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## THE CELEBRATION OF Penance AND FORGIVENESS IN OUR DIOCESE (3)

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There is nothing new in meeting people who are so very happy at having received God's forgiveness and being reconciled with their loved ones, that tears often well up from the deepest part of their hearts: it feels so good to finally experience peace! This newfound peace is close to each and everyone of us: let us ask God to reconcile us to Himself! He who is the God of the impossible can transform the densest darkness into the brightest light, and He can change hearts of stone to hearts of flesh! After having reflected on the beauty and greatness of individual reconciliation, I want with you to experience the wonder of an extraordinary blessing for our Church: community celebrations of forgiveness, or penance services.

### FELICITOUS INITIATIVES

Beginning in 1973 when the new ritual for the celebration of Penance was promulgated by Pope Paul VI, the Edmundston diocesan Church started holding community penance services. These thirty years are a treasure for all of us, an extraordinary discovery of the richness of divine forgiveness, of its depth, and of its daily requirements. We only have to look at an outline of these celebrations, study the instructions, and listen to people talk about the benefits they have drawn from these liturgies, to discover their pastoral timeliness. Besides, there was a reason for the Edmundston Diocesan Synod to recommend the continuation of "well prepared" community penitential services, "with proper instruction, to help people rediscover the meaning of the sacrament of penance in their lives."

### DEEPLY FELT CELEBRATIONS

It seems that the ending of St. Luke's parable of the prodigal son gives us a glimpse of what is happening in our communities, especially the fact that we are both "prodigal sons" and "elder sons." The elder son understood nothing of the celebration organised by the father for the return of his second son. The elder son grew angry at this and would not go in, but his father came out and began to plead with him. But the son answered the father: "For years now I have slaved for you. I never disobeyed one of your orders, yet you never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. Then, when this son of yours returns after having squandered your property with loose women, you kill the fatted calf for him." "My son," the father replied, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice! This brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost, and is found." Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel is always appropriate: only those who welcome from the heart the forgiveness of God can understand the Father's joy. It seems that this is also the joy which animates those who join in our community penance celebrations. Jean Vanier writes: "Community nourishment is made up of periods when the entire community becomes aware of the life current running through it. These are periods of grace and gift, when the community experiences the joy of being together, praying and celebrating. Our communities must be signs of joy and celebration. If they are, there will always be people joining in. Sad communities are sterile, antechambers of death."

### PLACE OF FORGIVENESS

In his beautiful book, *La communauté lieu de pardon et de fête* ["The Community, Place of Forgiveness and Celebration"], Jean Vanier writes: "Despite all the trust we can have in one another there are always words

that hurt, attitudes where we place ourselves ahead of others, situations where individual sensitivities clash. That is the reason why living together implies some kind of cross, a constant effort and acceptance which is a daily forgiving of one another." Whether at the heart of an organisation or other social grouping, whether within a family or religious, priestly or parish community, we must find time for reconciliation, forgiveness, kindness. That is where the God of the invisible, the God of forgiveness can show Himself in these grace-filled moments. "You are God's chosen ones, his beloved saints: clothe yourselves with feelings of tender compassion, loving-kindness, humility, and patience; support one another and forgive one another, if one of you has a complaint against the other. The Lord has forgiven you, you too must forgive one another. Above all, put on charity which brings all things to perfection." "Who is this God whom no one can love without loving one's neighbour? Who is this God whom we can hurt so seriously, in hurting one another?"

#### **AT THE HEART OF LIFE**

In the Church, expressions of reconciliation and sorrow depend on personal situations and the different kinds of groupings we have in our Church communities. The more there are different kinds of Christian groupings (organisations, religious communities, parishes, pilgrimages, etc.), the more there are special periods preferred for these gatherings, and ways of expressing conversion: examining one's life, penance services during high points of the liturgical year, pilgrimages. According to organisers of such events, it is important to find there four basic elements: a welcome of others in the manner of Christ welcoming the sinner, listening to the Word of God which proclaims reconciliation, receiving the Word, confession of the love of God and confession of our sin, and welcome of God's forgiveness, to witness to this. According to the Church's oldest tradition, these acts bring together in one exercise confession of faith, confession of sins, and an act of grace. Penitents and ministers confess together the love of God at work in those who come back to Him.

#### **TOWARDS A CONSECRATED WORLD**

We are urged to behave in the world as children of God who are called to freedom; we must respond through living a holy life dedicated to the Church's prophetic mission. "For man and woman to be children in His image, God moulded them with the breath of the Spirit. While we still had neither shape nor figure, His love already saw us free like Him. The gift of life came from God, but we held it captive to sin; hatred and death joined forces for injustice, and all law of love was abandoned. When the favourable day came, God gave us Jesus, the Beloved; the tree of the cross points out the way to a world where everything is consecrated" (*Liturgie des heures/Liturgy of the Hours, French*). May our community penance services proclaim to us the infinite mercy of God!

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