



CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP
AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

"NOTITIAE"

2015/2

REDISCOVERING THE «RITE OF PENANCE»

The interest stirred up by the Jubilee of Mercy has found expression in many ways. *Notitiae* also wishes to make its contribution with a series of articles designed to bring out the importance of the Mercy of God announced, celebrated and lived in the liturgical actions.

If the whole of the sacramental economy is pervaded by divine mercy, beginning with baptism "for the forgiveness of sins", the reconciling work of God is particularly bestowed and continuously manifested in the Sacrament of Penance^[1]. Precisely for this reason, Pope Francis in *Misericordiae vultus*, the Jubilee's Bull of Indiction, asks that the Sacrament of Reconciliation be placed with conviction at its centre so that «it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands» (MV 17).

Celebrating the Mercy of God helps us to place ourselves with honesty before our own conscience, to recognise our need to be reconciled with the Father, who with patience knows how to wait for the sinner in order to give an embrace that restores our dignity. Recognising and repenting of one's sins is not a humiliation. Rather, it is a recovery of the true face of God and an abandonment of self with confidence to his loving plan while at the same time rediscovering our true human face, created in the image and likeness of God. In rediscovering Him who is the origin and end of our life we experience the most beautiful fruit of mercy in the Sacrament of Penance.

In this spirit the desire here is to offer some reflections on the *Ordo Paenitentiae*, focusing above all on some theological-liturgical aspects and then, more broadly, on the celebrative dynamic of the rite itself. It is instructive to revisit this liturgical book, to re-read the *Praenotanda*, to become accustomed with the texts and gestures, to take on board the suggested attitudes and, in short, to understand *how* the Church, through rites and prayers, dispenses the Mercy of God.

1. CONTRITION AND CONVERSION OF HEART

The *Ordo Paenitentiae* was promulgated on 2 December 1973, in accordance with the conciliar mandate which revised the Rite and formulas «so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the Sacrament» (SC 72). At the distance of some decades, however, one notes that the Rite and formulas have not always been respected. Maybe, this is because some of the celebrative suggestions were judged inopportune or too excessive. While not being essential for the valid administration of the Sacrament they nevertheless constitute a richness for a celebration in which that full, conscious and active participation of the minister and the lay faithful is accomplished, which «in the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, [...] is the aim to be considered before all else» (SC 14).

The Loss of the Sense of Sin

In every part of the world, as has been confirmed during the course of *ad limina* visits, many bishops report with concern an ongoing disaffection of lay faithful and priests with the Sacrament of

Reconciliation. At the root of this, beyond a generic recognition of being sinners, there is without doubt confusion and a lack of recognition about the individual nature of sin and therefore in confessing it in order to seek the forgiveness of God. More than fifty years ago, Blessed Paul VI in one of his homilies observed that, «in the language of respectable people today, in their books, in the things that they say about man, you will not find that dreadful word which, however, is very frequent in the religious world – our world – especially in close relation to God: the word is 'sin'. In today's way of thinking people are no longer regarded as sinners. They are categorised as being healthy, sick, good, strong, weak, rich, poor, wise, ignorant; but one never encounters the word sin. The human intellect having thus been detached from divine wisdom, this word 'sin' does not recur because we have lost the concept of sin. One of the most penetrating and grave words of Pope Pius XII, of venerable memory, was, "the modern world has lost the sense of sin". What is this if not the rupture of our relationship with God, caused precisely by 'sin'»[2]. The Jubilee Year of Mercy should be the favourable time to recover the true sense of sin in the light of the Sacrament of forgiveness, keeping in mind that it forms part of the dialectic between the mystery of human sin and the mystery of the infinite Mercy of God which pervades the whole biblical narrative.

Conversion of the heart

Alongside other considerations something of the theological background of the Sacrament as found in the *Praenotanda* of the Rite should be re-evaluated in order to rediscover the full value of the *Rite of Penance*[3]. «Since every sin is an offence against God which disrupts our friendship with him, "the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him"» (RP 5). On the other hand the sin of one causes harm to all thus, «penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters» (RP 5). Above all one cannot forget that the sacramental experience requires the same welcome invitation with which Jesus opened his ministry, «The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel» (Mk 1: 15).

The Council of Trent listed four acts of penitence. Three acts of the penitent themselves (contrition, confession, satisfaction). Then the absolution given by the minister which Trent considers the most important part of the Sacrament[4]. The *Rite of Penance* takes up the doctrine of Trent, highlighting particularly the acts of the penitent, among which the primary and most important is contrition or «inner conversion of heart» (RP 6). The model for this is the prodigal son who decides to return to his father's house with a contrite and repentant heart. The Sacrament is shown to be in direct continuity with the work of Christ given that he proclaimed that *metanoia* is the condition of entering the Kingdom. In the absence of *metanoia*/conversion the fruits of the Sacrament are diminished for the penitent because; «the genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition» (RP 6). Note that the *Praenotanda* in mentioning the text of Trent, which understands contrition as heartfelt sorrow and aversion to the committed sin, interprets contrition in a richer and more biblical sense of conversion of heart: «For conversion should affect a person from within so that it may progressively enlighten him and render him continually more like Christ» (RP 6).

In the comprehensive and concrete anthropology of the Bible the human heart is the very source of an individual's personality which is conscious, intelligent and free. It is the centre of their decisive choices and of the mysterious action of God. The just walk with «integrity of heart» (Ps 101: 2), but «out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts» (Mk 7: 21). Accordingly, God does not despise «a broken and contrite heart» (Ps 51: 17). The heart is the place where we encounter God. In biblical language, the heart points to the totality of the human person, rather than the individual faculties and acts of the person. The heart is a person's inner and unrepeatable self, the centre of human existence, the meeting place of reason, will, spirit and feeling. It is the place where the person finds their unity and the inner direction of mind and heart, of will and affectivity. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, «the spiritual tradition of the Church also emphasises the *heart*, in the biblical sense of the depths of one's being, where the person decides for or against God» (n. 368). The heart is therefore an undivided self with which we love God and our neighbour.

Conversion of heart is not only the principle element it is also the one which unifies all the acts of the penitent which constitute the Sacrament given that every single element is defined as leading to conversion of heart: «This inner conversion of heart embraces sorrow for sin and the intent to lead a new life. It is expressed through confession made to the Church, due satisfaction, and amendment

of life» (*RP* 6). Therefore conversion of heart is not to be understood as a single, stand-alone act accomplished once and for all, but rather as a resolute detachment from sin in order to make a progressive and continuous journey of adherence to Christ and of friendship with him. The sequence of the *Rite of Penance* is, so to speak, the expression of the various moments or stages of a journey that does not end with the celebration of the Sacrament but shapes the whole life of the penitent.

In this context, non-sacramental penitential celebrations are to be valued. Indeed, if conversion of heart is at the core of the Sacrament of Penance it is necessary to give such celebrations the greatest importance for, as we read in the *Praenotanda*, they «are gatherings of the people of God to hear the proclamation of God's Word. This invites them to conversion and renewal of life and announces our freedom from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ» (*RP* 36). These non-sacramental celebrations are placed before and after the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, because conversion of heart presupposes an awareness of what sin is and therefore of the sins committed. Let us recall the role that the Word of God played in the conversion of Saint Augustine: «... Domine, amo te. Percussisti cor meum verbo tuo, et amavi te»^[5](«Not with doubting, but with assured consciousness, do I love Thee, Lord. Thou hast stricken my heart with Thy word, and I loved Thee»). The response to the merciful love of God is love.

The Minister of the Sacrament

It is also important to consider the role of the minister of the Sacrament who, according to *Misericordiae vultus*, should be «authentic signs of the Father's mercy» (*MV* 17). Being sinners themselves, they should not forget to be penitents who experience the joy of forgiveness in the Sacrament. Catholic tradition has singled out four figures or characteristics to express the task proper to the priest confessor. He is Teacher and Judge – in order to indicate the objectivity of the law –; but he is also Father and Physician – in order to recall the need for pastoral charity towards the penitent. Different historical eras and different theological trends have underlined now one, now another of these figures. The Council of Trent affirms that priests exercise the function of remitting sins «as ministers of Christ», fulfilling their task in «the pattern of a judicial act» (*ad instar actus iudicialis*)^[6]. The *Rite of Penance* also speaks of the confessor as Judge and Physician when it says, «In order to fulfil his ministry properly and faithfully the confessor should understand the disorders of souls and apply the appropriate remedies to them. He should fulfil his office of judge wisely» (*RP* 10). Later on it underlines that «the confessor fulfils a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of Christ the Good Shepherd» (*RP* 10). The confessor is a witness to the Mercy of God towards the repentant sinner^[7]. In the Old Testament mercy is the compassionate and maternal sentiment of God for his creatures despite their infidelity (cf. Ex 34: 6; Ps 51: 3; Ps 131; Jer 12: 15; 30: 18). In the New Testament Jesus is presented as the «merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make expiation for the sins of the people» (Heb 2: 17).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarises well all these tasks of the confessor when it affirms, «When he celebrates the Sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep; of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds; of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return; and of the just and impartial judge whose judgement is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner» (n. 1465). The merciful presence of the Father, the self-giving gift of the Son, the purifying and healing love of the Spirit are made transparent in the formulas and ritual gestures of the sacramental celebration. The confessor must become the expression and the human means of this love which through him is poured out upon the penitent and leads the penitent once again to life, to hope, to joy.

The reflections set out above find their concrete effect in the celebration of the Sacrament itself which *per ritus et preces* leads penitents and ministers into an experience of the Mercy of God. Every celebration of the Sacrament is indeed a "Jubilee of Mercy".

There are other areas of a spiritual, disciplinary and pastoral character connected to the celebration of the Sacrament which are not considered in these reflections but which merit attention. One thinks, for example, of the care to be taken in the ongoing formation of the clergy, as well as the initial formation in seminaries and in institutes of formation. Important also is compliance with the discipline surrounding general absolution (cf. CIC can. 961-963), and paying attention to the risks

regarding discretion and privacy, to the protection of anonymity and secrecy, which are threatened today by facile and sacrilegious tapping, recording and diffusion of the content of confession (cf. CIC can 983).

2. TOWARDS A MYSTAGOGY OF THE *ORDO PAENITENTIAE*

In drawing our attention to a mystagogical reading of the «Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents» (chp. I) one must bear in mind the ecclesial dimension of the Sacrament, which is highlighted in chapter II: «Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution». The profoundly personal nature of the Sacrament of Penance is, in fact, closely associated with its ecclesial dimension given that it is an act which reconciles the penitent with God and with the Church (cf. CCC 1468-1469). In this regard the *Praenotanda* affirm that the «communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance» (*RP* 22). In fact, as the Council stated, «Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church [...]. Therefore liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it» (*SC* 26).

The Jubilee Year of Mercy represents a significant opportunity for diocesan and parish communities to rediscover the «Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution»^[8]. The ritual sequence which we find in the second chapter of the *Rite of Penance* helps to throw light on two important aspects of the ecclesial nature of its celebration. Above all listening to the Word of God takes on the structure of a Liturgy of the Word, indeed of a proper act of worship (cf. *SC* 56). Here the gospel proclamation of mercy and the call to conversion ring out in an assembly in which «the faithful listen together to the Word of God, which proclaims his mercy and invites them to conversion; at the same time they examine the conformity of their lives with that Word of God and help each other through common prayer» (*RP* 22). Indeed the apostle James invites us to «confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed» (Jms 5: 16).

If listening to the Word of God which “strikes the heart” and mutual support in prayer are important, no less so is the praise and thanksgiving with which the rite concludes (cf. *RP* 29). In fact «after each person has confessed their sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the Blood of his Son» (*RP* 22).

These brief remarks about chapter II of the *Rite of Penance* highlight the social as well as the personal dynamics of sin and conversion. The ecclesial and the personal coalesce in a very particular way in this Sacrament underlining the fact that, «penance should not be understood as a mere private and innermost attitude. Because (not “although”) it is a personal act, it also has a social dimension. This point of view is also of importance for the justification of the ecclesial and sacramental aspects of penance»^[9].

Let us now go through the ritual sequence of chapter I: «Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents» not just in order to facilitate a renewed understanding of the Sacrament but above all to facilitate its more authentic celebration in the awareness that in the actions of the penitent and the priest, in the gestures and in the words, the grace of forgiveness is communicated. Precisely because *mens concordet voci* a worthy celebration is necessary, in the conviction that the ritual form is of capital importance, because in the liturgy the word precedes listening, action shapes life^[10].

Reception of the Penitent

The rubric in n. 41 instructs the priest on how the penitent is to be received: «When the penitent comes to confess his sins, the priest welcomes him warmly and greets him with kindness». Here we are at the threshold of beginning the ritual act, and the *Rite of Penance* is anxious that the minister of the Sacrament, who represents Christ, makes this moment one into which the penitent can step with as much hope and ease as possible. We all know that it can be difficult for a person to come to confession. But if one has arrived at this point, then grace has already been at work. For this reason the priest should receive the one who comes with a welcome similar to the father of the prodigal son, who ran to meet his repentant son when he saw him already at a distance. Priests should

prepare themselves for celebrating this ministry by being aware that they represent the Christ who, in this parable, revealed the face of the heavenly Father who throws a feast and rejoices over the one who returns to him (cf. Lk 15: 11-32). This instruction for how the ritual should begin reveals that God the Father celebrates a "Jubilee" whenever any sinner presents themselves for this Sacrament: «There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance» (Lk 15: 7).

After being received, the penitent makes the sign of the cross, saying, «In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit» (RP 42). It is an act of faith distinctive to the Christian^[11]. Such a beginning is important both for practical and theological reasons. The familiar ritual sign and words mark the moment in which the liturgy truly begins. The sign of the cross will also be present at the central moment of sacramental absolution. While the Trinitarian formula recalls our baptism, in which we were reborn to divine life, it directs us towards the Eucharistic celebration which guards, increases and renews the life of grace in us.

The ritual space slowly intensifies in what comes next. The priest does not simply say to the penitent something like, "Now tell me your sins." His words of invitation quickly establish an atmosphere of great seriousness in this encounter, while at the same time evoking the penitent's trust in God. The priest says, «May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy» (RP 42). How strong and sweet such words will sound in the penitent's heart if the priest utters them with conviction and from deep within the role his ordination has equipped him to perform!

Numbers 67-71 of the *RP* offer alternative formulas for the beginning of the ritual, all of them theologically eloquent and very rich with biblical resonances. Each in a different way revives trust in the Mercy of God offered in the Sacrament. These formulas could be used in catechesis and preaching to invite the faithful to celebrate the Sacrament with joy, seriousness and serenity. Imagine the force, for example, on the penitent who hears the priest say with firm conviction the words of the prophet Ezekiel, «I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live» (cf. 33: 11). Here the priest speaks with the authority of God's word and not some merely commonplace expression of his own.

Reading of the Word of God

Even though the different options of the invitation to confess are based in varying degrees of intensity on the words of Scripture the rite continues with the reading of the Word of God. Although the ritual itself indicates this part is *ad libitum*, omitting it should only occur in the case of a true obstacle. In the structure of the *Rite of Penance* the proclamation of the Word of God is an important dimension of the celebration (cf. RP 17). The scriptural passages which the ritual offers are characterised as words which announce the Mercy of God and call us to conversion (cf. RP 43). The ritual offers twelve biblical passages (cf. RP 72-84), or another passage may be used that either the priest or penitent deems suitable.

In the ritual structure, the precedence given to the proclamation of the Word of God recalls the fact that here and now what is proclaimed is being fulfilled in the sacramental celebration. What is proclaimed is experienced by the penitent with absolute newness and freshness, because the Word rings-out enriched with new meaning thanks to the concrete sacramental moment that is lived with faith. The Jubilee of Mercy is a propitious moment for priests and faithful to truly enhance the use of the Word of God. In each of the biblical passages proposed by the Ritual priests can rediscover the grandeur of the ministry entrusted to them and penitents can stand in awe of the light which leads them to an encounter with Christ in the Sacrament.

For example, if Ezekiel 11: 19-20 is chosen (cf. RP 73), it is directly to this penitent that the divine oracle is addressed: «And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh...». When the penitent realises that in this very moment the promise is made to him, then his heart can open in relief and trust, and sins can be confessed. Or if the passage from Mark 1: 14-15 is used (cf. RP 75), then both the priest and the penitent must be mindful that Christ himself is present here and now and forcefully announcing to the one confessing: «The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the

Gospel». The response to this presence of Christ and his words will be the confession of sins. Or if the passage from Luke 15: 1-7 is chosen (cf. *RP 77*), the penitent should understand that for his sake Jesus defends himself against the complaint of the Pharisees and Scribes that he eats with sinners. In effect, in this sacramental moment, Jesus stands beside this penitent – a sinner – and declares himself willing to re-establish communion with him, to go after him as the shepherd goes after the lost sheep. Is not the Word of God announcing to us here a Jubilee of Mercy and giving us the courage to confess our sins with hope and confidence?

Confession of Sins and Acceptance of Satisfaction

The next moment in the rite forms an essential part of the sacramental celebration: the confession of the penitent's sins and acceptance of an act of satisfaction proposed by the priest (cf. *RP 44*). A few points deserved to be underlined about the ritual placement of confession and the form it takes. Unlike all the other parts of this rite, there are no set texts or words to be said, but the penitent is called upon to confess his sins. But what has preceded this in the rite, especially the proclamation of the Word of God, shows that the confession of sins does not have its origin solely in the penitent's initiative. Rather, confessing sins is rooted in the grace of having heard God's Word and being moved to repentance and contrition as a result of it.

If there are no set liturgical texts for this moment, nonetheless, rubrics are also part of the liturgical rite; and the rubrics at this point are carefully crafted. Indeed, they express the deep theological significance of this moment. It is not simply a question of the penitent speaking out a list of sins as if into the air or to no one. One confesses to the priest. The priest, for his part, is instructed to engage in a careful interaction with the one confessing: «If necessary, the priest helps the penitent to make an integral confession and gives him suitable counsel». This back and forth between penitent and priest is nothing less than the ritual form that enacts the penitent's encounter with Christ himself in the person of the priest. For this reason the priest is instructed to help the penitent to understand the deepest meaning of this encounter. «He [the priest] urges him [the penitent] to be sorry for his faults, reminding him that through the Sacrament of penance the Christian dies and rises with Christ and is thus renewed in the paschal mystery» (*RP 44*). This is an essential theological point for understanding the Sacrament rightly. All that happens in this Sacrament is rooted in the Paschal Mystery. The penitent is renewed in the original pattern of his baptism, where one dies with Christ to sin and rises with him to new life.

With the aid of the Jubilee Year it is to be hoped that priests and penitents alike may celebrate this Sacrament with greater awareness of how profound is this moment of encounter between priest and penitent. We recall the striking words of Pope Saint John Paul II in his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*: «In faithfully observing the centuries-old practice of the Sacrament of Penance – the practice of individual confession with a personal act of sorrow and the intention to amend and make satisfaction – the Church is therefore defending the human soul's individual right: man's right to a more personal encounter with the crucified forgiving Christ, with Christ saying, through the minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: "Your sins are forgiven"; "Go, and do not sin again"» (n. 20). It is unusual and very forceful that the Pope calls the encounter between penitent and priest a human "right". By this he is referring to something that lies deep inside the wounded heart of sinful humanity. In speaking of the *Redemptor hominis* he claims that every individual is longing for an intense, personal encounter with Christ, «with the crucified and forgiving Christ». The liturgical structure of the Sacrament is giving form to this very longing and to its satisfaction.

After the penitent's confession of sins, «The priest proposes an act of penance which the penitent accepts to make satisfaction for sin and to amend his life» (*RP 44*). In this way the rubric underlines anew the meaning of the intense encounter and exchange between priest and penitent. And in all that he does, the priest is urged to «adapt his counsel to the penitent's circumstances» (*RP 44*). Here and now the penitent meets the «crucified and forgiving Christ» who also shows the way to amendment and a new way of life.

Prayer of the Penitent

The priest continues his dialogue with the penitent, inviting him «to express his sorrow» in a prayer (*RP 45*). The rite requires this clear expression of contrition in the form of a prayer, but it offers a

wide variety of possible ways of doing this. Some ten different possible prayers are offered (cf. *RP* 45, 85-92). Even if, as with the biblical passages, only one is used in any given celebration, making all ten of these options the object of meditation will help people to behold the many facets of the jewel that this sacramental moment encapsulates. Such meditation will help people to prepare for confession and to utter such deep words of contrition with all their heart during the actual celebration of the Sacrament.

The first formula offered at *RP* 45 is a traditional prayer that many know as the "Act of Contrition." It has stood the test of centuries and perhaps needs no comment. The Jubilee is, nonetheless, an occasion to highlight the words and the theological density with which this prayer in its Latin form ends. The one praying pleads: «Per merita passionis Salvatoris nostri Iesu Christi, Domine, miserere». The Mercy that we celebrate is rooted in the merits of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

The other options offered (cf. *RP* 85-92) all take their inspiration directly from Scripture. In fact the first two options (cf. *RP* 85, 86) put verses from the psalms directly on the penitent's lips: «Remember that your compassion, O Lord, and your love are from of old...» (Ps 25: 6-7). Or: «wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me...» (Ps 51: 4-5). In response to the priest's invitation to the penitent to express contrition, the penitent simply utters the very words that Israel and the Church have used through the ages. Praying such prayers penitents today experience that their personal story of sin and God's forgiveness is part of the great drama depicted in the pages of the Bible. That drama of sin and forgiveness continues now in our lives, and the same Spirit-given prayers are perfectly adapted to the moment.

Something similar is true in the option that puts on the penitent's lips the words the prodigal son says to his father upon returning home: «Father, I have sinned against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Be merciful to me a sinner» (*RP* 87). To manifest their conversion of heart penitents, encouraged by the parable to not be afraid and moved to contrition, pronounce the words of the son who returns with confidence to the father's house.

Another beautiful formula is a prayer addressed to each person of the Trinity, echoing New Testament scenes in such a way that penitents can recognise themselves in them (cf. *RP* 88). This prayer addresses first the «Father of mercy» and says to him the same words of the previous option borrowed from the prodigal son, except that here the words are introduced with a specific reference to the parable: «...like the prodigal son...». Then «Christ Jesus, Saviour of the world» is addressed, and the penitent asks him to do now for him the same that was done for the good thief when the gates of paradise were opened as Jesus was dying. The penitent uses as his own the very words of the repentant thief: «Lord, remember me in your kingdom». The last invocation is addressed to the Holy Spirit who is called the «fountain of love». The penitent asks the Spirit: «Purify my heart, and help me to walk as a child of light».

The Ritual offers other prayers to the penitent for which we offer no commentary. However it is desirable that, motivated by the Jubilee Year, they become better known and used. With them we learn to pray with the very words and images of Scripture, expressing our contrition and asking for forgiveness. With them we learn that we too are caught up in the marvellous deeds of mercy that the Scripture proclaims. Like the tax collector whom Jesus praised in his parable, we too beat our breast and pray: «Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner» (*RP* 92 based on Lk 18: 13-14).

Absolution

In the *Rite of Penance* the prayer of the penitent and the absolution by the priest are treated under one title heading. We have divided them here simply to facilitate commentary without, however, forgetting that it is important that we understand the profound ritual connection between the one moment and the other. In prayer to God the penitent expresses contrition and asks for mercy. There is an immediate response to this prayer as God acts through the ministry of the priest.

The liturgical atmosphere intensifies. The priest extends his hands or right hand over the penitent's head as he begins to speak. This should be done as carefully and deliberately as any other such similar gesture performed in a liturgical celebration. The penitent should be able to sense by means

of the change in bodily posture and gesture of the priest that a solemn sacramental act is about to be performed. The extended hands mean to indicate that all the Mercy of God – invisible but immensely powerful and present – is being poured upon the contrite penitent.

The words that the priest says in absolution likewise deserve proper attention. Brief as they are, they are extremely rich theologically and express the very heart of this Sacrament's meaning. The *Rite of Penance* lists clearly the essential theological ingredients of the formula (cf. *RP 19*). First of all, its clear Trinitarian structure is noted. The reconciliation effected in this Sacrament comes from God, who is called «the *Father* of mercies». The formula declares what God has already done; namely: «God, the Father of mercies, has reconciled the world to himself». And God has done this «through the death and resurrection of his *Son*», which the formula sets in immediate relationship with the sending of «the *Holy Spirit* among us for the forgiveness of sins». Up to this point in the formula it is a question of liturgical *anamnesis*. That is, the death and resurrection of Jesus is remembered, declared, announced. This *anamnesis* is done in Trinitarian terms and with language that immediately indicates the relevance of this mighty act of God to what God is about to do now for the penitent. God has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.

Then the language of the formula shifts to the present moment, and the priest addresses his words directly to the penitent. This shift from past to present means to indicate that God's huge deed in the Paschal Mystery is being applied through the words of the priest here and now in all its fruits to this particular penitent. The formula likewise makes clear that what God is effecting has a strongly ecclesial dimension «because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church» (*RP 19*).

So, speaking to the penitent the priest prays first «may God give you pardon and peace». This kind of language is a type of invocation or blessing; the verb is in the subjunctive (*tribuat*) which characterises the style of so many of the Church's invocations and blessings, which are always efficacious. But then the style of language changes and the priest then says what the Ritual calls «the essential words» (*RP 19*). Still speaking directly to the penitent, he says: «and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit», making the sign of the cross over the penitent. The priest who says «I absolve you» is speaking here *in persona Christi*.

By means of these gestures and words of the priest, in virtue of the power given by Christ to the Church to forgive sins (cf. Jhn 20: 23), the sinner has been restored to original baptismal purity. The penitent has had satisfied his longing for an intense, personal encounter with Christ, with the crucified and forgiving Christ. The Lord has come and has met that sinner in that key moment in his life constituted by the moment of conversion and forgiveness. Such an encounter would be the very essence of a Jubilee of Mercy, a jubilee for repentant sinners and a jubilee for Christ himself!

Proclamation of Praise and Dismissal of the Candidate

Ritual instinct knows that a moment as intense and rich as absolution needs a denouement. It would be improper to move from so holy a space quickly out the door and back to normal life without any transition. And yet sometimes, if a clear liturgical sense is not observed, the Sacrament's celebration can finish with a sense that expresses nothing more than: «It's over; you can go now». The *Rite of Penance* says clearly what is needed: «After receiving pardon for his sins the penitent praises the Mercy of God and gives him thanks in a short invocation taken from Scripture. Then the priest tells him to go in peace» (*RP 20*).

This short ritual is arranged in *RP 47*. Again, priest and penitent speak not their own words but the words of Scripture. Quoting words inspired by Psalm 118: 1, the priest exclaims: «Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good». The penitent concludes with the next line of the same psalm: «His mercy endures forever» (cf. also Ps 136: 1). These words of praise used by Israel and the Church throughout the ages have been fulfilled once again very concretely with startling freshness and irreducible newness.

Every liturgy of the Church finishes with those who have celebrated it being sent into the world with new divine life instilled that is meant to be life for all the world. A sending by the Church is nothing

less than the sacramental form of being sent by Christ himself: «As the Father has sent me, even so I send you», says the risen Lord to his disciples (cf. Jhn 20: 21). In the *Rite of Penance* this is accomplished swiftly and with just one line which the priest pronounces as a minister of Christ and the penitent experiences as being sent by the Church: «The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace».

"Merciful like the Father"

Pope Francis continually invites the Church to rediscover the joy of the Gospel and to "go forth", to be missionary, to dare, to take the initiative without fear, demonstrating «an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy»^[12].

The vocation of the Church is also that of every disciple of Christ who has been refreshed by the Sacrament of forgiveness. In fact, the mercy celebrated *per ritus et preces* commits them to put the teaching of Jesus into practice: «Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful» (Lk 6:36).

[1] «The Sacraments, as we know, are the locus of the closeness and the tenderness of God for mankind; they are the concrete way that God thought and wanted to come and meet us, to embrace us, without being ashamed of us and of our limitations. Among the Sacraments, certainly Reconciliation renders present with particular efficacy the merciful face of God: it is constantly and ceaselessly made real and manifest. Let us never forget, both as penitents and confessors, there is no sin that God cannot forgive. None! Only that which is withheld from Divine Mercy cannot be forgiven, just as one who withdraws from the sun can be neither illuminated nor warmed»: FRANCIS, [Audience to the participants at a Course on the Internal Forum organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary](#), 12 March 2015.

[2] PAUL VI, *Homily*, 20 September 1964. Cf. also JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation [Reconciliatio et Paenitentia](#), 2 December 1984, 18.

[3] THE ROMAN RITUAL, *Rite of Penance*, Catholic Book Publishing Corp, New Jersey 2009 (from now on abbreviated as *RP* followed by the paragraph number).

[4] Cf. COUNCIL OF TRENT, Session XIV, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance*, chp. IV-VI: *The Christian Faith*, Alba House, New York 1982, 460-463.

[5] SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* 10,6.8: CCL 27, 158s.

[6] *The Christian Faith*, 462.

[7] «Let us never forget that to be confessors means to participate in the very mission of Jesus to be a concrete sign of the constancy of divine love that pardons and saves» (*MV* 17).

[8] «The second form of celebration, precisely by its specific dimension, highlights certain aspects of great importance: The Word of God listened to in common has remarkable effect as compared to its individual reading and better emphasizes the ecclesial character of conversion and reconciliation. It is particularly meaningful at various seasons of the liturgical year and in connection with events of special pastoral importance»: [Reconciliatio et Paenitentia](#), 32.

[9] INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, [Penance and Reconciliation](#), 29 June 1983, A,II,2.

[10] «God has given us the Word and the sacred liturgy offers us words; we must enter into the words, into their meaning and receive them within us, we must attune ourselves to these words; in this way we become children of God, we become like God»: BENEDICT XVI, [Catechesis at the General Audience, 26 September 2012](#).

[11] «The Cross is a sign of the Passion, but at the same time it is a sign of the Resurrection. It is, so to speak, the saving staff that God holds out to us, the bridge by which we can pass over the

abyss of death, and all the threats of the Evil One, and reach God. [...] Thus we can say that in the sign of the Cross, together with the invocation of the Trinity, the whole essence of Christianity is summed up; it displays what is distinctively Christian»: J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, in *Collected Works*, XI, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2014, 111.

[12] FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 24.
