

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO PRIESTS
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 2002

Dear Priests,

1. With deep emotion I am sending you this traditional Holy Thursday Letter, taking my seat beside you as it were at the table in the Upper Room at which the Lord Jesus celebrated with his Apostles the first Eucharist: a gift to the whole Church, a gift which, although veiled by sacramental signs, makes him “really, truly and substantially” present (Council of Trent: *DS* 1651) in every tabernacle throughout the world. Before this unique presence, the Church bows down in adoration: “*Adoro te devote, latens Deitas*”; she is unceasingly moved by the spiritual raptures of the Saints and, as the Bride, she assembles in an intimate outpouring of faith and love: “*Ave, verum corpus natum de Maria Virgine*”.

To the gift of this singular presence, which brings him to us in his supreme sacrifice and makes him our bread, Jesus, in the Upper Room, associated *a specific duty of the Apostles and their successors*. From that time on, to be an apostle of Christ, as are the Bishops and the priests sharing in their mission, has involved being able to act *in persona Christi Capitis*. This happens above all whenever the sacrificial meal of the Body and the Blood of the Lord is celebrated. For then the priest as it were lends Christ his own face and voice: “Do this in memory of me” (*Lk* 22:19).

How marvelous is this vocation of ours, my dear Brother Priests! Truly we can repeat with the Psalmist: “What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord” (*Ps* 116:12-13).

2. Joyfully meditating once again on this gift, I would like this year to speak to you about *an aspect of our mission* to which I called your attention last year at this same time. I believe that it warrants further reflection. I mean the mission which the Lord has given us to represent him not just in the *Eucharistic Sacrifice* but also in the *Sacrament of Reconciliation*.

Between the two sacraments there is a profound relationship. The Eucharist, the summit of the sacramental economy, is also its source: all the sacraments in a sense spring from the Eucharist and lead back to it. This is true in a special way of the sacrament charged with “mediating” the forgiveness of God, who welcomes the repentant sinner back into his embrace. It is true that as a re-enactment of Christ's Sacrifice, the Eucharist also serves to deliver us from sin. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: “The Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins” (No. 1393). Nevertheless, in the economy of grace willed by Christ, this purifying power, while it directly cleanses from venial sins, only

indirectly cleanses from mortal sins, which radically compromise the believer's relationship with God and his communion with the Church. "The Eucharist," the *Catechism* continues, "is not ordered to the forgiveness of mortal sins. That is proper to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Eucharist is properly the sacrament of those who are in full communion with the Church" (No. 1395).

In insisting on this truth, the Church in no way wishes to detract from the role of the Eucharist. Her intention is to grasp its significance in relation to the whole sacramental economy as instituted by God's saving wisdom. This, after all, is what Saint Paul clearly indicated when writing to the Corinthians: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself" (*I Cor* 11:27-29). In line with this admonition of Saint Paul is the principle which states that "anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1385).

3. My dear Brothers in the Priesthood: in recalling this truth, I feel a pressing need to urge you, as I did last year, to rediscover for yourselves and to help others to rediscover the beauty of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In recent decades and for a variety of reasons, this sacrament has passed through something of a crisis. More than once I have drawn attention to this fact, even making it the theme of a gathering of the Synod of Bishops, whose reflections I then presented in the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. On the other hand, I cannot fail to acknowledge with deep joy the positive signs which, in the Jubilee Year especially, have shown that this sacrament, when suitably presented and celebrated, can have a broad appeal, even among the young. Its appeal is enhanced by the *need for personal contact*, something that is becoming increasingly scarce in the hectic pace of today's technological society, but which for this very reason is increasingly experienced as a vital need. Certainly, this need can be met in various ways. But how can we fail to recognize that the Sacrament of Reconciliation – without confusing it with any of the various forms of psychological therapy – offers an extraordinarily rich response to this need? It does so by bringing the penitent into contact with the merciful heart of God through the friendly face of a brother.

Yes, great indeed is the wisdom of God, who by instituting this sacrament has made provision for a profound and unremitting need of the human heart. We are meant to be loving and enlightened interpreters of this wisdom though the personal contact we are called to have with so many brothers and sisters in the celebration of Penance. In this regard, I wish to repeat that the usual form of administering this sacrament is its *individual* celebration, and only in "cases of grave necessity" is it lawful to employ the *communal* form with general confession and absolution. The conditions required for this form of absolution are well known; but perhaps we should remember that for absolution to be valid the faithful must have the intention of subsequently confessing their grave sins individually (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1483).

4. With joy and trust let us rediscover this sacrament. Let us experience it above all for ourselves, as a deeply-felt need and as a grace which we constantly look for, in order to restore vigour and enthusiasm to our journey of holiness and to our ministry.

At the same time, let us make every effort to be *true ministers of mercy*. We know that in this sacrament, as in others, we are called to be agents of a grace which comes not from us but from on high and works by its own inner power. In other words – and this is a great responsibility – *God counts on us*, on our availability and fidelity, in order to work his wonders in human hearts. In the celebration of this sacrament, perhaps even more than in the others, it is important that the faithful have an intense experience of the face of Christ the Good Shepherd.

Allow me therefore to speak to you on this theme, imagining as it were all the places – cathedrals, parishes, shrines or elsewhere – in which you are daily engaged in administering this sacrament. Our minds turn to the pages of the Gospel which reveal most directly the merciful face of God. How can we fail to think of the *moving meeting between the prodigal son and his forgiving Father*? Or the image of the *sheep which was lost and then found*, and which the Shepherd joyfully lifts onto his shoulders? The Father's embrace and the Good Shepherd's joy must be visible in each one of us, dear Brothers, whenever a penitent asks us to become ministers of forgiveness.

In order to bring out certain specific aspects of the unique saving dialogue that is sacramental confession, I would like to use the “biblical icon” of *the meeting between Jesus and Zacchaeus* (cf. *Lk 19:1-10*). To me it seems that what takes place between Jesus and the “chief tax collector” of Jericho resembles in a number of ways the celebration of the sacrament of mercy. As we follow this brief but powerful story, we try to capture in Christ's demeanour and in his voice all those nuances of wisdom, both human and supernatural, which we too must strive to communicate if the sacrament is to be celebrated in the best possible way.

5. The story, as we know, presents the meeting between Jesus and Zacchaeus as if it happened by chance. Jesus enters Jericho and moves through the city accompanied by the crowd (cf. *Lk 19:3*). In climbing the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus seems prompted by curiosity alone. At times, God's meetings with man do appear to be merely fortuitous. But nothing that God does happens *by chance*. Surrounded by a wide variety of pastoral situations, we can sometimes lose heart and motivation because so many Christians pay too little attention to the sacramental life, and even when they do approach the sacraments, they often do so in a superficial way. Those who hear many confessions and see how people ordinarily approach the sacrament can be disconcerted by the way certain penitents come to confession without even a clear idea of what they want. Some come only because they feel the need to be listened to. Others because they want advice about something. Others have a psychological need to be released from burdensome feelings of guilt. Many, on the other hand, feel a real need to restore their relationship with God, but they confess without being really aware of the obligations which this entails. They may make a poor examination of conscience because they have little knowledge of the

implications of a moral life inspired by the Gospel. Is there any confessor who has not had this experience?

This is precisely the case of Zacchaeus. Everything that happens to him is amazing. If there had not been, at a certain point, the “surprise” of Christ looking up at him, perhaps he would have remained a silent spectator of the Lord moving through the streets of Jericho.

Jesus would have passed *by*, not *into*, his life. Zacchaeus had no idea that the curiosity which had prompted him to do such an unusual thing was already the fruit of a mercy which had preceded him, attracted him and was about to change him in the depths of his heart.

Dear Priests, with so many of our penitents in mind, let us re-read Luke's magnificent account of how Christ behaved: “When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today’” (*Lk 19:5*).

Every encounter with someone wanting to go to confession, even when the request is somewhat superficial because it is poorly motivated and prepared, can become, through the surprising grace of God, that “place” near the sycamore tree where Christ looked up at Zacchaeus. How deeply Christ's gaze penetrated the Jericho publican's soul is impossible for us to judge. But we do know that that *same gaze looks upon each of our penitents*. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we are agents of a supernatural encounter with laws of its own, an encounter which we have only to respect and facilitate. For Zacchaeus, it must have been an stunning experience *to hear himself called by his name*, a name which many of his townsmen spoke with contempt. Now he hears it spoken in a tone of tenderness, expressing not just trust but familiarity, insistent friendship. Yes, Jesus speaks to Zacchaeus like an old friend, forgotten maybe, but a friend who has nonetheless remained faithful, and who enters with the gentle force of affection into the life and into the home of his re-discovered friend: “Make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (*Lk 19:5*).

6. Luke's account is remarkable for the tone of the language: everything is so personal, so tactful, so affectionate! Not only is the text filled with humanity; it suggests insistence, an urgency to which Jesus gives voice as the one offering the definitive revelation of God's mercy. He says: “I must stay at your house”, or to translate even more literally: “I need to stay at your house” (*Lk 19:5*). Following the mysterious road map which the Father has laid out for him, Jesus runs into Zacchaeus along the way. He pauses near him as if the meeting had been planned from the beginning. Despite all the murmuring of human malice, the home of this sinner is about to become *a place of revelation*, the scene of a miracle of mercy. True, this will not happen if Zacchaeus does not free his heart from the ligatures of egoism and from his unjust and fraudulent ways. But mercy has already come to him as a gratuitous and overflowing gift. *Mercy has preceded him!*

This is what happens in every sacramental encounter. We must not think that it is the sinner, through his own independent journey of conversion, who earns mercy. On the contrary, it is mercy that impels him along the path of conversion. Left to himself, man can do nothing and he deserves nothing. Before being man's journey to God, confession is *God's arrival at a person's home*.

In confession, therefore, we can find ourselves faced with all kinds of people. But of one thing we must be convinced: anticipating our invitation, and even before we speak the words of the sacrament, the brothers and sisters who seek our ministry have already been touched by a mercy that works from within. Please God, we shall know how to cooperate with the mercy that welcomes and the love that saves. This we can do by our words and our attitude as pastors who are concerned for each individual, skilful in sensing people's problems and in delicately accompanying them on their journey, and knowing how to help them to trust in God's goodness.

7. "I must stay at your house". Let us try to penetrate these words still more deeply. They are a proclamation. Before indicating a choice on the part of Christ, they proclaim the will of the Father. Jesus appears *as someone with a precise mandate*. There is a "law" which he too must observe: the will of the Father which he accomplishes with such love that it becomes his "food" (cf. *Jn* 4:34). The words which Jesus speaks to Zacchaeus are not just a means of establishing a relationship but *the declaration of a plan drawn up by God*.

The meeting unfolds against the background of the Word of God, which is one with the Word and the Face of Christ. It is here too that the encounter which is at the heart of the celebration of Penance must begin. How poor if everything were reduced to the skills of human communication! Awareness of the laws of human communication can help and should not be overlooked, but it is the Word of God which must sustain everything. That is why the rite of the sacrament provides for the proclamation of this Word to the penitent.

This is a detail that should not be underestimated, even if it is not always easy to implement. Confessors very often find it hard to communicate what the Word demands to those who have only a superficial knowledge of it. Obviously, the actual celebration of the Sacrament is not the best time to make up for the lack. This should be done with pastoral insight during the time of preparation, by offering basic pointers that allow penitents to measure themselves against the truth of the Gospel. In any event, the confessor should not fail to use the sacramental encounter to lead penitents to some grasp of the way in which God is mercifully reaching down to them, stretching out his hand, not to strike but to save.

Who can deny that the dominant culture of our time creates very real difficulties in this regard? Even mature Christians are often hindered by it in their efforts to live by God's commandments and follow the guidelines set out on the basis of the commandments by the Church's magisterium. This is the case with many issues in the area of sexual and family morality, bio-ethics and professional and social morality; but it is also true of

problems regarding obligations in the area of religious practice and participation in the life of the Church. For this reason there is a need for a catechesis which the confessor cannot offer at the moment of celebrating the sacrament. It would be best to make this catechesis part of a deeper preparation for confession. With this in mind, penitential celebrations with community preparation and individual confession can be very helpful.

To clarify all of this, the “biblical icon” of Zacchaeus provides *yet another important cue*. In the sacrament, the penitent first meets not “the commandments of God” but, in Jesus, “the God of the commandments”. *To Zacchaeus, Jesus offers himself*: “I must stay at your house”. He himself is the gift that awaits Zacchaeus, and he is also “God's law” for Zacchaeus. When we see our encounter with Jesus as a gift, even the most demanding features of the law assume the “lightness” of grace, in line with that supernatural dynamic which prompted Saint Paul to say: “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (*Gal 5:18*). Every celebration of Penance should cause the soul of the penitent to leap with the same joy that Christ's words inspired in Zacchaeus, who “made haste and came down and received him joyfully” (*Lk 19:6*).

8. The availability and superabundance of mercy should not however obscure the fact that it is only *the premise of salvation*, which reaches fulfilment to the extent that it meets *a response in the human being*. In fact, the forgiveness granted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not some external action, a kind of legal “remission of the penalty”, but *a real encounter of the penitent with God*, who restores the bond of friendship shattered by sin. The “truth” of this relationship requires that we welcome God's merciful embrace, overcoming all the resistance caused by sin.

This is what happens in the case of Zacchaeus. Aware that he is now being treated as a “son”, he begins to think and act like a son, *and this he shows in the way he rediscovers his brothers and sisters*. Beneath the loving gaze of Christ, the heart of Zacchaeus warms to love of neighbour. From a feeling of isolation, which had led him to enrich himself without caring about what others had to suffer, he moves to an attitude of sharing. This is expressed in a genuine “division” of his wealth: “half of my goods to the poor”. The injustice done to others by his fraudulent behaviour is atoned for by a fourfold restitution: “If I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold” (*Lk19:8*). And it is only at this point that the love of God achieves its purpose, and salvation is accomplished: “Today salvation has come to this house” (*Lk 19:9*).

Dear Priests, this journey of salvation, so clearly described in the story of Zacchaeus, should guide us and help us accomplish with wise pastoral balance our difficult work in the ministry of the confessional. It is a ministry always beset by two opposite extremes: *severity* and *laxity*. The first fails to take account of the early part of the story of Zacchaeus: mercy comes first, encouraging conversion and valuing even the slightest progress in love, because the Father wants to do the impossible to save the son who is lost: “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost” (*Lk19:10*).

The other of the two extremes, *laxity*, fails to take into account the fact that the fullness of salvation, not just offered but also accepted, the salvation which truly heals and

restores, involves a genuine conversion to the demands of God's love. If Zacchaeus had welcomed the Lord into his home without coming to an attitude of openness to love and reparation for the harm done, without a firm commitment to living a new life, he would not have received in the depths of his heart the forgiveness which the Lord had offered him with such concern.

We must always be careful to maintain a proper balance in order to avoid falling into one or the other of these extremes. *Severity* crushes people and drives them away. *Laxity* is misleading and deceptive. The minister of pardon, who exemplifies for penitents the face of the Good Shepherd, must express in equal measure the mercy already present and at work and the pardon which brings healing and peace. It is on the basis of these principles that the priest is deputed, in dialogue with the penitent, to discern whether he or she is ready for sacramental absolution. Undoubtedly, the delicacy of this meeting with souls, at such a personal and sometimes difficult moment, demands the utmost discretion. Unless it appears otherwise, the priest must assume that, in confessing his or her sins, the penitent is genuinely sorry and is determined to make amends. This can be more readily assumed if there are suitable pastoral aids for sacramental Reconciliation, including a time of preparation for the sacrament, in order to help penitents come to a more mature and satisfactory sense of what it is that they are looking for. Clearly, when there is no sorrow and amendment, the confessor is obliged to tell the penitent that he or she is not yet ready for absolution. If absolution were given to those who actually say that they have no intention of making amends, the rite would become a mere fiction; indeed, it would look almost like magic, capable perhaps of creating the semblance of peace, but certainly not that deep peace of conscience which God's embrace guarantees.

9. In the light of what has been said, it is all the more evident why the *personal encounter* between confessor and penitent is the ordinary form of sacramental Reconciliation, while the practice of general absolution is only for exceptional circumstances. It is well known that the practice of the Church moved gradually to the private celebration of penance, after centuries in which public penance had been the dominant form. Not only did this development not change the substance of the sacrament – and how could it be otherwise! – but it actually expressed this substance more clearly and made it more effective. This happened not without the aid of the Holy Spirit, who here too fulfilled the mission of leading the Church “into all truth” (*Jn 16:13*).

The ordinary form of Reconciliation not only expresses well *the truth of divine mercy* and the forgiveness which springs from it, but also sheds light on the *truth of man* in one of its most fundamental aspects. Although human beings live through a network of relationships and communities, the uniqueness of each person can never be lost in a shapeless mass. This explains the deep echo in our souls *when we hear ourselves called by name*. When we realize that we are known and accepted as we are, with our most individual traits, we feel truly alive. Pastoral practice needs to take this into greater account, in order to strike a wise balance between gatherings which emphasize the communion of the Church and other moments which attend to the needs of the individual. People ordinarily want to be recognized and looked after, and it is precisely this nearness to them that allows them to experience God's love more strongly.

Seen in these terms, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is *one of the most effective instruments of personal growth*. Here the Good Shepherd, through the presence and voice of the priest, approaches each man and woman, entering into a personal dialogue which involves listening, counsel, comfort and forgiveness. The love of God is such that it can focus upon each individual without overlooking the rest. All who receive sacramental absolution ought to be able to feel *the warmth of this personal attention*. They should experience the intensity of the fatherly embrace offered to the prodigal son: “His father ... embraced him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). They should be able to hear that warm and friendly voice that spoke to the tax collector Zacchaeus, calling him by name to new life (cf. Lk 19:5).

10. Accordingly, confessors too need *to be properly trained* for the celebration of this Sacrament. It must be celebrated in such a way that even in its external form it has all the liturgical dignity indicated in the norms laid down in the Rite of Penance. This does not exclude the possibility of adaptations for pastoral reasons, where the situation of the penitent truly calls for them, in light of the classical principle which holds that the *suprema lex* of the Church is the *salus animarum*. Let us make the wisdom of the Saints our guide. And let us move with courage in *proposing confession to young people*. We must be close to them, able to be with them as friends and fathers, confidants and confessors. They need to discover in us both of these roles, both dimensions.

While we remain firmly anchored in the discernment of the Church's magisterium, let us also make every effort to keep our theological training truly up-to-date, especially where emerging ethical issues are concerned. It can happen that in the face of complex contemporary ethical problems the faithful leave the confessional with somewhat confused ideas, especially if *they find that confessors are not consistent in their judgments*. The truth is that those who fulfill this delicate ministry in the name of God and of the Church have a specific duty not to promote and, even more so not to express in the confessional, personal opinions that do not correspond to what the Church teaches and professes. Likewise, *a failure to speak the truth because of a misconceived sense of compassion should not be taken for love*. We do not have a right to minimize matters of our own accord, even with the best of intentions. Our task is to be God's witnesses, to be spokesmen of a mercy that saves even when it shows itself as judgment on man's sin. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

11. Dear Priests! Know that I am especially close to you as you gather with your Bishops on this Holy Thursday of the year 2002. We have all experienced a new momentum in the Church at the dawn of the new millennium, in the sense of “starting afresh from Christ” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29 ff.). We had all hoped that this momentum might coincide with a new era of brotherhood and peace for all humanity. Instead we have seen more bloodshed. Once again we have been witnesses of wars. We are distressed by the tragedy of the divisions and hatreds which are devastating relations between peoples.

At this time too, as priests we are personally and profoundly afflicted by the sins of some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of Ordination in succumbing even to the

most grievous forms of the *mysterium iniquitatis* at work in the world. Grave scandal is caused, with the result that a dark shadow of suspicion is cast over all the other fine priests who perform their ministry with honesty and integrity and often with heroic self-sacrifice. As the Church shows her concern for the victims and strives to respond in truth and justice to each of these painful situations, all of us – conscious of human weakness, but trusting in the healing power of divine grace – are called *to embrace the “mysterium Crucis”* and to commit ourselves more fully to the search for holiness. We must beg God in his Providence to prompt a whole-hearted reawakening of those ideals of total self-giving to Christ which are the very foundation of the priestly ministry.

It is precisely our faith in Christ which gives us the strength to look trustingly to the future. We know that the human heart has always been attracted to evil, and that man will be able to radiate peace and love to those around him only if he meets Christ and allows himself to be “overtaken” by him. As ministers of the Eucharist and of sacramental Reconciliation, we in particular have the task of communicating hope, goodness and peace to the world.

My wish is that you will live this most holy day in peace of heart, in profound communion among yourselves, with your Bishop and your communities, when we recall, with the institution of the Eucharist, our own “birth” as priests. With the words of Christ to the Apostles in the Upper Room after the Resurrection, and calling upon the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Regina Apostolorum* and *Regina Pacis*, I warmly embrace you all as brothers: Peace, peace to each and every one of you. Happy Easter!

From the Vatican, on 17 March, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, in the year 2002, the twenty-fourth of my Pontificate.

JOHN PAUL II