

Guide for Confessors

CATHOLICS COME HOME CHICAGO

Rev. Louis J. Cameli, STD

Introduction

As the *Catholics Come Home* evangelization initiative unfolds in the second year, we can anticipate that a number of people will hear the invitation to return to the Church and accept it. An important part of that return involves the celebration of the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

The essential nature of the sacrament of Penance does not change in the instance for 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 for a while.

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.

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. Guide is available on the website www.CatholicsComeHomeCHICAGO.org. 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 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. 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 faith formation process that will be a part of the *Catholics Come Home* evangelization initiative
- ✦ for those who have suffered the trauma of abortion, suggest Project Rachel (cards are available and the website is www.respectlifechicago.com or email at projectrachelchicago@gmail.com); remember that in the Archdiocese of Chicago, abortion is not a reserved sin
- ✦ for those who suffer problems associated with addiction, suggest a 12-step program.

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 some return after a long absence.

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 capacity of the penitent to fulfill such a penance. A simple penance that can be readily understood and easily implemented may be the best.

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/ A clear (and calm) communication to the penitents that their behavior is at variance with the moral law. This communication is best framed 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*.

b/ If behavior is habitual (or even compulsive), the confessor helps penitents to understand their 3diminished (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.

c/ Mainly for the confessor's own reference, he may try to identify whether or not the penitent has/had sufficient *scientia aestimativa* (estimative 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.

d/ 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.

- ✦ 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 circumstances, 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.