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***Calling God's People into New Life:
Ongoing Catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation***

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The Fascinating Pope and His Sacramental Encounter

In a very short time after his election, Pope Francis captured the imagination of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. His gestures of gospel-inspired simplicity and directness coupled with his wise and practical proclamation of God's Word have galvanized believers and have even gained the sympathetic hearing among those outside the family of faith. Echoing the question that people in the gospels posed about Jesus, we might ask, "Where did this man receive this wisdom and his contagious faith?"

News reports have given us a glimpse of the vocational journey of Jorge Mario Bergoglio. As a young man, he was on a professional track as were many of his contemporaries. He was studying chemistry. Then, when he was seventeen years old, he went to confession, and in that sacramental encounter he somehow discovered his call to become a Jesuit and a priest. Obviously, we do not know the details of that sacramental moment, but we do know how decisive it was for his vocation. And I am not surprised.

The Unexpected Power of the Sacrament of Penance

We know, of course, that the Sacrament of Penance brings us the forgiveness of our sins. What we may fail to appreciate fully is that the Sacrament also changes our lives, as it changed the life of Jorge Bergoglio. Forgiveness and transformation are the great gifts that God gives us in the Sacrament of Penance. These gifts with all their life-giving power are sadly, for so many of our Catholic people, out of sight and out of mind. We desperately need ongoing catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance that expands the vision of the Sacrament in the minds and hearts of believers. If we fulfill that need, we will have—I am firmly convinced—a great renewal of Christian life.

For many Catholic people, their expectations of the Sacrament of Penance are so limited and do not match its full and genuine reality. The very notion of "going to confession" often means a dispiriting encounter with our failures, and that is all. To go regularly to the Sacrament only reminds us of the dismal cycle of repeated failures that mark our lives. We stay stuck, people wrongly conclude, in the routines of our lives and our sins. Why bother to confess our sins and seek sacramental forgiveness? It is better or, at least, less distressing to avoid thinking about these unpleasant matters.

Some may even take another step and re-write the morality of behaviors that have become so intertwined with their lives. Often, these are behaviors associated with sexuality, such as artificial contraception and sexual activity outside of marriage. Other behaviors, for example, having to do with justice or upholding the truth or respecting all life, can also be subject to personal moral revision. Either I tire of revisiting my sins and failures, or I decide—apart from the community and traditions of faith—that these behaviors are not really sinful. If they are not sinful, then why would I bother bringing them to confession?

The downturn in the practice of Catholics approaching the Sacrament of Penance is entirely understandable, if they find it depressing simply to keep encountering their failures or if with a revisionist morality they have “eliminated” sin in their lives. The remedy for this situation, I would strongly submit, is a vigorous and clear catechesis of the transformative power of the Sacrament of Penance. But then, how do we do this catechesis? It must move in steps, and it must trace the true and deep experience of conversion and the Sacrament.

We are a people in deep need of healing.

Catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance must begin with our need for healing and forgiveness. This may seem obvious, but it is not. If morality, as it is often perceived, is about keeping or breaking rules, it does not effectively claim my personal attention. After all, the rules are outside of me. If, however, we start not with the sin but the sinner, we will begin to move more effectively on a personal path that touches the heart.

“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” Saint Paul says (see Romans 3:23). The net result of sin is not primarily that rules have been broken but that people are broken. They find themselves wounded and divided and distant from God, others, and even from their very selves. Catechesis and effective preaching can help people to identify and know their experience. They come to recognize that “what they have done and what they have failed to do” has left them empty, immobilized, and profoundly disappointed. In the first place, catechesis leads people to self knowledge and their need for healing.

We break through the isolation that sin imposes on us.

We do not carry or reveal our sin-sick souls in public. The brokenness and the deep need for healing that we feel usually stays buried within us. So, we feel very alone and even isolated. As we approach the Sacrament of Penance, however, we break through that isolation. The Church and her minister provide the safe place where we can stand before God in our deepest need without fear and without shame. With our examination of conscience and our confession of sin, we let God’s light shine on every corner of our souls. With startling clarity, we realize that God knows us as we are. We can echo the Samaritan woman’s words to her townsfolk, “Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did” (see John 4:29).

We meet the undeserved mercy of God that waits for us.

In the Sacrament of Penance, we do not—in the first place—meet ourselves and our failures. In fact, we first encounter the undeserved mercy of God. We cannot make ourselves worthy of

God's mercy and healing. We can make no claims, not even that of being a daughter or son of God. All we do is stand before the one who has waited for our arrival. This is the story of the father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-32), the father who waits and scans the horizon for the return of his errant child. His son's return, the simple gesture of turning back home, and not any good deeds and certainly not any claims he might have—just that triggers the father's lavish and undeserved mercy and the restoration of his son.

Undeserved mercy is foreign to our world in which everything must be earned. And perhaps if a little something is freely given, it is grudgingly measured out. Ongoing catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance ought to return frequently and insistently on the quality of this generous mercy that belongs to God alone, and that we so long for. For all us who are accustomed to our measured-out world, the undeserved and richly abundant mercy of God is a new and transformative experience.

We realign our lives, because God's forgiveness has turned our world around.

Once we truly recognize that God's mercy and forgiveness have healed and transformed us and made us part of the new creation, we will not only want to change our lives, we will feel compelled to do so. After Jesus touched Zacchaeus with his mercy, Zacchaeus re-ordered his life in an entirely new and original way: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." (Luke 19:8) When we leave the Sacrament of Penance, we resolve to sin no more and to live in a new way. As sincere as our resolutions may be, however, we may find ourselves stumbling here and there. We do not give up. Despite possible continuing failures, we have grasped our great hope, and that hope is not in ourselves and not in our own efforts. Our hope is in God, a hope sealed in the Sacrament.

Calling people to new life through the Sacrament of Penance

The Sacrament of Penance is necessary, because we all sin and we necessarily need forgiveness. Still, we will not effectively bring people to the Sacrament by just preaching its necessity to them. What will awaken them to the Sacrament will be a clear sharing of our experience of conversion, of life change, that unfolds in and through the Sacrament. In technical language, that means sharing the phenomenology of the Sacrament in all its experiential richness, as we have begun to do in these reflections.

We can take a cue from our Holy Father, Pope Francis, whose own experience of the Sacrament led to his vocational awakening and a new life of discipleship. Regularly, he reminds us of the experience of mercy, forgiveness, and conversion. He tells us that God never tires of forgiving us, as long as we do not tire of asking for forgiveness. If we preach, teach, and share this experience, our people will be touched. They will come to the Sacrament of Penance. They will draw deeply from the waters of mercy and transformation.

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