



“His Love is from Age to Age”

Pastoral Reflections on the Sacrament of the Kindness of God

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**A LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER
OF
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A Lenten Pastoral Letter on the Sacrament of the Kindness of God

Brothers and Sisters,

As bishop of Edmundston I made it a point to send you an annual pastoral message each year at Pentecost, a pastoral letter on a major element of our Christian life. This great feast of Pentecost seemed to me a most favourable time, a time of grace to better understand, with the power of the Holy Spirit, our life in the Church as disciples of Christ.

I. PASTORAL LETTERS 1994-2009

1. First Pastoral Letters

In my letter of May 22, 1994, entitled *Human Dignity and the Holiness of God*, I pointed out the priceless value of every person, the importance of the family, the holiness of God, the Day of the Lord, and the future of our parish communities. On June 4, 1995, in my letter titled *A Rushing Mighty Wind Has Risen*, the main topic was the Christian community, a praying, celebrating, bold community concerned with catechetical and sacramental formation, and the happiness of every family in our milieu. As we started to hold the first of five diocesan eucharistic congresses in preparation of the Jubilee year 2000, and desirous to celebrate Eucharist in memory of Jesus, my May 25, 1996 letter, *Keep Alive the Memory of the Lord* showed how the Holy Spirit is the memory of the Church, and that we are a priestly, prophetic, and royal people. On May 27, 1997 I published *Holy Spirit, Teach us about Jesus*, out of conviction that the presence of Jesus is there in the words and among our brothers and sisters, and at the heart of the sacraments and life's events. On May 31, 1998, the letter *In the Holy Spirit Let Us Live Our Mission of Love to the Limit*, I deepened with you the important virtue of fidelity that is at the heart of the mission and at the very core of required changes: fidelity to God's ways, fidelity to the ways of Moses, Jeremiah and Gideon, fidelity to the ways of Jesus, of Mary and Paul, and the fidelity of the first missionaries. *Eyes Fixed on Jesus*: this is the title of my May 23, 1999 pastoral letter, pointing out the importance of continuing the mission of Jesus, to welcome him, know him, to join in God's combat over evil, and to journey with Jesus. On June 11, 2000 I published *Let the Spirit Burst Forth*: On that day, that year, we had our fifth diocesan eucharistic congress, this time at the cathedral in Edmundston. The congress theme was "Animated by the Spirit, nourished by the Eucharist, Our Church is Being Renewed." The year 2001 marked the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Saint John Eudes (*Living with the Heart*). Following the Great Jubilee, I wanted to repeat again that the Christian life is an extension of the life of Jesus, and that it was important to live only for him and in him.

2. Letters on the States of Life and the Sacraments (2002-2008)

Pentecost 2002 marks a collective "turning point." My ninth Pentecost pastoral letter (May 19, 2002) was titled *You Have Seduced me, O Lord, and You Have Prevailed* gives voice to those primarily involved in the life of the diocese: 33 priests wrote about their vocation to the ordained ministry. The letter of June 8, 2003 was on *The Marvel of Consecrated Life*, and had the testimony of members of religious institutes, societies of apostolic life, and secular institutes. The Appendix, "Dieppe-Québec 1639" tells us of the grand epic of the missionaries of 1639. On May 30, 2004, I published *Witnesses of God's Love*, the testimony of loving couples who have been sealed with the gifts of the

Spirit, enlightened by a stimulating teaching on marriage and directed to a community of love. On May 15, 2005 I published *For the Kingdom of God*, about respect for the secret that inhabits our single people, appreciating celibacy, and discerning how to support the mission of those in the single life. On June 4, 2006, *The Baptismal Call* had the testimony of baptised persons and of those involved in baptism preparation: a heritage to discover and share, a teaching to welcome, and testimonies to reflect on. My letter of May 27, 2007 titled *Be Sealed with the Holy Spirit, the Gift of God*, was a dialogue with the future confirmed and their parents on the presence of the Holy Spirit with his gifts and fruits, and reminds us of his work in our midst from day to day. Then, as we neared the 49th International Eucharistic Congress in Québec, my letter of May 11, 2008, *A Taste for the Eucharist* is about the first communion experience of a few well-known saints; it has the testimony of several catechists and invites to an experience of awe and adoration. All of these documents can be found on the diocesan website www.diocese-edmundston.ca I can humbly say that you will find there powerful testimonies to help us live our daily commitment with the strength of the Holy Spirit. I am proud and happy to have let our people speak for themselves: they wanted to share their faith, at this beautiful Pentecost season.

3. Pentecost 2009

Following on Pope John Paul II's *Misericordia Dei* (May 2, 2002), I wrote several articles on the mercy of God and the sacrament of forgiveness. Following the adoption of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Canada's decree regarding the sacrament of forgiveness (January 2008), I immediately started thinking about the 2009 pastoral letter. However, since, at the urging of my doctor, I submitted my resignation to the Holy Father as Bishop of Edmundston and officially accepted by him on January 5 of this year, I thought I should have to give up the project. Then, since the College of Consultors elected me unanimously administrator of the Diocese of Edmundston until the arrival of Bishop Claude Champagne, O.M.I., my successor, on March 25, and no innovation is allowed during the vacancy of the episcopal see, with the encouragement of the pastors and catechists I am publishing this Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009, all the material I had gathered on the subject of the sacrament of forgiveness. Besides, five major articles were already published in the fall of 2008, a catechesis on the marvellous sacrament of God's kindness.

II. CATECHIST TESTIMONIALS

I am grateful to the catechists for their testimonials, and I invite you to accept them wholeheartedly.

1. First Confession

“When we prepare the children for first confession it is easy to use their own personal experience of life at home and with their friends because they all have experienced some conflict or quarrel, and they know of the importance of forgiveness. The word ‘give’ is part of ‘forgive.’ In receiving this sacrament of God, we give again and overlook hurts: we ‘forgive’ the fault. We are humans who do not always listen to our good little voice, before acting. We live with others and sometimes do things or speak words that are hurtful to others. There is in us anger, sadness, and hatred that get the upper hand and stop us from living in true happiness. The Lord’s forgiveness wipes out our failures to love and our hurts, and transforms them in unconditional love for the other. The sacrament of forgiveness bears with it a grace, a gift of God to us. It is of the utmost importance to have an open heart to welcome this gift: in this way we shall become better and shall better serve our Church.”

– Louise

2. Receiving Divine Forgiveness

“Receiving divine forgiveness is first of all learning to listen to our heart so as to be happy and make others happy. When we listen to the heart, ask for forgiveness and then feel inner peace, we can say that forgiveness has happened, and we cannot do otherwise than be well. To receive divine forgiveness is to learn to be at peace with oneself, when forgiveness is given with respect and sincerity. Preparing the child to receive divine forgiveness is to lead him to become aware that his or her daily actions can bring happiness or pain, at whatever age we may be. Receiving divine forgiveness is allowing the child to learn about forgiveness. It is important to give the children a sense of true forgiveness, and to bring them to understand that this forgiveness can be experienced in the small matters of daily life. Through becoming aware – ‘How do you feel when you ask forgiveness, when you know you have hurt someone?’ ‘What can we do to ask forgiveness?’ Forgiveness is lived on a day to day basis. To receive divine forgiveness is to lead the child to sincerity, honesty, self-respect and respect of others, so that all may live their Christian lives in love of self and of others. To receive divine forgiveness is to help the child take a step further along the Christian journey, to help the child grow daily in life and be happy. May this divine forgiveness help our children today, our leaders of tomorrow, to be happy, in order to make others happy.”

– *Jocelyn*

3. God’s Dream

“Preparing for the sacrament of forgiveness is an important task if we want to understand its full meaning. Forgiveness is a wonderful gift that Jesus gives us. In grade three we the catechists and the children discover how this sacrament helps us realise God’s dream to have us live in harmony together, like in a big family. The children preparing for the sacrament of forgiveness know that they belong to the great family of God. They can, in the light of the teaching of Jesus, recognise their failings, and they easily identify with the little lost sheep, the one that Jesus wants to bring back home at all cost, so that it may live in harmony with the others. Children forgive easily, and this is such a great lesson to us adults! Together we go a bit further as we try to understand that we need to ask forgiveness and that Jesus, like our friends, forgives us. More than that, Jesus loves us, he is always there, he never abandons us. It is up to us now to turn to him, to make the first step. All together, the friends, my child and I, the catechist-parent, we discover the greatness of the gift of forgiveness. It frees us from our feelings of regret and sadness, and gives us happiness and love. And it is this happiness and love that help us live in harmony in God’s great family. What an enrichment it is for me, this preparation for the sacrament of forgiveness with wonderful, easy-going and warm-hearted children!”

– *Lyne*

4. Beautiful Moments

“In 2008-2009 I as a catechist had the chance and privilege of helping my daughter through her third catechetical stage. This wonderful experience allows me to help my daughter and a few other children in preparing for the sacraments of forgiveness and of the Eucharist. It is for me a wonderful opportunity to grow in my faith as I help the children discover the message of Jesus. I believe that it is more and more important for us parents to take an active part in our children’s pastoral direction. That is why I am happy and am touched for having had this chance to live these beautiful moments with the children.”

– *Gaston*

5. Putting in Effort and Love

“Preparing the children for their third catechetical stage, the sacrament of forgiveness, is a very important undertaking. So important that I must give time and much love to it! For this, these children who are guided by catechists at parish meetings and with parents at home, must have completed the first two catechetical stages. In this third stage, they must have done all of the work assigned in preparation for the sacrament of forgiveness. My mission as coordinator of family- and parish-based catechetics is to help parents and catechists to prepare this delicate and noble task that is leading the children to encounter Jesus in the sacrament of forgiveness. The [French] document on forgiveness prepared by the Diocesan Catechetical Office guides parents and catechists in this undertaking. Here, then, are some of the attitudes that I develop with the parents and catechists, so that in five meetings a good study is made to bring the child to grasp that Jesus is always present in our lives and that he forgives our lacks of love if we ask his help.

Urge the child to surpass him- herself:

“We are all drawn to evil. The support of others helps us go beyond ourselves. At this sharing, the word of God invites us to identify what is forgiveness. Jesus used examples: the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well, Zaccaeus at his house and Peter by the lake, etc. Guiding the child is to bring him/her to reflect on his/her life; it is to have the child tell Jesus about everything that is going well – the joys, successes, and dreams – and to thank him. It is also telling Jesus about what bothers me, what ails me, what makes me uncomfortable, what I regret having or not having done.

Recognise the sin and be reconciled;

“Help the child discover that a sin is a refusal to love as Jesus asks us to love. ‘When I act without thinking, without making on purpose, it is not a sin. But if it is on purpose, not wanting to love and closing our hearts to God and others, that is a sin.’ Reconciling with his/her parents when there has been a lack of love on the child’s part will be all the easier if the child feels loved and accepted as Jesus does for each and everyone of us. We come to the priest and we tell him about our lack of love: it is through him that Jesus will talk to the child, accept the child, love and encourage the child, and help the child experience a lot of friendship. The child like the adult can regret in his/her heart, but as long as this has not been expressed verbally and received forgiveness, he/she is not at peace. Confession liberates the heart, and forgiveness brings back peace and joy. In simplicity, the child grasps this great mystery quite well.

Ask forgiveness to the child:

“One important dimension that I study with the parents is this: forgiving the child or calling on the child to forgive is rather easy to do. But asking the child forgiveness for hurting him/her, an undeserved punishment, a negative attitude, is more difficult. The parent often finds it hard to recognise that he/she is wrong or that he/she is far from the ideal. Isn’t asking forgiveness a good way of telling the child that we are all limited and sinners, and that we all need to be forgiven? To prepare the child for the sacrament of forgiveness is to say: ‘Jesus loves you, he always offers you his forgiveness for all the wrong you may have done. He now wants to help you develop the best that you have in you so that you will have more joy in your heart.’ It is to prepare the child to love better with an ever-renewed heart. I have a lot of joy in preparing the catechists and the parents in this undertaking; it calls on me to deepen my own discovery of the God of Love who is always ready to offer his forgiveness.”

– *Alberte*

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT AT THE HEART OF THE SACRAMENT OF FORGIVENESS

Who does not remember the wonderful gift that the Lord gave his disciples, at Easter? “Jesus came and stood before them. ‘Peace be with you, he said... As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ Then he breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men’s sins, they are forgiven them. If you hold them bound, they are held bound’.”

1. Bonds of Love and Life

It was only gradually that we became aware of the irreplaceable role of the Holy Spirit. However, from the very first pages of the Bible we are told that the Spirit was there at the beginning of the world and was part of every covenant concluded between humankind and God. The prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones receiving flesh, spirit, and life confirms the necessary action of the Holy Spirit in the relationship established by God with the chosen people. In his celebrated Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul declares: “You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out ‘Abba,’ that is, ‘Father.’ The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Just as the Holy Spirit was present at our baptism, so is he present at the moment of forgiveness: Christ himself gives him to us not only as our advocate and defender but also as our most intimate and committed life there is. The liturgy itself boldly petitions the Holy Spirit to flood the hearts of the faithful with his light divine, and to grant us his sevenfold gift. “What is stained by sin, renew; what is dry, with grace bedew; strength to wounded souls restore; coldness with thine ardour burn; willfulness to wisdom turn; crooked ways make straight once more!” Without the Spirit’s divine presence there is nothing in man that is not perverted. In labour he is rest, in fever, refreshment, and in sorrow, comfort. May he come to us, this father of the poor, and may he give his precious gifts, and be light to our hearts.

2. The One Spirit

In his Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul goes even further: “No one can say ‘Jesus is the Lord!’ except in the Holy Spirit.” When we are reconciled with one another and with God, we acknowledge the Lordship of God who presides over all these acts of life and love. We would be incapable of such reconciliation with God and neighbour, without the aid of the Holy Spirit. “It was in one Spirit that all of us were baptised into one Body. All of us have been given the drink of the one Spirit.” God alone is the origin of all reconciliation: the priest who acts in the name of God is but the living instrument to make visible the forgiveness that is granted, and that reconciliation is achieved. If we can come to such life-giving ‘moments,’ we must admit that the spirit always goes before us on the road of forgiveness and reconciliation. He is the one who disposes our hearts to welcome such divine gifts, he is the one who makes us aware of our sinful condition and shows us our sins, because left to our own resources we, like King David, might not recognise them. It was thanks to the inspired words of Nathan that David recognised himself a sinner. And in the touching story of the prodigal father and his youngest son, we see how the Spirit really transformed the young man’s heart. “Coming to his senses at last, he said, ‘I will break away and return to my father, and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son’.”

3. Reconciliation and Penance

Twenty-five years ago, December 2, 1984, an extraordinary Synod of Bishops was held in Rome, and Pope John Paul II published a post-synodal exhortation entitled *Reconciliation and Penance*. Even though some may have differences of opinion regarding this document, it appears to me that

this exhortation can still be of use to us, to better understand the penitential process of reconciliation. In a broken world, the Pope first writes of conversion and penance as a task and commitment of the Church: in the light of Christ the Reconciler, the Church is both “reconcilee” and “reconciler.” Reconciliation is from God, and the Church is the great sacrament of reconciliation. “The Church is the sign of that universal charity which Jesus Christ left as an inheritance to his followers, as a proof of belonging to his kingdom. It must be translated into ever new manifestations of conversion and reconciliation both within the Church and outside her, by the overcoming of tensions, by mutual forgiveness, by growth in the spirit of brotherhood and peace which is to be spread throughout the world.”

4. Promotion

Convinced as he is that love is greater than sin, Pope John Paul brings up the pastoral ministry of penance and reconciliation by showing the importance of dialogue, catechesis, and the sacraments. He repeats his basic conviction and shows three forms of penitential celebration: the ordinary form, known for centuries as individual confession; the second form is similar to the first but it includes a community preparation followed by individual confession. The third form, called the extraordinary form, is employed in situations of grave necessity (which we have already seen): the passing presence of a priest, or a lack of same.

5. Conviction

Pope John Paul points out that “The word of God which is read, recalled and explained, when this is possible and suitable, to the faithful and with them, will help to give fresh life to the practice of the sacrament and prevent it from declining into a mere formality and routine.” Let us continue coming to this sacrament, and let us discover even further the richness of the mercy of God. I am convinced the Holy Spirit will be there to help us in this. And joy, which is a gift of the Spirit, will be in our hearts as it was in the hearts of the disciples on the first Easter evening. “In your great love, almighty and ever-living God, you give to those who call on you more than they deserve and desire, grant us your mercy by delivering our conscience from its concerns and by giving more than we dare ask.”

IV. LIVING AND CELEBRATING FORGIVENESS

One of the most beautiful and greatest sacraments that is given to us to celebrate is the sacrament of forgiveness. In His infinite mercy, God the Father reminds us that through His Son Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are reconciled with God and with one another. I pray that the doctrinal and pastoral guidelines that I offer today help you discover the deep joy that comes with this sacrament.

1. The Meaning of Forgiveness

Before leaving his Apostles Jesus left them an awesome legacy: “love one another as I have loved you.” Christians today know that these words are also addressed to them and that they, too, are invited to learn how to love like Jesus. To do this, they acknowledge that they must turn away from themselves in order to turn to God who is kind and merciful, and who is close to us in Jesus, his Son. The power to forgive sins was given to the Apostles by the risen Christ: “receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the people their sins, they are forgiven them. If you hold them bound, they are held bound.”

2. To Understand Better

In His great mercy, God the Father decided to reconcile all things in His Son by making peace through the blood and the cross. In Israel's history, the prophets had already called the people to penance, and Jesus did not simply talk of penance and conversion. He welcomed sinners and brought them back to God. To show that he had the power to forgive sins, he healed the sick, and he himself died to free us from sin and rose again for our justification. It was for the forgiveness of sins that he instituted the sacrifice of the New Covenant in his blood. It was in the death and resurrection of Christ that God showed His immense love for humankind: "I have come so they may have life in abundance." Jesus' love is boundless, and he always makes the first step. He looks with kindness on those who are rejected by their own, and he shares their meal. All have value in his eyes, they feel loved by God, love themselves more, and become more and more capable of loving one another.

3. Mercy of God

The God to whom Jesus introduces us always allows us to start over again. He does not destroy us. Quite the opposite, if we have sinned, He picks us up and does not condemn. In his first letter, saint John has these comforting words: "No matter what our consciences may charge us with; for God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything." Jesus calls us to conversion. What does this mean? To convert is to change our point of view, our way of looking at things. It means looking around us with the eyes of God. It means hearing God speak to us as we meet one another. It means to acknowledge our successes and failures, and our troubles. Converting means to acknowledge that God is close to us, and that He speaks and acts through us. He never abandons us, and His forgiveness covers all our sins. He is a merciful God who accepts us no matter what, just as we are.

4. Sacrament of Forgiveness

The sacrament of forgiveness reminds us that the initiative of conversion and reconciliation does not come from us, but from God himself who comes to us. It tells us of God's wonders for each of us, and it re-welds the link that sin has broken. This new creation between God and us is created when the priest speaks the following words: "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Thus the sacrament of forgiveness calls back to life those who have been estranged from His love. We can therefore say that the aim of this sacrament is to reconcile us with God. This sacrament is so great that it restores or repairs the fraternal communion that sin has broken. Christ died for all humankind, and in his Church he wants the doors to be wide open to welcome all those who want to turn away from their sins.

5. Basic Elements

In the basic structure of the sacrament of forgiveness, there are two equally essential elements: the first refers to the person who, under the action of the Holy Spirit, desires conversion; the second element refers to God's action. For this, three conditions are needed: contrition, which is the regret of the sin committed; confession, which is acknowledgement of one's fault before a minister of God; and satisfaction, which implies a change of direction in life and repairing the harm done. There is no requirement on God's part: absolution is the free gift of forgiveness given by God.

6. Possibilities

Since the time of Jesus Christ the sacrament of forgiveness has had several different forms, either collective or private. Nowadays, the Church proposes three forms of penitential celebration:

individual celebration, community celebration of forgiveness with individual absolution and, in certain cases, a community celebration with collective confession and absolution. The following directives concerning the forms of absolution are taken word for word from the [French] Ritual for the sacrament of forgiveness, Celebrating Penance and Reconciliation: “Individual reconciliation allows, in an irreplaceable way, to show that forgiveness touches that which is the deepest and most personal in us. Community celebration with individual confession and absolution: A common celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. After everyone has confessed and received absolution, all together praise God for the marvels He works for His people whom the Son has redeemed by his blood. Community celebration with collective confession and absolution: One cannot give collective absolution to several penitents without having this preceded with individual confession, except in the following instances: where there is danger of death and there is not enough time for the priest to hear each individual confession; in cases of grave necessity, that is when, because of the number of penitents there is not a sufficient number of confessors to hear them within a convenient time limit, and there is danger that these penitents would be forced to be deprived – through no fault of their own – of the sacramental grace or of holy communion. Judging whether the required conditions are met is reserved to the diocesan bishop who in doing so takes into consideration of the criteria established with a common accord by the Conference of Bishops.”

V. BENEFITS OF INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION

On May 2, 2002, His Holiness Pope John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter, a “*motu proprio*” titled *Misericordia Dei*, on the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, in which he reaffirmed that individual confession is the only ordinary mode by which the faithful who are aware of grave sin is reconciled with God and with the Church. With this decision, the Pope rules out collective absolution as the ordinary mode of reconciliation. On January 30, 2008, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops published a Canadian decree on the application of the papal decision in Canada. With all the bishops in Canada and those throughout the world, I urge all the faithful to recognise the greatness of this sacrament. As first shepherd of the Diocese of Edmundston, I wish that every Catholic discover or rediscover the benefit of individual confession as a divine gesture.

1. To Re-Experience the Beauty of Individual Forgiveness

At a course on confession organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary, last March, Pope Benedict XVI said: “It is not sin that is at the heart of the sacramental celebration, but the mercy of God which is infinitely greater than any fault.” All those in charge of parishes have published the schedule for individual confessions. In the 32 parishes of the diocese: everyone who wishes to receive God’s forgiveness can approach the priest for confession and reception of the Lord’s forgiveness, at any time of the week. I am grateful to the priests for their availability. This is one of the most beautiful sacraments that a priest can celebrate with a penitent, making the mercy of God visible, in granting forgiveness.

2. Everything is Ready, but...

Like the parable of the banquet in the Gospel (Luke 14:15), the guests are few in number: I regret the small number who come for individual confession. What is the cause of this disaffection? Is it due to a lack of sins or of new sins? Is it the bad memory concerning past confessions? The coldness of certain confessors? Too relentless questioning, or too guilt-generating? Why not confess directly to God? Did the prodigal son or the Samaritan woman have to disclose all their sins before giving themselves over to the merciful Jesus? Doesn’t the practice of oral confession only go as far back

as the 11th century? Haven't the community celebrations brought a new acceptance of the sacrament? Whatever the reason for estrangement from the sacrament, we have in Pope John Paul's instruction only one "ordinary" mode of celebration: individual confession. I believe it is important for us to pray for each other, that we may accept this teaching.

3. Acknowledgement of Exceptional Situations

Pope John Paul II left it to each diocesan bishop to judge the appropriateness of pastorally applying reasons "of very grave necessity" that can lead a bishop to sometimes have recourse to collective absolution. A particular instance of this would be of certain Christian communities living in distant parts of the country where there are no priests and that are visited only once or a few times by one priest, as well as the situation of Christian communities living away from major centres and who can only count on the occasional presence of a very limited number of priests who are usually of advanced age. In our Atlantic region with its eleven dioceses, situations can vary from one diocese to another. We have close to one million Catholics in 770 parishes, served by approximately 550 priests who often minister to four or five parishes, and the average age of these priests is above seventy. Even with the best intentions, it is difficult for one norm to apply to all the dioceses. In our diocese, there is no pastoral zone besides Edmundston, with more than three priests in active parish ministry. Besides, Pope Paul VI asked that the priest "take the time needed" to hear individual confessions, that is, confessions composed of welcoming the penitent, meditation on the word of God, confession of sins, and thanksgiving. It behooves every bishop, with the support of his principal collaborators, to reach the best decision. Only the bishop can judge of the gravity of certain situations. The Decree specifies that the priest is not to announce beforehand whether there is to be general absolution or not. Hence, with a congregation of five hundred attending and only one priest available, the most appropriate solution will have to be taken, to give each penitent the time necessary to celebrate forgiveness.

4. Community Celebration of Penance

Aware of all the effort that has been made in each of our parishes, these past thirty years, I ask the shepherds of the people to continue doing what has already been so well begun in each Christian community. I ask every pastor of a parish and every member of the pastoral units to continue preparing penitential celebrations, especially at the liturgical high points of Advent and Lent. Throughout the thirty years mentioned, Catholics have discovered to a greater degree, through these celebrations, the meaning of sin and of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and of the meaning of the celebration of forgiveness. This acquired experience should not be forgotten overnight: Holy Scripture witnesses to the fact that throughout its history, the entire people of God together proclaimed "the mercy of God." Religious education programmes talk of forgiveness and Eucharist: there are wonderful pages on the wonders of God in our world today that ought to be meditated.

5. Gratitude

I am deeply grateful to those who "make visible" the mercy of God by accepting to be the "servants" and "missionaries" of divine mercy. In the seventeenth century Saint John Eudes, who contributed so much to the renewal of Christian society as a whole, wrote these words: "He is merciful who carries in his heart the burdens of the most miserable." I thank my precious collaborators for their continuous effort to teach one and all how to better understand this sacrament. And thank you to our pastoral agents, catechist and parents who give themselves wholeheartedly to preparing this sacrament.

VI. GRAVITY OF SINS

In his letter of May 2, 2002, Pope John Paul II refers to a sinner who is aware of having committed a grave sin... but what is a “grave” sin? In the early church there is mention of three “grave” sins: adultery, homicide, and apostasy. Then the Church began publishing lists of actions that could be “mortal sins,” and to some moralists the least peccadillo could be classed a “mortal sin.”

1. Important Distinctions

Many people were deeply marked by this rather puritanical teaching. I shall always remember that there is a distinction between a mortal sin and a venial sin. I shall remember, too, that there must be at least three elements, to commit a mortal sin: grave matter, a thorough understanding of the gravity, and full consent of the will. If one of these elements is lacking, there is no mortal sin. The Church obliges us to confess our mortal sins once a year. When we talk of “grave” sin we refer to actions to be seriously considered, and which we have committed with full knowledge and will. The “lists” of sins that were familiar to us, not so far back, stressed mostly faults of a sexual nature: the sixth and ninth commandments of God were the focus, while honesty and justice should have been given more attention. The Lord Jesus left us only two commandments that are really only one: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and all your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” It is those faults against this commandment that must especially be confessed, when there is serious matter. We would have to be deaf or blind believers or else living on another planet, to assert that there are no longer any sins. Or one would need to no longer believe in God, to declare that our covenant was never weakened in our relationship with Him and with our neighbour.

2. Murderers without Borders

Last year I meditated long and hard on the biblical story of how King Ahab of Samaria and Queen Jezebel his wife falsely accused their neighbour Naboth and condemned him to death, in order to take his vine. The prophet Elijah had to step in for them to realise the seriousness of their crime they had committed in cold blood. When we look at everything that we inflict today on the poor in our society by exposing them to certain death, I have written this song because today, still, there are Ahabs and Jezebels: “Who will deliver us from the assassin Ahab? Who will deliver us from the murderess Jezebel? They rob us of our lands, and kill our families; they dishonour God. But God watches over the poor and gives them hope of living in a world of justice. Three thousand years ago there lived in Samaria Queen Jezebel and Ahab her husband. As they wanted to increase the size of their domain, they wanted to take the vine of their neighbour Naboth. ‘This vine is mine, it is my inheritance: never will I give it up for money.’ The king and queen decided to end the quarrel, and they set up a false trial, accusing their neighbour before false witnesses, of having cursed God. Naboth was stoned before his accusers, and Ahab and Jezebel shamelessly took over the vine, because they were all-powerful. The Lord sent the prophet Elijah to these remorseless murderers, for him to confront the truth: you have committed a most odious murder, and you shall die where Naboth was killed, and dogs will lick your guilty blood.’ Ahab repented, but Jezebel did not. There are bloodthirsty murderers today roaming the world. They shamelessly rob and kill without pity. They make the poor people poorer still, robbing them of even their basic needs as they raise prices and become almighty.”

3. Grave Matter...

The example of Ahab and Jezebel illustrates very well what we mean when we say that something is considered grave matter, a grave sin: stealing without shame, robbing from the poor, defaming others, breaking the bonds of kindness and friendship between people, becoming increasingly unjust toward others, not to care about the victims of bandits who take from them their very livelihood, whether it be food, lodging, clothing, means of getting around, or honour. “Whatever you have done to the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me.” These actions are far from being petty misdeeds. Saint Basil and Saint John Chrysostom had reason to react strongly against those who seized for themselves the wherewithal of the starving, the needy and the destitute. “The bread you keep for yourself belongs to the poor, the money you hide belongs to the impoverished, the things that you waste belong to the needy, the coat that you hide away belongs to the naked...” These are examples of grave sin, a lot more serious than “sins of the flesh,” without, however denying their graveness, such as sexual aggression or violence, prostitution, or so-called sexual tourism. And there are also grave sins committed against God Himself: conscious and willed blasphemy is one of them, and perjury, desecration of holy places and things, and religious indifference, rebellion against God, etc.

4. Helping Someone

If the prophet found the way of awakening Ahab and Jezebel from their murderous indifference, it is sometimes necessary for a colleague, a spouse, a pastor or a catechist to make us aware of the seriousness of the action we are doing. For instance, it would be a serious matter for parents not to show concern for the Christian formation of their children, just as it would be a grave matter not to be concerned about their physical and intellectual development. In order to understand the seriousness or gravity of a believer’s action, one must always place it under the gaze of God, and in relation to the covenant He has established with man and woman. Acknowledgement of the seriousness of our actions, and confessing them, can be a source of liberation.

5. Divine Forgiveness

Divine forgiveness is much greater than anything we can imagine or do to receive it. Divine forgiveness surpasses the blessings everything a human being could do to obtain it. I would like to quote, here, from the Song of Songs: “Were one to offer all he owns to purchase love, he would be roundly mocked.” It is not by what we must do that matters in receiving forgiveness, but by discovering the unfailing goodness of the God of all kindness for all humans and in a very special way, for every sinner who has broken the covenant existing between God and our brothers and sisters.

6. Discovering Justice

Individual or community celebrations of forgiveness can help us measure the seriousness of our actions. I have discovered a prayer of an international organisation for solidarity and development, that could help us root our penitential act and help us become aware of all those bonds that unite us to God, to the cosmos, and to humankind. It is a guidepost along the path to justice: “Creator God, you hold the depths of the earth and the heights of the mountains in your hands, because all creation is yours. Give us the grace to cherish this world of yours, and the wisdom to take care of its riches. Keep us from wanting to control what belongs to others, and from longing to possess what is of the common good. Help us discern the abuses of power, and give us the courage to speak out when the truth is spurned. Protect us from self-satisfaction in the face of arrogant destruction and arouse in us

sacred anger where the fires of war are kindled through envy. Give us a heart of gold so we can face suffering with compassion, and an iron will to forcefully denounce injustice. Guide our every step to you; help us find new paths so that friends and strangers together, we discover justice and find the treasure of the Eternal.”

7. Exercise in Trust

We are not always at the point of having every individual confession resemble a dialogue between husband and wife! So much reserve holds us back. It is much more an “act of faith” than an “act of love” that seems to be at the root of the penitential encounter. Still, when we consider it seriously, the individual approach can be a personal response to a personal undertaking by God on our behalf. It is such a grace to discover forgiveness as a particular sign of Jesus’ friendship, and to understand that Jesus came to us to reveal and carry out the Father’s dream, that God loves us and wants us to be happy. It is so good to discover the words and actions Jesus used to reveal and carry out the Father’s dream to gather the whole world together in love. It is so good to learn how to perform acts of reconciliation. The catechetical programme on the sacrament of forgiveness is an excellent tool to make us rediscover the sense of forgiveness, and it is a welcome “instrument” to rekindle our hope in the divine mercy.

8. Today... at Your House!

The Gospel story of Zacchaeus is always timely. Zacchaeus lives in Jericho, and earns his living as a tax collector. But Zacchaeus is a thief, he often demands too much money of his clients, and he pockets the difference. Needless to say that the people despise him. He is pointed out on the street, because of his evil way. One day, news is spread that Jesus will be coming through Jericho. Zacchaeus decides that he will not miss seeing the man everyone is talking about. Since he is short, Zacchaeus climbs a tree in order to see what is going on. “Anyhow,” he says to himself, “Jesus doesn’t know me.” He ignores that he is like a lost sheep that the good shepherd is looking for. The crowd flows on... and on... and on. Suddenly, Jesus stops under the tree, looks up, and says: “Come down, Zacchaeus, I mean to stay at your house today.” – “It is Jesus calling me, and he wants to come to my house. What an honour!” Without hesitating, Zacchaeus climbs down from the tree and welcomes Jesus to his home. The door is joyfully swung open, and with Jesus the light of God enters his house and especially his heart. He discovered that Jesus does not reject him because of all the many bad things he has done. This is such good news! Who cares about those who laugh at him. “He has gone to a sinner’s house as a guest.”

9. A New Man

As he looks at Jesus, Zacchaeus realises that causing harm to others is bad. It is as if a blindfold had fallen from his eyes, and for the first time he sees himself as God sees him, with kindness and love. He believed in Jesus and decided that he wanted to set himself right. “Because of Jesus, I cannot keep this stolen money,” he tells himself. “I have to give back what I have stolen. If I have defrauded anyone in the least, I pay him back four-fold. Now Jesus will be my friend, and I want to follow everything he asks.” And now, Jesus had transformed him and Zacchaeus became a new man. Jesus came to save what was lost, Zacchaeus was glad to open his door and, with Jesus, the light of God penetrated into his house. Zacchaeus wanted to set his life in order, and he became a new man. Jesus transformed him.

10. Come and Save Us

The [French] hymn *Viens nous sauver* ["Come and Save Us"] is a fitting conclusion to our reflection on God's forgiveness: "Lord, come and save us. You know us and love us. Come and save us. Look at us, Lord: you see our sins; look at us, Lord, and forgive us. Why hide your face? Why turn away, Lord? To whom would we go? Come, Lord, rise up, and we shall be saved; come, Lord, rise up and deliver us from your anger. You shall welcome us. To whom shall we go?"

CONCLUSION

1. God of Kindness

As I bring this pastoral letter to a conclusion – I could even say: In concluding all of my pastoral letters – how can I not glorify God and repeat "always and everywhere," His love is from age to age? How can I not take the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (N^{os}. 1442 and 1443): "Christ has willed that in her prayer and life and action his whole Church should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood. But he entrusted the exercise of the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the 'ministry of reconciliation'. The apostle is sent out 'on behalf of Christ' with 'God making his appeal' through him and pleading: 'Be reconciled to God'." "During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them. A remarkable sign of this is the fact that Jesus welcomed sinners at his table; even more, he goes to their own table, a gesture that expresses in an overwhelming way the forgiveness of God and one's return to the family of the faithful.

2. A New Bond

As I contemplate this God of kindness, how can I not repeat the eucharistic prayers for reconciliation; "Father, all-powerful and living God, we praise and thank you through Jesus Christ our Lord for your presence and action in the world. In the midst of conflict and division, we know it is you who turn our minds to thoughts of peace. Your Spirit changes our hearts: enemies begin to speak to one another, those who were estranged join hands in friendship, and nations seek the way of peace together. Your Spirit is at work when understanding puts an end to strife, when hatred is quenched by mercy, and vengeance gives way to forgiveness... You never cease to call us to a new and more abundant life. God of love and mercy, you are always ready to forgive; we are sinners, and you invite us to trust in your mercy. Time and time again we broke your covenant, but you did not abandon us. Instead, through your Son, Jesus our Lord, you bound yourself even more closely to the human family by a bond that can never be broken. Now is the time for your people to turn back to you and to be renewed in Christ your Son, a time of grace and reconciliation. You invite us to serve the family of mankind by opening our hearts to the fullness of your Holy Spirit." "The love of God is never exhausted, his compassion each day is renewed," the liturgy reminds us. "Renew your wonders, master and God of all!... You, Lord, do not keep your kindness away from us; let your love and truth keep us always!" Yes, His love is really from age to age!

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