



Letter to Friends and Benefactors

April 2011

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Passion Sunday 2011

Dear Friends and Benefactors,

During Lent we purify our hearts and lives for the grand celebration of the Christ's Resurrection. His Resurrection is our hope, for now the way to heaven is open for man. But man is a sinner! He is born under the law of original sin. His frailty inclines him to apparent goods which are in opposition to God's laws. He suffers temptation and often succumbs. Fasting, alms and sacrifices are required in order to do reparation for the sins we committed in our past life. Many efforts are made with the intentions of pleasing God, receiving grace (again), and preparing our hearts to obtain His mercy. However, the most important event in our Lenten preparation is that great gift of God, Sacramental Confession. From the early times Confession was an integral part of the Lent and Easter celebration.

Let's consider the Gospel account of the first Easter evening in Jerusalem: Jesus said to his disciples, "Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them; and he said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

Here we have the institution of the Sacrament of Penance, the clear biblical witness that the Our Lord Jesus Christ gives to His priests the authority to forgive sins. The gifted English convert, biblical scholar and preacher, Monsignor Ronald Knox strikingly likens the events of Easter Sunday evening to a new creation, an outpouring of the Spirit equivalent to the very act of creation itself. His claim is bold but true, for this is the grandeur of the priesthood in regard to the forgiveness of sins. Just as only God can create the universe out of nothing, only God can forgive sins. Only He has the power. Only He has the authority. And He gives it to His Church through the institution of the priesthood, through the institution of the Sacrament of Penance!

Reading the four Gospel accounts together, we can see that the Sacrament of Penance is not a later invention, some afterthought, something leftover, something ancillary. Rather it is at the very heart of Christ's saving and redeeming work. On the day that His Passion begins, the Lord Jesus gave us the Eucharist and the priesthood. On the day of the Resurrection, the Lord Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Penance and, as it were, completed the institution of the priesthood. All three sacraments are born from the heart of the Church in the Cenacle; all three are inserted into the heart of the redemptive and salvific work of Christ Jesus; all three lie at the heart of the Catholic life in every age.

To pronounce the sacramental absolution by which our sins are forgiven is one of the primary reasons the Church and the priesthood exist. Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, came to reconcile us to the Father. By the grace of God man is washed from original sin and from every sin through the Sacrament of Baptism. Sanctifying grace is poured into his soul and he becomes a son of God forever. Human infirmity, however, necessitates that even "a just man shall fall seven times a day." (Proverbs 26:16) A second cleansing sacrament is thus required. We call this sacrament "penance," "confession," and "reconciliation" in regard to its qualities of reparation for sins committed, acknowledgement of our transgressions, and return to God. This sacrament is essential in the lives of all the faithful. Every Catholic should be eager to hear the words of absolution; every priest should be eager to say them.

But those words are not heard as often as they should be. We can't imagine Catholic life without the words of consecration – "This is my body! This is my blood!" Likewise Catholic life cannot be lived properly without the Sacrament of Penance. We need the forgiveness of our sins. We need the grace of this sacrament in order to grow in virtue. The frequency of Confession indicates better the condition of a parish than does the number of faithful regularly receiving Holy Communion.

If the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance are at the very heart of the Christian life, why is the latter neglected? It is a lamentable characteristic of the Church's life in our time. We do not only observe a diminishing sense of sin in the secular culture around us, we also find it in the Church herself. Pope John Paul II in 1984 complained about this drop in the awareness of sin: "Some are inclined to replace exaggerated attitudes of the past with other exaggerations: from seeing sin everywhere they pass to not recognizing it anywhere; from too much emphasis on the fear of eternal punishment they pass to preaching a love of God that excludes any punishment deserved by sin; from severity in trying to correct erroneous consciences they pass to a kind of respect for conscience which excludes the duty of telling the truth." (1)

We receive the gift of mercy to the extent that we realize our need for it. We desire forgiveness only if we acknowledge the seriousness of sin. In the Gospel, the self-righteous Pharisees are scandalized looking at Jesus who eats with publicans and sinners. Jesus relies by stressing the impossibility of receiving God's pardon for those who "exalt themselves" (Luke 18:6) and the necessity of true contrition for those who seek to be healed by God: "They that are well have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. For I came not to call the just, but sinners" (Marc 2:17).

The recently beatified Cardinal John Henry Newman explained the magnitude of sin with his characteristic literary force: "The Catholic Church holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one willful untruth, or should steal one poor farthing without excuse." (2)

Do we think today that Blessed John Henry Newman is right? How many of us would argue the opposite – that a little sin here and there is no big deal? How many, both inside and outside of the Church, argue that a little sin here and there is worth this technological advance, or that public policy goal, or is an acceptable means to some desired end?

We can speak so boldly about the horror of sin because the good news is that the Lord Jesus did not just die for sin in general, but for my sins, and yours. So our horror at sin should be accompanied by a serene confidence that forgiveness is ours and we should ask for clemency with true contrition.

Repentance is grace; it is a grace that we recognize our sins; it is a grace that we realize the need for renewal, for change, for the transformation of our being. Repentance, the capacity to be penitent, is a gift of grace. Especially in recent times Catholics have often avoided the word penitence – it seemed too difficult. It is necessary to do penance, that is, to recognize what is wrong in our lives, open ourselves to God's forgiveness, and prepare ourselves for pardon by allowing ourselves to be transformed.

Ironically, while ridiculing the Church for being "hung up" on sin and guilt, the world delights in speaking of sin, and not just the sins of priests and bishops, but of anyone who is prominent. Our culture has an almost perverse delight in detailing the sins and scandals of those in the public eye, and ordinary people are eager to get in on the action! Television offers an entire genre of "reality shows" which put on public display a wide variety of sinful behaviors which people should be ashamed, not proud, to commit. It seems as if everybody's "going to confession" except in the sacrament! There are parades of talk shows in which the troubled and afflicted share their intimate secrets with a vast television audience. People use social networks to make available to all on the internet what should be treated with utmost discretion. It seems at every moment someone, somewhere is shouting for our attention, eager to confess from the rooftops what Catholics should whisper in the confessional. The "confessional culture" around us shouts itself hoarse, but sadly there is no absolution. Sin confessed but unredeemed either leads to despair or is trivialized. We see the despair in the vast anguish that fuels an enormous therapeutic industry. We see the trivialization in the celebrity scandals that become not occasions for averted eyes, but fodder for jokes. Our culture does not need to be taught how to confess; it needs to discover where forgiveness can be found.

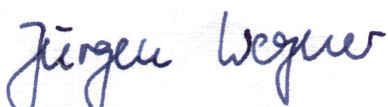
The return to a regular practice of sacramental confession will reveal man's true condition and bring him back to God; more importantly, it will also reveal God's justice and His loving mercy. The Sacrament of Penance is in fact a school of Christian life for all true penitents. Examination of conscience has an important pedagogical value. It teaches us how to look squarely at our lives, to compare them with the truth of the Gospel and to evaluate them according to divine standards. Comparison with the Commandments, with the Beatitudes, and especially with the Precept of Love, constitutes the first great "school of penance." In our times, ones full of noise, distraction, and loneliness, the penitent's conversation with the confessor can be one of the few – if not the only – opportunities to be truly heard.

The integral confession of sins also teaches the penitent humility, recognition of his or her own frailty and, at the same time, an awareness of the need for God's forgiveness and the trust that divine grace can transform his life. Likewise, listening to the confessor's recommendations and advice is important for judging actions, for the spiritual journey, and for the sanctification of the penitent.

Finally, regular confession helps the penitent to avoid sin in the future. Having already in mind the next confession, the next time he will have to disclose his deeds, the next meeting with his confessor to whom he will have to reveal his sins and important circumstances, the penitent will find strength in temptation. He would hide himself in shame, in his own eyes and before the eye of the priest, if again and again, without any serious effort, he should repeat the same sins.

I encourage you to make a good confession before Easter, even if it has been a long time. Be reconciled to God through the Sacrament of Penance! You can count on God's mercy. You can trust in His pledge of grace to help you lead a better life. Please God, this letter might encourage Catholics to keep the tradition of making a good confession before Easter.

Sincerely Yours in Christ and Mary,



Father Jürgen Wegner

(1) John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 2 December 1984, #18.

(2) Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, "The Position of My Mind since 1845" in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 1864.

N.B. This letter adopts ideas and wordings from the letter “The Altar and the Confessional “ by Archbishop Timothy Michael Dolan (New York) and Pope Benedict XVI’s address to participants in the course on the internal forum of March 25th 2011.