

**Presentation of the decree of the CCCB
on the application of the norms of *Misericordia Dei***

My dear fellow priests,

It is five years now since I presented to you the letter *Misericordia Dei* of Pope John Paul II, and provided you with some guidelines for the practice of the ministry of reconciliation while reserving the right to return to the subject once the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments had confirmed the decree that the CCCB intended to put before it.

Some revisions and several meetings between the representatives of the CCCB and the Holy See were necessary before the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops received from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments the *recognitio* requested following a vote by more than a two-thirds majority of the members of the Conference. It was actually on January 18th last that the Conference received the confirmation of its decree.

You will find as an appendix the text of the decree in French and English. This decree of the Conference confirms the exceptional character of general absolution and specifies the conditions for it even more precisely. You will realize that the necessary conditions do not obtain in our diocese to enable me to authorize recourse to this third form of the sacrament of penance. In this respect, nothing has changed in what I said to you in my letter of February 9th, 2005 in which I informed you of my decision to give no further approval to the adoption of general absolution. But the decree that you are going to read cannot be reduced to a mere question of general absolution. This is why I permit myself to make comments on some of the articles of this decree so that we might take them into account in our practice of the ministry of reconciliation.

The first article of the decree reminds us that individual confession of sins with individual absolution is the ordinary form of the sacrament of confession. It is its normal, customary form. This affirmation conforms to affirmations made by Pope Paul VI in 1972. Their goal was to reassert the value of the sacrament of penance. And it is in this sense that the Rite, for the first and second forms of the sacrament, was going to give fundamental importance to the Word of God and do

everything that could be done to make the first form the occasion of an experience of personal encounter with a God of mercy. All the sacraments are, moreover, acts of Christ. They all provide occasions for a personal encounter with him.

The articles that follow indicate the means by which this personal encounter may become possible and fruitful.

While article 2 recalls that the faithful have a right to individual confession and that *those who have the care of souls* are obligated to see that the confessions of the faithful are heard, article 3 adds that *all* priests who have the faculty to administer the sacrament of penance must show themselves to be always and fully disposed to administer it every time the faithful reasonably ask for it.

Article 4 stipulates the responsibilities of Ordinaries, pastors and sanctuary rectors to ensure that *the most extensive facilities possible for the confessions of the faithful* actually exist: by the establishment of *schedules suited to* the real situation of the penitents, by *the visible presence of confessors* during the hours posted and by particular opportunities before Masses and even during Mass if additional priests are available. To this end, *the time and place* of confessions should be *posted at the location and made public*, in the weekly parish bulletin for example, and, should the occasion arise, on the parish or sanctuary website. More specifically, confession should be offered regularly on a weekly basis and, if there are several places of worship, at least once a month in each of these places. Finally, we may quote Paul VI to the effect that priests may find themselves obliged to postpone or even give up other activities, but never the confessional.

It is therefore not enough that we say priests are available on request. It is important that this availability be made clear by the timetables provided and the presence of priests at the places of worship to hear confessions.

For the purpose of offering and reasserting the value of the sacrament of reconciliation, article 5 requests the bishops to ask priests to give a new impetus to the sacrament of reconciliation, this being a requirement of charity and pastoral justice when you consider the right of the faithful to receive it. The bishops are also called to encourage the faithful to seek the grace of this sacrament during the hours scheduled. It is also stated that additional times for individual confession will be offered to the faithful during major feasts and major periods in the liturgical calendar.

Articles 6 and 7 restate the traditional doctrine concerning the constitutive parts of the sacrament and the obligations of the faithful.

Articles 8 to 14 deal with the question of general absolution, which is characterized as exceptional. For this reason, the norms that govern it have to be given a strict interpretation, which is provided by articles 11 and 14. The decree concludes with article 15 concerning the place of confession.

Beyond the juridical and imperative force of a decree, we have to explore the whole field that is open to us of a continuously renewed discovery of the God of mercy and of the gift given by the Resurrected Christ to the Apostles, on the very evening of the Resurrection, when he entrusted to them the mission of being the ministers of reconciliation with the Father. This mission the bishops and priests have received in their turn. They have the unceasing duty to explore its meaning, and to bring the people who are entrusted to them to some understanding of the depth of this mystery of mercy and to the inclination to have recourse with confidence to the sacrament of forgiveness, in which the unfathomable love of God for humanity manifests itself in a very particular way.

This is why I ask that during the next pastoral year the Vicar-General for the Regions undertake with you and your collaborators a profound reflection on the ministry of mercy and on the means of putting it to work through a suitable catechesis and a generous offering of the sacrament of forgiveness. I am also asking the Vicar-General co-ordinating ministries to commit our diocesan services to a guarantee that our pastoral staff will be equipped and informed as necessary to guide the whole People of God who are in Saint-Jean-Longueuil to an understanding and a fruitful practice of the sacrament of forgiveness, be they children or young people, or adults and Christian communities.

May the Spirit of God, whose breath permeated the Apostles and the disciples, take hold of us all and inspire in our Church that dynamism which will renew it to its very depths !

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Jacques Berthelet, C.S.V.". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

↖ Jacques Berthelet, C.S.V.
Bishop of Saint-Jean-Longueuil

Jean-Pierre Camerlain, priest
Chancellor

May 12, 2008