

Drawing the Parish To Partake in God's Mercy

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In the papal bull, *Misericordiae Vultus* (Face of Mercy), in which Pope Francis proclaimed the Jubilee Holy Year of Mercy, the pope describes mercy as one of the Christian basics that we must retrieve to be effective disciples, learning not only to extend the gift of mercy to others, but also to receive mercy with gratitude and joy. For this reason, Pope Francis asks that the season of Lent during the Jubilee Year be focused on preparing for and celebrating sacramental Reconciliation. He writes: "Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the center once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands" (*Misericordiae Vultus* [MV], 17).

This article seeks to generate reflection on the groundwork to pave the way to the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We need the Sacrament of Reconciliation because we need to see in a tangible way that the Lord desires to heal his people. As Pope Francis stated in his February 14, 2014, general audience: "Celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation means being enfolded in a warm embrace: it is the embrace of the Father's infinite mercy" (*God Rich in Mercy*, Catholic Book Publications, 2015: 62). Let us consider how we might prepare parish communities for such an encounter with mercy.

REVITALIZATION OF THE SACRAMENT

I teach the college course "Sacraments, Justice and the Moral Life." The overarching goal of the course is to demonstrate that liturgy is intrinsically related to life. We explore the seven sacraments by examining the way in which they establish and renew relationships within the Body of Christ. When it comes to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, students tell of poor experiences of the sacrament, and virtually all have been taught from a young age that sin is solely personal and private. They are skeptical of the value of confessing private matters to a priest. In a sense, sin has become secularized; one can choose what constitutes sin without any input or advice from an outside source.

A recovery of the positive and prophetic importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I believe, lies precisely in its communal nature. As Christians, we cannot receive the mercy of God unless we first recognize that, as a whole, we are sinners. Consider the Mass: within the first moments of our being re-collected together as the Body of Christ, we stand in a posture of contrition, imploring God's mercy. When we begin to recognize that reconciliation is a task that we share, we will no longer be afraid of the sacrament. Penitents will begin to see that the humility and vulnerability associated with the sacrament help to encourage others to seek the gift of forgiveness. Pope Francis writes: "In our parishes, communities, associations and move-



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The Sacrament of Reconciliation is not only for the individual but for the entire Body of Christ.

ments, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy" (MV, 12).

DIOCESAN CELEBRATIONS

Such stimulation to strengthen our communal sense of Reconciliation ought to ripple forth from the local bishop's office. The Jubilee Year of Mercy calls for dioceses around the world to work to break down divisions among communities that serve to isolate parishes. In particular, the season of Lent provides an opportunity for parishes to connect with the greater diocese. Diocesan liturgical commissions may consider preparing a similar penitential gathering for Ash Wednesday, or certainly within the first few days of the start of Lent.

Pope Francis also suggests that the ancient custom of making a pilgrimage might play a role in the Holy Year (MV, 14). Bishops ought to consider this concept creatively. For instance, parishioners from around the diocese should be encouraged to make pilgrimages to the Holy Door at the cathedral. Journeys that require some sort of sacrifice, from walking to foregoing the use of modern technology, can certainly help to increase the desire to shed the weight of sin. In the words of Pope Francis: "May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion: by crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God's mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us" (MV, 14).

24 HOURS FOR THE LORD

Furthermore, Pope Francis asks that each diocese implement “24 Hours for the Lord” on the Friday and Saturday before the Fourth Week of Lent. This initiative, begun by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, encourages communities to gather in Eucharistic adoration, to celebrate some form of a penitential service, and to provide the opportunity for sacramental Reconciliation.

The resource, *God Rich in Mercy*, compiled by the Pontifical Council and published by Catholic Book Publishing, is a pastoral guide for the “24 Hours for the Lord” and contains reflections for preparing for Reconciliation as well as stories of conversion. The introduction to this pamphlet states: “It would be important to arrange for the parish church to be open on the evening of Friday, March 13, and during the entire day on Saturday, March 14, in order to make available Confession, preferably celebrated in the context of a guided service of Eucharistic adoration. The 24-hour period might then be concluded with the celebration of the festive Holy Mass of Saturday evening.”

Parishes will need to be creative in structuring these twenty-four hours. Perhaps opportunities to hear testimonials of conversion or to view movies of the lives of saints might be staged in the parish hall. An appropriate counterpoint to Eucharistic adoration would be an encounter with God’s Word in *lectio divina*. The fourth part of *God Rich in Mercy* offers two outlines that could be used or adapted for *lectio divina*. Finally, it will be important for communities to consider joyful celebration as the outcome of this period of penitence. How might music and food play a role in making tangible our joy for receiving the gift of God’s mercy?

CATECHESIS AND CONVERSATION

It is true that rich symbols should be experienced, not explained. Sacramental celebration as a whole follows the same principle. However, in the case of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, most people who go to confession do not understand the liturgical role that they are fulfilling. I suspect that the Rite of Penance, promulgated in 1973, is rarely enacted as it was designed. For example, we need to help penitents discover that the rite does not begin with the words “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been X number of months since my last confession.” Instead, it begins with a “warm” greeting from the priest, the Sign of the Cross, and a simple invitation to trust in God’s mercy: “May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy.”

Furthermore, the rite calls for the reading of Scripture. All sacraments must be a response to the Lord’s Word. This ought to be particularly true in a situation in which one is seeking conversion of heart. We must ask: is there a Bible visible and readily available in every reconciliation room? It will be helpful for confessors to study the rite and to prioritize the encounter with God’s Word over and above the limitations of time, which tempt those presiding at the sacrament to take shortcuts. Parish communities might consider holding evening gatherings to provide catechesis on the rite or might provide resources that offer insight into the symbols and structure of sacramental Penance.

Likewise, to evangelize according to the theme of conversion, parishes may find it helpful to organize sessions for parishioners or guests to speak on their experience of conversion and/or the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Participants might also be encouraged to share some of their fears regarding the sacrament, and in a confidential setting, might be able to discuss with one another their life struggles. Group experiences such as these may lead individuals to seek out sacramental Reconciliation.

CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

Like sin itself, we commonly mistake penance as a purely private affair. Penitents are quite accustomed to being given a task of prayer or a small act of self-sacrifice as a means of demonstrating their desire for conversion. Most often, others do not recognize the penance that one is undertaking. This is very different from the days of the early Church, when penance was performed prior to absolution and was public. Often dressed in sackcloth, penitents would sit at the doors of the Church to demonstrate their separation from the community. Furthermore, these sinners would be reconciled at Mass on Holy Thursday, able to participate fully around the Lord’s Table once more.

While a return to a clearly recognized “Order of Penitents” may not be possible, parishes might undertake projects of public penance during Lent. The seven Corporal Works of Mercy provide an overall agenda for such a penance. While these acts of charity are meant to flow from the Christian spirit and are not intended as satisfaction for sin, there is no reason that they cannot be considered as forms of corporate penance. During Lent, communities could gather for a Penitential Service (see Appendix II of the Rite of Penance) and then commit themselves to a work of penance that might take place for several days or even weeks. After completion of the merciful act, communities could gather again for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, allowing the prayer of absolution to be heard individually.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, true conversion requires the totality of one’s heart. However, true conversion in Christ also requires a commitment to the relationships that make up his Body. Likewise, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is for the restoration not only of the individual soul but the entire Body of Christ as well. During Lent, we are reminded in a special way that we must care for the Body’s healing and wholeness. We come to Reconciliation to participate in the prophecy of God’s mercy. As Pope Francis writes, “The Church feels the urgent need to proclaim God’s mercy. Her life is authentic and credible only when she becomes a convincing herald of mercy” (MV, 25). Hopefully, discovering mercy as a communal undertaking will serve to draw more and more people to the wellsprings of sacramental reconciliation. ♦

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