

## ***The Beauty of Mercy: Pope Francis and Confession***

### *God Never Tires of Forgiving Us*

Since he was elected Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis has continually emphasized the infinite mercy of a God who never tires of reaching out. Throughout his teachings, the Holy Father has put forth the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a gift that permits each one of us to encounter the mercy of God in a personal and profound way.

“Among the Sacraments, certainly **Reconciliation renders present with particular efficacy the merciful face of God:** it is constantly and ceaselessly made real and manifest,” Pope Francis says with the force of personal experience and conviction. (Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary March 2015.)

“The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a Sacrament of healing. When I go to confession, it is in order to be healed, to heal my soul, to heal my heart and to be healed of some wrongdoing,” describes Pope Francis. (General Audience Feb. 2014)

“The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation flows directly from the Paschal Mystery. In fact, on the evening of Easter the Lord appeared to the disciples, who were locked in the Upper Room, and after addressing them with the greeting, ‘Peace be with you!’, he breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven’ (Jn 20:21-23). This passage reveals to us the most profound dynamic contained in this Sacrament.”

#### **Francis, Angelus 17 March 2013**

“God never ever tires of forgiving us!  
“Well, Father what is the problem?”  
Well, the problem is that we ourselves tire, we do not want to ask, we grow weary of asking for forgiveness. He never tires of forgiving, but at times we get tired of asking for forgiveness.”

Like the merciful father in the parable of the prodigal son, God is eager to forgive, adds Pope Francis: “Each time we go to confession, God embraces us. God rejoices!” (General Audience Feb. 2014).

*Finding God’s Forgiveness through the Church*  
The Holy Father stresses that forgiveness of our sins is not something that we can give ourselves. In confession, we ask

forgiveness from Jesus. “Forgiveness is not the fruit of our own efforts but rather a gift, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit who fills us with the wellspring of mercy and of grace that flows unceasingly from the open heart of the Crucified and Risen Christ.” (General Audience Feb. 2014).

However, it is not enough to simply ask the Lord for forgiveness in one’s own mind and heart because Jesus himself entrusted to the Church the ministry of the forgiveness of sins. “It is necessary humbly and trustingly to confess one’s sins to a minister of the Church. In the celebration of this Sacrament, the priest represents not only God but also the whole community,” points out Pope Francis.

The shame we feel speaking our sins to another makes us more humble, as we unburden ourselves before God, notes the Holy Father. “When one is in line to go to Confession, one feels all these things, even shame, but then when one finishes Confession one leaves free, grand, beautiful, forgiven, candid, happy. This is the beauty of Confession!”

Understanding the struggle that some experience when it comes to accepting, understanding and participating in this sacrament, Pope Francis boldly cries: “Be courageous and go to Confession!”

Urging frequent confession, Pope Francis says: “Go – the priest will be good. Jesus is there, and Jesus is more benevolent than priests, Jesus receives you, he receives you with so much love.” (General Audience, Feb. 2014). He continually stresses that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a profound gift that strengthens our personal relationship with Christ, heals us, and renews our baptism when we were first incorporated into the community of faith.

“The Sacrament of Penance or Confession is, in fact, like a ‘second baptism’ that refers back always to the first to strengthen and renew it. In this sense, the day of our Baptism is the point of departure for this most beautiful journey, a journey towards God that lasts a lifetime, a journey of conversion that is continually sustained by the Sacrament of Penance. Think about this: when we go to confess our weaknesses, our sins, we go to ask the pardon of Jesus, but we also go to renew our Baptism through his forgiveness. And this is beautiful, it is like celebrating the day of Baptism in every Confession,” says Pope Francis (General Audience 13 November 2013).

During World Youth Day in July 2013, at the celebration on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis again described how Jesus awaits us in the Sacrament of Penance, telling youth of the world gathered for the event: “...with his mercy he will cure all the wounds caused by sin. Do not be afraid to ask God’s forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving us, like a father who loves us. God is pure mercy!”

#### *Responsibilities of Priest Confessors*

In speaking to priests about the sacrament, Pope Francis describes it as a way to help one’s sisters and brothers experience “human and Christian peace and understanding.”

Everyone should leave the confessional with happiness in their hearts, he says. “It should be a liberating encounter, enriched with

#### **Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 44**

“I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best. A small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.”

humanity, through which one can educate in mercy, which does not exclude but rather includes the just obligation to atone for, to the extent possible, the wrong committed. Thus the faithful will feel called to confess frequently, and will learn to do so in the best of ways, with that gentleness of soul that does so much good for the heart — also the heart of the confessor! In this way we priests enable the personal relationship with God to grow, so that his Kingdom of love and peace expands in hearts.”

Being merciful is not the same as being lenient as a confessor – nor is being rigid a way to offer mercy, Pope Francis says. Neither the lax nor the rigid confessor “treats the penitent as a brother, taking him by the hand and accompanying him in his conversion!”

Rather, the truly merciful confessor listens, accompanies, and encourages. “Mercy means carrying the burden of a brother or sister and helping them walk... The confessor who prays, the confessor who weeps, the confessor who knows that he is more a sinner than the penitent, and if he himself has never done the bad thing that the penitent speaks of, it is but for the grace of God. Merciful is being close and accompanying the process of conversion,” stresses Pope Francis.

Pope Francis has also encouraged priests to let themselves learn from the Sacrament of Reconciliation. “Often, we are also called on to witness genuine miracles of conversion. People who for months, sometimes years have been under the dominion of sin and who, like the prodigal son, come to their senses and decide to arise and return to the Father’s house (cf. Lk 15:18), to implore his forgiveness. How beautiful it is to welcome these contrite brothers and sisters with the sanctifying embrace of the merciful Father, who loves us so much and holds a feast for every child that returns to Him with all his/her heart!”

Priests are also called to conversion through the sacrament, points out Pope Francis. “How much we can learn from the conversion and from the repentance of our brothers and sisters! They urge us too to perform an examination of conscience: Do I, a priest, love the Lord as much as this elderly woman? Am I, a priest who was made a minister of his mercy, able to have the mercy that is in the heart of this penitent? Am I, a confessor, open to change, to conversion, like this penitent, at whose service I have been placed? So often these people edify us, they edify us.”

When hearing the sacramental confessions of the faithful, priests must “keep the inner gaze turned to Heaven,” Pope Francis adds. “We all were constituted ministers of reconciliation purely by the grace of God, freely and through love, indeed through mercy... am I, in hearing this sin, this soul who regrets with such remorse or with such frailty of spirit, capable of being ashamed of my sins? This is a grace. We are ministers of mercy thanks to the mercy of God; we must never lose this supernatural

gaze, which renders us truly humble, accepting and merciful toward every brother and sister who asks to confess.”

Each faithful penitent who approaches the confessional is “sacred ground,” describes Pope Francis, “sacred ground to ‘cultivate’ with devotion, care and pastoral attention.”

*Confession and the Jubilee Year of Mercy*

In declaring the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis invites all to focus on the Sacrament of Reconciliation as an important dimension of experiencing God’s mercy. The Holy Father says: “So many people, including young people, are returning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation; through this experience they are rediscovering a path back to the Lord, living a moment of intense prayer and finding meaning in their lives. **Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God’s mercy with their own hands.** For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace.”

*(Misericordiae Vultus, #17)*

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