

WHY GO TO CONFESSION?

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Some years ago when I was chaplain in a university residential college, a student, who had recently returned to the practice of confession after a long time, came to me and said: "Father, please pray for a friend of mine. We are going away on a study weekend, and I am trying to get him to go to confession. I told him that if he goes, I will do 500 times the penance the priest gives him." Needless to say, I was astounded and we quickly calculated how long it would take him to say 500 rosaries, in case the confessor gave a generous penance! When I caught up with the student again in the middle of the following week I asked him how it had gone with his friend. He said, with an obvious look of joy on his face, that he was doing 100 times the penance. Naturally intrigued, I asked him what had happened. "The offer of 500 was only valid for the weekend", he said with a smile, "but he went to confession today." When I asked him what the penance had been, he answered with a look of relief: "an act of thanksgiving".

I relate this anecdote because it highlights both the great joy experienced when someone goes back to confession after a long time and the resulting eagerness to share that joy with others by encouraging them to go as well. Today, that joy is experienced by too few, as far fewer people go to confession than was the case 30 years ago. The long queues of people waiting to confess their sins in years gone by are today to be found in few churches. So much is this the case that the Holy Father, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* in 1984, bluntly stated that "the Sacrament of Penance is in crisis."

This situation is most unfortunate because, in my opinion, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is one of the greatest treasures of the Catholic Church. It is a gift from Jesus Christ, indeed his first gift to the Church after the Resurrection. On the afternoon of that first Easter, when Christ appeared to the Apostles in the Upper Room "he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit; when you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven, when you hold them bound, they are held bound.'" (*John 20:22-23*) If Jesus himself has given us this gift we would be most ungrateful and even foolish if we did not make use of it. Having heard many thousands of confessions over the years, I can attest to the fact that the ministry of the confessional is one of the greatest blessings for the priest as well as for the penitent. It is a forum in which one experiences the grace of God acting in a gentle yet powerful way, always leaving the penitent with a great peace and joy. As the Church celebrated the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation in 2000, she invited the faithful to make use of this sacrament as an integral part of the celebration. The Holy Father, in an address to Portuguese bishops in November 1999, expressed his hopes in this regard: "May one of the fruits of the Great

Jubilee of the Year 2000 be the general return of the Christian faithful to the sacramental practice of confession.” And the Decree outlining the conditions for gaining the Jubilee indulgence stated: “The high point of the Jubilee is the encounter with God the Father, through Christ the Saviour present in his Church and in a special way in the Sacraments. For this reason, the whole Jubilee journey, prepared for by pilgrimage, had as its starting point and its conclusion the celebration of the Sacraments of Penance and of the Eucharist...” The Decree went on to explain that a personal confession is necessary in order to gain the Jubilee plenary indulgence.

But confession is not only for Jubilee years. It is for always.

Why did Christ institute a sacrament for the forgiveness of sins?

The question is often asked, especially by those who find it difficult to go to confession and by non-Catholics, “Why do we have to go to confession?” Why did Jesus Christ institute a sacrament—an outward sign which confers grace—for the forgiveness of sins if it only makes life more difficult for us? Why can’t we simply go straight to God in Heaven, tell him we are sorry and be forgiven? As it is, we have to seek out a priest, perhaps wait in a queue or find that the priest isn’t even there, discover that we don’t like the priest anyway, and then confess our sins, all of which can be burdensome. Surely it would have been easier if we could just confess directly to God.

The answer must surely be that Our Lord instituted a sacrament for the forgiveness of sins because he knew human nature and he knew we needed it. After all he was the Son of Man. He knew us, and he knew that it would be a great help for us to go through the mediation of a priest to be forgiven.

What aspects of human nature point the way towards the fittingness of confession? I would suggest four in particular.

The fact of sin

Firstly, there is the fact that we all sin. In spite of our efforts to do good, we all fall into sin, whether venial sins such as impatience, angry remarks, or gossip, or mortal sins like missing Mass on Sunday through our own fault, impure acts or drunkenness. St John reminds us that “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (*1 John 8:11*) And Jesus himself teaches us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses.” (*Matt 6:12*)

What can happen, though, is that we lose the sense of sin, the awareness of our sinfulness before God. Cardinal Silvio Oddi, the then Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, said in Philadelphia in 1982: “It would be consoling to be able to maintain that there are now more Communions and fewer confessions because fewer sins are

being committed. The headlines of the daily papers, however, do not permit us to be satisfied with that explanation. What has happened, of course, is that the people's *sense of sin* has been eroded systematically."

Pope Pius XII summed it up graphically in a radio message in 1946: "The sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin." And Pope John Paul II, in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, in turn relates the numbing of conscience and loss of the sense of sin to an even more fundamental loss of the *sense of God*. But whatever the causes of this phenomenon, regular confession, with the examination of conscience which precedes it, is an excellent way of restoring and deepening this spiritual sensitivity.

The need to apologise

A second aspect of human nature which points to the helpfulness of confession is the deep human need to apologise when we have offended someone. If a man inadvertently forgets to kiss his wife goodbye as he usually does on leaving the house, and he suddenly remembers on his way to work that he has forgotten, he doesn't merely feel sorry. He gets on the phone as soon as he arrives at work, rings his wife and apologises. He needs and wants to tell her that he is sorry. Only then does he feel at peace. Jesus Christ knew this human need and he gave us in confession a forum in which we can tell him, through the mediation of a human being, "I am sorry".

The need to tell others what we have done

A third aspect of human nature suggesting the need for confession is the human need to tell others what we have done, including our misdeeds. If we have a car accident, for example, we feel the need to tell someone as soon as possible. Or if we have had an argument with a loved one, we also have a need to tell someone about it. Criminals tell others what they have done, even to boast about it, and sometimes this leads to their arrest. We all share our experiences with our friends at work or over a beer or a cup of coffee. And we do this, even though sometimes we receive bad advice from them or they in turn pass on to others what we have said. In confession, on the contrary, when we tell the priest what we have done we receive only good advice and the priest is bound by the seal of confession never to reveal our sins to anyone.

I once witnessed in a particularly graphic way how deep the need is to tell others what we have done. A non-Catholic woman once told me that some twenty years before she had done something very wrong, but in all those years she had never told anyone about it. Needless to say she suffered greatly during those years. Finally she got up the courage to go to a Catholic Church where she entered the confessional and told the priest, to her overwhelming relief. Of course the priest couldn't absolve her, but he

did give her a blessing. That conversation engraved on my mind in an indelible way the treasure of the Sacrament of Penance. When we have sinned we can not only tell someone but we can also be forgiven by Jesus Christ.

In a pastoral letter for Advent 1998, Cardinal George Pell, when Archbishop of Melbourne, elaborated on this aspect of the sacrament: "It would be ironic in an age where we are encouraged to verbalise our problems, and speak about our concerns, when so many more people are helped by competent counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists, that the personal exchanges necessary in individual confession to a priest should be falling into disuse. Many people are helped wonderfully in the First Rite of Penance, because the combination of personal confession, sincere repentance, absolution, advice and penance are the best means to deal with guilt." Indeed, it has often been said that many people would not need to have recourse to a counsellor or psychologist if they made more regular use of the Sacrament of Penance.

The need to know we are forgiven

Fourthly, we need to know that we are forgiven. We need to hear it in a human way. When we were children growing up, we did many wrong things. We went to our parents and told them we were sorry. If they just grunted and didn't reply, we wouldn't know whether we were forgiven and we would be very uneasy. But when they put their arms around us and said, "Don't worry, dear, I forgive you", we were at peace. As is obvious, the need to know we have been forgiven is deeply rooted in human nature.

We can tell God directly that we are sorry, but we don't hear that we are forgiven, and we might wonder whether we are sufficiently sorry and really determined to avoid committing that sin again. Moreover, we have probably had the experience of having sinned, sometimes even grievously, of saying an act of contrition with the intention of going to confession, and finding that the real peace did not come until we actually went to confession and heard the words, "I absolve you". We need to hear those words with our ears, and only then are we certain that we are forgiven. After all, we are human beings with body and soul, not pure spirits, and Our Lord instituted the sacraments as outward signs precisely so that we could know when grace is acting in us.

In this way, through the mediation of the priest who tells us we are forgiven, the Sacrament of Penance brings Christ close to the penitent. The Holy Father, speaking in a general audience on the 22nd of February 1984, asked the question, "Why should I reveal to a man like myself my most intimate situation, and even my most secret sins? Why can't I address myself directly to God, or to Christ, instead of having to go through the mediation of a man in order to obtain forgiveness for my sins?" He answered, "It is well to consider that despite the feeling of discomfort that ecclesial mediation can cause, it is a very human method, so that the God who frees us from our sins does not

fade into a far off abstraction which would, in the end, become a colourless, irritating and despairing imitation of ourselves. Through the mediation of the Church's minister, this God makes himself very close to us in the concrete reality of a heart that is indeed pardoned. In this perspective we come to ask whether the Church's instrumentality, instead of being contented, should not rather be desired, since it responds to the deepest expectations that are hidden in the human soul, when one approaches God and lets himself be saved by him."

When we hear the words of absolution we know we are forgiven, because Jesus instituted the sacrament in the form of a judgment: "When you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven. When you hold them bound, they are held bound." (*John 20:23*). The priest, having judged our understanding of what we have done and our degree of sorrow, determines that he can forgive us and pronounces the words of absolution. Then "what is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven." (*Matt. 16:19*) Without the mediation and judgment of the priest we would, in the end, be judging ourselves, and no one can be a good judge in his own case.

What is more, that encounter with Jesus Christ is, in a sense, a *right* of the penitent and a *right* of Christ as well. The Holy Father, in his very first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, wrote: "In faithfully observing the centuries-old practice of the Sacrament of Penance, the practice of individual confession, with a personal act of sorrow and the intention to amend and make satisfaction, the Church is therefore defending the human soul's individual right. As is evident, this is also a right on Christ's part with regard to every human being redeemed by him. His right to meet each one of us in that key moment in the soul's life constituted by the moment of conversion, forgiveness."

Is this not the way Christ healed the sick and forgave sinners when he was on earth? He came close to them and laid hands on them one by one. As someone commented to me facetiously, only on one occasion did Jesus heal ten lepers at once, and they were a most ungrateful lot! He wants to come close and lay his hands individually on each person, and therefore he instituted this sacrament. In this regard the use of the grille, or *crates*, can be helpful. Apart from allowing the penitent to remain anonymous, which is a right of every penitent, the fact that the penitent cannot see the priest makes it more clear that he or she is confessing not merely to the priest but to Christ himself.

The dedication of priests

Naturally, if Christ's intention of allowing each sinner to be absolved personally is to be made effective, it requires great dedication on the part of priests. As is well known, the history of the Church is filled with heroic examples of priests spending long hours, year after year in the confessional. The extraordinary witness of such priests as the Cure of Ars and Padre Pio springs immediately to mind. But far more common are the

countless unacclaimed pastors all over the world who are only too willing to hear the confessions of their people whenever required.

One such example is that of an auxiliary bishop from the diocese of Huancavelica, high in the Andes of Peru, with whom I spoke some years ago. There were 335,000 Catholics in his diocese looked after by 20 priests, 16 of whom were over the age of 65. The bishop told about visiting a particular village to which he could go only once or twice a year. To reach the village he travelled seven hours by car, followed by six more on horseback. On arrival he heard confessions for two hours, then celebrated Mass and reserved the Blessed Sacrament. Afterwards he heard confessions for four more hours or longer until all the confessions were heard. He mentioned that the 71 year-old diocesan bishop heard some 1000 confessions a week. He would sometimes enter a church at 8pm and leave at 7am, having heard confessions, confirmed and married people all night. I asked the bishop if he ever gave general absolution, and he answered simply: "No, there is no need." He was a true minister of Jesus Christ, willing to sacrifice his own comfort so that each soul could have a personal encounter with the divine Master.

Moreover, this willingness to hear confessions individually testifies to the dignity and worth of each person. The Holy Father, in an address to Mexican bishops some years ago, said: "The very poorest, as are many of the members of your diocese, for whom nobody takes time in our restless and hurried society, can give witness, if they are received by the priest with love and respect in the Sacrament of Penance, to the fact that the Church welcomes everyone, respects and listens to everyone, with that personal love which expresses itself in the care and affection of Christ for each and everyone whom he has redeemed by his Blood. In the exercise of the ministry of the confessional, the priest who makes himself readily available for each of the faithful who needs his service is the visible witness of the dignity of each one of the baptised."

The benefits of confession

The Sacrament of Penance not only responds to deep human needs, it is also a source of many blessings.

Even before we confess our sins we have to examine our conscience, and that act of looking at our life and seeing how we have failed to respond to God's love for us is very helpful. It helps us to get to know ourselves, to see where we have failed since our last confession and where we repeatedly fail. It thus gives us **growth in self-knowledge** which, as a means to spiritual growth, to amendment of life, to struggling harder to improve, is a great blessing. The examination of conscience, together with the act of confessing our sins, helps us to grow in **humility**, in the truth about how we really are, including our faults. We tend to have an exaggerated sense of our self-worth and a

diminished realisation of our defects. St Teresa of Avila says: "The devil has as his chief mission to make us proud", and he succeeds much of the time. Then let us go to confession frequently so that we can grow in humility and come to the awareness of our true worth.

Also, in confession we grow in **sincerity** or truthfulness. To face our sinfulness frankly in the examination of conscience and to tell the priest in clear terms what we have done is a means of growing in sincerity. Obviously we don't have to mention all the minute details, but when the sin is mortal we must at least mention the species and number of times we have committed the sin. Sometimes we can find it hard to be sincere with others, but our experience in being sincere with God in confession can help to make it easier.

Perhaps the most obvious fruit of confession itself is **forgiveness of our sins**. We have sinned against the infinite majesty and love of God, and by ourselves we would have no way of making up. But, like the prodigal son, we go before our forgive us and we are absolved. Commenting on the difference between human tribunals and the tribunal of God, a modern day champion of the Sacrament of Penance, Saint Josemaria Escriva, wrote in his popular book *The Way*, "What depths of mercy there are in God's justice! For, in the judgments of men, he who confesses his fault is punished; and in the judgment of God, he is pardoned." This sacrament is truly, in the words of Saint Josemaria, "a miracle of God's love".

The greatest fruit of confession is **sanctifying grace**, which we first received in the Sacrament of Baptism. Each time we make a good confession the sanctifying grace of our Baptism is restored or increased. Sanctifying grace is a sharing in God's own life which, as its very name suggests, sanctifies us and makes us pleasing to God. We are all called to be saints, and we are sanctified by God's life within us. Some years ago I came to realise the importance of confession as a means of receiving sanctifying grace while visiting a woman in hospital. I was wondering what I could do for her, besides giving her conversation and a blessing, since on that occasion I could not take her Holy Communion. But then I remembered that I could give her a sacrament, the sacrament of Penance, and with it an increase of sanctifying grace. I asked her if she would like to go to confession, and she said yes. If it were only for the sanctifying grace we would have ample reason to go to confession frequently.

In addition to sanctifying grace we receive **actual grace**, that passing help of God to do good deeds and to avoid committing sin. The actual grace, or sacramental grace, of confession is the special help to avoid committing the sins we have just confessed. It is not that we will be able to avoid them completely—after all, we are not perfect—but we receive the help of grace to be stronger in struggling against them. This is not only a theory but the experience of anyone who goes regularly to confession. After we have

confessed something, we are much more successful in avoiding falling again in the same matter.

Helped by this sacramental grace, confession gives us a **new beginning in the spiritual struggle** each time we go. Perhaps we have confessed only venial sins, but the soul, which had been “stained” with the guilt and habit of those sins, is cleansed and purified of the guilt. This affords a great incentive to struggle to keep the soul pure. After confession we always do better. And the more often we go to confession, the more often we renew that struggle and the more quickly we improve in our spiritual life.

Then too, through confession we receive **spiritual direction**. Most priests offer at least a few words of encouragement, of advice, of clarification of conscience about what the penitent has just confessed. It is only a brief encounter but it can be very helpful in the spiritual life. And for many, the occasion of confession is their regular opportunity to receive a deeper spiritual direction. In this regard the Holy Father said in his general audience on the 11th of April 1984: “Certainly, ‘spiritual direction’ (or ‘spiritual counsel’, or ‘spiritual dialogue’, as some prefer to express it at times) can be carried out even outside the context of the Sacrament of Penance and even by someone who is not endowed with Holy Orders.

However, it cannot be denied that this function –insufficient, if it is done only within a group, without a personal relationship—is in fact frequently and happily linked to the sacrament of Reconciliation and is done by a ‘teacher’ of life (cf Eph 4:11), by a ‘*spiritualis senior*’ (spiritual elder) (Rule of St Benedict, chap. 4, 50-51), by a ‘doctor’ (cf. *Summa Theologiae, Supplementum*, q. 18), by a ‘guide in the things of God’ (ibid., q. 36, a. 1) who is the priest, who is made suitable for special duties ‘in the Church’ by a ‘singular gift of grace’ (ibid., q. 35, a. 1). Thus the penitent overcomes the danger of arbitrariness and is helped to decide his vocation in the light of God.”

It is not easy to admit to another human being what we have done, especially when the priest knows us. But isn't this confession to one who knows us, humbling though it may be, rather something to be desired? When we take our car to be serviced, do we go to a different mechanic each time so that no one gets to know the car? And when we go to a doctor, do we go to a different one each time so that he can perhaps discover something new? Rather, we go to a doctor who knows us, and a mechanic who knows our car, precisely because they do know us. Then, if we are consistent, we should not act any differently in what refers to the wellbeing of our soul, which is far more important than our bodily health, or the wellbeing of our car, especially if through that act we can receive valuable spiritual direction.

Another benefit offered by confession is the **penance** which the priest asks the penitent to undertake. As we know, every sin harms the mystical body of Christ and the sinner must make up in some measure for the harm caused. This is known as temporal

punishment, and it must be undergone either here on earth through good deeds, penances or indulgences, or in Purgatory. Left to our own devices we might be inclined to do too little penance, but the penance which the priest imposes makes up at least in some measure or the temporal punishment owing for our sins. Assuredly those who go regularly to confession will have a much shorter time in Purgatory if they go there at all.

Related to the penance which helps to make up for some of the temporal punishment is the **reconciliation with the Church** brought about through the sacrament. As all members of the Church are one in the body of Christ, every sin harms the mystical body, just as every good deed contributes to the spiritual welfare of the Church.

Through confession we are reconciled with the whole Church and forgiven for the harm we have caused. This is more obviously the case when we are forgiven for mortal sins, which cut us off from communion with God and the Church altogether. The priest, acting on behalf of the Church, brings about this reconciliation. This communal dimension of sin and its forgiveness is obviously another reason why Christ instituted a sacrament for the forgiveness of sins.

And as the fruit of all we have mentioned, confession invariably gives great **joy and peace of soul**, on knowing that the burden of sin that was weighing on us has been lifted. The experience of many penitents is that this is one of the greatest joys they have had, especially when the sins were mortal and thus would have prevented them from going to heaven. To illustrate this joy, Christ gives us the example of the prodigal son, who is kissed and embraced by his father when he humbly confesses his sinfulness.

How often should we go to confession?

If confession offers so many benefits, and if Christ gave it to the Church as a gift, it is only natural that we should want to take advantage of it frequently. We need it and it will give us the vitality, the self-knowledge, the humility, the sincerity, the grace, etc., that we need to be truly effective leaven, salt and light in society. How often should we go to confession?

Obviously there can be times in life when we *must* go. This is especially the case when we have committed a mortal sin, which ruptures communion with God and, unless it is repented of, prevents us from going to heaven. It is true that sincere contrition moved by the sorrow of having offended God who is all good and worthy of our love restores the soul to the state of grace, but only if it is accompanied by the intention of going to confession. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, perfect contrition, arising from a love by which God is loved above all else, “obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.” (CCC 1452) Just as a person who has broken a leg seeks out a doctor as soon as possible, so the sinner who has broken his relationship with God

will seek to be reconciled with him immediately.

And of course one cannot receive Holy Communion after mortal sin without going first to sacramental confession. This traditional teaching is stated clearly in the *Catechism*: “anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive Communion without having received absolution in the Sacrament of Penance.” (CCC 1415) Anyone can commit a mortal sin, but we should have the honesty and love for God to confess that sin sacramentally before going to receive Holy Communion. We should not forget either that “children must go to the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.” (CCC 1457). Then too, the obligation of confessing serious sins at least once a year remains in force: “after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year.” (CCC 1457) But this is obviously only a *minimum* requirement. Anyone wanting to grow in love for God will take advantage of confession on a regular basis.

Frequent confession

The Magisterium of the Church has always encouraged frequent confession. One of the most often quoted passages is that of Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, in which the Pope attributes the introduction of the practice of frequent confession to the Holy Spirit: “For a constant and speedy advancement in the path of virtue we highly recommend the pious practice of frequent confession, introduced by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; for by this means we grow in a true knowledge of ourselves and in Christian humility, bad habits are uprooted, spiritual negligence and apathy are prevented, the conscience is purified and the will strengthened, salutary spiritual direction is obtained, and grace is increased by the efficacy of the sacrament itself.

Therefore those among the young clergy who are diminishing esteem for frequent confession, are to know that the enterprise on which they have embarked is alien to the Spirit of Christ and most detrimental to the mystical Body of our Saviour.”

The introduction to the *Rite of Penance* also encourages frequent confession: “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.”

The encouragement of frequent confession was reiterated by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its 1972 *Pastoral Norms Concerning the Administration of General Sacramental Absolution*: “Priests should be careful not to discourage the faithful from frequent or devotional confession. On the contrary, let

them draw attention to its fruitfulness for Christian living (cf *Mystici Corporis*) and always display readiness to hear such a confession whenever a reasonable request is made by the faithful. It must be absolutely prevented that individual confession should be reserved for serious sins only, for this would deprive the faithful of the great benefit of confession and would injure the good name of those who approach the sacrament singly.”

And Pope John Paul II, in an address to priests at the beginning of Lent in 1981, recalled that frequent confession has always been a means of growing in holiness. He told the priests: “The sphere of the use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation cannot be reduced to the mere hypothesis of grave sins; apart from the considerations of a dogmatic character that could be made in this connection, we recall that confession periodically renewed, the so-called confession ‘of devotion’, has always accompanied the ascent to holiness in the Church.” More recently, on the 13th March 1999, he told priests hearing confessions in the patriarchal basilicas of Rome, “It should not be forgotten that the so-called confession of devotion was the school which formed the great saints.” Confession is clearly a powerful means of growing in holiness and if we take our calling to holiness seriously we will make frequent use of it.

In view of this criterion, monthly, fortnightly or even weekly confession is much to be desired. It should be recalled that in order to gain a plenary indulgence—and the Church makes them readily available—one must go to the Sacrament of Penance within some 20 days before or after gaining the indulgence. Thus monthly confession would enable a person to gain such an indulgence at any time.

Pope John XXIII gives us his own example in encouraging frequent confession. At the age of 80 he wrote a note which would later be included in his *Journal of a Soul*: “During my whole life I have kept faithful to my practice of weekly confession. Several times during my life I have renewed my general confession.”

Someone might argue that there is little point in going to confession frequently when we are only going to fall into the same sins again anyway. But we wash frequently when we are only going to get dirty again, and we eat regularly when we are certainly going to get hungry again. Of course, for our sorrow to be genuine, we must be determined to struggle to avoid falling again into the sin, even though we know by experience that we may not succeed.

Given the great benefit of confession to those who make use of it, it is not surprising that the devil does everything in his power to discourage people from taking advantage of it. Unfortunately he has been very successful in recent times. The following words are very relevant to the present situation: “Most holy persons are firmly persuaded that whatever of piety, of holiness, or religion, has been preserved to our times in the Church, through God’s goodness, must be ascribed in great measure to confession. It

cannot, therefore, be a matter of surprise that the enemy of the human race, in his efforts to destroy utterly the Catholic Church, should, through the agency of his wicked designs, have assailed with all his might this bulwark, as it were, of Christian virtue." Those words, while very applicable to the situation we have been witnessing in the past decades, were in fact written over 400 years ago, in the *Catechism for Parish Priests* issued after the Council of Trent.

Helping others to go to confession

But it is not enough simply to go to confession frequently ourselves. We should make a great effort to help others to go as well. We cannot forget that episode in the fifth chapter of St Luke's Gospel, where the friends of a paralytic brought their friend to Jesus. He could not walk, but had to be carried on a stretcher. They could not get into the house because of the number of people, and they went up on to the roof and lowered him through the roof into the middle of the assembly. What did Jesus say? "Rise up and walk", as everyone would have expected? No, "your sins are forgiven". He gave the paralytic the greatest blessing in his power. Even greater than curing his physical paralysis was healing the paralysis of his soul. And that man was forgiven and healed because his friends took him to Jesus.

As we invite others to read a book we have liked or to see a film we have seen, it would be only natural to do the same when it is a matter of the spiritual and human welfare of our relatives and friends. Everyone has acquaintances who have not been to confession for a long time and we would be showing little real concern or love for them if we did not speak to them about something as important as confession. If we do succeed in getting them back to confession we will be giving them, as well as ourselves, the great joy of coming closer to God.

The following anecdote, this one again from Peru, is one of the countless which could be related to exemplify this truth. A priest was just leaving the confessional when a man came and asked if he could hear his confession. The priest explained that he had been called to attend to a dying man but would return shortly. After about a half hour he returned and heard the man's confession. The man then explained that he had brought a friend of his, who had not been to confession for some 40 years, and urged the priest to treat his friend kindly lest he become frightened and never return. The priest heard the friend's confession as well as that of his wife and several others. When he left the confessional he met the man and his wife, who was holding an infant crying inconsolably. "Is the baby sick?" he asked. They explained that they had just walked for two days over the mountains to find a priest, since there were no priests in their own village. They had no money and during those days they had had nothing to eat, so that

the woman had nothing to feed the baby. The priest, naturally, arranged food and lodging for the visitors.

The story illustrates the great value some people place on confession and the effort they are prepared to make to take advantage of it. It is one of the great treasures we have in the Catholic Church. In this country, where confession is readily available, perhaps we are inclined to take it too much for granted.

Some non-Catholics envy us for this sacrament. I was told recently about a man who was showing his non-Catholic wife around the cathedral in Washington, D.C. It was not a Sunday and there were several benches full of people in one part of the cathedral. The wife asked what the people were doing, and her husband explained that they were going to confession. He continued showing her around and at one point he noticed that she had disappeared. Sometime later she reappeared and when he asked where she had been, she explained: "I went to confession!" Obviously she would not have received absolution, but her very desire to confess her sins to a priest indicates how great a treasure the Sacrament of Penance is.

Recourse to Mary, Refuge of Sinners

If we want extra help to convince our friends to go to confession, I suggest we go to Our Lady. She stood beside the Cross while Our Lord gave his life to win for us the grace of salvation, and as Mother of the Redeemer and Refuge of Sinners, she is eager to lead souls to her Son so that they can obtain that grace. My experience over many years in hearing confessions in St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, an experience which I later learned was shared by Cardinal Freeman, was that around feast days of Our Lady there were invariably more people in confession and more people for whom their confession was especially significant. I sometimes asked them why they had come and seldom did anyone make reference to the feast, of which they were obviously unaware. I was convinced then that it was Our Lady herself who was bringing them back to Jesus.

The Holy Father, in the first year of his pontificate, in a homily in the Basilica of Our Lady of Zapotan, encouraged us to have recourse to Mary in this apostolate: "She is refuge of sinners... If we are oppressed by awareness of sin, we instinctively seek him who has the power to forgive sins (cf. Luke 5:24), and we seek him through Mary, whose shrines are places of conversion, penance and reconciliation with God. She awakens in us the hope of mending our ways and persevering in good, even if that may sometimes seem humanly impossible. She enables us to overcome the multiple 'structures of sin' in which our personal, family and social life is wrapped. She enables us to obtain the grace of true liberation, with that freedom with which Christ liberated every man."
