

# A Source of Reconciliation and Joy

## The Sacrament of Penance

There's an old joke about a carpenter who went to confession after he had been stealing lumber from his job site. He confessed his sins, and the priest said, "For your penance, make a novena." The carpenter replied, "I'm not quite sure what a novena is, Father, but if you have the blueprints, I have the lumber!"

The story is good for a laugh, but it makes a good point. It raises the question of whether in the Sacrament of Penance anything good can come from our guilt and our sins. Notice the use of the term *penance* rather than *confession*. Confession is just one moment in the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. Confession probably gets the most attention because it's the scariest part—no one likes to have his or her sins brought into the light—even if it's in the darkness of a confessional. Perhaps in the past the Church focused too much on the telling of the sins and too little on the joy to be gained through the healing that comes through an encounter with the mercy and forgiveness of God. Confession is an important step on the way to forgiveness, but it's shortsighted to let this one aspect stand for the whole gift.

### Here's what the Sacrament of Penance actually offers:

- restoration to honesty—no more need to rationalize
- restoration to integrity—no more need to have secret or unacknowledged parts of your life
- relief from unproductive guilt—transformation of remorse into living a new life. The purpose of this sacrament is not punishment but true reconciliation with God and the community.
- an encounter with God—meeting God in humility (not humiliation!) and weakness
- spiritual guidance—no need to struggle with your moral issues alone
- inner peace—no longer having to live a life at war with yourself
- strength in meeting future challenges and temptations
- grace—rediscovering, as did the prodigal son, your Father's unconditional love.

Why should you not be afraid of this sacrament? The best reason is that God longs to forgive you. Remember, God knows that you are much more than the worst thing you've ever done.

# God's Gift of Forgiveness Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation

by Chris Sullivan

Since childhood I have approached the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation with some fear and uncertainty. Not unlike many other Catholics I wonder, “Am I doing it right? Have I remembered everything I ought to confess? How long *has* it been since my last confession?”

I ought to go more often, and not because of any legal prescription. In fact, like the Eucharist, the [Sacrament of Reconciliation](#) is an opportunity to draw near to God.

I desire to draw near to God, so I was heartened by some words of gentle encouragement about making a good confession in a book by the French Jesuit Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade. Fr. de Caussade is best known for his authorship of the spiritual classic *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. From 1733–1740, de Caussade served as spiritual director to the Nuns of the Visitation at Nancy, France. He wrote many letters to the sisters full of sage advice about surrendering the soul to the will of God. Of confession, he says to one of the sisters:

With regard to confession, be firmly convinced that you need not trouble about it, either on account of your miseries or of your sins. St. Francis of Sales says that after sorrow for sin there should be peace. This then is what you ought to aim at, and above all you should be full of great confidence in the infinite goodness of God, remembering that His mercy is greater than any of His works, that He glories in forgiving us, but cannot prove His generosity if we are wanting in confidence. He loves simplicity, candor, and uprightness, go to Him therefore with perfect confidence, in spite of all your weakness, misery, and unfaithfulness.

I need not trouble about confession but have confidence in the infinite goodness of God. That *is* good news.

That is what the Church has always taught, of course, but I forget. My inclination, sinner that I am, is to put myself at the center when God wants to be there—in the heart of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and in my heart. Fr. de Caussade reminds us that God's mercy is greater than our sin or our fear. God longs to forgive us.

How might we avail ourselves of de Caussade's advice to draw us more deeply into relationship with God through the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

- As I reflect on my sins in preparation for the sacrament, am I also reflecting on the great mercy of God?
- Do I speak of my sins with “simplicity, candor, and uprightness,” that is, am I prepared to name my sins with boldness and brevity, not dwelling unnecessarily on the story of what is past?

- Do I approach God in the sacrament with utter confidence that God's infinite mercy is bigger—much bigger!—than my sin?

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After reading the Parent Information document how do you, as a Catholic parent, view the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Which of the activities helped your child to understand the Sacrament of Reconciliation the most? Why?