



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on 14th February 2016, the First Sunday of Lent.

THE SACRAMENT OF GOD'S MERCY

Dear People of God,

As we begin this holy Season of Lent, hearing in today's Gospel how Satan tempted Jesus,¹ I need to speak to you about something serious that some of you will no doubt find provocative. Pope Francis, in the document establishing the Year of Mercy, said: "During the Jubilee Year, the season of Lent should .. be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy."² Now my question to you is this: When did you last go to Confession? How on Earth can we be sure to experience personally One-to-one the mercy of God, without at some point – and I would say regularly, even once a month – celebrating this Sacrament?

Let me clear up some erroneous opinions. Someone once said to me: "I don't commit any sins: I never go out!" Yet that is already missing the point. A true disciple of Jesus is always aware of their failings, their distance from God, their need to grow in holiness, prayer and the spiritual life. The closer we are to the Light - to God - the more evident our dark sides.³ It's like saying to God: "I don't need you. I am sinless - like the Blessed Virgin!"⁴ Let's be candid: Jesus did not come to call virtuous people. This is why we all need regularly to examine our consciences, to review our thoughts, words and deeds, to take stock of our attitudes and life-style. Sin is not like a stain to be dry-cleaned or a law infringed.⁵ Sin is a lack of love or lovelessness. Sin is often an omission rather than a commission. Think of it like 'missing the mark.' It is a wound to be healed. In our night prayers, we should review the day, thanking God for His love, but identifying too our failings, expressing our sorrow, and making a firm purpose of amendment not to sin again.⁶

Someone asked me: "Why do we need to confess our sins to a priest?" But I asked them: If you felt sick, would you not go to the doctor? Would you not

have a check-up? Would it not be risky doing a self-diagnosis? Humans are not angels. We are bodily; we need physical contact and communication, which is why Jesus instituted sacraments. Only God can forgive sins⁷ but in the Sacrament of Reconciliation Jesus gives the priest authority to speak to us personally.⁸ Just as in Mass when the priest says, "This is my Body; this is my Blood," the bread and wine are changed, so too when the priest says, "*Ego te absolvo* .. I absolve you from your sins," I am liberated.⁹ Without this encounter with a priest, how could we know for sure that our sins have been forgiven? For this is the Sacrament that brings us personally across space-time the mercy of Jesus, Who laid down His life for us on the Cross of Calvary.

Another might ask: "Why can't I tell God directly I'm sorry?" We must tell God directly, making regularly the Act of Contrition.¹⁰ But Christianity is not about 'me-and-God;' it's about 'you-me-and-God.' Our sins not only offend Jesus; they cause social damage; they wound His Body the Church, dimming the Light. This is why we need to say sorry not only to God but to God's family, the Church. In earlier times, this was done by a public penance, but mercifully today we need only meet the Church's representative, the priest, in order to say sorry to God and sorry to the People of God.

Another common response: "I've not murdered anyone or done anything serious, so why do I need to go?" This Sacrament works on many levels. For grave sins, as the Council of Trent taught, it is the only ordinary means of forgiveness,¹¹ which is why we should not receive Holy Communion without first receiving sacramental absolution.¹² But the Church urges us also to make a regular confession of ordinary, venial sins, to help form our conscience and to fight evil tendencies.¹³ For this Sacrament of Reconciliation is profoundly therapeutic; it gives us grace, strength and energy. We receive Christ's healing and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, often too with a word of advice from the priest. Frequent confession is a huge help to the life-long project of our conversion. The more we are forgiven, the more forgiving we become. The more we become *misericordes sicut Pater*, 'merciful like the Father.'¹⁴

One more: "I'd be embarrassed to go to our own priest; he knows me." Well, why not find another priest? And why not 'go anonymous'?

I say all this not to make you feel bad, ashamed or guilty, but simply to encourage you this Lent to receive the joy of God's mercy. I hope that one lasting grace from this Holy Year will be a renewal of this breathtaking Sacrament. Pope Francis puts it splendidly: "Don't be afraid of Confession! When you are in line waiting to go, you feel many things, even shame, but then when you finish, you leave free, grand, beautiful, forgiven, candid, happy. This is the beauty of Confession!"¹⁵ Parishes might try new times in addition to the regular times. Here at the Cathedral, the priests tell me many people are rediscovering the Sacrament, coming in ever greater numbers.

Let me attach a note about Lent, for *now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation*.¹⁶ In preparation for Easter, please fulfill your Easter duties by receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation.¹⁷ To aid unfamiliar users, I am sending out some leaflets on 'How to Go to Confession.'¹⁸ On the weekend of Fourth Sunday of Lent, the Pope has asked the whole Church to undertake 24

Hours for the Lord and so our clergy will nominate one church in each Pastoral Area to host 24 hours of Eucharistic Adoration, with confessions at designated times.¹⁹ I am also, with this Pastoral Letter, giving you a free gift. It is a small book called *Via Crucis: The Way to Heaven*. I hope you will enjoy using it and gain thereby many graces.

Finally, why not undertake a Holy Year pilgrimage to one of our two shrine churches: St. John's Cathedral, Portsmouth and St. Edmund's, Abingdon? In them, pilgrims can cross through the Holy Door and thus, by the specified prayers and the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, obtain the Jubilee Indulgence. Some people find indulgences perplexing, but think of it like this. If I deliberately smashed your window, but later came to say sorry, even after forgiving me, you would still expect me in justice to offer to repair the window. So too our sins. They cause collateral spiritual and emotional damage to ourselves and to others; even when God has forgiven us, there is still need for healing and repair. Indulgences help to put things right, to make restitution, to heal the memories of sin, to repair hurt and to restore charity.²⁰

During this Holy Year, let us call often on the Mother of Mercy, saying the *Salve Regina*, the *Hail Holy Queen* prayer. May Mary unite us intimately with her Son, Jesus Christ. Indeed, may she help us experience personally the mercy and love with which His Heart abounds.

Happy Lent!

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ Luke 4: 1-13.

² See Pope Francis *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* (11th April 2015), available online at www.vatican.va (February 2016), 17.

³ See *YOUCAT: Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church* 229.

⁴ Once at a funeral, when everyone was saying of the deceased "She never did anyone any harm", another whispered, "But, father, she never did anyone any good!"

⁵ See Pope Francis *The Name of God's Mercy* (London, Bluebird: 2016) 19-25

⁶ "The movement of return to God, called conversion and repentance, entails sorrow for and abhorrence of sins committed, and the firm purpose of sinning no more in the future. Conversion touches the past and the future and is nourished by hope in God's mercy" *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [henceforth CCC] 1490.

⁷ Mark 2: 7. Cf. CCC 1441-1442.

⁸ "In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week ..Jesus came and stood among them. He breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit. For those who sins you forgive, they are forgiven. For those who sins you retain, they are retained'" John 20: 19, 22-23. Cf. CCC 1444-1445.

⁹ The Prayer of Absolution in the Sacrament of Penance, is a very beautiful one to reflect upon: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church, may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" *Rite of Penance Approved for Use in the Dioceses of England and Wales* (London, Collins: 1976) 48.

¹⁰ Here is the traditional (short) Act of Contrition, approved for use in England and Wales, that everyone ought to know: “O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you. But by the help of your grace, I will not sin again.” This Lent, I have asked all our diocesan schools to ensure that their pupils know and use this prayer.

¹¹ The Council of Trent teaches that “although contrition is sometimes perfected by charity and reconciles man with God before the sacrament [of confession] is actually received, this reconciliation is still not to be ascribed to that contrition without the intention of receiving the sacrament [*sacramenti voto*] that is included in that contrition” DH 1677.

¹² “Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass or receive the Body of the Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession, unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case, the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, which includes the resolve to go to confession as soon as possible” *Code of Canon Law* 916.

¹³ Cf. *Code of Canon Law* 918 and CCC 1458. “Christians who take seriously their decision to follow Jesus seek the joy that comes from a radical new beginning with God. Even the saints went to confession regularly, if possible. They needed it in order to grow in humility and charity, so as to allow themselves to be touched by God's healing light even in the inmost recesses of their souls” YOUCAT 235.

¹⁴ ‘Be merciful as your Father is merciful’ Luke 6: 36. For the official Vatican website and resources about the Holy Year, see www.im.va. *Misericordes sicut Pater* is the Holy Year logo: see <http://www.im.va/content/gdm/en/giubileo/logo.html> (February 2016)

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *General Audience of 19th February 2014*, available online at www.vatican.va (February 2016).

¹⁶ 2 Cor 6: 2

¹⁷ This is the Second Precept of the Church: “‘You shall confess your sins at least once a year’ [thus ensuring] preparation for the Eucharist by the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation, which continues Baptism's work of conversion and forgiveness” CCC 2042; cf. *Code of Canon Law* 989.

¹⁸ I must also draw attention to the *Anchor Series*, developed by the Dominican Sisters of St. Joseph and our diocesan Formation For Mission team, which includes a six-session resource on the Sacrament of Penance: see www.anchoryourfaith.com. It also offers much practical teaching, including how to make an examination of conscience.

¹⁹ “The initiative of ‘24 Hours for the Lord’ to be celebrated on the Friday and Saturday preceding the Fourth Week of Lent, should be implemented in every diocese” *Misericordiae Vultus* 17.

²⁰ For a classical and authoritative exposition of the Church's doctrine on indulgences, see CCC 1471-1479. See also the *Year of Mercy* webpage on the diocesan website, which has various resources, including a handout on indulgences and a video about making a good Confession: <http://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/holyyearofmercy/index.php> (February 2016)