



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

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Pastoral Letter on the Sacrament of Reconciliation  
"Trusting in the Lord's Forgiveness"  
Most Reverend William E. Lori  
Lent 2012

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Christmas is not the only season for gift giving. We like to give and receive gifts on occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's Day, and the like. And don't we all enjoy giving and receiving gifts on the spur of the moment? What a joy it is to give or receive a gift even when it isn't a special occasion.

As the Season of Lent begins, we should ask ourselves what the Lord wants from us. After all, the Lord of heaven and earth has everything. There is no gift all my own that I can give Him that the Lord does not already have - except one. That gift is my sins.

"What an awful gift!" you might be saying just about now. And if that's what you are thinking, you would be correct. No matter how I may bundle my sins and package them, no matter what euphemisms I might use to describe them, they're not pretty. My sins, like the sins of every human being, are a stark absence of good. They don't create happiness. They rob us of our dignity. They are an affront to God's love. And they are an affront to our neighbors. So why on earth does God want our sins?

The answer is both simple and mysterious. The plain Gospel truth is that God wants our sins so that he can forgive us, restore our wounded dignity, and repair our relationship with the Church and those around us. The fact is that God loves us with an everlasting, merciful love: a mystery in which we should rejoice in and a mystery we should strive to appreciate more and more as time goes by.

Actually, we have a few clues from ordinary experience to help us see why God, in His love for us, wants our sins. Think about parents who love their children. They certainly want to know when their children are in trouble, not just to help them get out of trouble but also to help them grow in strength of character. For their part, children express their loving trust in their parents by being honest with them. So too, husbands and wives need to be honest with each other. And they need to trust one another enough to admit when they've sinned in big or small ways against the marriage relationship. Confessing, so to speak, to one's spouse is among the demands of love, is it not? Not only does it set the record straight but it is also an expression of trust in the goodness of one's spouse. Maybe these very examples are something for us to think and pray about!

Somewhere in her lovely book called *Confession*, the author Adrienne von Speyer reminds us of the two meanings of that word - that dreaded word - "confession". It

indicates not only the avowal of our sins but also the profession of our faith. The Church calls the medieval King of England, Edward, "the Confessor", not because he heard confessions but because he confessed – proclaimed and bore witness to – the faith. Adrienne von Speyer invites us to put together these two meanings of the word "confession". We confess our faith and trust in the Lord by confessing our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance. In doing so, we confess Jesus as our Redeemer. We are declaring in a very personal way that Jesus' redeeming love is stronger than our sins. We are expressing our trust in his power and his will to forgive us. We are really embracing the truth that Jesus shows us the face of the Father of Mercies.

"Can't I do that without going to confession?" you might ask. "After all, doesn't the Lord know my sins?" Indeed he does. As the Psalmist says, "Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely" (Psalm 139:4). Why, then, do we need to tell the Lord through a priest where we've gone wrong if he already knows it?

Well, let's go back to the relationship of husband and wife. Let's say that the husband has a fender bender with his wife's car. If he returns and parks it in the drive way, she'll soon figure out what happened. Knowing what happened isn't the point. She will want her husband to tell her not only what happened but how it happened *and* to take responsibility for what happened by saying that he's sorry. Or let's say that, in the middle of a work day, when her colleagues are really depending on her, a woman slips out of the office to go to the gym. When she returns carrying her gym bag, her co-workers will quickly figure out where she's been. That's not the point. They will need her to admit she left them in the lurch and to say, "I'm sorry!"

Confession really is good for the soul. In verbalizing our sins, in calling them by their proper name, we are taking responsibility for them even as we seek the Lord's mercy. And, when we confess our sins to the priest, we are not confessing merely to another human being. The priest, of course, is not some sort of a demigod – he's mortal and sinful too. But by God's mercy he has been called and equipped through the Sacrament of Holy Orders to act in the Person of Christ and to represent the Church in making present and palpable Christ's saving words and deeds. As the saintly Cure of Ars once said, "The priesthood is the love of the heart of Christ." The priest is there to help us give our sins to the Lord and then, in the Lord's name and power, he forgives those sins.

In confessing our sins, we are not merely wiping the slate clean. We are not merely seeking psychological relief from our guilt. Rather, we are acknowledging our sins so as to give God permission to forgive us. Confessing is how we give God our sins. Confessing is also how we receive his gift of forgiveness. Confessing is how we acknowledge in faith the love that is in the heart of Christ.

Once again this year, the Diocese of Bridgeport will conduct a Lenten Penance Campaign. Confessions will be heard every Tuesday evening in Lent from 7p.m. until 9p.m., in all the parishes of the diocese. This is designed to make it as easy as possible for as many as possible to make a good, complete, unburdening confession. It is also our united confession of faith as a diocesan family of faith in Jesus' power over sin and death. I am grateful to the priests of the Diocese for their generosity as confessors and I pray that their pastoral love will deepen the faith of those who are active Catholics and bring back to the Lord and to the Church many who have been away.

May God bless us and keep us always in His love!