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## « RICH IN MERCY »

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During Lent 1997, one of the greatest discoveries we are asked to experience is how much God the Father in His Son Jesus is rich in mercy, according to what Saint Paul writes in his Letter to the Ephesians. [Ephesians 2:4] Besides, all of the People of God's sacred history as well as our own remind us of this infinite mercy.

### CALLED TO HOLINESS

We are all called to holiness: « *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect...* » [Matthew 5:48] said Jesus. We aim at this ideal, but it also happens that we move away from it. We live in a world where sin crops up in a thousand and one ways, and we are personally affected by this. We know that we are sinners, and this we willingly and humbly acknowledge. Not to realise this would be blindness on our part. Not to recognise it would be to lie: « *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us.* » [1 John 1:8, 10]

### A BREAK IN RELATIONSHIP

Sin cannot be reduced to a simple error in conduct, a wrong step, an awkward movement on our part. Rather, it is a break in our relationship with God. The sense of sin is relative our perception of God. Our perception of sin and the ability we have to recognise our own sin depend on our love of God. Sin separates from God and it affects our relationship to our brothers and sisters. According to its degree of seriousness, it can break the relationship we have with God and with our fellow creatures. God does not stop offering His forgiveness to the sinner, because God is love and therefore God forgives.

### WAYS OF RECEIVING FORGIVENESS

There are many ways for us to receive the forgiveness of God. According to the Bible, almsgiving, fasting, and fervent prayer are all sources of forgiveness. We are encouraged to use these frequently so as to remain in perfect harmony with God. Mutual forgiveness is also a way that God uses to bring us His own forgiveness. It is not in vain that we say « *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* » Sharing in the Eucharist frees us from our sins, because the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Blood of Christ shed for all, for the forgiveness of sins. Many other Christian practices can bring about the forgiveness of our daily sins.

### CONVERSION AND RECONCILIATION

In matters of serious sin, the Church requires one to receive the sacrament of reconciliation which was specifically instituted for the forgiveness of sins. This sacrament is often called the sacrament of forgiveness because it is a freely-given and merciful action stemming from God's own initiative; it is also called sacrament of reconciliation because it reconciles to God and the Church one who has distanced oneself from them. This sacrament is also known as the sacrament of penance because it implies a process of conversion, a change in direction, a change of option and behaviour, all of which are really demanding. As a matter of fact, the official name of the sacrament,

as we find it in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is sacrament of penance and reconciliation, which implies a true life process. Like all the other sacraments, the sacrament of penance and reconciliation happens at the point of an intensive encounter with God in the Church. It is a privileged place where the penitent's act of returning to the Father through confession and repentance meets with God's action of welcome His child and offering forgiveness through love.

### AT THE HEART OF THE CHURCH

All penitential movement takes place within the Church. This undertaking is encouraged and supported by the Church that calls us to conversion. On Ash Wednesday, the Church told us to « *turn away from sin and believe the Good News.* » The Church constantly prays for penitents. The penitential action culminates in the gesture of the Church's minister who, in the words of absolution restores the sinner to community with his or her brothers and sisters, reveals God's forgiveness.

### ELEMENTS OF RECONCILIATION

God is the origin of the reconciliation process. It is God who inspires the prodigal son to reflect on his behaviour, makes him recognise his sin, and encourages him to return to his father. It is only in reference to the Word of God and to responding to the Gospel that we discover ourselves as sinners, but sinners who are loved enough by God as to be forgiven. We cannot see ourselves as sinners without regretting it, otherwise there would be no forgiveness nor reconciliation, and it would be a farce. Contrition is an act of lucidity which recognises the facts as they are. Contrition is an expression of regret for having hurt someone, and an expression of one's desire to amend oneself. The Church asserts the necessity of confessing in order to ensure the greatest possible truth to the penitential undertaking. Through absolution, the minister acting in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, forgives the sinner his or her sins. What is left for the penitent to do is to continue to give tangible signs of conversion and to act in a way that will bring about healing. Word of God, contrition, confession of one's fault, absolution, and satisfaction, all of these are vital elements of the penitential process.

### LITURGY OF JOY

Whether it is celebrated privately or as a community undertaking, the sacrament of penance and reconciliation must always be a liturgy of joy, because if it confesses the sin of poor sinners that we are, it proclaims even louder God's immeasurable love which forever seeks us out in order to remind us of His love. May this Lenten period help us better understand this *love which is from age to age.*

Have a good week!



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