



Diocese of Worcester  
Office of the Bishop  
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*"Jesus breathed on them, and said to them. 'Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven, and whose sins you retain are retained.'" (Jn. 20:22-23)*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I write this pastoral letter in preparation for a pastoral initiative called, *Come Home to God's Mercy*, that will provide the opportunity for many Catholics in the Diocese of Worcester to return to the Sacrament of Penance during the upcoming Season of Lent.

It is well-known that in the last forty years, there has been a precipitous decline in the number of Catholics who regularly receive the Sacrament of Penance. A recent survey of American Catholics revealed some startling and sobering statistics. One statistic that was particularly unsettling was that 45% of Catholics who attend Mass weekly never receive the Sacrament of Penance.

The reasons for the virtual disappearance from the lives of the majority of Catholics of the regular practice of going to confession are, no doubt, varied. Yet, an explanation of this disconcerting pastoral situation has to include to a significant degree a loss of the sense of sin among contemporary Catholics. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "sin is an offense against God ... it is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods" (CCC, nos. 1849-1850). Moreover, the moral tradition of the Church reminds us that there is a distinction to be made in the type of sins that we commit. The most fundamental distinction, already evident in the Bible, is between mortal and venial sins. Mortal sin is such a serious offense against God and his law that it destroys the life of grace, that is, our participation in God's own divine life, within our soul. It also breaks our relationship with the Body of Christ, the Church.

For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present. "Mortal sin is a sin whose object is grave matter and which is committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent" (CCC, no. 1857). Venial sin, while not depriving the soul of supernatural grace, nonetheless weakens the life of God within us. Venial sin "impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of virtue and the practice of moral good ... Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin" (CCC, nos. 1863).

St. John the Evangelist wrote the following words to the early Christians for whom he had pastoral care, "If we say, 'We are without sin', we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1Jn. 1:8). A central theme of Jesus Christ's own public ministry was the need for people to repent of their sins in order to enter the kingdom of God. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17). Conversion, that is, the continual turning away from sin and under God's grace, turning back to God, is essential to the Christian life. It is not easy to admit that we are sinners. Yet to do so is the first step on the journey to growing in holiness of life. The world in which we live, while affording us many opportunities for living the good life and pursuing happiness for ourselves, our families and loved ones, is also filled with temptations that can slowly yet effectively turn us away

from God and the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. As Pope Benedict XVI observed two years ago in an address to a group of confessors, "If, moreover, even when one is motivated by the desire to follow Jesus, one does not go regularly to confession, one risks gradually slowing down his or her spiritual pace to the point of increasingly weakening and ultimately perhaps even exhausting it." (Benedict XVI, Address to Confessors, March 16, 2008.)

We need the powerful grace of God to assist us in living the Christian life in an authentic way. Indeed, it is impossible to live the Christian life without the help of God's grace, and that grace is made available to us every time we receive the Sacrament of Penance. Our Catholic faith teaches us that the sacraments of the Church are privileged ways of receiving the grace that enables us to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. As you will recall from your own catechetical formation, a sacrament is an "efficacious sign of Christ, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life (grace) is dispersed to us" (CCC, no. 1131). In every sacrament, we personally encounter the Crucified and Risen Christ who is the Savior of the world. In the Sacrament of Penance, in which we repent of our sins with sincere sorrow, confess them to a priest and receive an appropriate penance to make amends for our offenses, we experience the mercy and forgiveness of God that have been made abundantly available to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I trust that this brief summary of the teaching of the Church on the nature of sin and the purpose of the sacraments will provide some theological foundation for recognizing why the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance should be a regular part of the life of every Catholic, clergy, religious or lay faithful. Yet I also recognize that there are some curious and often mistaken notions about the Sacrament of Penance that have contributed in recent years to the decline of going to confession.

One reason, I believe, is that there exists a generation of Catholics who received a poor catechesis about the nature and purpose of the Sacrament of Penance. In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the importance and necessity of receiving the Sacrament of Penance were sometimes minimized or, sad to say, even denied. Priests rarely preached about the sacrament's crucial role in living the Christian life. Some people came to believe that the Penitential Rite at Mass, during which the priest asks us to recall our sins before entering into the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist, imparted sacramental absolution or the forgiveness of our sins. This is not the case, especially if some one has committed a mortal sin. In still other cases, some Catholics decided that they did not have to confess their sins to a priest in order to receive forgiveness of their sins. A type of "private confession to God" in the silence of their heart would suffice to receive forgiveness of their sins.

It is true that God can forgive sins when and in the manner in which he wishes. Nevertheless our Catholic faith teaches us that all sin affects both our relationship with God and the Church. In the case of mortal sin, this relationship with God and the Church is broken. Sacramental confession, in which we are assured of receiving God's forgiveness through the absolution imparted by the priest, is the ordinary means that Christ has established for the forgiveness of sin. "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven. Whose sins you shall retain are retained" (Jn. 20:22-23).

I also believe that a very simple but real reason why many Catholics have stopped going to confession is that they have forgotten "the how to." So often I have had practicing Catholics say to me, "Bishop, I don't know what to confess." Or, "I have forgotten my Act of Contrition." Or, "I'm

embarrassed.” In order to help everyone to return to the Sacrament, a simple brochure, entitled *How to Go to Confession*, will be included with the Bulletin inserts that will be provided to all parishes in the Diocese during the approaching Season of Lent.

What is fundamental in ‘making a good confession’ is an appropriate examination of conscience. Before we actually enter the Reconciliation room or confessional, we should spend some time reflecting seriously on how we are living our daily lives in relation to the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, the precepts or Commandments of the Church and the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Asking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we should honestly look at how we are living out the commitment and responsibilities of the state of life to which we have been called.

In order for the Catholic community to be properly prepared to embrace this pastoral initiative, I have asked all the priests of the Diocese of Worcester to preach on the Sacrament of Penance prior to and during the Season of Lent to help our Catholic people re-acquaint themselves with the Sacrament of Penance. I have asked our Catholic school teachers and our religious education teachers and adult faith formators to give special attention to providing catechesis and instruction on this sacrament during the days and weeks ahead. I have also asked the staff of our diocesan newspaper, “The Catholic Free Press” to print articles that will help our Catholic people come to a sound understanding of the importance of the Sacrament of Penance in their spiritual lives.

I write this pastoral letter to put in proper theological and pastoral context the diocesan-wide pastoral initiative, *Come Home to God’s Mercy*, that will take place this Season of Lent. The initiative will be that in every parish church in the Diocese of Worcester, on the Tuesday evenings during Lent, from 7:00 – 8:30 P.M. (beginning February 23), there will be a priest available to hear confessions, carrying out his “ministry of reconciliation” (2Cor. 5:18). My hope is that by making the Sacrament of Penance more available, more of our Catholic people will avail themselves of this spiritually healing and renewing sacrament.

The forty days of Lent constitute a privileged time in the Church’s liturgical life during which Catholics seek under God’s grace to change their lives and believe more sincerely in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is my fervent prayer that the devout reception of the Sacrament of Penance this Lent will help us all to be prepared spiritually to celebrate the solemn feast of our redemption in Christ Jesus during the Sacred Paschal Triduum which begins on Holy Thursday and culminates on Easter Sunday.

With every prayerful best wish and asking you to join me in invoking the powerful intercession of Mary, Our Lady of Mercy and Mother of our Redeemer, for the success of this pastoral initiative, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert J. McManus". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Robert J. McManus, S.T.D.  
Bishop of Worcester

January 10, 2010  
The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord