

THE LIBERATING POWER OF THIS SACRAMENT

INSTRUCTION ON THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE



BISHOP ROBERT J. CARLSON | LENT 2009

“The liberating power of this sacrament, in which our honest confession of sin is met by God’s merciful words of pardon and peace, needs to be re-discovered and re-appropriated by every Catholic. To a great extent, the renewal of the church in America, and throughout the world, depends on the renewal of the practice of penance and the growth in holiness which the sacrament both inspires and accomplishes.”

-Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Nationals Stadium, April 17, 2008

1 Introduction

Every 3,000 miles or so, we change the oil in our car. There may not be any major problem with our engine. But slowly, over time, minor impurities have been building up. If we leave those impurities unattended, they will eventually result in major (and costly) problems for our car.

Every once in a while, we move the furniture and vacuum behind our couch. If we don’t get to it one week, it’s no big deal. If we don’t get to it the next week, it’s no big deal. If we fail to move the couch and vacuum behind it for six months, it will be filthy.

The sacrament of penance is like an oil change for the soul. It’s like moving the furniture of your soul and getting to the places that escape everyday cleaning.

It is now one year after I released the pastoral letter *Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician*. On this first anniversary, I’d like to turn our attention, again, to the sacrament of penance – partly to reiterate some of the themes of the pastoral letter, and partly to deepen our understanding of sin and the sacrament.

2 Style

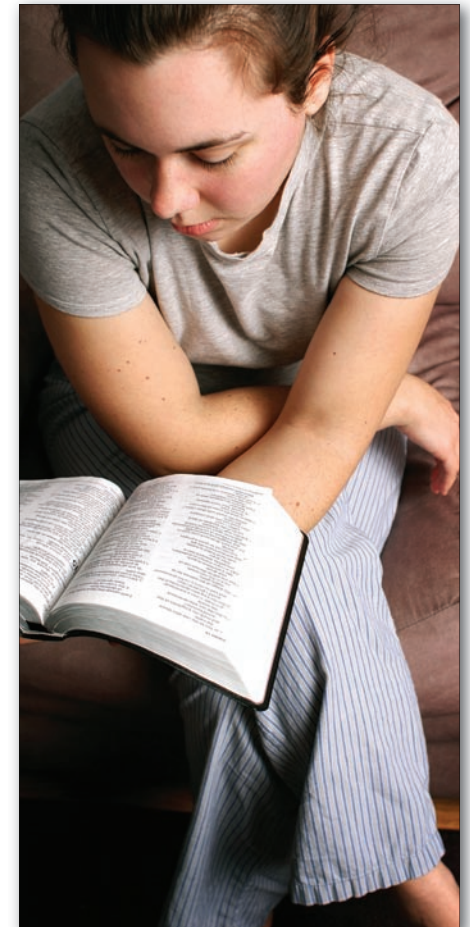
Different sections of the newspaper need to be read differently. You don’t read the world news the same way you read the editorials; you don’t read the editorials the same way you read the comics.

The same point is true of different pastoral letters. All deserve respect, but they need to be read differently.

The pastoral letter on evangelization, for example, was more like a homily. Its purpose was to *send people out* to share the good news. (That’s part of why it was distributed in the parishes.)

The pastoral letter on penance, on the other hand, was meant to be more like a *retreat*. In a retreat, the director comes in and gives a short talk on some aspect of the faith, then sends the retreatants out with some points for prayer and reflection. The most important thing is not the talk itself, but what happens in the prayer and reflection as people talk (and listen) to the Lord.

In order to get the most out of the letter on penance, it’s important to approach it in that spirit. It is punctuated with scripture and meditations because I hoped that your reading of it would be punctuated with prayer.



“What is an image that might help you to understand the sacrament of penance more deeply, and take advantage of its graces more frequently in your spiritual journey?”

3 Structure

The structure of the letter is taken from a visit to the doctor’s office – an experience that most people are familiar with.

SYMPTOMS: We go to the doctor because we are troubled by *symptoms*.

DIAGNOSIS: Based on the symptoms, and perhaps with some further observations and tests, the doctor *diagnoses* the underlying cause of our illness.

PRESCRIPTION: Based on the diagnosis of the underlying cause, the doctor *prescribes a course of treatment* – not just to eliminate the symptoms, but to eliminate the root cause of the illness.

If someone has a case of pneumonia and they only treat the symptoms (fever) and a (cough), the underlying cause of illness – an infection in the lungs – could kill them. The same is true of our spiritual health. If a person really wants to get back to good health, they have to get at what’s underneath the symptoms.

Therefore, following the analogy of a visit to the doctor’s office, the letter looks at **1)** the symptoms of sin – our overt sinful actions, **2)** the underlying causes of sin – the attitudes and habits of our heart, from which our actions spring, **3)** the healing offered by Jesus, who is both our divine physician and the medicine of immortality, and **4)** how the healing mission of Jesus is continued in the church through the sacraments.



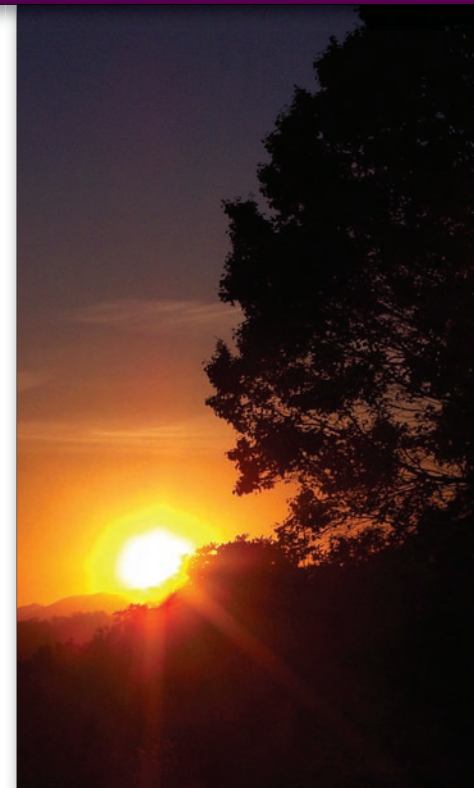
4 Key Insight

What may be the key insight of the letter, and the driving force behind it, is in the section called Getting to the Roots of Sin (pg. 12). Let me recall the following quotation:

“What we tend to do when we go to confession is confess our sins – but not the root of the sin. So our sins are forgiven, but what caused us to sin has not been healed. We think that the sin is what the problem is. But it’s not. The problem is what’s been building up in us in terms of our attitudes, our habits, our weakness, our human condition, that needs regular infusions of God’s grace. We need to look deeper, asking the Holy Spirit, ‘Come in. Probe my heart. Reveal to me what the real problems are. What are the things that lead to sin? What are the attitudes? Where do I need mercy most? Where do I need healing? What are the things in me at a deep level that need to be healed?’”

I already mentioned a few simple ways we can think about that – in terms of an oil change for the soul, and in terms of vacuuming behind the couch. Let me add one more analogy: brushing your teeth. If you forget to brush your teeth tonight, it’s no big deal. If you forget to brush your teeth tomorrow morning, it’s no big deal. If you forget to brush your teeth for three months – or 10 or 15 years – there are going to be big problems!

One person’s analogies may help or hinder another person’s understanding. So I want to encourage each of you to come up with your own analogies. What is an image that might help you to understand the sacrament of penance more deeply, and take advantage of its graces more frequently in your spiritual journey?



5 Seven Deadly Sins

Let’s leave analogies behind for a moment, and be more specific. What, exactly, tends to be underneath our overt sinful actions? The wisdom of our tradition tells us it tends to be one of the seven deadly sins.

What are the seven deadly sins? According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Vices can be classified according to the virtues they oppose, or also be linked to the capital sins which Christian experience has distinguished, following St. John Cassian and St. Gregory the Great. They are called “capital” because they engender other sins, other vices. They are pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth or acedia. (CCC 1866)

If you feel ashamed because it's been a long time since you went to confession, I invite you to come back home. Just as the prodigal son returned to his father, let me invite you to come back to the Lord.

To the right is a chart of the seven deadly sins, along with their opposite virtues.

In light of that chart, we can ask ourselves the following questions:

What am I struggling with? What are the actions? What's underneath the actions – what attitudes or habits? What do I need to aim for? (Notice the opposites are basically fruits of the Spirit.) What do I want help becoming?

Sin	Virtue
Pride	Humility
Avarice (Greed)	Generosity
Envy	Charity
Wrath (Anger)	Meekness
Lust	Chastity
Gluttony	Moderation
Sloth (Laziness)	Zeal

Centuries of Christian experience have shown we can't overcome these deadly sins by ourselves, and we can't acquire these holy virtues on our own. But we can ask for help – and it will be given. In conjunction with the Sacrament of Penance, we can ask God to give us the specific gift we most need.

One thing we need to realize, however, is this: the way God gives help is more like water washing over a rock than it is like switching on a light. In other words, the process of overcoming sin and acquiring virtue usually takes time. When we ask for God's help, over and over, we open the flood gates of our soul to his grace, over and over.

6 Encounter

In a way, you might say the final meditation – the “Bartimaeus” meditation – is the climax of the pastoral letter. In it, we are invited to enter into a Gospel passage and encounter Jesus, who asks us: “What do you want me to do for you?”

In the moment of that encounter, we can ask for Jesus to heal the things that cause us to sin. We can ask for the things we most want to be freed from, and freed for. We can present to him our heart's deepest desire for healing.

That is precisely what the sacrament of penance gives us a privileged opportunity to do. Therefore the meditation concludes with these words: *In his sacramental presence through the priest Jesus repeats his question to us: “What do you want me to do for you?” When we have unburdened our hearts we will hear him speak again, saying to us “Go in peace, your faith has made you well.” In quiet solitude, reflect on the experience of Jesus calling you to him. What do you want him to do for you?*

7 How to

Because the main point of the letter is to draw people back into the sacrament of penance, and because there are many people who, for many reasons, haven't



been to confession for a long time, and may not remember how to go, or may not feel comfortable going, I published a “how to” guide, along with the letter, explaining how to go to confession and how to prepare to go to confession.

Copies of these “how to” guides should be readily available in every church. But let me add one more thing.

If you feel ashamed because it's been a long time since you went to confession, I invite you to come back home. Just as the prodigal son returned to his father, let me invite you to come back to the Lord. Just like the father of the prodigal son anxiously watched for any sign of his son's return, God is watching and waiting for you. He wants to embrace you, put a cloak over your shoulder and a ring on your finger, and hold a feast in honor of your return: “For this son/daughter of mine was dead and has come back to life, he/she was lost and has been found.” Let me invite you to experience the joy, the freedom – and the relief – that comes from hearing the following words spoken to you, individually:

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and 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 of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Take a week and pray with the examination of conscience based on the Ten Commandments (from the “how to” guide). Ask the Holy Spirit to show you any areas of your life that need to be healed or strengthened. I’m confident something will come up!



8 How often

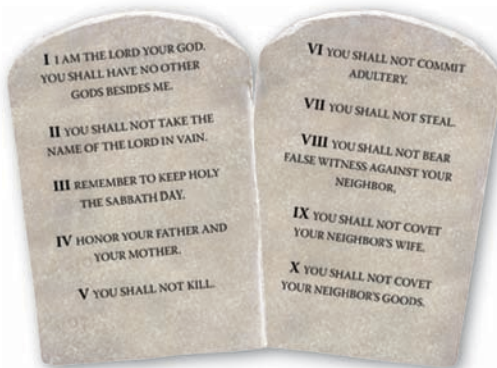
On a simple, practical level, people ask: How often should I go to confession?

In the first place, there’s no time like the present! I encourage everyone to go sometime during Lent.

Beyond that, while the best frequency certainly varies from person to person, let me suggest this: For those who want to re-discover the joy and freedom that comes from frequent reception of the sacrament, I would recommend going at least seasonally.

Go during Advent, which would cover late fall or early winter. Go during Lent, sometime in the late winter or early spring. Go once during the summer months, and once again in the fall when school (or football season!) begins.

Of course, one can go more often than that. And we should all certainly go as often as we need to. But if you go for three or four months and don’t think there are any real issues that need to be brought to the sacrament for strengthening or healing – then that’s probably the issue! It probably means you have developed a blind-spot. Take a week and pray with the examination of conscience based on the Ten Commandments (from the “how to” guide). Ask the Holy Spirit to show you any areas of your life that need to be healed or strengthened. I’m confident something will come up!



9 Practical Norms

The letter also set forth two practical norms I want to recall to everyone’s attention. These are not norms I was making into particular law for the Diocese of Saginaw, but universal norms for the church that have already been set forth in the *Catechism* and the *Code of Canon Law*. My goal was simply to draw our attention to these norms. Still, I think it is always good to offer some explanation of why the norms are the way they are.

A. Regarding General Absolution

There are three Rites for celebrating the Sacrament of Penance. But Rites I and II, with individual confession and absolution, are the only forms intended for ordinary use.

Why? The fundamental reason is scriptural: *Jesus fed great crowds, but he always healed individually.*

Another reason can be grasped from the analogy of a visit to the doctor’s office: You wouldn’t go to the doctor’s office for a group diagnosis. There are certainly many common ailments. But we always want to see a doctor and have our case, with its particular symptoms and unique circumstances, looked at individually. The same principle applies to our particular sins.

For these reasons, the Holy Father has asked that pastors “be vigilant with regard to the sacrament of reconciliation, and to limit the practice of general absolution exclusively to the cases permitted” and I am asking the same. I would like every parish to be moving away from the celebration of Rite III (General Absolution) and toward the restoration of Rites I and II (with individual confession and absolution).

For those who want to know, the basic cases where General Absolution is permitted are:

1) When there is danger of death through an imminent life-threatening situation. The usual examples for this are when soldiers are going into battle on short notice, or when an airplane appears to be headed for a crash.



2) When penitents would be without sacramental grace or unable to receive Holy Communion for the significant time of at least one month. The usual example for this is in extreme missionary circumstances, where a priest may only visit a village once or twice a year.

B. First Reconciliation before first Communion

In accord with the *Catechism* and the *Code of Canon Law*, I also directed that parishes start to prepare students to receive first Reconciliation before first Communion.

Perhaps the most common question people have about this is: “Aren’t second-graders too young to understand the Sacrament of Penance?” Let me provide several answers to that question.

First: I don’t think second-graders are too young to understand the difference between right and wrong, or the importance of saying “I’m sorry,” or the value of being forgiven. If they are starting to understand those things in the context of normal human relations, they can certainly start learning to apply them to their relation with God.

Second: If second-graders are too young to understand the Sacrament of Penance, they must also be too young to understand the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Conversely, if they can understand enough about Holy Communion to start receiving it, they can understand enough about the Sacrament of Penance to start receiving it.

Third: The directives do not say children have to receive first Reconciliation in second grade. They simply say that they must receive first Reconciliation before first Communion, whenever that is. If a parent feels strongly that their child is not ready to receive first Reconciliation, and the parent



wants to delay the child’s reception of that sacrament, that is up to them. The parent must simply understand that, by that same choice, they are deciding to delay their child’s first Communion.

Fourth and finally: In a world where children begin to play organized hockey, soccer and baseball – with all their attendant rituals – when they are five-years-old, it strikes me as a double standard to claim they are not ready for the organized rituals of the sacraments until they are 9-or 10-years-old. If children start to play sports or dance or play musical instruments when they are very young, so that they can learn their way into being comfortable with those activities, then we can certainly start them young with the sacraments, and let them learn their way into being comfortable with the sacraments.

10 Conclusion: Penance vs. Reconciliation

People will sometimes ask: Why did I call this the “sacrament of penance?” Why not “reconciliation?” Here is my reply.

Reconciliation is a perfectly legitimate term for the sacrament. It is not the only one, or the preferred one. The *Catechism* says this sacrament is called the sacrament of conversion, the sacrament of penance, the sacrament of confession, the sacrament of forgiveness and also the sacrament of reconciliation. (CCC 1423-1424)

I am comfortable with all of those terms. While I tend to call it the Sacrament of Penance, or simply confession, I was not and am not taking a stand on what this sacrament needs to be called or what I expect it to be called. I have no objection to those who wish to call it the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I will say this, however: The term “reconciliation” has sometimes been used in an attempt to make the sacrament more comfortable and welcoming. To judge by the numbers of people who have come to the sacrament over the past several decades, I don’t think the strategy has worked. Maybe it’s time to try a different strategy. Maybe there is something a little uncomfortable about confessing our sins. And maybe that’s OK.

In this year of St. Paul, let us conclude with the following words of St. Paul, which are an apt description of the graces available to us through the sacrament of penance:

God rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. Through him we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins. - Colossians 1:13-14





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