins but God alone, so Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." He gave them God the Holy Spirit so that they might forgive sins, just as we hear every time the priest pronounces those beautiful words in confession, "God, the Father of Mercies... has sent His Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins." And then he said words that point clearly to the sacrament of confession: "Those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; those whose sins you retain, they are retained." Jesus was making them his ministers, his ambassadors. Just as through them, Jesus himself says, "this is my body, this is the cup of my blood" in the Mass, so through them Jesus was going to say, "Your sins are forgiven; go in peace!" This was going to be the apostles' most important mission, the mission in which he involved them intimately as his first action upon rising from the dead. The only way that they would know which sins to forgive and which to retain would be if penitents told them their sins in confession. In the early days of the Church, the confessions were made publicly and penance and absolution was given publicly. Since about the 7th century, the sacrament has been available privately between the sinner and Christ's ambassador. But the essence of the sacrament goes back to Jesus on Easter Sunday evening. Such was Jesus' love and will.
4. How important is our confession to God? Listen to what Jesus said, about his Father, whom as we heard in tonight's Gospel, is "merciful." It is found in Luke's second chapter. When the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.
5. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."
6. Then Jesus compared the joy of the Father in reconciliation to that of the father of the Prodigal Son. "Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. ...The Father said, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."
7. Over the course of the centuries, many of us have forgotten this mercy of God and of our need for it. We were reminded of it in the 17th century when Jesus revealed his Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. Christ wanted to reconcile sinners. It helped for a time. Then it was forgotten. We were reminded again when Jesus revealed his divine mercy to St. Faustina in the 1930s. God talked about the unfathomable riches of his mercy and asked that priests preach about it often. It brought back, into devotional form, what we find in the Gospels, first about our need for God's mercy, our receiving God's mercy, and our sharing God's mercy.
8. To recognize our need for God's mercy — like the Prodigal Son, we have to realize that we have sinned, and that without God's forgiveness, we will die in our sins. The Holy Father in his pastoral letter talked

about the crisis of the “sense of sin.” We need to recognize our need for it. But God does not desire the death of the sinner, but that the sinner return to him and live, which leads us to the second step:

9. To trust in, ask for and receive God’s mercy — Here in this world, Jesus established only one ordinary way for us to receive this mercy for all the sins we’ve committed after our baptism: the sacrament of reconciliation, confessing our sins to Christ through the priest. There are a lot of people today, including Catholics, who say, “I can confess my sins directly to the Lord!” Out of real love for you, please let’s be very clear: you can confess your sins to whomever you want — to your best friends, husbands or wives, parents and children, coworkers, social workers, shrinks, bartenders, Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Springer — to anyone you want. But you can’t receive forgiveness there, which is the point. The only means in this world in which we can be SURE that the Lord forgives us is when we confess our sins to a priest, whom Jesus has ordained, and sent out from the Upper Room for this purpose. To believe in the Lord Jesus means to believe that he knew what he was doing, and he established this sacrament on the night he rose from the dead. Do you want to tell him that he was wrong? Do you really trust your own ideas more than Jesus and want to risk your eternal salvation on the gut feeling you’re right? It didn’t make sense to Naaman the leper to wash seven times in the Jordan river at the word of Elisha the prophet, but he did and he was cleansed. If you were God and had the chance to establish the means of the forgiveness of sins, you might have done differently than Jesus. But you’re not God — He is — and he set it up this way, so we need to trust in him and learn from the inside why he set it up this way. The Holy Father wrote that he has been “insistent in calling for a rediscovery of Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself. It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance, which for the faithful is “the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism.”
10. We are also called to share it with others — We’re called to be merciful with others. Jesus said, “Be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful. . . The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you” (Matt. 7:2). In another place, the Lord says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). The Lord’s point is that the prerequisite for our receiving mercy is our showing mercy to others. After having taught us the Our Father in which we pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we have forgiven those who have trespassed against us,” the Lord warned us, “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their sins, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:14-15). We could paraphrase this requirement in a couple of ways, positively or negatively, according to what you might need in a greater way today. “If you want to go to Hell, don’t forgive, for Jesus promises you that neither will you receive His mercy, which you’ll need in order to avoid it.” Or positively, “If you ever hope to come into that incredible kingdom of joy and love which is heaven, where you will see God and become like him, you must respond to his grace to become like Him in this world, being merciful as he is.” Today is the day to choose; every day from this point forward is the day to put that choice into action.
11. Out of love for us, Jesus has made the sacrament of confession available to us. He has also bound priests by a seal such that they would die to protect the revelation of even your least venial sin.
12. (Seal). There is the story of Father Pierre. A parish gardener left a blood-stained cassock near the scene of the crime. All of France was shocked when Fr. Pierre was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to the dreaded Devil’s island. He only said, “I am innocent of this crime.” There he lived a very difficult life, despised by prisoners as a murderous priest. His charity began to win them over. One day he was called to help a notorious prisoner who was dying. He looked into the dying man’s eyes and whispered, “I am your friend. Can I help you?” The man looked up and said, “I am the gardener, who murdered the woman.” The gardener called the other prisoners around, “Father Pierre is innocent. For over 20 years he has suffered because of me and he has never revealed the secret. Please now tell the officials of my public confession of guilt.” With that, he quietly made another confession to Father Pierre, was absolved and died in peace. Fr. Pierre remained in the prison after he was offered his freedom, to be a chaplain to the prisoners.

13. That is how seriously God takes this sacrament that priests would suffer and die so that you would have the confidence to go to the Lord who absolves through the priest. So that you would have the chance to make heaven erupt with joy.
14. The Holy Father stresses that this sacrament is essential to training in holiness. Someone who is trying to become a saint should regularly go to the Lord. Mother Teresa used to go every day to confession. The closer we are to the sun, the more we see the imperfections. It's the same way in the growth in Christian life. Someone trying to become a saint should be going at least about once a month. Moreover, to help the person in going, we should be examining our consciences regularly, each night before we go to bed, making an act of contrition, and getting our desire up to receive the Lord's mercy in the sacrament.
15. We sang every Friday in the psalms, "Create a clean heart for me, O God. Renew in me a steadfast spirit." The way God does that is through the sacrament he created on Easter Sunday evening. May God fill us with a deep gratitude for this act of love and help us to take full advantage of it, so that we might become the saints he calls us to be!