



## Pastoral Letter to my Brother Priests of the Diocese of Saint-Jean-Longueuil

My dear Confreres,

The Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei* of Pope John Paul II, dated April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2002, calls us to question our certainties and our pastoral customs, to inquire into our priestly ministry in one of the actions that is reserved to it, the ministry of reconciliation carried out in the name of God and of the Church. As a consequence of this letter and of positions taken and steps initiated by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, it is my duty today to call upon you to receive the Holy Father's letter as a document written to clarify, deepen and guide our faith. To do this, I intend to place the question in a broader context, to share with you what I get from this papal letter and to provide you with some useful indications of how the ministry of reconciliation is to be exercised in the immediate future while reserving to myself the task of speaking again when the Congregation for Divine Worship and Sacramental Discipline has confirmed the proposed decree that the CCCB has submitted to it.

### **Conversion and reconciliation at the heart of the faith and the pastoral ministry**

We are well aware of the capital importance of conversion and pardon in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus's first words state his full plan and appear to be the very heart of his preaching: "He proclaimed the good news of God and said. This is the time of fulfilment. The reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14-15). Conversion (*metanoia* in Greek, *poenitentia* in Latin), there is the key to forgiveness, to the kingdom of God, to salvation. When Jesus pardons, the witnesses are astonished. They know very well that God alone can pardon. By pardoning, Jesus reveals his divinity at the same time as the mystery of God *rich in mercy* (Ephesians 2:4). On the eve of his resurrection, in the strength of the Spirit who dwells fully in him, Christ entrusts to his Apostles the mission of forgiving sins: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound" (John 20:22-23). In this way was the forgiveness of sins prescribed, from then on, in the name of God and of the Church.

But it must be said that the sacrament of penance and of reconciliation do not exhaust all the means by which conversion is effected and the mercy of God expresses itself. The whole Christian mystery can be seen from the perspective of divine mercy. Baptism itself is conferred "for the remission of sins". To those who had participated in the event of Pentecost and who asked him what they had to do, the Apostle Peter gave the same discourse as Jesus had at the start of his mission: "You must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The Eucharist itself invites us to conversion and reminds us of "the blood shed for you and for many for the remission of sins". The liturgical seasons of Advent and Lent and the exhortation to fasting, to prayer and to charity constitute times and occasions for conversion, for pardon and for reconciliation. The hearing of the Word of God, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, deeds of sharing and compassion, mutual forgiveness, the struggle for justice, and apostolic commitment are also occasions for conversion and forgiveness to the person who dedicates himself to them.

We understand that the whole mission of the Church is to reconcile. Pope John Paul II emphasized this strongly in his Apostolic Exhortation on penitence and reconciliation: "Closely tied to the mission of Christ, we can therefore synthesize the mission, rich and complex, of the Church in its central task of reconciling man with God, with himself, with his brothers, with all creation; and of doing this in a lasting way for (Y) the Church is by its nature always reconciliatory."

But the Church recognizes the necessity of a specific sacramental sign for the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism. This sign manifests God's solicitude for the sinner and restores him to full communion with God, with the Church and with his brothers and sisters. The history of the sacrament of penance is complex. It took centuries to define the essential elements of the sacrament, the emphasis not always being put on the same elements. One thing is certain, the ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to the Church and it constitutes part of the core of the revelation transmitted through Scripture and the Living Tradition. Consequently, it is always up to the magisterium of the Church to determine the manner in which this sacrament must be received if it is to bear all its fruits.

### **The sacrament of penitence and pardon in recent times**

The Second Vatican Council anticipated in the Constitution on the Liturgy that "the rite and the formularies of penitence would be revised in a manner that would express more clearly the nature and effect of the sacrament". That was in 1963. The period following the Council has been an occasion for various bishops to request a broadening of the law of exception that would authorize general absolution, hitherto reserved for cases of war and danger of imminent death.

A document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on June 16, 1972, the Roman Rite of 1974, the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* in 1980, the Code of Canon Law of 1983 and the Apostolic Exhortation issued in 1984 after the Synod of Bishops on Reconciliation all expressed the same statement concerning general absolution. It is an extraordinary form, exceptional, justified by motives that must all be present and cannot be disassociated: the large number of penitents, the insufficient number of priests, the impossibility of the faithful being able to make their confession within a reasonable time and the danger that they will be deprived for a long time

of sacramental grace or of communion. To that it must be added that when absolution is granted, the faithful are obliged to confess their serious sins subsequently and not to have recourse to another general absolution before having made this confession, specifically within twelve months. All these documents remind us that individual confession, with admission of sin, is the ordinary, customary form of receiving the sacrament of penitence, be it in its first form, individual, or in its communal form, with individual admission and absolution.

The letter of Pope John Paul II adds nothing substantially new to these documents. It constitutes an authentic interpretation of the supreme legislator. A certain number of details are addressed to bishops and pastors, others are addressed to bishops' conferences. They concern notably the accurate understanding of the conditions required for general absolution.

The bishops are asked to remember the universal laws concerning the sacrament of penitence in its various forms. It is stated that only the bishop has the necessary permit to authorize the third form of the sacrament. The bishop and pastors are also exhorted to take all means to promote the participation of the faithful in the sacrament with individual admission and absolution. The Holy Father authorizes the hearing of confessions during mass, notwithstanding the dispositions established in this respect on the subject of the Eucharistic liturgy.

The precise details on the subject of the accurate understanding of the conditions required for recourse to general absolution are as follows. Of cases of grave necessity where there may be recourse to general absolution are described, it is said that they must be "objectively exceptional". The bishop is the sole judge of this. The expression "suitable time" for an "adequate" hearing of individual confessions, in the absence of which the bishop may authorize recourse to general absolution, refers only to the time reasonably necessary for the authentic and dignified celebration of the sacrament. When it is a matter of defining the sense of the expression "long time" to describe the duration during which penitents would be deprived of sacramental grace or of holy communion, it is stated that one must proceed with caution. In this regard, the law has established an empirical norm of one month for interpretation of the expression "long time".

The last specifications concern the bishops' conferences which must inform the Holy See when they consider that there are cases of grave necessity justifying recourse to general absolution. It is also incumbent upon the bishops' conferences to collect from dioceses information regarding cases of grave necessity existing in the dioceses and to inform the Holy See of the situation existing on their territory.

### **The practice of our Church**

Since 1972, following publication of "Pastoral Norms for the Administration of General Sacramental Absolution" by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Monseigneur Gerard-Marie Coderre specified the conditions that could justify recourse to general absolution and transmitted copies of the Roman norms to pastors. For a number of years pastors had to request authority from the bishop to have recourse to general absolution, while advising how at the same time recourse to private confession would be guaranteed. This practice was evaluated over a period of several years. As time passed the chancellor of the diocese restated the conditions required for recourse to general absolution, the bishop judging that during the seasons of Advent

and Lent (especially during the last two weeks of each of these liturgical seasons) general absolution could be given.

This recourse to the third form of the sacrament of penitence and reconciliation was positive in several respects. In the course of celebrations prepared with care, the faithful were brought to a new awareness of the God of Love and Mercy. They discovered as never before that the Word of God would enable them to see their situation as sinners, their need of pardon and the greatness of reconciliation. The communal celebrations also clarified in a fresh light the collective dimension of sin together with the personal responsibility of everybody. They enabled persons who had undergone humiliating or wounding experiences in their frequentation of the sacrament a more tranquil path towards reconciliation. They also enabled priests, older and less numerous, to avoid exhausting themselves in interminable, gruelling and often tedious sessions in the confessional.

In practice, there has been recourse to general absolution in most parishes. The sacrament of penance with individual confession and absolution, which had already been practised less and less often since the beginning of the sixties, was largely abandoned, in the seasons of Advent and Lent as well as the rest of the year. The confessionals were deserted in many parishes. Many parish bulletins do not indicate the times when priests are available to hear confessions, stating only that confession may be heard before mass or upon request.

In the minds of the faithful, including many of the priests, the celebration of the sacrament of penitence with general absolution has practically become an ordinary form of the sacrament equivalent to its two primary forms, and no longer an extraordinary or exceptional form as stipulated in the Roman norms since 1972.

In recent years, on the occasion of *ad limina* visits, and of visits by the president of the CCCB and in response to reports from the bishops requested by the Holy See, the Holy Father has deemed it necessary several times to enhance the practice of individual confession and to restate the norms that must govern the celebration of the sacrament of penance. He has asked the bishops to take their responsibilities in this matter. It is in response to this appeal that I issue the following directives and that I obligate you to put them into practice forthwith.

### **Some Instructions on the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation**

#### **1) *The reassertion of the sacrament of penitence with individual confession and absolution***

At their last plenary meeting, the Catholic bishops of Canada decreed as a first step, the decree being subject to approval by the Holy See, that they "will bend every effort to reassert the private celebration and the communal celebration of the Sacrament of Penitence and Reconciliation with individual confession and absolution". They thus confirmed the statement they had made on March 18, 1988: "The Conference of Catholic Bishops of Canada states that individual confession is the usual form of sacramental reconciliation. The bishops intend therefore to encourage the availability of this form of the sacrament to the faithful and they wish to promote, by every means at their disposal, celebrations of high dignity, in conformity with the requirements of the Rite of Penitence. In particular, they draw the attention of the pastors of souls to their duty

to provide for individual confessions, regulating the hours when they can each day give suitable access to the Sacrament of Reconciliation." (canon 986, # 1)

We must acknowledge that recourse to general absolution has not in fact led to a reassertion of the sacrament of penitence in its private form and that the latter continues to be neglected or misunderstood, except on rare occasions such as the visit of the relics of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus or of World Youth Day. On the other hand, it would be an exaggeration to state that we have bent every effort to make the meaning, the value and the greatness of the sacrament in its two primary forms understood. It is enough to ask ourselves what use we have made of the doctrinal and pastoral notes in the Rite of Penitence and Reconciliation; what instructions we have given the faithful about the sacrament in its individual form, what sermons have taken up the meaning of sin and of reconciliation.

The reassertion of the sacrament of penitence entails several measures to which I want to draw your attention.

1) The education of the faithful

- S** The most recent teaching on the mystery of reconciliation is to be found in the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, in the encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and in the Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei*. Those are the fundamental references that must inspire our own teaching, our catechesis, our sermons and our statements.
- S** The *Rite of Penitence and Reconciliation* contains a great wealth of doctrinal and pastoral notes that can help us in the presentation of the mystery of mercy and the different forms of forgiveness, sacramental and non-sacramental. (The French edition of this rite is particularly well composed and appears to me indispensable.)
- S** In the course of the year the Word of God, proclaimed at Sunday celebrations and most especially during the seasons of Advent and Lent, provides us with the opportunity to speak about God's merciful love, about the meaning of sin, and about the conversion to which we are called.
- S** Several excellent studies exist on the mercy of God and on the sacrament of penitence and pardon which can help us in shouldering our responsibility as teachers of the faith (see bibliography attached).

b) Availability of confessors

While ensuring henceforth the instruction that is an essential part of the prophetic function entrusted to us, we must also take measures to facilitate access to the sacrament of penitence and reconciliation. In this respect, it is not sufficient to say that we are available as requested. We have to be there at designated times and

places. We therefore need to announce in the parish bulletins and on notice boards provided for this purpose the times when confessors will be present in the confessionals or in the room of reconciliation, so that the onus will not be on the faithful to go to extra lengths to find a priest. Such planning will take into account the considerations that you often have to look after more than one parish, that celebrations can be offered in one or another of the churches in the same cluster, and that special measures also call for a particular availability, for example, for couples preparing for marriage, for the confirmation of adults, or for the sacrament of the sick.

It will be necessary, when a communal celebration of the sacrament of pardon with individual confession and absolution is planned, to provide for a sufficient number of priests and therefore to work at the level of a cluster or grouping, just as you are accustomed to doing this for the celebration with children on the occasion of their first communion or of their confirmation.

In conclusion, it is my desire that in some churches of our diocese we can count, as we did during the jubilee year, on the constant availability of a priest in each of the regions of our diocese, notably in the cathedral and in the co-cathedral, in the Basilica at Varennes, and in other churches that can be designated as places where the sacrament of penitence is permanently on offer.

c) Instruments at the service of the faithful

In the communal celebrations of pardon, the time is taken that is needed to provide ample room for the Word of God, to help the faithful to acknowledge their condition as sinners, and to make an examination of conscience easier. The time necessary is allowed for meeting the priest and for giving thanks to God for his mercy. Usually a leaflet is prepared for the benefit of the faithful and all the conditions are present for a fruitful celebration. In the individual proceeding, the faithful are often left to themselves. That is why it would be useful and necessary to prepare instruments to help penitents prepare themselves individually for the sacrament. There could be a booklet providing extracts from the Word of God, information on how to examine one's conscience and make one's confession, and on the essential elements of the proceeding (contrition, confession, penance) as well as suggestions for a prayer of thanksgiving.

d) The second form of the sacrament of penitence and reconciliation

The second form of the sacrament, communal celebration with individual confession and absolution, has been put forward chiefly for children on the eve of their first communion and of their confirmation and for the seasons of Advent and Lent. It has seldom been offered to adults. It is however a form suited to a proper education of the faithful. It provides ample room for the Word of God; it brings out the ecclesial character of conversion and of reconciliation; its purpose is the true spiritual good of the faithful; it enables the penitent to meet the priest, provided there is a sufficient number of priests for the celebration. In addition, it allows penitents in all conditions to take a penitential step that is comfortable for them, whether it be recognizing that their venial faults are obstructing their progress towards the sanctity to which they are called, offending God and wounding the Church; or recognizing that their grave faults are depriving them of their communion with God in the Church; or that their situation in life, being objectively a break with the Church denying them absolution, they are nonetheless putting themselves in the sight of the merciful Lord and taking a step progressing towards conversion. The Rite of Penitence and Reconciliation provides different scenarios of strong significance for this second form of the sacrament. The Exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* furnishes, regarding this, the theological and pastoral basis for such a step. I invite you urgently therefore to give consideration to this possibility that is offered to us. It can truly lead to a rediscovery of the sacrament of reconciliation in its individual form.

## 2. *The conditions of recourse to general absolution*

It is not without merit to state that recourse to general absolution has not been forbidden by the Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei*. This third form of the sacrament is inscribed in the Code of Canon Law and always remains a possibility. However, it is subject to strict conditions that bind the conscience of the minister of the sacrament and that of the Bishop who must in the last resort judge whether the conditions justifying this recourse actually obtain. It challenges also the lawfulness and the very validity of the sacrament when all the required conditions are not fulfilled. It must be emphasized that the third form of the sacrament is not equivalent to the primary two, it remains exceptional, extraordinary, requiring conditions that are objectively verifiable. It always requires in the last resort the judgement of the bishop.

I repeat once more these conditions. There must be (1) either danger of death in which case the priest or priests do not have enough time to hear the confession of every penitent, (2) or *grave necessity*.

There is grave necessity if

- 1) taking into account the **number of penitents**,
- 2) **confessors are not available**
- 3) to hear everyone's confession **properly**
- 4) **within a reasonable time** and consequently the penitents, through no fault of their own, are compelled **to go without** sacramental grace or holy communion **for a long period of time**.

It is also understood that it is not acceptable to create, or allow to be created, situations of grave necessity (1) arising from failure to provide for the usual administration of the sacrament and (2) even less, from the penitents' choice of general absolution as if this were a normal possibility equivalent to the two usual forms decreed in the Rite.

Furthermore, in order for one of the faithful to benefit **authentically** from a sacramental absolution given to a number of people together, it is required that he not only be well disposed, but that he have at the same time the intention to confess privately, in good time, the grave sins that he cannot acknowledge in these circumstances. Finally, it is clear that penitents who live habitually in a state of mortal sin and who do not intend to change their situation cannot receive **valid** absolution.

There is still the question of knowing whether such cases of grave necessity confront us in our diocese. It seems to me premature to give a definitive answer to this question. On the one hand, we must wait until the Congregation for Sacred Worship and Sacramental Discipline has confirmed the decree envisaged by the CCCB; on the other hand, we must guarantee to the faithful a renewed understanding of the sacrament of penitence and reconciliation in its two primary forms and we must prepare them to accept the conditions required for recourse to general absolution. That is why we must proceed by stages.

We shall experience the first stage in the course of the coming weeks and especially during Lent.

- 1) I ask pastors to offer adequate instruction to the faithful during their Lenten homilies, especially on Sunday. Homilies are catechetical opportunities of which we can profitably take advantage, particularly during the season of Lent. The texts of the Word of God lend themselves well to this.
- 2) I ask also that during Lent you make known to the faithful the times and places for reception of the sacrament of penance, in its primary form.
- 3) I invite pastors, during the early weeks of Lent, to offer the sacrament of penitence and reconciliation in its second form.
- 4) As the bishop cannot grant a blanket authorization of recourse to general absolution, I ask that pastors who, on the basis of the explanations that I have given above, foresee having to resort to general absolution, make the request to the bishop in writing and specify the reasons motivating their request, and that they do this before March 15. At the same time as this request is made, these pastors must also report what they plan to do during the Lenten



season to make the sacrament of forgiveness available in one or the other of its usual forms (times, places, notice of places) and how they intend to inform and instruct the faithful.

- 5) Finally, once Easter is past, I am going to ask that an evaluation be made, with the help of a grid that I will propose to you, of the effort undertaken to restore the authenticity of the sacrament of reconciliation in its two primary forms in a manner that anticipates the other stages to be covered.
- 6) Without waiting for confirmation of the CCCB decree, I deem that we cannot consider the following small groups as cases of grave necessity justifying recourse to general absolution:
  - 1) persons in hospital and the aged or infirm in residences;
  - 2) communities of the consecrated life;
  - 3) groups, movements or associations at meetings where the sacrament of reconciliation is offered;
  - 4) gatherings of children or young people preparing themselves for first communion or confirmation or assembled for a feast or a pilgrimage;
  - 5) adults preparing for confirmation or marriage;
  - 6) persons assembled for a retreat or spiritual exercises.

## **Conclusion**

Allow me to conclude this letter by recalling for our benefit this beautiful passage from Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians: *"All this has been done by God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. I mean that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's transgressions against them, and that he has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. This makes us ambassadors for Christ, God as it were appealing through us. We implore you, in Christ's name: be reconciled to God!"* (II Corinthians 5:18-21)

I pray with you that the Spirit of the Lord, given to the Apostles the evening of the Resurrection at the same time as the task of remitting sins was entrusted to them, will guide you, help you and enlighten you in the exercise of the ministry of reconciliation.

Given at Longueuil, February 11, 2003  
On the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes

↙ Jacques Berthelet, c.s.v.  
Bishop of Saint-Jean-Longueuil

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