A Guide to the Sacrament of Penance
Discover God's Love Anew:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has asked "for renewed pastoral courage in ensuring that the day-to-day teaching of Christian communities persuasively and effectively presents the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation*" (Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 37). A renewed appreciation for this wonderful sacrament which leads many to return to the life of grace will bring about a new springtime, a new era of growth and life for the Church.

In response to the Pope's invitation, this statement will speak of our need for reconciliation and explain how we receive it. While we hope that all Catholics properly understand the nature and importance of the sacrament of Penance, this statement is directed in a special way to those who do not understand it or who have drifted away from its use.

We invite every Catholic to celebrate the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation or, as we have traditionally said, "go to Confession," on a regular basis. There can be no better way to make progress on our spiritual journey than by returning in humble repentance and love to God, whose forgiveness reestablishes us as his children and restores us to peace with his Church and our neighbors.

With every prayerful best wish, we remain,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

The Bishops of Pennsylvania

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1. What is Confession?

Confession is a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ in his love and mercy. It is here that we meet the loving Jesus who offers sinners forgiveness for offenses committed against God and neighbor. At the same time, Confession permits sinners to reconcile with the Church which also is wounded by our sins.

The sacrament, as the ***Catechism of the Catholic Church*** notes, is known by many names. Sometimes "it is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion" (1423). But it is also better known as "the sacrament of Penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction" (1423).

For many of us it still continues to be known as "the sacrament of confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament" (1424). At the same time, the ***Catechism*** reminds us that "it is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent 'pardon and peace'" (1424). Finally, it is also called the sacrament of Reconciliation because it reconciles sinners to God and then to each other (1424). In this text, we will refer to the sacrament as the sacrament of Penance.

Through this sacrament, we meet Christ in his Church ready and eager to absolve and restore us to new life. The graces of Christ are conferred in the sacraments by means of visible signs - signs that are acts of worship, symbols of the grace given and recognizable gestures through which the Lord bestows his gifts. In the sacrament of Penance, the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of grace are the gifts received through the outward sign, i.e., the extension of hands and words of absolution pronounced by the priest.

2. What is sin?

Unfortunately, in society today, many people have lost the understanding of sin.

Our Holy Father has stated that "it happens not infrequently in history, for more or less lengthy periods of time and under the influence of many different factors, that the moral conscience of many people becomes seriously clouded. . . . Too many signs indicate that such an eclipse exists in our time." (*Reconciliation and Penance*, 18) In our day, many people have

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lost the sense of sin and feel that they can do whatever they wish without considering or fearing the consequences.

For such people, the term "sin" has no meaning. Yet we know that sin is a terrible evil which all of us must come to understand and with which all of us must struggle. According to the ***Catechism of the Catholic Church***, sin "is an offense against God as well as a fault against reason, truth and right conscience. Sin is a deliberate thought, word, deed, or omission contrary to the eternal law of God." (1849, 1853) In other words, sin is willfully rejecting good and choosing evil. In judging the degree of sin, it is customary to distinguish between mortal and venial sins. "Mortal sin," the ***Catechism*** teaches, "destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law . . . Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it" (1855). (Refer to the ***Glossary*** on Mortal and Venial Sin at the end of the booklet).

3. Why is Confession necessary?

We need the sacrament of Penance because each of us, from time to time, sins. When we recognize that we have offended God who is all deserving of our love, we sense the need to make things right. Like the prodigal son in the Gospel, we long to know again the loving embrace of a forgiving father who patiently waits for each of us. Jesus himself has established this sure and certain way for us to access God's mercy and to know that our sins are forgiven. By virtue of his divine authority, Jesus gives this power of absolution to the apostolic ministry. As the ***Catechism of the Catholic Church*** says, "in imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church" (1444).

We need to know that our sins are forgiven. There is something in our human nature that calls out for the assurance that our sins are actually forgiven. Confession is the visible manifestation of God's mercy that provides us, in human terms as well, the clear awareness that God has forgiven us.

4. What is the source of the forgiveness of our sins?

Jesus invites us to reconciliation with God. It is Christ, the Good Shepherd, who offers us forgiveness and the power to turn away from sin. Writing to the Corinthians, Saint Paul reminds us that just as sin came into the world through Adam and Eve, so too grace and new creation come to us through Jesus Christ. Just as death came through a human being, so too the

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resurrection of the dead came through a human being. As in Adam all people die, so in Christ all shall be brought to life-a fullness of life, a new creation already beginning in us through grace (cf. 1 Cor 15).

This is the message we proclaim when we face the mystery of sin. Just as Adam brought sin, death, disharmony, confusion, disruption and struggle into our lives, Christ, the new Adam, gives us grace, redemption, new life and salvation. (Refer to the ***Glossary*** on Original Sin at the end of the booklet). It is in Jesus Christ that we find the beginnings of the new creation. He leads us back to the Father, overcomes the tragic alienation of sin and restores harmony. Jesus gives us newness of life in grace that begins to restore our relationship with God and that will lead to full communion with God in glory. Grace is the beginning of a new creation for all of those baptized into Christ. In short, Jesus' passion and death have rescued us and given us new life.

5. How is the Church able to forgive sins?

The Church professes belief in "the forgiveness of sins" and is fully aware that only God forgives sins. It also believes that Jesus, through his death, washed away all sin and, after his resurrection, gave to his Church the power and authority to apply to us the redemption he won on the cross, namely God's forgiveness of our sins.

As the ***Catechism*** points out, our faith in the forgiveness of sins is tied to faith in the Holy Spirit and the Church: "It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his apostles that the risen Christ conferred on them his own divine power to forgive sins: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (976; cf. John 20:22-23).

We bring our failings to the Church, then, because Jesus imparted to his apostles, their successors, and through them to all ordained priests, his own power to forgive sins, to restore and reconcile the sinner with God and also the Church. This power to forgive sins is often referred to as the "power of the keys", the power entrusted to the Church when Jesus told St. Peter, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:19). This power is manifested and operative in the sacrament of Penance.

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6. Why do we continue to need forgiveness if we are already saved?

The new life received in Christ does not abolish the weakness of human nature or our inclination to sin. "If we say, 'We are without sin,'" Saint John wrote, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). There are a great many kinds of sins, some mortal, others venial. But all sin has a detrimental effect. It impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the prevalence of the good. "Sin creates a proclivity to sin," the ***Catechism*** reminds us. "It engenders vice by repetition of the same acts" (1865).

As a result, even though we are baptized into new life, we must continue to return to the sacrament of Penance to cleanse ourselves of sin and receive God's mercy. We are always in need of God's forgiveness through the sacrament of Penance if we are to grow in a life of grace.

7. Why do I need to go to a priest for confession?

It is most unfortunate that many people have adopted a mindset that they do not need to go to Confession. Many say "I just tell my sins to God and he forgives me."

There is on the part of such persons a failure to recognize that the sacrament of Penance is not an invention of the Church. Rather, the sacrament of Penance is Christ's gift to the Church to ensure the forgiveness he so generously extends will be made available to every member of the Church. Once again, we cite the words of our Holy Father in highlighting the connection between Christ, his Church and the sacrament of Penance:

"From the revelation of the value of this ministry and power to forgive sins, conferred by Christ on the Apostles and their successors, there developed in the church an awareness of the sign of forgiveness, conferred through the Sacrament of Penance. It is the certainty that the Lord Jesus himself instituted and entrusted to the Church - as a gift of his goodness and loving kindness to be offered to all - a special
Sacrament for the forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism."
(*Reconciliation and Penance*, 3)

8. What is the role of the priest in forgiving sins?

In establishing his Church, Christ passed on to her the power to forgive sins. Just as he forgave sins, so would those chosen by him to be his

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apostles have the extraordinary power to forgive sins. In the priesthood today, the visible external sign of Christ's mercy and forgiveness is exercised in confession. Just as the whole Church makes visible in our world the presence of Christ, so the priest makes visible the forgiveness and mercy of Jesus in the sacrament of confession. The priest who by ordination is configured to Christ absolves sinners, not in his own name and power, but in the name and person of Jesus.

9. What do I need to do to be forgiven?

What leads us to the sacrament of Penance is a sense of sorrow for what we have done. The motivation may be out of love of God or even fear of the consequences of having offended God. Whatever the motive, contrition is the beginning of forgiveness of sin. The sinner must come to God by way of repentance. There can be no forgiveness of sin if we do not have sorrow at least to the extent that we regret it, resolve not to repeat it and intend to turn back to God. While we cannot be certain that we will not sin again, our present resolve must be honest and realistic. We must want to change, to be faithful to the Lord, and intend to take steps to make faithfulness possible. Christ's forgiveness always calls for such a commitment: "Go, and do not sin again" (John 8:11).

10. What happens in Confession?

In the sacrament of Penance, the contrite sinner comes before Christ in the person of the priest who hears the sins, imposes a penance and absolves the sinner in the name and by the power of Christ.

The sinner comes before the merciful judgment of God and approaches the Lord in sorrow, admitting guilt before his representative. It is in the person of Christ that the priest hears the confession of guilt. The words spoken in Confession are guarded by the most solemn obligation of complete confidentiality. In fact, Church law prescribes a serious penalty for any confessor who directly violates the "seal of Confession."

It is in the name of Christ that the priest pronounces the Savior's mercy: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The ***Catechism*** reminds us that "absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused" (1459). Thus, the priest imposes a penance on the penitent, which can take the form of "prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear" (1460).

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11. How do I prepare for Confession?

Confession is not difficult, but it does require preparation. We should begin with prayer, placing ourselves in the presence of God, our loving Father. We should harbor in our hearts a sense of sorrow for all we have done. The motivation for our sorrow may be out of love of God or even fear of the consequences of having offended God.
Whatever the motive, contrition is the beginning of forgiveness of sin. We need to have sorrow at least to the extent that we regret it, resolve not to repeat it and intend to turn back to God.

With this disposition of heart, we should review our lives since our last confession, searching our thoughts, words and actions to discover those that did not conform to God's love, to his law or to the laws of the Church. This is what is known as an 'Examination of Conscience." (Refer to ***Appendix*** at the end of the booklet)

12. How do I go to Confession?

The following may be helpful in preparing for confession. Above all, do not be afraid. If you are hesitant about what to do, ask the priest for help:

- **Greeting:** The priest welcomes the penitent warmly and greets him or her with kindness.

- **Sign of the Cross:** Then the penitent makes the Sign of the Cross, which the priest may also make.

- **Invitation to Trust in God:** The priest invites the penitent to have trust in God using one of the formulas in the ritual or similar words. If the penitent is unknown to the priest, it is proper for the penitent to indicate his or her state in life (married, single, or clergy), the time of his or her last confession and anything else that may help the confessor in exercising his ministry.

- **Reading of the Word of God:**

- **Confession of Sins and Acceptance of Satisfaction:**
  The penitent confesses his or her sins and accepts the prayers or deeds that the priest proposes as a penance.

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- **Prayer of the Penitent and Absolution:**
  The priest asks the penitent to express sorrow by praying one of the prayers found in the ritual or in his or her own words. The priest then prays the Prayer of Absolution, to which the penitent responds: "Amen."

- **Proclamation of Praise and Dismissal:**
  The priest continues:
  "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good."
  The penitent responds:
  "His mercy endures for ever."
  The priest then dismisses the penitent, using one of the formulas found in the ritual.

NOTE: This is taken from the ritual for Roman Catholics. Eastern Churches utilize a different formula.

13. Why do I receive a penance?

To complete the process, a penance is imposed. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all disorders caused by sin. While we are not capable of truly satisfying God for the evil we have done and its consequences, we must make satisfaction for our sin through some action or prayer that will express our desire to make amends and to repair something of the disorder, damage or harm which our sinful actions have brought into the world.

The penance imposed takes into account the penitent's personal situation and serves to support his or her spiritual good. It corresponds as much as possible to the gravity of the sins confessed. It may be a prayer, an offering, works of mercy, sacrifices or service to another. But this penance is in a real way our share in the Cross and helps us to be more closely joined to Christ.

In the *Introduction to the Rite of Penance*, we are reminded that true conversion is completed by acts of penance or satisfaction for the sins committed, by amendment of conduct, and also by the reparation of injury. The kind and extent of the satisfaction should be suited to the personal condition of each penitent. In this way the penitent is helped to be healed of the evil which caused him to sin. Therefore, it is necessary that the act of penance really be a remedy for sin and a help to renewal of life.

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14. How often should I go to Confession?

Individual and integral confession remains the only ordinary way for us to reconcile ourselves with God and the Church. A Catholic who has committed mortal (grave) sin is obliged to seek God's forgiveness in this sacrament as soon as possible.

In ordinary circumstances, a Catholic who has committed mortal sin should not receive Holy Communion before receiving sacramental absolution. Not only does God forgive our sins, but we also receive the power of God's grace to struggle against sin and to be strengthened in our commitment to God and the Church. So powerful is the grace of this sacrament that the *Introduction to the Rite of Penance* reminds us that frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly.

Conclusion: Our Continuing Conversion

As we complete these thoughts on the sacrament of Penance, we might well reflect that the deepest spiritual joy each of us can sense is the freedom from whatever would separate us from God, a loving and merciful Father who receives each of us with all the forgiveness and love lavished on the prodigal son. Renewed, refreshed and reconciled in this sacrament once more, we who have sinned become a "new creation." Once more we are made new. It is this newness of spirit and soul that we hope all of us experience time and again in the sacrament of Penance.

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Appendix

Examination of Conscience

As you prepare to make a good confession, you want to ask God's forgiveness for any way in which you have offended him but particularly for any serious sin. If you are not certain what you should bring to the priest in confession, do not be afraid to ask him for help. The priest is there to assist you and to share with you God's love and mercy.

Many people find the Ten Commandments to be a good frame of reference for an examination of conscience. The Commandments are listed here as a reminder that you might find helpful.

1. I am the LORD your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the LORD'S Day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Act of Contrition

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell; but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life. Amen.

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Glossary of Terms

Original Sin is the sin committed by Adam and Eve, the first human beings. This sin was a willful act of disobedience, a rejection of God's command that was so devastating that it ruptured the relationship which our first parents enjoyed with God. As a result of this sin, paradise was lost to them and to their descendants until our Redeemer, Jesus Christ came to conquer sin and death and restore us to our inheritance of the Kingdom of God. Original sin taints all human beings and is washed away through the sacred waters of baptism. However, while original sin is removed, its effects remain. One of these effects is concupiscence, that disordered desire within us which produces an inclination to sin (1264, 1426, 2515).

Mortal Sin is defined by the ***Catechism of the Catholic Church*** as "a grave infraction of the law of God that destroys the divine life in the soul of the sinner (sanctifying grace), constituting a turning away from God. For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present: grave matter, full knowledge of the evil of the act, and full consent of the will" (1855, 1857). The ***Catechism*** emphasizes that "to choose deliberately - that is both knowing it and willing it - something gravely contrary to the divine law and to the ultimate end of man is to commit a mortal sin. This destroys in us the charity without which eternal (happiness) is impossible. Unrepented, mortal sins brings eternal death" (1874). This "eternal death" we call Hell, where those who have died unrepentant of mortal sin suffer the eternal separation from God and loss of eternal happiness, i.e., seeing God face-to-face.

Venial Sin, according to the ***Catechism***, "does not destroy the divine life in the soul, as does mortal sin, though it diminishes and wounds it" (1855). Venial sin is a failure to observe necessary moderation, in lesser matters of the moral law, or in grave matters acting without full knowledge or complete consent." (1862) We must realize, however, that while venial sins do not have the grave effects of mortal sin, "deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin" (1863). It should be the goal of every Christian to strive, through steadfast prayer, acts of penance and works of charity, for a life free of sin.

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