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GUIDE FOR CONFESSORS IN THE JUBILEE OF MERCY

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Introduction

When Pope Francis called the Church to observe an extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy (see *Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of Indiction for the Holy Year of Mercy*), he envisioned that the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance could offer the faithful a powerful experience of the mercy of God. He highlighted the initiative entitled “24 Hours for the Lord” which will be celebrated in the Archdiocese of Chicago as “Days of Mercy and Forgiveness” on the weekend of the Fourth Sunday of Lent (March 4-5, 2016). That will certainly be a graced moment for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, but the Sacrament should be a continuing feature of the entire year.

In the *Bull of Indiction*, he speaks of the Sacrament of Penance in the context of the Jubilee Year. In a particular way, he develops his thoughts on how confessors can foster an authentic experience of God’s mercy and forgiveness in the Sacrament. He writes:

So many people, including the youth, are returning to the sacrament of reconciliation; though this experience they are rediscovering a path back to the Lord, living a moment of intense prayer and finding meaning in their lives. Let us place the sacrament of reconciliation at the center once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God’s mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace.

I will never tire of insisting that confessors be authentic signs of the Father’s mercy. We do not become good confessors automatically. We become good confessors when, above all, we allow ourselves to be penitents in search of his mercy. 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.

We priests have received the gift of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, and we are responsible for this. None of us wields power over this sacrament; rather, we are faithful servants of God’s mercy through it. Every confessor must accept the faithful as the father in the parable of the prodigal son: a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance. Confessors are called to embrace the repentant son who comes back home and to express the joy of having him back again.

Let us never tire of also going out to the other son, who stands outside incapable of rejoicing, in order to explain to him that his judgment is severe and unjust and meaningless in light of the father’s boundless mercy. May confessors not ask useless questions but like the father in the

parable interrupt the speech prepared ahead of time by the prodigal son, so that confessors will learn to accept the plea for help and mercy gushing from the heart of every penitent. In short, confessors are called to be a sign of the primacy of mercy always, everywhere and in every situation no matter what. (Misericordiae Vultus, 17)

This Guide for Confessors is meant to prepare priests for this special moment in the life of our local Church. Certainly, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in this context is no different than at any other time. There are, however, certain aspects that need to be underscored because of the deliberately extended outreach we are making across this year and especially in the season of Lent.

A special hope for this Jubilee Year of Mercy is that many Catholics who have been away from the Sacrament of Penance will return. The essential nature of the sacrament of Penance does not change in the instance of those approaching the sacrament after a long absence. What is needed, however, is a special sensitivity on the part of confessors to receive these men and women well, as the Lord would have us do. The following notes are meant to provide confessors with some reminders and hints as they receive their brothers and sisters who have been away from the Sacrament of Penance for a while, as well as those who regularly come to the Sacrament.

Preaching the Merciful Forgiveness of God

Priest-confessors begin their ministry of reconciliation well before they enter a reconciliation room or confessional. Their deliberate proclamation of the merciful forgiveness of God coupled with an invitation to share in the Sacrament of Penance begins a process that culminates in the actual celebration of the sacrament. Priests re-enforce the message they proclaim by living lives that reflect the compassion, mercy, and forgiveness of God in their dealings with parishioners and, indeed, with everyone they encounter. Pope Francis has been particularly insistent that priests, through their words and demeanor, reflect the abundant mercy that God wants to share with us.

Ash Wednesday offers us a special opportunity to invite people to repentance and to the celebration of God's mercy and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance. Many people come for ashes, and many of them are marginally connected with the Church. This contact moment can be a graced opportunity to invite those who are distant and perhaps even alienated from the life of the Church. Each community is unique. Those who serve in a particular community need to exercise imagination and creativity to tap the rich possibilities of the Ash Wednesday experience.

Guide for Penitents Who Want to Approach the Sacrament

A very simple two-page guide has been prepared for those who wish to approach the sacrament of Penance. The guide explains the sacrament, suggests a prayer for guidance, offers an examination of conscience, and details the steps of making a confession including the act of contrition. To make this guide for penitents usable, it was important to keep it simple. As you review it, you will understand that the confessor may need to help penitents in one way or another, for example, by expanding on the examination of conscience.

The Initial Welcome and Offer of Help

Once a penitent presents him/herself and indicates that this celebration of the sacrament represents a return to the Church after a time of absence, the confessor ought to extend an initial and simple word of welcome, as

simple as, “Welcome back. Let us thank God for this opportunity for mercy and forgiveness that he extends to you.” Additionally, an offer of help can be very much appreciated, for example, “If you have been away from this sacrament for a while, it may be a bit awkward for you. Please let me know if there is any way that I can help you.” The explicit word of welcome and an offer of help set a tone and help to address the awkwardness that commonly accompanies the experience of confession after a long absence. Also in creating a favorable environment for the penitent, we must remember to provide for the possibility of anonymity (confessional or screen) and clearly let the penitents know of this option.

Receiving the Penitent’s Confession

Every good confessor knows enough to steer between laxism and rigorism. Laxism does not take the confession of sins seriously or writes them off as unimportant. Rigorism does not take into account the diminished knowledge and freedom of the penitent that often marks their moral lives and diminishes their culpability. Although moving between these two extremes is always important for confessors, it is especially important in the instance of those who are returning to the sacrament of Penance after a long absence. A good confessor will simply and sincerely receive what the penitent confesses and, when necessary, offer a simple clarification.

The Joy of Welcome Expressed

In his public ministry, Jesus regularly linked repentance and joy. A well known passage from Luke’s gospel underscores this relationship: *Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.* (Luke 15:4-7) Although an initial word of welcome was extended, after the confession it is appropriate and helpful to re-iterate this message, for example: “Once again, in the Lord’s name I want to welcome you back to this sacrament and to the forgiveness which God gives us through his Church. When we repent, there is joy in heaven.”

A Recognition of Limits and an Offer of Other Possibilities

The celebration of the sacrament of Penance has its own purpose—to share God’s forgiveness with those who repent of their sins. It is not meant to be a counseling session nor a time for spiritual direction in any detailed way. For those who have been away for a while, it would be important to acknowledge that there may be much more to talk about than the sacramental forum allows for. Some particular recommendations may be in order:

- suggest a more extended conversation with a priest or pastoral minister in the local parish;
- suggest coming back to the sacrament in the near future;
- invite the penitent to participate in a faith formation process that may be a part of the parish, in some instances, perhaps even involvement in the RCIA;
- for those who have suffered the trauma of abortion, suggest Project Rachel (cards are available and the website is www.respectlifechicago or email at projectrachelchicago@gmail.com); remember that in the Archdiocese of Chicago, abortion is not a reserved sin and, in fact, the Holy Father has extended the faculty to absolve this sin to all priests during the Jubilee;
- for those who suffer problems associated with various forms of addiction, suggest a 12-step program;

- for those who suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder (ocd) manifest, for example, in scrupulosity, suggest a more extended conversation with a priest or pastoral minister and the possibility of a counseling and/or medical referral.

A Call to Conversion and to Newness of Life

At the end of his conversation with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus says to her, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:11) In those words, he sends her away forgiven and also calls her to live in a new way that reflects true conversion. A similar kind of appeal and encouragement belong in the sacrament of Penance, especially as someone returns after a long absence. Such an appeal and encouragement, however, may not be enough. It is also advisable to help people find those means of support that will bring them closer to the Lord, such as a prayer group or routines of personal prayer or some spiritual reading or an extended pastoral conversation.

An Appropriate and Uncomplicated Penance

A particular person’s story may suggest a specific behavioral penance or the praying of a particular passage of Sacred Scripture. Indeed, these may be appropriate penances, but it will be important for the confessor to be sensitive to the capacity of the penitent to fulfill such a penance. A simple penance that can be readily understood and easily implemented may be the best.

Some priests have asked for possible penances that they can offer penitents, something that might be a little more creative or specific to particular circumstances. Here are some possibilities.

1> For those who confess that they have difficulties with other people (anger, jealousy, envy, resentment, lust), a good penance might be to pray for those persons who trigger these feeling. Pray for them by name. Place them in God’s hands. One spiritual writer says that when we pray for others, when we intentionally put them in God’s hands, over time they will begin to appear differently to us. We will see them in a new way.

2> For those who confess involvement in pornography, a good penance might be to pray for those persons whom they have viewed and who have been exploited and whose personal human dignity has been diminished by their involvement in pornography. This prayer can help penitents to begin to see people differently, not as sexual objects but as created in the image and likeness of God.

3> For those who recognize their lack of concern for others, a lack of concern that may be accompanied by excessive self-absorption, a good penance would be to resolve each day to ask one or more persons how they are doing—not in a superficial way but with true attention and close listening. Sometimes, if we adjust our behavior in a certain direction, our general demeanor will shift as well. If we act more compassionately, we may well become more compassionate.

4> For those who know that they are dominated by an excessive desire to acquire material things, a good penance might be to take fifteen minutes to plan and decide how to be more generous with the good things the Lord has given them. In effect, this is an exercise in formation for stewardship.

5> For those who confess wasting time on the internet or misusing it, a good penance would be to go to the website of the Irish Jesuits for daily prayer (www.sacredspace.ie) and learn to use the internet for the greater glory of God.

6> For those who feel tepid in their spiritual lives and want to embrace discipleship of Jesus more steadfastly, suggest that they take some time and in one sitting slowly read through the whole gospel of Mark, which is the gospel of discipleship. Encourage the penitent to read the gospel with attention to the disciples: their call, their misunderstandings and fumbling, their willingness to take risks in following Jesus, their participation in his mission, and their sharing in the mystery of his cross and resurrection. Alternately, in this Jubilee of Mercy, suggest that they read of the Gospel according to Luke. The prayer-commentary *Rejoicing in Mercy* is available through the jubilee website of the Archdiocese.

7> For those who confess a profound sense of discouragement about life and/or their relationship with God, offer as a penance that they read slowly and pray over Romans 8. As they do so, they should recognize that God has loved them first with a love that cannot be broken. They should also recognize that they have within them the gift of the Holy Spirit, the consoler.

8> For those who have been away from the sacraments for a long time, a good penance is to invite them to an exercise of gratitude. Suggest that they find a quiet space and that they summon all the great and good gifts that God has placed in their lives beginning with the very gift of life itself. They should summon these gifts that include personal gifts, relationships, opportunities, faith, and even material blessings. As they recall each gift, they lift each one up to God in gratitude and with a prayer that they might assume responsibility for these gifts in their lives. If people begin in gratitude and truly understand what God has given them, their lives will take on a new shape.

9> For those who have felt distanced from God, weak in faith, and shallow in hope, ask them to take time to sit quietly before a crucifix. Ask them to let the Lord speak to them and let them know how much he loves them and how his cross is clear evidence of that love.

10> For those who confess problems with addictions in any form whether chemical or behavioral, suggest as a penance that they learn about 12-step recovery and, at least, consider this path as a way of being freed up from their addictions.

Difficult Situations: External Forum

For some who approach the Sacrament of Penance, their confession becomes a first step in a larger process of reconciliation in the Church. It may be that absolution cannot be given at the time of the confession but needs to be deferred until the penitent's situation in the Church is regularized. The most common case of this kind would be that of someone who was validly married, later civilly divorced, and then re-married civilly. Members of the Archdiocesan Tribunal as well as representatives of Family Life Ministries who offer support to those seeking and are in the process of obtaining annulments are all available. Proper referrals need to be made.

Other situations that require more extended dialogue might include those who publicly advocate a stance contrary to Church teaching, for example, concerning abortion, or those who are publicly engaged in an immoral and notorious enterprise, for example, drug dealing in the context of a gang. These cases require their own particular attention, and those involved need to make changes that reflect true repentance, a change of heart. Those approaching the sacrament of Penance in these difficult external forum situations need to be welcomed and encouraged. They need an explanation to help them understand the larger process of reconciliation. The priest-confessor should assure the penitent of ongoing accompaniment which either he himself would provide or which would be available through the Church. Until matters are resolved and they can

receive the Eucharist, the confessor should encourage the penitent to stay close to the Church, to seek whatever counsel is necessary, and to pray to God for help in public worship and private devotions.

Difficult Situations: Internal Forum

In addition to the difficult external forum situations noted above, there are other difficult situations that remain in the internal forum, because there is no *per se* manifest public behavior that separates the penitents from communion with the Church. Generally, these difficult situations involve habitual or entrenched patterns of behavior at variance with the moral law but not known in a generally public way. Such a situation, for example, might involve attitudes and actions rooted in racism or prejudice directed to whole groups of people. Difficult family situations of resentments, feuds, and alienation are another example. Frequently, it is a matter of sexual morality, for example, contraception, pre-marital or extra-marital relations, homosexual activity, and addiction to pornography with accompanying masturbation.

For the confessor, these situations provide a significant challenge. He needs to summon God's help and to cultivate a prudential sense that combines a clear proclamation of moral truth with pastoral sensitivity in applying that truth. A series of steps suggest themselves.

a/ It is essential to begin with what God wants for all of us—the fullness of life. It is also essential to communicate the gospel message that God “wants none of these little ones to be lost.” The good news we proclaim is not that we are without sin but that even when we were sinners God loved us and gave us his Son. We must begin, as the Gospel begins, with grace.

b/ A clear (and calm) communication to the penitents that their behavior is at variance with the moral law. This moral law, in the minds of so many, is roughly equivalent to rules and regulations. In fact, the moral law simply expresses the consequences and implications of a living relationship with the Lord. To communicate this sense of the moral law effectively, it is best to frame it in a positive way, e.g. in matters of sexuality, to communicate that in God's design the gift of human sexuality in its full range of physical expression is for married couples who are open to generating life and that any other behavior veers away from that design. At this point, the confessor helps the penitent to confront *the gravity of the matter*, which is another way of considering the implications for our living relationship with the Lord.

c/ If behavior is habitual (or even compulsive), the confessor helps penitents to understand their diminished (not extinguished) responsibility. At this point, the confessor helps the penitent to confront the necessary freedom to commit a grave sin and to see how sin, in turn, diminishes human freedom.

d/ Mainly for the confessor's own reference, he may try to identify whether or not the penitent has/had sufficient *scientia aestimativa* (estimative or evaluative knowledge). One may have a theoretical knowledge and understanding of the moral law without a grasp of how this applies to me here and now (estimative knowledge). The culture or environment or particular personal/religious formation (or lack thereof) can blunt a person's capacity to have this practical knowledge that connects the values of the moral law with the decision that lies before me. These subtle distinctions need not necessarily be communicated to a penitent. A confessor's understanding of the penitent's capacity or incapacity to have estimative knowledge can help to define whether or not the penitent needs further moral formation (e.g. through a pastoral counseling or spiritual direction resource). At this point, what is in play is the knowledge sufficient to commit a grave sin.

e/ **The pastoral directives of the third part of *Humanae vitae* provide the confessor with a resource for these difficult situations that may include the question of contraception but other concerns as well that might cover a large range of practical moral dilemmas.**

- Pope Paul VI speaks of the fundamental stance of the Church which is one that confessors ought to adopt as their own: *The Church, in fact, cannot act differently toward men [and women] than did the Redeemer. She knows their weaknesses, she has compassion on the multitude, she welcomes sinners. But at the same time she cannot do otherwise than to teach the law. For it is in fact the law of human life restored to its native truth and guided by the Spirit of God.* (n. 19)
- He speaks of the Church's teaching and says, *... to many it will appear not merely difficult but even impossible to observe...* (n. 20)
- In this context, it is important to remember that the moral law cannot be observed apart from God's grace. (n. 20)
- At the same time, human beings are called to the value of self-discipline, a way of cooperating with God's grace. (See n. 21)
- After an honest acknowledgement of the great difficulties that people can face in trying to be faithful to God's law (See n. 25), Paul VI calls them to pray, to stay with the Church, and to stay with the sacraments: *Then let them implore the help of God with unremitting prayer and, most of all, draw grace and charity from that unfailing fount which is the Eucharist. If, however, sin still exercises its hold over them, they are not to lose heart. Rather must they, humble and persevering, have recourse to the mercy of God, abundantly bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance.* Ultimately, they need confidence that God is drawing them forward to himself. (n. 25)
- Finally, the Holy Father speaks of the stance of Christian compassion that ought to mark the ministry of priests. The full text of n. 29 is cited with its references to married couples but with application to other situations as well: *Now it is an outstanding manifestation of charity toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ; but this must always be joined with tolerance and charity, as Christ Himself showed in his conversations and dealings with men. For when he came, not to judge, but to save the world, was he not bitterly severe toward sin, but patient and abounding in mercy toward sinners? Husbands and wives, therefore, when deeply distressed by reason of the difficulties of their life, must find stamped in the heart and voice of their priest the likeness of the voice and the love of our Redeemer. So speak with full confidence, beloved sons, convinced that while the Holy Spirit of God is present to the magisterium proclaiming sound doctrine, he also illumines from within the hearts of the faithful and invites their assent. Teach married couples the necessary way of prayer and prepare them to approach more often with great faith the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance. Let them never lose heart because of their weakness.*

In general, in these difficult situations confessors are called to be honest with the Church's teaching and compassionate and sensitive in its application. They need to be committed to being sources of encouragement and formation as they assist the pilgrim people of God on their journey toward freedom from sin and its compulsions.

A Final Word about Mercy, Forgiveness, Hope, and Confidence

When we look at our broken world and our broken selves, we can become profoundly discouraged. The only full remedy for this discouragement is an experience of the mercy and forgiveness of God. When we have that experience, it generates within us hope and confidence—essential ingredients for life that so often seem to be in short supply in our world. Our ministry of reconciliation carried out in the Sacrament of Penance as an encounter with the living Lord of mercy and forgiveness lays a foundation for hope and for confidence in the lives of the people we serve. The prayer that follows catches this movement. It is *An Act of Confidence of God* by St. Claude de la Colombiere, SJ.

My God, I am so convinced that You keep watch over those who hope in You and that we can want for nothing when we look for all from You, that I am resolved in the future to live free from every care, and to turn all my anxieties over to You.

Men may deprive me of possessions and of honor; sickness may strip me of strength and the means of serving You; I may even lose your grace by sin; but I shall never lose my hope. I shall keep it until the last moment of my life; and at that moment all the demons in Hell shall strive to tear it from me in vain.

Others may look for happiness from their wealth or their talents; others may rest on the innocence of their life, or the severity of their penance, or that amount of their alms, or the fervor of their prayers. You, O Lord, have singularly settled me in hope. As for me, Lord, all my confidence is my confidence itself. This confidence has never deceived anyone. No one, no one has hope in You Lord and has been confounded.

I am sure, therefore, that I shall be eternally happy, since I firmly hope to be, and because it is from You, O god, that I hope for it. I know, alas I know only too well, that I am weak and unstable. I know what temptation can do against the strongest virtue. I have seen the stars of heaven fall, and the pillars of the firmament; but that cannot frighten me. So long as I continue to hope, I shall be sheltered from all misfortune; and I am sure of hoping always, since I hope also for this unwavering hopefulness.

Finally, I am sure that I cannot hope too much in You, and that I cannot received less than I have hoped for from You. So I hope that You will hold me safe on the steepest slopes, that You will sustain me against the most furious assaults, and that You will make my weakness triumph over my most fearful enemies. I hope that You will love me always, and that I too shall love You without ceasing. To carry my hope once and for all as far as it can go, I hope from You to possess You, O my Creator, in time and in eternity. Amen

taken from *Human Development Magazine* (Vol 35/1, Fall, 2014)