



## In Joy and Hope

by

Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy

### The sacrament of reconciliation – a gift of love

As a community of faith and worship, we are enriched in powerful ways through the liturgy we celebrate. Liturgy is an action of the community in which we celebrate the presence of God. Liturgy touches each of our lives at significant moments in special celebrations which we call sacraments.

Through the sacraments, God shares life with us, nourishes us, strengthens us, and celebrates our commitments. There is one special sacrament where God invites us to experience forgiveness and reconciliation. This is the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

In the marvelous introduction to the Revised Rite of Penance promulgated in 1973, the church offers a wonderful overview and understanding of this sacrament of reconciliation which deserves our special attention, especially as we prepare to celebrate the season of Lent.

#### **A call to conversion**

In the mystery of His death and resurrection, Jesus effected the reconciliation between God and the human race. Jesus entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to the church. We are told that "the Lord ... instituted a special sacrament of penance for the pardon of sins committed after baptism, and the church has faithfully celebrated the sacrament throughout the centuries - in varying ways, but retaining the essential elements."

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to ongoing conversion and renewal. The church assists us in living out this vocation by challenging all the baptized who have sinned to acknowledge their sins against God and their neighbor and to have heartfelt repentance for them. The celebration of sacramental reconciliation provides us with this opportunity in the powerful encounter we have to experience God's grace and forgiveness.

#### **Essentials for reconciliation**

There are essential elements for a celebration of reconciliation which call for a conversion of heart and the intention to lead a new life. The first element is contrition which is heartfelt sorrow for sin with the intention of doing our best not to sin again. Contrition calls us to establish new priorities in our lives in response to God's love.

Reconciliation then calls us to a confession of our sins whereby we acknowledge our sin and failings. True conversion is completed by acts of penance or satisfaction for the sins committed. Priest confessors are asked to suggest acts of penance suited to the personal condition of each penitent which will help in renewing one's life. Absolution by the church's minister completes the celebration of sacramental confession through which God grants pardon to the sinner.

The church teaches that "the faithful must confess to a priest each and every grave sin which they remember upon examination of their conscience." Furthermore, "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." Reconciliation is a healing experience which asks us to look at the root causes of sin and failing in our lives and to seek ways in which we might reform and refashion our lives.

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### **The celebration of reconciliation**

The Rite of Penance outlines three forms of celebrating God's forgiveness. Each form includes a spirit of welcome, the reading of the Word of God, the confession of sins, the act of penance, and absolution.

The first form is the celebration of the sacrament with an individual penitent. The second form calls for a communal celebration with individual confession to one or more of the priests who are present. The Rite tells us that such a communal celebration "shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance" and is a wonderful reminder to us not only of personal sin, but social sin as well. Though the church tells us that although "individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the church ... particular, occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to give general absolution to a number of penitents without their previous individual confession." However, the church goes on to tell us that "those who receive pardon for grave sins by a common absolution should go to individual confession before they receive this kind of absolution again."

### **Reconciliation - It is a celebration**

In the ministry of Jesus, there was the constant outreach to those in need of healing. The Sacrament of Reconciliation continues that ministry today. Years ago, Pope Pius XII stated that "the greatest sin of our time is the loss of a sense of sin." Somehow or other, we have to recognize our need for healing, our need for reconciliation with God and one another. The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers us this opportunity and it is a celebration of God's love and forgiveness. May the coming Lenten season be a time when we take advantage of this wonderful gift. May God's grace and peace be yours.