

THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION  
OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

**THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY**

# MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER

24 HOURS FOR THE LORD  
*MARCH 4-5, 2016*



PASTORAL GUIDE TO THE  
SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION



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# Introduction

This pastoral guide is meant to offer some suggestions for parishes and Christian communities that would like to prepare themselves for the observance of “24 Hours for the Lord” and to experience the greatest possible fruitfulness during this special time of the Jubilee of Mercy. The suggestions here can, of course, be adapted according to local needs and practices.

Pope Francis will open this event in Rome by presiding at a penitential celebration in St. Peter’s Basilica. Parishes and communities may consider the feasibility of initiating this event in the same way. For the penitential celebration, please refer to the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution (see *Rite of Penance*, 22-30).

During the Friday evening of March 4 and all day on Saturday, March 5, it will be important to have planned a special opening of the parish church and to make sacramental confession available. The event can conclude with the celebration of the Saturday Vigil Mass for Sunday.

**Part One** of this guide offers assistance to the individual penitent to prepare his or her meeting with the priest in confession in a conscientious way and seeking to overcome any inner resistance.

**Part Two** offers three testimonies of people who recount their conversion stories. These particular moments in their lives can be helpful as we reflect on our own conversion and on God's presence in each of our lives.

**Part Three** presents texts that offer thoughts for reflection that can be useful during individual preparation or during catechetical meetings so that people can grasp the meaning of this event.

**Part Four** offers a program of reading and prayer that can be used during the time the church is open so that all who approach confession can be assisted in their preparation by means of a spiritual itinerary based on the word of God that is heard, meditated upon, and prayed.



*Part One*



**A Companion to the  
Individual Celebration of the  
Sacrament of Reconciliation**

## I

### **Why Should I Go to Confession?**

This is a big question. Here is an answer that Pope Benedict XVI gave:

I would say two things. The first: naturally, if you kneel down and with true love for God pray that God forgives you, he forgives you. It has always been the teaching of the Church that [when] one, with true repentance — that is, not only in order to avoid punishment, difficulty, but for love of the good, for love of God — asks for forgiveness, he is pardoned by God. This is the first part. If I honestly know that I have done evil, and if love for goodness, a desire for goodness, is reborn within me, [and if there is] repentance for not having responded to this love, and I ask forgiveness of God, who is the Good, he gives it to me. But there is a second element: sin is not only a “personal,” individual thing between myself and God. Sin always has a social dimension, a horizontal one. With my personal sin, even if perhaps no one knows it, I have damaged the communion of the Church, I have sullied the communion of the Church, I have sullied humanity. And therefore this social, horizontal dimension of sin requires that it be absolved also at the level of the human community, of the community of the Church, almost physically. Thus this second dimension of sin, which is not only against God but concerns

the community too, demands the sacrament, and the sacrament is the great gift in which through confession, we can free ourselves from this thing and we can really receive forgiveness in the sense of a full readmission to the community of the living Church, of the Body of Christ. And so, in this sense, the necessary absolution by the priest, the sacrament, is not an imposition — let us say — on the limits of God's goodness, but, on the contrary, it is an expression of the goodness of God because it shows me also concretely, in the communion of the Church, I have received pardon and can start anew. Thus, I would say, hold on to these two dimensions: the vertical one, with God, and the horizontal one, with the community of the Church and humanity. The absolution of the priest, sacramental absolution, is necessary to really absolve me of this link with evil and to fully reintegrate me into the will of God, into the vision of God, into his Church and to give me sacramental, almost bodily, certitude: God forgives me, he receives me into the community of his children. I think that we must learn how to understand the Sacrament of Penance in this sense: as a possibility of finding again, almost physically, the goodness of the Lord, the certainty of reconciliation. (Pastoral Visit to the Rebibbia District Prison, December 18, 2011)

## II

### **The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation**

(From Compendium to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

#### **296. What is the name of this sacrament?**

It is called the sacrament of Penance, the sacrament of Reconciliation, the sacrament of Forgiveness, the sacrament of Confession, and the sacrament of Conversion.

#### **297. Why is there a sacrament of Reconciliation after Baptism?**

Since the new life of grace received in Baptism does not abolish the weakness of human nature nor the inclination to sin (that is, *concupiscence*), Christ instituted this sacrament for the conversion of the baptized who have been separated from him by sin.

#### **298. When did he institute this sacrament?**

The risen Lord instituted this sacrament on the evening of Easter when he showed himself to his apostles and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:22-23).

### **299. Do the baptized have need of conversion?**

The call of Christ to conversion continues to resound in the lives of the baptized. Conversion is a continuing obligation for the whole Church. She is holy but includes sinners in her midst.

### **302. What are the essential elements of the sacrament of Reconciliation?**

The essential elements are two: the acts of the penitent who comes to repentance through the action of the Holy Spirit, and the absolution of the priest who in the name of Christ grants forgiveness and determines the ways of making satisfaction.

### **304. Which sins must be confessed?**

All grave sins not yet confessed, which a careful examination of conscience brings to mind, must be brought to the sacrament of Penance. The confession of serious sins is the only ordinary way to obtain forgiveness.

### **305. When is a person obliged to confess mortal sins?**

Each of the faithful who has reached the age of discretion is bound to confess his or her mortal sins at least once a year and always before receiving Holy Communion.

### **309. Is a confessor bound to secrecy?**

Given the delicacy and greatness of this ministry and the respect due to people every confessor, without any exception

and under very severe penalties, is bound to maintain “the sacramental seal” which means absolute secrecy about the sins revealed to him in confession.

### **310. What are the effects of this sacrament?**

The effects of the sacrament of Penance are: reconciliation with God and therefore the forgiveness of sins; reconciliation with the Church; recovery, if it has been lost, of the state of grace; remission of the eternal punishment merited by mortal sins, and remission, at least in part, of the temporal punishment which is the consequence of sin; peace, serenity of conscience and spiritual consolation; and an increase of spiritual strength for the struggle of Christian living.

## **III**

### **Preparation for Confession**

“But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your cloak do not withhold your coat as well. Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again. And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” (Lk 6:27-36)

**Fantasies are beautiful, but life is tough. Jesus’ words seem like a paradoxical challenge that cannot be taken too seriously. If I climb up high, I can see a beautiful panorama, but I suffer from vertigo up there. I need practical advice and not judgmental moralizing. I am open, however, to being questioned, but I am not open to following just anybody without knowing where he is taking me.**

This time in Jesus’ life was extraordinarily important. The actions that Jesus performs in front of the Pharisees raise a question: Is Jesus above the law or under it? He himself answers unambiguously, “The Son of man is lord of the sabbath” (Lk 6:5) — a declaration that will cost him his life!

He retires to the mountain to pray all night. He summons his disciples and chooses twelve of them, calling them each by name. Jesus gives Simon a new name, some of the disciples are brothers, and one of them will betray him!

He descends the mountain and finds a large crowd of disciples and people from the whole region who want to touch him to receive healing.

At this point, Jesus looks up at his disciples: evidently he had been looking down, but now he fixes his gaze on them. It is time to reveal their destiny. In the sermon on the beatitudes people are called to identify personally with at least one of Jesus' categories: "those of you" who are poor, hungry, mourning, despised, reviled, or "those of you" who are rich, satisfied, insolent, proud.

As we are seated along with Jesus' disciples, we, too, are stunned and spellbound; we, too, must understand, analyze, and review our own behavior.

The noise of the world seems far off, and daily thoughts fade away unexpectedly to leave room for what is important. We are ready to let ourselves be led: he is the true Master. He comes with respect and gentleness; he does not want to violate the freedom the Father has given not just to him but to us as well. If we are open, he shares his heart with us.

"To those who have ears to hear, I say ... " (see Mt 11:15). It is a precious moment of grace with the aura of eternity. We cannot minimize or dilute the words that the Lord has said to us as he looks into our eyes.

**I am actually uncomfortable in front of this person who scrutinizes the depths of my being. I am afraid of being judged as evil or rejected. In any case, I am afraid that I will not be able to live up to his teachings that are so demanding.**

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk 6:27-28). His words take us right to the heart of relationships with

others. These paradoxical words prevent us from being satisfied with a “politically correct” truce.

To understand these words we need to have Jesus’ voice resonate in the silence while he says them. He articulates and emphasizes four instructions: **love, do good, bless, pray for**. No one can remain apathetic or unmoved. The heart is made to love, a healthy will tends toward the good, and a lucid and humble mind entrusts all that concerns us to God.

When we do not do those things, our greatest undertakings, just like insignificant times during the day, become hollow. At most we have satisfaction for only a moment. On the other hand, when we conduct ourselves the way Jesus proposes, we never have anything to be ashamed of. When we think, speak, and say good things about other people — in front of them as well as behind their backs — we do not have to fear judgment.

Up to this point things are fairly obvious. However, what surprises us is the people we are meant to treat this way: our enemies, those who hate us, those who curse us, those who abuse us. It would be nice not to have enemies and not to be anyone’s enemy, but we all have some people who do not understand us, who do not support us, who do not forgive us.

The problem occurs, then, when we find ourselves facing evil, especially if it is directly or indirectly aimed at us. From an early age we have learned to defend ourselves from what we perceive as an injustice, and we consider that necessary. So then we excuse ourselves and consider ourselves fair in responding to evil with another evil.

**What can I excuse myself for and what do I need to ask pardon for?**

“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17). Does this mean me, too?

Sin often occurs in response to a presumed injustice or when I think that God is asking too much of me. Eve and Adam are convinced that God has done them an injustice, and, believing the tempter, they disobey. Cain believes he has been unjustly discriminated against, so he commits murder.

It is usually sinners who consider themselves justified in what they do. Only if I realize that I have fallen into this kind of deception can I desire to be freed of it.

### **What can I do concretely about the evil done to me?**

Simply respond with good: “To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your cloak do not withhold your coat as well. Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again” (Lk 6:29-30).

Is it really right to act this way? Can anyone expect this kind of behavior from someone who has been mistreated? Isn't this a demand that is beyond my strength?

Even the ancient law states that equal restitution should occur for a wrong done: “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex 21:24-25).

According to Jesus, however, this is not good enough: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20). Is this an absurd demand then?

There would be no hope for peace if we do not accept his instruction: “As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” (Lk 6:31). This is the only perspective from which I can

humbly look at others and myself. If I repay the evil done to me with evil, then I increase it and spread it. But above all, I make it mine: it becomes my evil as well.

The Old Covenant was meant to educate the people of God to restrain barbarism: it condemns whoever reacts in an exaggerated way to a wrong done to them. However, in the new law, Jesus points to the possibility of transforming evil into the highest manifestation of the good by means of mercy!

### **I am not capable of doing that.**

But I am not the one who is obliged to act this way first. “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). He came to me without waiting for my conversion. He is the one who makes the first move. I can therefore be converted and believe that sin is not the last word, the inexorable fate of all human beings.

Evil is a mystery that is not easily explained. St. John Paul II, however, has offered an enlightening perspective about it: “The limit imposed upon evil . . . is ultimately Divine Mercy” (*Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections*, pp. 60-61).

I am not God; I am not the gratuitous origin of goodness. But if God forgives me, then I, too, can forgive. If God has mercy on me, then I, too, can have mercy on my brothers and sisters. And this is truly the great innovation for me and for the whole world.

The Lord calls me to take active responsibility for my own life, to take care of a friend, of another, without waiting for their initiative. If I believe that my action bears fruit, I am satisfied. At times the outcome of one of my actions can be a brother’s or a sister’s smile, which brings joy to my heart.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?”

For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again” (Lk 6:32-34). If I am acting only to get something in exchange, then I am just a wheeler-dealer headed for many disappointments. Graciousness to others that is unexpected and has no strings has a very different quality and value.

## **The Scandals**

But I am not sure if I am interested in seeking peace and charity in the Church. There has been no lack of difficulties and scandals these past few years. The media, it seems, have even given preference to the Church as one of its targets, especially in demonstrating the disloyalty of so many of its members. “How much filth there is in the Church,” said Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger during a memorable Way of the Cross at the Colosseum (Ninth station, *Via Crucis*, 2005)! Because of this, many have distanced themselves from the Church due to what they experienced or saw or due to what they thought was lacking in the Church. On the other hand, it is true that the shining testimony of so many saints, often in silence and in the midst of troubles and persecutions, continues to offer genuine hope.

### **What can I do in this situation?**

How can one begin to change the Church? “You and I are the starting point,” said Mother Teresa of Calcutta to an inter-

viewer (quoted by Pope Francis, Prayer Vigil, World Youth Day, July 27, 2013). I can start with my life being illuminated by God's grace.

My examination of conscience needs a new foundation: I am not satisfied to look at myself from the perspective of the law to see how well I have observed it, so at this time moralizing sermons are not enough for me.

I can instead examine myself beginning with God, with how he has acted toward me. I doubt that I would be ready to die for him at every moment, but I believe he sent his Son to die for me, to save me.

I could make a tiresome list of all the good things I have not received and even of the wrongs that have been done to me. I could try to justify myself that way. However, that is a slippery slope that would plunge me hopelessly into sadness and loneliness. I want to have justice because there is no peace without justice. But the highest justice is the mercy that I have received. Only this can make me just.

**The Lord has had patience with me, so I look at my sin from this perspective.**

Pope Francis, in one his daily homilies, recalled the idea that St. Thomas Aquinas had expressed that the Lord who walks with us is the also the Lord of Patience. He had patience “with all generations, with all these people who lived their history of grace and sin. God is patient, God walks with us, because he wants all of us to come to be conformed to the image of his Son ... [and] from that moment in Creation in which he gave us freedom — not independence — until today, he continues to journey with us” (Homily at Santa Marta, September 8, 2014).

God's mercy is expressed above all in his patience. It is clear how much patience the Lord has had with me. I am profoundly grateful to him for that.

**But I don't want to be made to suffer endlessly and remain that way forever.**

Therefore, I want to entrust my past to him so that he can forgive me. And, even more, so that he can help me in my weakness. This support is called "grace": it means that his help is freely given, loving, and also able to make me lovable, even in my own eyes. Whoever has been forgiven is truly a new person.

## **Bringing Joy to God**

The experience of injustice and wickedness can become the propitious occasion to fill my life with goodness: "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish" (Lk 6:35). God himself is my reward.

And here we come to the heart of what Pope Francis points to for this year: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

I will thus be a child who demonstrates his Father's traits. It almost seems as if the Father is begging for something that resembles him in my heart. There is no dad who does not deeply enjoy seeing his characteristics in his own child. And God, more so than any man, is a Father capable of joy. I can make him happy (see Lk 15:6)!

## **What good is God's forgiveness if other people's judgments remain?**

Above all, criticisms or insults no longer frighten me. If I deserve them, I know that all I can do is ask for forgiveness, but not demand it. And I want to do that.

I also want to ask the Church for the gift of reconciliation and to ask forgiveness of the people I have offended. If they are ready to be reconciled with me, then I will experience genuine joy. If they are not yet ready to do so, I can understand that. Many times I, too, am slow to forgive. I hope that the time of peace will come for them as well.

## **Possible Reparation**

The tenderness and patience of God's mercy call me to take genuine responsibility to face the wrong I have done. The humility with which I acknowledge it also moves me to do reparation for what I have done. And it gives me the courage to rediscover my dignity as a human being.

As I think about it, there are so many brothers and sisters who have loved me, who have forgiven me, who have been patient with me. I am sure that even those who are not ready now to appreciate my turnaround will nevertheless do so later, and that seed of hope will bear the fruit of peace.

## **Where do I go to ask the whole Church for forgiveness?**

The priest makes the face and authority of God present, but also the face of the Christian community. Through him I turn

back humbly to the whole Family of God. In the Eucharist [at Mass] I already express my faults together with my brothers and sisters: “I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned . . . through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” (Confiteor, *Roman Missal*).

But no one prevents me from walking forward on the path of reconciliation, not even those I have directly or indirectly offended: a friend, a family member, or even an enemy who shows me where I have been wrong. I can listen to them; I can encourage them to speak truthfully to me — with gentleness and love if possible. I can invite them to accompany me in the experience of reconciliation, praying and celebrating with me, so that my joy and God’s joy would be full! (See the parable of the two sons in Luke 15:11-32.)

### **Now I want to examine my conscience.**

I would like to use this occasion to experience the sacrament of forgiveness in all its fullness. To do that, I need to ask the Lord to enlighten my conscience so that I am able to look at my life honestly.

According to Pope Francis:

The evil one ... always tries to deceive, to lead us and make us choose the wrong path.... When the evil one succeeds in anesthetizing the conscience ... in quieting the conscience ... then he can claim a true victory, for he has become the master of that conscience.... This happens everywhere! Everyone has problems; we are all sinners! ...

The evil one is hidden; he comes with his very cultured friends, knocks on the door, asks permission, enters, and follows that man in his daily life and little by little gives him instructions. (Homily at Santa Marta, October 9, 2015)

The pope goes on in the same homily to enunciate the solution:

Discernment is necessary.... A Christian cannot rest easy, assuming that everything is fine. He must discern things and really look at where they come from, what their root is. Where does this come from? What is the origin of this opinion, these phenomena, this thing?

Know how to discern situations: this is of God and this is not of God; this comes from the Holy Spirit, and this comes from the evil one.... Vigilance is necessary, because the enemy may come.... Temptations will always return.... The evil one never tires. He was cast out, but he has patience and waits to return.... The Church counsels us to always make an examination of conscience: What happened today in my heart because of this? Where do these comments, these words, these teachings come? Who is saying this?

**Now I am ready to examine myself about mercy in my thoughts, words, deeds, and omissions.**

It is appropriate to start with the ancient law that God gave his people, the commandments. The contemporaries of Jesus, hearing the proclamation of the beatitudes, were thinking they could reach the top of the mountain without having to follow the paths that lead to it, but Jesus also said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17).

**Pope Francis summarizes the questions to ask ourselves:**

***About God***

*Do I turn to God only in my need?*

*Do I attend Mass on Sunday and holy days of obligation?*

*Do I begin and end the day with prayer?*

*Have I taken the name of God, the Blessed Virgin, or the saints in vain?*

*Have I been ashamed to say that I am a Christian?*

*What am I doing to grow spiritually?*

*How do I grow spiritually? When?*

*Do I resist God’s will? Do I insist that he does things my way?*

***About my neighbor***

*Do I know how to forgive, share with, and help my neighbor?*

*Have I slandered, stolen from, or scorned the poor and defenseless?*

*Am I envious, hot-tempered, or prejudiced?*

*Do I care for the poor and the sick?*

*Am I embarrassed by my brother’s body or my sister’s flesh?*

*Am I honest and fair with everyone, or do I foster a “throw-away culture”?*

*Have I led others to do evil?*

*Do I observe the spousal and family morality taught in the Gospel?*

*How do I fulfill my responsibility for my children’s education?*

*Do I honor and respect my parents?*

*Have I rejected a newly conceived life?*

*Have I extinguished the gift of life? Or helped others do that?*

*Do I respect the environment?*

### ***About myself***

*Am I a believer who is somewhat worldly and only somewhat believing?*

*Do I overindulge in eating, drinking, smoking, or being entertained?*

*Am I overly concerned about my physical well-being and my possessions?*

*How I do use my time?*

*Am I lazy?*

*Do I desire to be served?*

*Do I love and safeguard purity in my heart, thoughts, and deeds?*

*Do I plot vengeance or harbor resentments?*

*Am I gentle and humble? A peacemaker?*

(See Pope Francis’ booklet *Safeguard Your Heart*, distributed after the Angelus, February 22, 2015)

Now I can examine myself about the concrete actions that mercy requires and by which we will be judged:

*Have I given food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty?*

*Have I welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked?*

*Have I set aside time and had the courage to visit the sick and the imprisoned?*

*Have I helped anyone be released from doubts that make him or her fearful and that are often the source of loneliness?*

*Have I participated in overcoming ignorance by supporting education, especially for the young?*

*Have I told those who live in sin about the need for conversion?*

*Have I been a neighbor to someone who is lonely and afflicted?*

*Have I forgiven those who offend me and resisted every kind of resentment and hate?*

*Have I been patient with others based on the example of God who is so patient with us?*

*Have I commended my brothers and sisters to prayer?*

(See *Misericordiae Vultus*, 15)

Now **I am ready** and eager to entrust everything to God's loving kindness and that of my brothers and sisters. I will therefore willingly accept the **penance** the priest gives me. I want to be given a **concrete task** through which I can express my desire for **conversion** and **reparation**.

The encounter with mercy will be **joyful** above all for those who are close to me. The Father summons the whole Church to celebrate (see Lk 15:9-10). I can conclude my **thanksgiving** with a psalm:

*Psalm 103*

Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
and all that is within me, bless his holy name!  
Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits,  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with mercy and the compassion,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works vindication  
and justice for all who are oppressed.  
He made known his ways to Moses,  
his acts to the people of Israel.  
The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in mercy.  
He will not always chide,  
nor will he keep his anger for ever.  
He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his mercy toward those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.  
As a father pities his children,  
so the LORD pities those who fear him.  
For he knows our frame;  
he remembers that we are dust.  
As for man, his days are like grass;  
he flourishes like a flower of the field;

for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.  
But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting  
upon those who fear him,  
and his righteousness to children's children,  
to those who keep his covenant  
and remember to do his commandments.

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,  
and his kingdom rules over all.  
Bless the LORD, O you his angels,  
you mighty ones who do his word,  
hearkening to the voice of his word!  
Bless the LORD, all his hosts,  
his ministers that do his will!  
Bless the LORD, all his works,  
in all places of his dominion.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

#### IV

### **Individual Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance**

*At the time you present yourself as a penitent, the priest cordially receives you, speaking words of encouragement to you. He makes the merciful Lord present.*

*Together with the priest you make the Sign of the Cross and say,*  
**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

*The priest helps you to prepare yourself to trust in God with these or similar words:*

**May God, who has enlightened every heart,  
help you to know your sins  
and trust in his mercy.**

The priest, according to the occasion, reads or recites from memory a text from sacred Scripture that speaks about the mercy of God and invites the person to convert. For example:

**After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” (Mk 1:14-15, NAB)**

At this point, you confess your sins. If necessary the priest will help you, asking you questions and giving suitable advice, proposing a penance. He will invite you, finally, to demonstrate your commitment to conversion by reciting an act of contrition or some other similar formula. For example:

**Remember your compassion and your mercy, O  
LORD,  
for they are ages old.  
Remember no more the sins of my youth;  
remember me according to your mercy  
because of your goodness, LORD.  
(Ps 25:6-7, NAB)**

Now the priest will stand and lay his hands on your head, saying:

**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.**

*You answer:* **Amen.**

*After absolution, the priest says:* **Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.**

*You answer:* **His mercy endures forever.**

*Then the priest will dismiss you, saying:* **The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.**

*(See Rite of Penance)*

## V

### **What Should I Do after Confession?**

#### **Live in the Grace Received in the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a privileged occasion in which God grants his mercy. If people think they can merit salvation in some way, any attempt to attain it will generate the frustration of never being able “to do enough” (*satis facere*) to merit that grace.

The relationship between God and human beings is not based on a dynamic of people expiating their own sins. The confession of sin, even when repeated many times, does not make a person “worthy” of God’s love. Instead, it brings awareness that the grace received through the sacrament is a gift that transforms the heart and is the path that leads to the forgiveness of sins. God waits for and welcomes even small steps by any person who comes back to him, and he does not wait for perfection to grant his benevolence. This allows human beings to abandon themselves to the Father’s embrace and to start over again. The celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation does not make people “sinless” but strengthens the desire to respond to God’s freely given love.

Renewed through the experience of the sacrament, life for believers now becomes an occasion for giving to others what they have received from God. Just as in a human relationship in which the beloved desires to return the goodness received from the lover, so, too, people experience that the freely given love

they have received from God becomes the model and example for their lives. People who have received God's forgiveness and mercy become aware that they will have peace only when they succeed in passing on to others what they themselves have been given. This is Jesus' teaching to the apostles at the Last Supper: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done" (Jn 13:15).

The example of the conversion of Zacchaeus, who radically changed his life and restored more than what the law required, demonstrates that deep emotions arise in the heart of a person who has been forgiven, and these emotions often change a person's way of living and orient him or her to follow Christ in a manner inspired by the Gospel (see Lk 19:1-10). People who have experienced this grace will sense the need to reorder their personal relationships — gradually or all at once — and offer forgiveness to brothers and sisters and receive it from them. From this initial reconciliation, a dynamic of interior renewal is released that affects relationships and even people's understanding of the meaning of existence and of the world. Resisting this desire for change, which is an authentic movement of the heart inspired by the Holy Spirit, would mean blocking the gift of grace that transforms a person's life and emotions. After confession, then, it is necessary to express the impulse toward love that permeates the soul and respond to the Lord by rethinking the priorities of life and loving the brothers and sisters who live next to us in a new way.

Accepting the loving forgiveness of the Father stirs people to come out of themselves, out of their comfort zone of affections and relationships, in order to place themselves in service to brothers and sisters who are afflicted by poverty, misery, sickness, and sorrow. A deeper sensitivity develops with respect to the suffering of others, and charity becomes

the response to the grace received, conforming actions and emotions to those of Christ Jesus (see Eph 5:1-2).

Since sin breaks the communion with brothers and sisters, this sacrament reconciles people to the ecclesial community. The gift of the Spirit, which the Father lavishes on all his sons and daughters through Christ, communicates the power to bring about this deep communion for people on their path to perfect unity (see Jn 17:11-23). This thirst for unity is expressed in the Eucharistic prayer of the Holy Mass in which we ask, “Grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ” (*Roman Missal*). The Eucharist is the feast of forgiven sinners who gather together to become one new reality in Christ Jesus.

The ecclesial community becomes the special place in which communion is preserved and experienced, making what is narrated in Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47 present and alive. The Church is the maternal womb in which the Word is heard, in which the Father is prayed to in a united way, and in which the bread of the Eucharist is shared. The Church is not a place of perfect people but of those on the path to perfection; it is not a place of holy people but of those who are clothed in God’s holiness through grace. The Church is the tent of God in the midst of his people — the people to whom the Lord Jesus assures his presence and his loving mercy. Reconciliation, then, culminates in a rediscovery of one’s parish community, the dwelling place of God’s presence among his people in which the assembly celebrates the mysteries of salvation in the course of the liturgical year, as believers await the glorious day in which our Savior, Jesus Christ, will take his seat on his glorious throne (see Mt 25:31-46).



## *Part Two*



# Reflections

Christians are called to ongoing conversion, to a continuous return to the merciful Father who waits for the prodigal son with open arms. Some of us are also granted a grace of conversion that is quite special through a deep and moving experience of God that touches the heart of someone who is far away and changes it in an instant. St. Peter, astonished at the conversion of Cornelius, says, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). He then turns to his Jewish brethren, who are scandalized at the conversion of pagans because they were considered unworthy of the Lord’s grace, and asks, “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47).

We present three testimonies here of both historical and contemporary people who experienced an intense moment of conversion. Like the apostle Peter, we are astonished and are grateful to God that he is not a respecter of persons. Their experiences of conversion make us reflect and consider how we are experiencing our return to God.

## The Conversion of G. K. Chesterton

Be willing to talk openly with your God of mercy  
who wants to speak words of pardon  
and lavish his graces on you.

— St. Faustina, *Diary*, 1485

### A New Experience

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in 1874 in Kensington, a district in London. In his 1937 autobiography, he states he was “baptized according to the formularies of the Church of England in the little church of St. George opposite the large Waterworks Tower that dominated that ridge.” And then he jokingly adds, “I do not allege any significance in the relation of the two buildings; and I indignantly deny that the church was chosen because it needed the whole water-power of West London to turn me into a Christian” (*Autobiography*, 2006 edition, 1).

During a happy childhood, Chesterton recalls that “the background of all that world was not merely atheism, but atheist orthodoxy, and even atheist respectability” (146). In that intellectual and religious atmosphere his family stood out: “My own parents were rather exceptional, among people so intelligent, in believing at all in a personal God or in personal immortality” (124).

Despite his intelligence and his acute powers of observation, he went somewhat unnoticed in school and summarizes

the time of his education as “the period during which I was being instructed by somebody I did not know, about something I did not want to know” (61).

During his studies, Chesterton went through a profound spiritual and intellectual crisis that immersed him in a world of doubt:

All I had hitherto heard of Christian theology had alienated me from it. I was a pagan at the age of twelve, and a complete agnostic by the age of sixteen.... I read the scientific and skeptical literature of my time.... Our grandmothers were quite right when they said that ... free-thinkers unsettled the mind. They do. They unsettled mine horribly. The rationalist made me question whether reason was of any use whatever; and when I had finished Herbert Spencer I had got as far as doubting (for the first time) whether evolution had occurred at all. As I laid down the last of Colonel Ingersoll’s atheistic lectures the dreadful thought broke across my mind, “Almost thou persuadedest me to be a Christian.” I was in a desperate way. (*Orthodoxy*, 2015 edition, 51-52)

Losing himself in so many questions that had no answers, doubting in doubts themselves, Chesterton reached the unique security of immutable truth:

It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one’s own. It is always easy to be a modernist; as it is easy to be a snob. To have fallen into any of those open traps of

error and exaggeration which fashion after fashion and sect after sect set along the historic path of Christendom — that would indeed have been simple. It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect. (*Orthodoxy*, 62)

The discovery of the truth and beauty of the faith has consequences on a personal level as well. When Chesterton was asked why he converted to the Catholic Church, he answered:

“To get rid of my sins.” For there is no other religious system that does really profess to get rid of people’s sins. It is confirmed by the logic, which to many seems startling, by which the Church deduces that sin confessed and adequately repented is actually abolished; and that the sinner does really begin again as if he had never sinned.... And in that brief ritual [of confession], God has really remade him in His own image. He is now a new experiment of the Creator. He is as much a new experiment as he was when he was really only five [minutes] old. He stands, as I said, in the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man. The accumulations of time can no

longer terrify. He may be grey and gouty; but he is only five minutes old.... The doctrine I should always have liked to teach ... is the idea of taking things with gratitude, and not taking things for granted. Thus the Sacrament of Penance gives a new life, and reconciles a man to all living, but it does not do it as the optimists and the hedonists and the heathen preachers of happiness do it. The gift is given at a price, and is conditioned by a confession.... I have said that this rude and primitive religion of gratitude did not save me from ingratitude; from sin which is perhaps most horrible to me because it is ingratitude.... I had found only one religion which dared to go down with me into the depths of myself. (*Autobiography*, 324-325,334)

G. K. Chesterton died in Beaconsfield in 1936, leaving a brilliant and vast legacy of reflections and publications that continue to inspire people yet today in their search for freedom and for the Truth that never deceives.

## The Conversion of Pope Francis

When the Lord looks at someone, he saves them.

— Ambrose, “Psalm 45,” 15  
Commentary of St. Ambrose  
on Twelve Psalms (2000), 265

### It Was September 21

For him it was a great gift that sneaked up on him unnoticed. It was September 21 and, like many young people, seventeen-year-old Jorge Bergoglio was getting ready to go out with his friends for Students’ Day. But he decided to start the day by visiting his parish church. He was a practicing Catholic who attended the Buenos Aires church of San José de Flores.

When he arrived, he met a priest he’d never seen before. The priest conveyed such a great sense of spirituality that Bergoglio decided to confess to him. He was greatly surprised when he realized that this was not just another confession, but a confession that awakened his faith. A confession that revealed his religious vocation, to the point where he decided not to go to the train station to meet his friends, but instead went home with a firm conviction. He wanted to — he had to — become a priest.

“Something strange happened to me in that confession. I don’t know what it was, but it changed my life. I think it surprised me, caught me with my guard down,” he recalls more than half a century later. Bergoglio now has his own theory about that mystery. “It was the surprise, the astonishment of

a chance encounter,” he says. “I realized that they were waiting for me. That is the religious experience: the astonishment of meeting someone who has been waiting for you all along. From that moment on, for me, God is the one who te primerea — ‘springs it on you.’ You search for him, but he searches for you first. You want to find him, but he finds you first.” He adds that it was not only the “astonishment of the encounter” which revealed to him his religious vocation, but the compassionate way in which God called him — in such a way that, over time, it became a source of inspiration for his own ministry....

“Religious vocation is a call from God to your heart, whether you are waiting for it consciously or unconsciously. I was always very moved by a breviary that said Jesus beheld Matthew with an attitude that, translated, would be something like ‘by having compassion and by choosing’ (*miserando atque eligendo*). That was precisely the way I felt that God saw me during that confession. And that is the way he wants me always to look upon others: with much compassion and as if I were choosing them for him, not excluding anyone, because everyone is chosen by the love of God. ‘By having compassion and by choosing’ was the motto of my consecration as a bishop, and it’s one of the centerpieces of my religious experience: service in the name of compassion and the choice of people based on a suggestion. A suggestion that could be colloquially summarized like this: ‘Look, I ask for you by name, I chose you, and the only thing I ask is that you let yourself be loved.’ This is the suggestion I received.”

Excerpted from Chapter 4 of *Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio: His Life in His Own Words*, Pope Francis with Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti (New York: G. P. Putman’s Sons, 2013), 33-34,40-41.

## The Conversion of Leah Darrow

But what is it that I love in loving Thee? Not physical beauty, nor the splendor of time, nor the radiance of the light — so pleasant to our eyes — nor the sweet melodies of the various kinds of songs, nor the fragrant smell of flowers and ointments and spices; not manna and honey, not the limbs embraced in physical love — it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet it is true that I love a certain kind of light and sound and fragrance and food and embrace in loving my God, who is the light and sound and fragrance and food and embracement of my inner man — where that light shines into my soul which no place can contain, where time does not snatch away the lovely sound, where no breeze disperses the sweet fragrance, where no eating diminishes the food there provided, and where there is an embrace that no satiety comes to sunder. This is what I love, when I love my God.

— St. Augustine, *Confessions*

(trans. Albert Cook Outler, 2002, 175-176)

## Made for More

I was born and raised Catholic, but around fifteen years old, I began to drift from the practice of my faith. I lost my virginity at fifteen years old and unfortunately believed that, because of my sins, I no longer had a place in the Catholic Church. I was scared Jesus wouldn't really forgive me, and so I slowly did not practice my faith anymore. I stopped receiving the sacraments and stopped believing that God would really make me happy. That's when I began to look to the world, to popular culture, to give me what I wanted.

I believed that to be somebody in this world I needed to be rich, famous, and beautiful. This attitude led me to audition for the TV show *America's Next Top Model*. I was chosen to be on "Cycle 3," and this began my modeling career. After my time on the show ... I decided to move to New York City and pursue modeling full time. I was able to get jobs on the runways in New York City with major clothing labels, and my picture was on the side of taxicabs and on the billboards in New York's Times Square. I thought all of this would make me happy. I thought making a lot of money, fame, and being told I was beautiful would make me feel successful and wanted. But none of these things made me feel happy, at peace, or fulfilled. I was surprised that all of the fame, money, and popularity ended up making me feel more alone and empty.

I always knew I was made for something great and thought that my life as a professional model was that "something great." I received a phone call from an international magazine one day, and they offered me a modeling job that would show people a different side to me. The magazine mentioned that I

had always portrayed a nice, safe look, but they thought I had something more to offer — that I could be sexy. I agreed to the photo shoot and thought it would help my career since the magazine is distributed all over the world.

On the day of the photo shoot, I was feeling irritated with my current life. My live-in boyfriend of two years said he loved me but didn't think we were ready for marriage, my party lifestyle, filled with drunken nights, was getting old, and I began to question my purpose in life. I was tired of it all but still decided to show up for the magazine photo shoot.

As I got into hair and makeup, they wheeled in a rack of clothes for me to choose from. I did not feel comfortable with any of the outfits, and it then became very clear to me that the “more” they thought I had to offer was being a body to be objectified. I asked for a different set of clothing options to model but was informed that if I did not wear what they offered, I had to leave. I was scared and embarrassed, so I told them it was no problem; I picked out a few outfits, and the photo shoot began.

Halfway through the shoot, I accidentally looked right into the flash from the camera. I asked for a few seconds to regain my focus. During the next few seconds, something happened that I did not expect or plan. As I blinked to regain my focus, I saw an image of myself inside my head — as if a little movie was playing. I was wearing the outfit that I was modeling; however, I had both hands cupped together at my waist which I then raised all the way up as if I was offering them to someone. At this time, I felt a massive feeling of disappointment, and so, I brought my hands back down to see what was disappointing. As I looked into my hands, I saw nothing. Nothing. I had nothing to offer, nothing to give. A message was placed on my heart at this time that said to me, “I made

you for more.” I knew that this message was true. I *was* made for more than the life I was currently leading. God had given me so many gifts and talents, but I wasted them all on myself.

The photographer began snapping his fingers saying, “Leah, focus, let’s get back to the shoot.” But I couldn’t. Regardless of my past, I knew God was speaking to my heart and reminding me of my dignity and call to greatness. I told the photographer I had to leave and began walking toward the door. Before I walked out of the photo shoot, he said, “If you leave, you’ll be a nobody.” All I could say to him was, “Do you promise?”

I had been away from the Catholic faith for over ten years, and my sins and lifestyle were not bringing me peace. However, the reminder that I had been made for more and the promise of Revelation 21:5, “Behold, I make all things new,” was enough for me to give God another chance.

I knew I needed to change my life but felt overwhelmed with all of the choices of what to do first and how to do it. So, I began first with God. The one step I was sure of was reconciliation. I needed to reconcile myself with God, to ask for forgiveness and the grace to live a better life. I had not been to the Sacrament of Reconciliation in years and was nervous. But I remembered again that I was made for more, and so I chose to go to confession immediately.

In that confession, I did not pretend to be a better person than I was. I was honest and gave Christ all of me. In return, Jesus gave me absolute and complete forgiveness, peace, joy, and a new beginning. I believe Jesus was speaking to my heart during that photo shoot, and he is right — we are made for more.

It is never a question of *if* God will forgive you, it is only a question of *when* — and we control the when. The mercy of Christ awaits all who seek it. I wish I had not been so selfish

and prideful in my past so that I could have begun my journey with Christ sooner. But fear kept me from Christ. I beg all Christians, do not allow fear to steal your joy and your place with Christ. “We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father’s love for us and our real capacity to become the image of His Son Jesus” (Pope John Paul II, Homily, World Youth Day, July 28, 2002).

You have been made for more. I pray that you may experience the peace and joy of Christ’s mercy and love. And remember, “The ways of the Lord are not easy, but we were not created for an easy life, but for great things, for goodness” (Pope Benedict XVI, Address to German Pilgrims, April 25, 2005).

— See *Leah Darrow: From Top Model to Role Model*, DVD, 2011

## Inspiring Texts

The confession of sins has a history as long as the history of humanity. On the first occasion of the transgression of divine law, we observe how sin drives Adam and Eve to hide themselves. For the first time in humanity's history we encounter God, who is looking for them in the Garden of Eden, asking, "Where are you?" (Gn 3:9). It is an experience common to all of us: trying to hide our sin. At the other end of the spectrum, however, we have the liberating experience of the confession of sins: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).

We present some texts here that can inspire us to confess our sins and experience the forgiveness of God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

## **St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina** **(Francesco Forgione, 1887-1968)**

“His confessional was a tribunal of mercy and firmness; even the vast majority of those who were sent away without receiving absolution were eager to return and find peace and sympathy again as a new period of spiritual life was already beginning for them. Mercy and firmness. Condemnation for sin, forgiveness for the repentant sinner.”

Domenico Mondrone, “*Ricordo di Padre Pio*,”  
*Civiltà Cattolica*, vol. 119, no. 4 (1968), 149.

“During a visit in 1928, Padre Pio’s mother said to him, ‘We confess everything that we can remember or know, but perhaps God sees other things that we cannot recall.’ Pio replied: ‘If we put into [our confession] all our good will and we have the intention to confess everything — all that we can know or remember — the mercy of God is so great that He will include and erase even what we cannot remember or know.’”

*Padre Pio: The Wonder Worker*, Ed. Brother Francis Mary  
(Ignatius Press, 1999), 128

“In our thoughts and in confession, we must not dwell on sins that were previously confessed. Because of our contrition, Jesus forgave them at the tribunal of penitence. It was there that he faced us and our poverty, like a creditor standing before an insolvent debtor. With a gesture of infinite generosity, he tore up and destroyed the promissory notes that we signed with our sins and that we would never have been able to pay without the help of his divine mercy. To think back

over those sins, to want to dig them up again just to have forgiveness for them again because of a doubt that they were not really and completely remitted, isn't that really a distrust in the goodness he showed when he tore up the debt that we contracted through sinning?... If it comforts your souls, turn your thoughts to your offenses against justice, wisdom, and the infinite mercy of God, but only do so to weep redeeming tears of repentance and love.

*Padre Pio, quoted in Giorgio Festa,  
Tra i misteri della scienza e le luci della fede  
(Arte Della Stampa, 1933), 169*

**St. Leopold of Castelnuovo  
(Bogdan Ivan Mandić, 1866-1942)**

“Rev. Father Leopoldo da Castelnuovo did not succeed in teaching and preaching due to a speech impediment and his frail physical condition.... In confession, however, he held an extraordinary fascination because of his immense knowledge, his keen intuition, and especially his holiness of life.”

*Annali dei Cappuccini Veneti dell' anno (1923)*

“People say that I am too good, but if someone comes and kneels before me, is that not sufficient proof that he wants God's forgiveness?”

Leopold, quoted in Father Antonio Sicari,  
*La misericordia nei santi*

“Look, he himself set the example! We were not the ones who died for souls, but he poured out his divine blood. Therefore, we must treat souls as he has taught us with his example.

If the Crucified One were to reproach me for ‘too much generosity,’ I could say to him, ‘Blessed Lord, you are the one who gave me this bad example.’”

Leopold, quoted in Lorenzo da Fara,  
*Leopoldo Mandić: L’umanità, la santità* (Padova, 1987)

“To the people who went to Father Leopold and expressed their uneasiness about their spiritual coldness toward God, he would say, ‘Until there is brotherly love and reciprocal esteem among you, as long as jealousy and envy reign among you, you cannot speak of fervor or holiness. The silence of the Lord will only increase.’”

Danilo Zanella, *Alle sette chiese:  
Apocalisse epifania della speranza*  
(Paoline Editoriale Libri, 2004), 143

### **Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta (Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, 1910-1997)**

“With the witness of her life, Mother Teresa reminds everyone that *the evangelizing mission of the Church passes through charity*, nourished by prayer and listening to God’s word.”

St. John Paul II,  
*Homily for the Beatification of Mother Teresa*,  
October 19, 2003

“Confession makes the soul strong because a really good confession — the confession of a child in sin coming back to her Father — always begets humility, and humility is strength. We may go to confession as often as we want and to whom we want, but we are not encouraged to seek spiritual direction from any and every source. The confessional is not a place for

useless conversation or gossip. The topic should be my sins, my sorrow, my forgiveness: how to overcome my temptations, how to practice virtue, how to increase in the love of God.”

Mother Teresa, *Jesus, The Word to Be Spoken: Prayers and Meditations for Every Day of the Year* (Servant, 1986), 11

“One thing is necessary for us — confession. Confession is nothing but humility in action. We call it penance, but really it is a sacrament of love, a sacrament of forgiveness. That is why confession should not be a place in which to talk for long hours about our difficulties. It is a place where I allow Jesus to take away from me everything that divides, that destroys. When there is a gap between me and Christ, when my love is divided, anything can come to fill the gap. We should be very simple and childlike in confession. ‘Here I am as a child going to the Father.’ If a child is not yet spoiled and has not learned to tell lies, he will tell everything. This is what I mean by being childlike. Confession is a beautiful act of great love. Only in confession can we go as sinners with sin and come out as sinners without sin.

Mother Teresa, *Jesus, The Word to Be Spoken*, 12

“And how will you find Jesus? He has made it so easy for us. ‘Love one another as I loved you.’ If we have gone astray, we have the beautiful sacrament of confession. We go to confession a sinner full of sin. We come from confession a sinner without sin by the greatness of the mercy of God. No need for us to despair. No need for us to commit suicide. No need for us to be discouraged — no need, if we have understood the tenderness of God’s love. You are precious to him. He loves you, and he loves you so tenderly that he has carved you on the palm

of his hand. These are God's words written in the Scripture. You know that. Remember that when your heart feels restless, when your heart feels hurt, when your heart feels like breaking — then remember, 'I am precious to him. He loves me. He has called me by my name. I am his. He loves me. God loves me.' And to prove that love he died on the cross.

Mother Teresa, *Jesus, The Word to Be Spoken*, 12-13

### **Pope Benedict XVI**

(The following is from the catechetical meeting of Pope Benedict XVI with children who had received their first Communion at St. Peter's Square, October 15, 2005)

*Livia: "Holy Father, before the day of my first Communion I went to confession. I have also been to confession on other occasions. I wanted to ask you, Do I have to go to confession every time I receive Communion, even when I have committed the same sins? Because I realize that they are always the same."*

I will tell you two things. The first, of course, is that you do not always have to go to confession before you receive Communion unless you have committed such serious sins that they need to be confessed. Therefore, it is not necessary to make one's confession before every Eucharistic Communion. This is the first point. It is only necessary when you have committed a really serious sin, when you have deeply offended Jesus, so that your friendship is destroyed and you have to start again. Only in that case, when you are in a state of "mortal" sin, in other words, grave sin, is it necessary to go to confession before Communion. This is my first point.

My second point: Even if, as I said, it is not necessary to go to confession before each Communion, it is very helpful to

confess with a certain regularity. It is true: our sins are always the same, but we clean our homes, our rooms, at least once a week, even if the dirt is always the same, in order to live in cleanliness, in order to start again. Otherwise, the dirt might not be seen, but it builds up. Something similar can be said about the soul, for me myself: If I never go to confession, my soul is neglected, and in the end I am always pleased with myself and no longer understand that I must always work hard to improve, that I must make progress. And this cleansing of the soul which Jesus gives us in the sacrament of confession helps us to make our consciences more alert, more open, and hence it also helps us to mature spiritually and as human persons. Therefore, two things: Confession is only necessary in the case of a serious sin, but it is very helpful to confess regularly in order to foster the cleanliness and beauty of the soul and to mature day by day in life.

*Anna: "Dear Pope, can you explain to us what Jesus meant when he said to the people who were following him: 'I am the bread of life'?"*

First of all, perhaps we should explain clearly what bread is. Today, we have a refined cuisine, rich in very different foods, but in simpler situations bread is the basic source of nourishment; and when Jesus called himself the bread of life, the bread is, shall we say, the initial, an abbreviation that stands for all nourishment. And as we need to nourish our bodies in order to live, so we also need to nourish our spirits, our souls, and our wills. As human persons, we do not only have bodies but also souls; we are thinking beings with minds and wills. We must also nourish our spirits and our souls, so that they can develop and truly attain their fulfillment.

And, therefore, if Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," it

means that Jesus himself is the nourishment we need for our soul, for our inner self, because the soul also needs food. And technical things do not suffice, although they are so important. We really need God's friendship, which helps us to make the right decisions. We need to mature as human beings. In other words, Jesus nourishes us so that we can truly become mature people and our lives become good.

*Adrian: "Holy Father, they've told us that today we will have Eucharistic Adoration. What is it? How is it done? Can you explain it to us? Thank you."*

We will see straightaway what adoration is and how it is done, because everything has been properly prepared for it: we will say prayers, we will sing, kneel, and in this way we will be in Jesus' presence.

But, of course, your question requires a deeper answer: not only how you do adoration, but what adoration is. I would say, adoration is recognizing that Jesus is my Lord, that Jesus shows me the way to take, and that I will live well only if I know the road that Jesus points out and follow the path he shows me.

Therefore, adoration means saying, "Jesus, I am yours. I will follow you in my life, I never want to lose this friendship, this communion with you." I could also say that adoration is essentially an embrace with Jesus in which I say to him: "I am yours, and I ask you, please stay with me always."

*PART FOUR*

## Resources

The Holy Scriptures were not given to us  
that we should enclose them in books,  
but that we should engrave them upon our hearts.

St. John Chrysostom  
*Homilies on the Gospel of John*

## Lectio Divina, Plan 1

### THE WORD OF GOD

#### ... IS HEARD

*Mark 10:46-52*

And they came to Jericho; and as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; rise, he is calling you." And throwing off his cloak he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Master, let me receive my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

#### ... IS MEDITATED UPON

Bartimaeus ... a name that merely indicates his family origin, his past ("son of Timaeus"), but certainly not his present, that is devoid of potential and of any future plans. He became

blind; he lost his vision. He will continue to be surrounded by light, but his eyes will never see any images again. At one time, his eyes took in the marvels of creation, but not anymore. From light to darkness, he is condemned to live at the margins of life like someone at the end of an alley with no exit.

How his human condition resembles our own! At one time the eyes of our souls were inundated with the light of the presence of God. Then, a wrong choice, a sin we committed, a closing off to love made us fall into the deepest darkness of being distant from God. We believed Satan's lie: "Now there is and will only be darkness for you. God has abandoned you. Your mistake has consigned you to eternal darkness."

We have remained for too long like blind people who are surrounded by shining light but are incapable of seeing the luminous presence of God who used to be reflected in us and around us.

And then an announcement: "Jesus is coming." He is coming for you. Call out to him, appeal to him, and if your eyes are so blind as to not recognize his features, then use other senses. Seek him, discover him hidden along the paths of life, open yourself to the love he has in response to the wounds of our humanity, and his brilliant light will open your eyes.

You will discover that the tempter has made you believe too many lies, the first of which is that you are irremediably blind. It is not true: your dignity as a child of God cannot ever be nullified. Your blindness is in reality only a habit of being accustomed to the dark, and, like eyes that have been closed for too long, your eyes are almost dazzled at the appearance of the powerful light of God!

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus is asking you, that you take stock of the actual significant needs in your life.

What can truly make you happy? What can truly fulfill you?  
What particular light does the eyes of your soul need?

Perhaps it is a pardon not given, perhaps a “grace” not articulated, perhaps a reconciliation that has been delayed for too long. Perhaps you have too many unresolved issues with a neighbor or even with yourself. Perhaps you too are a victim of the pride that puts your “I” in the place of God.

Despite your being immersed in light, all of the sicknesses of the soul that little by little close the eyelids of your heart confine you to the darkness of the most unimaginable solitude.

Bartimaeus knows he needs light so as not to end his life on the margins of life, knocked down to the ground and trodden underfoot, condemned to survive on scraps from the alms of others. Bartimaeus moves all of us to recognize the true light that never fades, the unique merciful Love that is able to heal every wound in our souls so that, like him, we too can begin to follow Jesus. Only Jesus can guide us, only he can show us the path to fullness of life, that shining path of light and joy that nothing and no one can destroy.

## **... IS PRAYED**

*Isaiah 58:4b-10*

Fasting like yours this day  
will not make your voice to be heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day for a man to humble himself?  
Is it to bow down his head like a rush,  
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?  
Will you call this a fast,  
and a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
    to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
    to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
    and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
    and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover him,  
    and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?  
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
    and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you,  
    the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
    you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.  
If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,  
    the pointing of the finger, and  
    speaking wickedness,  
if you pour yourself out for the hungry  
    and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,  
then shall your light rise in the darkness  
    and your gloom be as the noonday.

*Psalm 91*

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust."

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;

he will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,  
nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand;  
but it will not come near you.

You will only look with your eyes  
and see the recompense of the wicked.

Because you have made the LORD your refuge,  
the Most High your habitation,  
no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.

For he will give his angels charge of you  
to guard you in all your ways.

On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you dash your foot against a stone.

You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample

under foot.

Because he cleaves to me in love, I will deliver him;  
I will protect him, because he knows my name.  
When he calls to me, I will answer him;  
I will be with him in trouble,  
I will rescue him and honor him.  
With long life I will satisfy him,  
and show him my salvation.

*A Prayer by St. Silouan*

Where art Thou, my merciful God?  
Where art Thou, O Light that never sets?  
Wherefore hast Thou hidden Thyself from me,  
and I no longer behold Thy meek and  
radiant countenance? ...  
My heart has loved Thee, O Lord,  
and therefore I yearn for Thee  
and seek Thee in tears.

Thou has adorned the sky with stars,  
The air with clouds,  
and the earth with seas and rivers and green gardens  
where birds sing,  
but my soul is filled with love of Thee  
and knows no desire to look upon this world,  
beautiful though it may be.

Only for Thee does my soul long, O Lord!  
I cannot forget Thy meek, gentle gaze,  
and weeping I pray to Thee:

Come and take up Thine abode,  
and cleanse me of my sins.

From the height of Thy glory  
Thou seest how my soul yearns after Thee.  
Forsake not Thy servant. Hear me as  
I cry unto Thee, like the Prophet David,  
“Have mercy upon me, O God,  
According to Thy loving kindness.”

Archimandrite Sophrony,  
*Saint Silouan the Athonite*  
(St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press,  
1999), 283-284

## **Lectio Divina, Plan 2**

### **THE WORD OF GOD**

#### **... IS HEARD**

*Luke 6:36-41*

“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

He also told them a parable: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

#### **... IS MEDITATED UPON**

Judging means denying the possibility that a brother or sister can improve; it means taking away the possibility of the rehabilitating experience of feeling precious in another’s eyes (see Is 43:4). Judging and condemning are the polar opposites of mercy, which is instead a giving. The merciful love of the

Father never takes away or relegates to a corner but always fills up. What gets filled up is our hearts, which are too often void of a healthy self-esteem based on the lofty dignity that is inherent in human nature itself. Deprived of that, our hearts are full of illusion, competition, presumption, and selfishness.

People who often judge, who indulge in the condemnation of others, are people who have not known such a Love for themselves. When people are incapable of relating to brothers and sisters on the same level, then destroying the other becomes the only way for them not to be overwhelmed by their own error, which has probably been repeated so many times it has become a habit.

The key to the path toward the truth about ourselves is precisely to have the courage to name our defects specifically, to recognize their breadth and depth, and to understand their consequences.

Mercy is accompanied by truth. It can be painful to admit to ourselves our own failings, but it is freeing. Only then will we be able to see in others not just their errors or their “being mistaken” — which are most often projections of what is inside of us — but rather the subtleties of the beauty in their souls, those features of light that too often are concealed behind big and small troubles.

More than that, when we have been touched by the tenderness of Love and confirmed in the profound truth of who we are, then we will be able to correct our brothers and sisters and help them recognize the particular things in their lives that they need to improve, those “specks in their eyes” that hinder the contemplation of the work of art that is hidden in every human being.

It is in receiving mercy that we will become merciful. It is

in letting ourselves be touched by the Father's love that we will be able to impart mercy to others generously.

Otherwise, as victims of blind pride that prevents us from practicing the truth, we will be doing character assassinations, climbing up into pulpits and sitting on juries that we have set up, and we will end by experiencing a deep loneliness, the antechamber of hell that is already on this earth.

### **... IS PRAYED**

#### *Psalm 15*

O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?  
Who shall dwell on your holy mountain?

He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right,  
and speaks truth from his heart;  
who does not slander with his tongue,  
and does no evil to his friend,  
nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;  
in whose eyes a reprobate is despised,  
but who honors those who fear the LORD;  
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;  
who does not put out his money at interest,  
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these things shall never be moved.

#### *Psalm 64*

Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint;  
preserve my life from dread of the enemy,  
hide me from the secret plots of the wicked,

from the scheming of evildoers,  
who whet their tongues like swords,  
    who aim bitter words like arrows,  
shooting from ambush at the blameless,  
    shooting at him suddenly and without fear.  
They hold fast to their evil purpose;  
    they talk of laying snares secretly,  
thinking, "Who can see us?  
    Who can search out our crimes?  
We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot."  
    For the inward mind and heart of  
    a man are deep!

But God will shoot his arrow at them;  
    they will be wounded suddenly.  
Because of their tongue he will bring them to ruin;  
    all who see them will wag their heads.  
Then all men will fear;  
    they will tell what God has wrought,  
    and ponder what he has done.

Let the righteous rejoice in the Lord,  
    and take refuge in him!  
Let all the upright in heart glory!

*A Prayer by Søren Kierkegaard*

Father in Heaven! In the external world one is stronger, another is weaker; the first is perhaps proud of his strength and the second perhaps sighs and feels jealous; but in our own inner world we are all weak in the light of Thy countenance, Thou the powerful one, Thou the only strong one.

*Prayers of Kierkegaard*  
(University of Chicago Press, 1956), 6

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