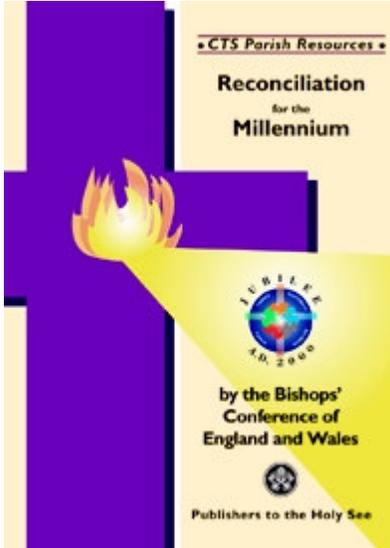


# **RECONCILIATION FOR THE MILLENNIUM**

*Foreword by Cardinal Basil Hume*



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## **Foreword**

The new Millennium draws ever closer. All over the world plans are well under way as how best to celebrate this unique occasion. But we believe that the most important celebration is that of conversion, turning back to the God who made us. As we prepare for the Great Jubilee we could all reflect on these words from the Holy Father: "...the joy of every Jubilee is above all a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion..." (Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 32).

The practice of regular confession has sadly dwindled on recent years. The Millennium provides an opportunity to renew the practice of sacramental confession and this booklet has been produced precisely for that reason. As bishops we are concerned that every opportunity to receive God's grace should be taken. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God reveals himself as the One who loves us unconditionally, who welcomes back the repentant sinner. Let us prepare for the Millennium by turning to God, and receiving grace and strength to help us witness to our faith.

### **Cardinal Basil Hume**

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## Introduction

Without doubt the dawning of the new Millennium - the 'Millennium Moment' - will be one of those "Where were you when...?" times. Already we have heard so much about computers crashing, unable to cope with a date ending in '00'; we may have been bombarded with information about where best to see-in the Millennium, and some people may have planned their route across the International Date Line to see in the Millennium in as many different places as possible.

But all these events run the risk of missing the point. The Millennium is about Jesus Christ: "...the two thousand years which have passed since the Birth of Christ (prescinding from the question of its precise chronology) represent an extraordinarily great Jubilee, not only for Christians but indirectly for the whole of humanity" (Pope John Paul II, [PJ1]Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 15).

This great Jubilee provides a unique opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation: "...the joy of every Jubilee is above all a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion....[The Church] cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves, through repentance, of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency, and slowness to act. Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today's temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them" (op.cit., 32 & 33).

This booklet is about that conversion and the forgiveness of sins. A priest once said, 'The hardest thing about going to confession is going through the door'. Reconciliation for the Millennium is offered to help us all cross that threshold. The Millennium is a time for us all to look at the past and to look towards the future, a time to celebrate the joy of forgiveness.

Reconciliation for the Millennium aims at encouraging us all to approach the Millennium in a spirit of penance. It offers practical help in celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a number of ways, with suggestions for prayers and scripture passages. Of course this is not a 'Millennium Project' which ends once the Millennium has begun. At the heart of Reconciliation for the Millennium is the call for personal renewal and conversion: "Everything ought to focus on the primary objective of the Jubilee: the strengthening of faith and of the witness of Christians. It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and for personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbour" (op.cit. 42).

## **Chapter 1: The Origins of Confession**

It used to be a common scene on Saturday afternoons to have large numbers of people going to confession, and these numbers were greatly increased around Christmas and Easter, especially since the latter was the time when people made their 'Easter duty'. For some, confession may have followed a set routine. You went into a dark 'box' and began by stating how long it was since your last confession. Then came the phrase, 'And these are my sins...'. The list followed: 'I have missed my morning and night prayers three times; I have been uncharitable five times; I have had impure thoughts seven times; I have sworn thirteen times and taken God's name in vain on four occasions. And I am sorry for the sins I cannot now remember'. The priest would then say a few words and give you a penance, probably a few 'Hail Marys'. You then said an Act of Contrition and the priest said the words of Absolution.

Of course this is just a generalisation and in no way suggests that all confessions were like that. The picture today would show us that the queues outside confessionals have almost gone and many people seem to have stopped going to the Sacrament. The reasons are many: 'I can get forgiveness directly from God'; 'Sin doesn't mean anything anymore'; 'The priest won't understand my problems even if I had the courage to tell him'; 'Why should I do penance?'; 'Father is too busy'; 'My priest isn't a compassionate, humble, forgiving person so why should I ask him for forgiveness?'.

But the Sacrament of Reconciliation has not died. It is a sacrament not simply about forgiveness, but a celebration of the fact that human beings can change, can grow through God's continuous, unconditional love. Out of death comes life - a sacrament of Spring.

### **Where does it all come from?**

One of the memorable stories from the Old Testament concerns a goat. The people of Israel knew they had a special relationship with God through the Covenant. Being chosen by God - "You will be my people and I will be your God" - was a fact reflected in every aspect of their lives. The people had chosen to obey God's laws and any breaking of that offended the rest of the people and God also. And so ceremonies of repentance took place.

Chapter 16 of the book of Leviticus describes the ceremony which took place on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The Lord God explains to Moses what is to happen. At the end of the prayers and sacrifices, a live goat is brought before Aaron, the high priest: "Aaron shall lay his hands on the head of the goat and confess over it all the wickedness of the sons of Israel and all the sins they have committed against me. So he will charge them on the head of the goat and send it away to the wilderness by the hand of an assistant. So the goat will carry away all their wickedness to an arid land, when the man releases it in the wilderness" (Leviticus, 16: 21-22).

Such a story has many echoes today in our use of the word 'scapegoat'. . Everything was 'loaded onto the goat' and then forgotten about. For the Israelites, it was a way of getting rid of their sin - a basic human need. Jesus, too, was conscious of this need as he called people to repentance at the start of his ministry: "The time has come; the kingdom of God is at hand. Change your ways and believe the Good News" (Mark 1:15). But the difference is crucial: the Israelites and their scapegoat called for little or no personal sacrifice or change, while Jesus is calling people to change. It is not about blame but about a change of heart, "change your ways and believe the Good News".

The story of the Prodigal Son in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel reveals a basic truth about sin and reconciliation. The story, as we know, is about the mercy of God. Just as the

Israelites broke the covenant and yet were welcomed back by God who was never unfaithful, so the Prodigal Son is welcomed back by a God who had never stopped loving him, no matter how far away he might have been. His love for sinners is constant. Jesus' ministry was concerned with showing people the way to God and reconciling sinners when they strayed. He spoke of the rejoicing there would be over the return of one repentant sinner, a joy that would go beyond the happiness for the ninety-nine who did not stray. He offered both physical and spiritual healing, forgiving sins before bringing about physical healing (Luke 5:18-26), and entrusted that forgiveness to the Church through the apostles: "Receive the Holy Spirit; for those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (John 20:23). Here we have the institution of the sacrament by Christ, as he gives the formal power to forgive sins to the apostles and their successors, the bishops and priests.

Jesus' teaching about forgiveness also applied to how his followers were to behave. Peter even asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive: "'Seven times?' Jesus answered, 'No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times'" (Matthew 18:22). The early local Christian communities therefore encouraged their members to correct one another, confess to one another and pray for each other (James 5:16a). There was no common, ritual practice of reconciliation. It was one of the prime responsibilities of the early Church to let her people know that they were loved and forgiven when they turned away from sin. Sin had a clear community dimension and so forgiveness was also a community responsibility.

The earliest form of the sacrament, called 'canonical' or 'public' penance, made this very clear. A Christian who had sinned against the family, the community, or the faith confessed their sins to the bishop. The penitent was excommunicated and admitted to the Order of Penitents, beginning a stringent, disciplinary penance. The length of the penance was determined by the bishop, who at the end of this period, usually at Easter, publicly absolved the penitents, reconciling them with the Church and readmitting them to the Eucharist. It is clear that absolution was linked with the Church's Easter celebration of new life and interesting to note that although the penitents were denied the Eucharist they were not cut off completely from the community, which continued to pray for those in the Order of Penitents.

The practice of 'private confession', as we know it, developed in the Church from about the sixth century. At this time the influence of Celtic monks was very important, as they encouraged each other to confess to a 'soul friend'. Confession thus became a matter of conversion and spiritual direction, not simply 'automatic' confession. This practice spread beyond the monasteries, as more and more people used the sacrament as an opportunity to reflect on the spiritual nature of their lives, as they embraced the chance to turn back to God, to turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel. The penance imposed, arduous though it may have been, was offered as an aid to change direction in one's life. The entire emphasis of the sacrament hinged on personal conversion and sorrow for sins committed.

Although over the next few centuries there was an increasingly legal approach to the sacrament, with every sin earning a pre-arranged amount of penance, or 'tariff', nevertheless the form of individual confession had been set. The sixteenth-century Council of Trent spoke of the three necessary elements of the sacrament: contrition, confession, and penance. Over the next few centuries there was little practical change in the way the sacrament was celebrated. At this time many people only received communion once a year, and so confession, too, became an annual event. It was as if there was something 'magic' about the sacrament.

Things began to change again at the start of the twentieth century when Pope Pius X encouraged people to receive communion on a regular basis. People were used to going to confession before communion and so more frequent communion meant more frequent confession. But since the late 1960s, there has been a gradual decline in the number of people going to confession.

### **The Rite of Penance (1973)**

At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops called for the reform of the Sacrament of Penance, so that the nature and effect of the sacrament be better expressed and thus allow sinners to be reconciled with God and the Church. The result was the 1973 Rite of Penance.

The Rite of Penance offers a richer, more positive approach to the sacrament of penance which better suits our needs and focuses attention more on God, through celebration of his Word, than on self. Gone has any legal approach to sin, gone has any possible lingering idea of God pointing the finger of judgement, for the sacrament of penance is a celebration of new life: "In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among Christ's faithful, it must take root in their whole lives and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbour. The celebration of this sacrament is thus always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith, gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ has made us free, and offers its life as a spiritual sacrifice in praise of God's glory, as it hastens to meet the Lord Jesus" (Rite of Penance, n.7).

It is a 'celebration of the sacrament', the emphasis is on reconciliation, not simply confession and absolution; 'open' or 'face-to-face' confession shows the importance of spiritual direction in the sacrament, helping individuals not simply preserving anonymity; and the guidance is provided not so much by a list of do's and don'ts, but reflection on the Word of God, the message revealed by Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life. All these elements were ideally summed up by the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin. It is called the sacrament of penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance and satisfaction. It is called the sacrament of confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a 'confession' - acknowledgement and praise - of the holiness of God and of his mercy towards sinful man. It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent 'pardon and peace'. It is called the sacrament of reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: 'Be reconciled to God'. He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: 'Go; first be reconciled to your brother'" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1423)

## **Chapter 2: The Sacrament of Penance - What does it contain?**

"Confession is not a matter of going into a secret little closet as an enemy of God, fearful that one is under sentence of eternal death, and coming out a friend of God with a certified ticket to heaven. What drives us to confession is not primarily fear of God's anger and punishment but, rather, love of the Body of Christ and concern for the community we have damaged. Does one apologize to one's closest friend out of fear, or out of concern for the relationship that one's actions may have caused?"

(From *Confession Can Change Your Life*, David Knight, St Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, 1984)

Just as the Prodigal Son is always loved by his father, so God always loves those who have turned away from him. While the Prodigal Son was still a long way off, his father was looking out for him. This attitude of being loved by God must be at the basis of any approach to the sacrament of reconciliation. We must approach the sacrament confident in God's love for us, for reconciliation is first of all God's initiative: "...the sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who 'first loved us' (1 John 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us, and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly" (Rite of Penance, n.11).

Response to God's call First of all, then, we should approach the sacrament of reconciliation as a response to God's call. Here is a God who loves even when we are a long way off, a God who is looking out, waiting for us to return. Reconciliation is a response to that love. In the story of the Prodigal Son this stage is reached when the son came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's workers have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will get up and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me then as one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:17-20).

Such a move is conversion. It is a change of heart that is on-going, not just one-off. Every day we need to look at our lives and see where we need to change direction: "The most important act of the penitent is contrition, which is 'heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more'. 'We can only approach the Kingdom of Christ by metanoia [conversion]. This is a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge, and arrange his life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in his Son in the last days and given to us in abundance'...conversion should affect a person from within so that it may progressively enlighten him and render him continually more like Christ." (Rite of Penance, n.6a). The first step stems from the realization that we are loved by God - in the case of the Prodigal Son that there is actually something better than what he is at present experiencing, an awareness that he had turned his back on a loving father. Allowing God to love us is the first step in reconciliation.

Examination of Conscience and Confession As the Prodigal Son experienced his conversion, he also spoke of his wrongdoing, stating how he had "sinned against God and against you". To use an old, but still important phrase, this is his examination of conscience. Conversion calls into question the values we live by, the things that are important to us. The Prodigal Son realised the material wealth he craved had not provided the satisfaction he presumed - and so he changes the values he lives by, returning to look for the basic love which he had lost. His conversion brought about an examination of his life-style and attitudes which resulted in his expression of sorrow for what he had done.

This process must be part of our everyday lives, leading to confession. It is interesting to notice how the very name of this sacrament has varied down the centuries according to the emphasis the Church has given it. It has been called the 'Sacrament of Penance',

because the emphasis was on making up for what had been wrong; it has been called 'Confession', because the emphasis was on owning up to what had been done wrong; today, it is more commonly called the 'Sacrament of Reconciliation' because the emphasis is on being re-united with God and the community damaged by sin. Confession, then, is but one part of the celebration: "The Sacrament...includes the confession of sins, which comes from true knowledge of self before God and from contrition for those sins. However, this inner examination of heart and the exterior accusation should be made in the light of God's mercy" (Rite of Penance, n.6b).

It has been suggested that one of the reasons for the decline in numbers celebrating the sacrament is due to a prevailing attitude which says 'Why confess my sins to a priest? I can confess directly to God'. Some would take this argument a stage further and say that this is in fact a true reflection of the Prodigal Son's story, where the son doesn't get the chance to repeat his list of sins to his father - his 'confession' doesn't matter because the father had already forgiven him! But a number of points need to be made in reply here. Sin, as we shall see, is not just a matter between the sinner and God - sin has community aspects, wounding the community, too, and so confession is made to the representative of the community, the priest. Furthermore, as human beings we need, as the sixth century Celtic monks stressed, a 'soul friend', to whom falls the 'spiritual direction' aspect of the sacrament. Sinners need to open their hearts, not keep everything 'bottled up'. The confessor is that 'soul friend' who will listen: "By receiving the repentant sinner and leading him to the light of truth the confessor fulfils a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. He should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who mercifully accomplished the saving work of man's redemption and who is present by his power in the sacraments" (Rite of Penance, n. 10c). And of course it was to the bishops and priests, successors of the apostles, that Christ entrusted the formal power to forgive sins: "Receive the Holy Spirit; for those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (John 20:23).

Confession of sins, then, remains an important part of the sacrament. But what is needed is a shift from the notion of the old 'laundry list of sins'. Here the role of the confessor is so important, since it is his role to look not so much at the symptoms (sins) but at the disease (sinfulness). For the penitent preparing for the sacrament the question is not so much 'What have I done or not done?' but rather 'What sort of person am I?' It is an examination of the attitudes, values and beliefs which cause the sinner to do certain things, rather than just reciting a list of those things.

**Satisfaction and Absolution** The final elements of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are the somewhat strangely-named satisfaction and the absolution given by the priest. The word 'satisfaction' immediately conjures up an image of being happy - perhaps the satisfaction given by a filling meal. And so what has this word got to do with the Sacrament of Reconciliation? "Many sins wrong our neighbour. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbour. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction for' or 'expiate' his sin. This satisfaction is also called 'penance' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1459).

Satisfaction, or penance, should be directly linked to the sins committed. It really must be a remedy for sin, something to tackle the disease not just keep at bay the symptoms.

It must take into account the penitent's personal situation and correspond as far as possible to the gravity and nature of the sins committed.

And so at the end of this celebration, the priest says the prayer of absolution. It is not a prayer asking for forgiveness, but one restoring the penitent to God and the community. It is a prayer expressing the fact that the Father "receives the repentant son who comes back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings it back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies this temple of God again or lives more fully within it. This is finally expressed in a renewed and more fervent sharing of the Lord's table, and there is great joy at the banquet of God's Church over the son who has returned from afar" (Rite of Penance, n.8d).

The journey back to the community, to the table of the Lord is complete; the journey of faith continues.

### **Chapter 3: Preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

The 1973 Rite of Penance offers three celebrations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: the traditional private confession, a communal service of reconciliation with individual confession and absolution, and a rite for reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution. The latter is limited to circumstances where the number of penitents and confessors would not make individual confession possible. The conditions attached to such a celebration stipulate that those who have committed serious sin must go to individual confession as soon as possible.

Individual confession is regularly celebrated in our churches. You will be able to find the times of confession from the church notice-board or parish newsletter, although the celebration is not limited solely to prescribed times. It is desirable that penitents "should be encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance at times when Mass is not being celebrated" (Rite of Penance, n.13). Many churches now have the possibility of 'open' or 'face-to-face' confession for those who wish to celebrate in this manner. Although there is no set lay-out, the design in many confession boxes will be similar. On entering the confessional, you will see the traditional kneeler and screen. To one side, there will be a chair. This will be placed at such an angle that the priest will be able to see you from his seat behind the screen. Both options - kneeling at the screen or 'open' or face-to-face confession - are open to the penitent without any imposition of one form above another. The penitent must celebrate the sacrament in the manner with which they are most comfortable.

**Preparing for Reconciliation** A true celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation calls for thoughtful, prayerful preparation. It is not a matter of simply kneeling for a minute or two outside the confessional before rushing in and reciting a list of sins. A profound 'examination of conscience' deserves more than that.

**1)** Reconciliation is responding to God's love and presence. Let some of these thoughts from Scripture help you. Psalm 51(50): "Have mercy on me, O God, in your love. In your great compassion blot out my sin. Wash me thoroughly of my guilt; cleanse me of evil"; Psalm 86 (87): "Listen, O Lord, and answer me, for I am afflicted and needy. Preserve my life for I am God-fearing; save your servant who trusts in you. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all day"; Psalm 139 (138): "O Lord, you know me: you have scrutinized me. You know when I sit and when I rise; beforehand you discern my thoughts. You observe my activities and times of rest; you are familiar with all my ways"; or read "The Lord says, "Yet even now, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning. Rend your heart, not your garment. Return to your God - gracious and compassionate" (Joel 2:12-13); "Then I shall pour pure water over you and you shall be made clean - cleansed from the defilement of all your idols. I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I shall remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you shall be my people and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:25-28); "I loved Israel when he was a child; out of Egypt I called my son....Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; yet little did they realize that it was I who cared for them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with leading strings of love, and I became for them as one who eases the yoke upon their neck and stoops down to feed them" (Hosea 11:1,3-4).

**2)** "The penitent should compare his life with the example and commandments of Christ..." (Rite of Penance, 15). The traditional Examination of Conscience is not just a list of possible sins, but a reflection inspired by the life of Christ, the Word of God, and many passages for reflection taken from a variety of sources. Here are some suggestions for different groups.

For all those celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation "Jesus began his proclamation with the message, 'Change your ways: the kingdom of Heaven is near'" (Matthew 4:17) - How do I hear those words? What does the proclamation mean to me? How might I 'change my ways'? "Jesus answered 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the most important of the commandments. But after this there is another one very similar to it: You shall love your neighbour as your self. The whole Law and the Prophets are founded on these two commandments'" (Matthew 22:37-40) - Do these words of Jesus reflect my relationship with God and my neighbour? Jesus says the whole Law and Prophets are founded on these two commandments: what place do they have in my life and what values do I base my life on? "Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied'" (Matthew 5:6) - This beatitude affects every aspect of daily life, at home and at work. In what ways might it affect my life, particularly in situations where I might cause or see injustice? "Jesus said, 'You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because servants do not know what their master is about. Instead I have called you friends, since I have made known to you everything I learned from my Father. You did not choose me; it was I who chose you and I sent you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last'" (John 15:14-16a) - Would Jesus call me his 'friend' who bears witness to him? What does it mean to be a 'friend' of Jesus? What are the responsibilities that I have as a 'friend' of Jesus? How good am I at carrying them out?

For children "Jesus said, 'What do you think of this? If someone has a hundred sheep and one of them strays, won't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside, and go to look for the stray one? And I tell you: when he finally finds it, he is more pleased about it than the ninety-nine that did not get lost. It is the same with your Father in heaven: there they don't want even one of these little ones to be lost'" (Matthew 18:12-14). - This is how it is with God. He is always happy when you say 'sorry' and come back to him, trying to be a better person. Think about what you might say to God. How might can you try to be a bit better?

For young people "Christians can strive to be 'imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love' by conforming their thoughts, words and actions to the 'mind...which is yours in Christ Jesus', and by following his example" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1694) - We are called to be Christians, to be Christ-like. What does that mean to you? Are there ways in which you are, or aren't, Christ-like? "Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them...The use of drugs inflicts very grave damage on human health and life" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2288 & 2291) - What do these statements make you think about? Life is the most important gift we have, but are there other things that I value highly? Do I feel any pressure from those around me about how should look, think, feel, or do?

For married couples and parents "Jesus said to his disciples, 'Now I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another'" (John 13:34) - Jesus is speaking to me. What are the characteristics of his love that I am called to show? What example is Jesus calling me to give? "And you, parents, do not make rebels of your children, but educate them by correction and instruction which the Lord may inspire" (Ephesians 6:4); "Parents, do not be too demanding of your children, lest they become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21) - In these two passages St Paul is offering clear guidance to parents. What do I think of his comments? What might he say to me about my parenting? "Love is patient, kind, without envy. It is not boastful or arrogant. It is not ill-mannered nor does it seek its own interest. Love overcomes anger and forgets offenses. It does not take delight in wrong, but rejoices in truth. Love excuses everything, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1

Corinthians 13:4-7). - Does this portrait reflect the love I show in the family home? [Read the passage again, inserting your name in place of the word 'love'].

For single people "We must also remember the great number of single persons who, because of the particular circumstances in which they have to live - often not of their choosing - are especially close to Jesus' heart and therefore deserve the special affection and active solicitude of the Church, especially of pastors...[Single people are called to] live their situation in the spirit of the Beatitudes, serving God and neighbour in exemplary fashion" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1658). - Think about the joys and sorrows of being single, the times when it is clear you are "especially close to Jesus' heart" and the times when he seems absent. The Beatitudes talk of the rewards for those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the gentle, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who work for peace, and those who are persecuted for the cause of justice. How helpful are the Beatitudes? What do they say to you?

For bishop, priests and deacons "Look and see whom God has called. Few among you can be said to be cultured or wealthy, and few belong to noble families. Yet God has chosen what the world considers foolish, to shame the wise; he has chosen what the world considers weak to shame the strong. God has chosen common and unimportant people, making use of what is nothing to nullify the things that are, so that no mortal may boast before God. But, by God's grace you are in Christ Jesus, who has become our wisdom from God, and who makes us just and holy and free. Scripture says: Let the one who boasts boast of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31). - Think about your priestly calling. How is it reflected in this passage from St Paul? What do the words 'just', 'holy' and 'free' mean to me as I live out my life as a priest? "Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to 'the affairs of the Lord', [priests] give themselves entirely to God and to men. Celibacy is a sign of this new life in the service of which the Church's minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1579). - Reflect on this passage and how I might explain it to someone who finds it difficult to understand. "...in virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, after the image of Christ, the supreme and eternal priest, they are consecrated in order to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful as well as to celebrate divine worship as true priests of the New Testament" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1564) - Priests are called to proclaim the Gospel in its fullness in the service of Christ and his Church. What might the phrase 'in its fullness' mean? Where does the Gospel and vision of Church I proclaim come from? Does my interpretation and vision come first?

For the sick "Lest I become proud after so many and extraordinary revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a true messenger of Satan, to slap me in the face. Three times I prayed to the Lord that it leave me, but he answered, "My grace is enough for you; my great strength is revealed in weakness". Gladly, then, I will boast of my weakness that the strength of Christ may be mine. So I rejoice when I suffer infirmities, humiliations, want, persecutions: all for Christ! For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10) - St Paul was explaining his own situation to the people of Corinth. How comforting are his words?

## **Chapter 4: Celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

The sacrament about to be celebrated is an expression of God's love. He is waiting, with open arms, to welcome back the penitent: "Who among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and seek out the lost one till he finds it? And finding it, will he not joyfully carry it home on his shoulders? Then he will call his friends and neighbours together and say: 'Celebrate with me for I have found my lost sheep'. I tell you, just so, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine upright who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:4-7).

### **Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents**

Reception of the Penitent The Rite of Penance begins with the welcome and greeting from the priest. The Sign of the Cross may be made. The priest is then encouraged to invite the penitent to have trust in God, using his own words or a phrase from Scripture: 'May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy. Amen'; 'May the grace of the Holy Spirit fill your heart with light, that you may confess your sins with loving trust and come to know that God is merciful' (Rite of Penance, n. 43). "At this point, if the penitent is unknown to the priest, it is proper for him to indicate his state in life, the time of his last confession, his difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else which may help the confessor in exercising his ministry" (op. cit. n.44).

Liturgy of the Word Just as the Examination of Conscience can be guided by the Word of God, so the Rite of Individual Confession offers the opportunity for a short Scripture reading: "Through the word of God the Christian receives light to recognize his sins and is called to conversion and to confidence in God's mercy" (n.17). The Rite of Penance offers a number of possible texts, including: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, abounding in love and slow to anger. As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his love for those fearing him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove from us our sins" (Psalm 103(102):8,11-12); "Forgive the mistakes of your neighbour and you may ask that your sins be forgiven. If a man bears resentment against another, how can he ask God for healing? If he has no compassion on others, how can he pray for forgiveness for his sins?" (Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 28:2-4). Liturgy of Confession Part of the priest's role is to help the penitent make a 'good' confession. Sometimes, a penitent might be concerned over whether something is a sin or not, or might be scrupulous about sins already confessed. The priest is there to help, not to judge. Following the confession of sins, the priest's advice will be linked to what has been said. This will be reflected in the penance, which should correspond to the seriousness and nature of the sins. Penance may take the form of prayer, self-denial, or service of others, reflecting the fact that sin and forgiveness have a social aspect. The penitent's sorrow is then expressed in the 'Prayer of Sorrow', or 'Act of Contrition'.

The Rite of Penance offers a wide variety, some more well-known than others: 'Father, I have sinned against you and am not worthy to be called your son. Be merciful to me, a sinner'; 'Lord Jesus, you chose to be called the friend of sinners. By your saving death and resurrection free me from my sins. May your peace take root in my heart and bring forth a harvest of love, holiness, and truth'; 'O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you, and with the help of your grace I will not sin again'; 'O my God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins, and detest them above all things, because they deserve your dreadful punishments, because they have crucified my loving Saviour Jesus Christ, and, most of all, because they offend your infinite goodness; and I firmly resolve, by the help of your grace, never to offend you again, and carefully to avoid the occasions of sin'; 'God our Father, I thank you for loving me. I am sorry for all my sins, for what I have done and for what I have failed to do. I will sincerely try to

love you and others in everything I do and say. Help me to walk in your light to-day and always'. The priest then says the prayer of Absolution: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, + and of the Holy Spirit".

#### Conclusion

It is suggested that the sacrament of Reconciliation conclude with a simple prayer of praise. The priest may say 'Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good', to which the response is, 'His mercy endures for ever'. The priest then says, 'The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace'.

## **A Jubilee Penitential Service**

Penitential services - involving individual confession and absolution - have become increasingly popular in parishes in recent years, especially during the seasons of Advent and Lent. These seasons are seen as 'natural' times to be reconciled with God and neighbour. Celebrating these seasons as we approach the Millennium offers even more opportunity to reflect in our communities and ask forgiveness of God and our neighbour.

### **Opening hymn**

Amazing Grace (Hymns Old & New 36) God forgave my sin (Hymns Old & New 175) King of glory, King of peace (Hymns Old & New 292) Look around you (Hymns Old & New 316) Many times I have turned (Hymns Old & New 344) Oh, the love of my Lord is the essence (Hymns Old & New 430) Yahweh, I know you are near (Hymns Old & New 620)

### **Greeting and welcome**

The priest should explain the nature of the celebration. It is an opportunity, as the Millennium approaches, to reflect on the witness we give as Christians. It is also a preparation for Easter, allowing us to reach newness of life in Christ through forgiveness from sins.

### **Opening Prayer**

Lord Jesus, you redeemed us by your passion and raised us to new life in baptism. As we prepare to celebrate the Millennium, strengthen us in faith, renew us in hope, and fill us with charity that we may be better witnesses of you who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

### **Liturgy of the Word**

A number of biblical references are offered for possible readings for a Jubilee Penitential Service.

#### Old Testament

Exodus 23: 1-13 'Do not make false statements...For six years you will sow your fields and reap their produce, but in the seventh you will let the land rest and lie fallow'.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11 'Therefore I give you this commandment: you must be open-handed to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land'.

Ezekiel 11:19-20 'They shall be my people and I will be their God'

Malachi 3:1-7a 'Look, I am going to send my messenger to prepare a way before me.

And the Lord you are seeking will suddenly enter his Temple'.

#### Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 22 (21):2-3, 7-9, 18-28 'O Lord, do not leave me alone, my strength, make haste to help me'

Psalm 27 (26): 1, 4, 7-10, 13-14 'O Lord, hear my voice when I call; have mercy and answer'

Psalm 31(30): 10, 15-17, 20 'It is you who will redeem me, Lord'

Psalm 85 (84): 1-13 'Let us see, O Lord, your mercy and give us your saving help'

Psalm 106(105): 6-10, 13-14, 19-22 'Our sin is the sin of our father; we have done wrong, our deeds have been evil'

Psalm 146 (145): 5-10 'The Lord raises those who are bowed down'

#### New Testament

1 John 1: 5-2:2 'If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth'

Romans 7:18-25 'So, with my conscience I am a servant of the law of God, and with my mortal body I serve the law of sin'

### **Gospel Reading**

Matthew 3: 1-12 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand'

Matthew 5:1-12 'Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven'

Mark 10:42-45 'The Son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many'  
Luke 15:1-7 'I tell, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous people who have no need of repentance'  
Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32 'Your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found'  
John 8: 31-32, 34-36 'You will be my true disciples if you keep my word'

### **Homily**

The priest should give a brief homily based on the readings and encouraging the people to reflect on their lives in the Examination of Conscience which will follow in the celebration.

### Reflection

This reflection is taken from Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente. It can be read or adapted into an Examination of Conscience.

"Hence it is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal.

...Among the sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion should certainly be counted those which have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his People. In the course of the thousand years now drawing to a close, even more than in the first millennium, ecclesial communion has been painfully wounded, a fact 'for which, at times,

...both sides were to blame'. Such wounds openly contradict the will of Christ and are a cause of scandal to the world. These sins of the past unfortunately still burden us and remain ever present temptations. It is necessary to make amends for them, and earnestly to beseech Christ's forgiveness.

...Another painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth.

...On the threshold of the new Millennium Christians need to place themselves humbly before the Lord and examine themselves on the responsibility which they too have for the evils of our day.

...How can one remain silent, for example, about the religious indifference which causes many people today to live as if God did not exist, or to be content with a vague religiosity, incapable of coming to grips with the question of truth and the requirement of consistency? To this must also be added the widespread loss of the transcendent sense of human life, and confusion in the ethical sphere, even about the fundamental values of respect for life and the family. The sons and daughters of the Church too need to examine themselves in this regard. To what extent have they been shaped by the climate of secularism and ethical relativism? And what responsibility do they bear, in view of the increasing lack of religion, for not having shown the true face of God, by having 'failed in their religious, moral, or social life'?

...And with respect to the Church of our time, how can we not lament the lack of discernment, which at times became even acquiescence, shown by many Christians concerning the violation of fundamental human rights by totalitarian regimes? And should we not also regret, among the shadows of our own day, the responsibility shared by so many Christians for grave forms of injustice and exclusion? It must be asked how many Christians really know and put into practice the principles of the Church's social doctrine.

...An examination of conscience must also consider the reception given to the [Second Vatican] Council

...To what extent has the word of God become more fully the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living...? Is the liturgy lived as the 'origin and summit' of ecclesial life...? In the universal Church and in the particular Churches, is the ecclesiology of communion described in *Lumen Gentium* being strengthened? Does it leave room for charisms, ministries, and different forms of participation by the People of God, without adopting notions borrowed from democracy and sociology which do not reflect the Catholic vision of the Church and the authentic spirit of Vatican II? Another serious question is raised by the nature of relations between the Church and the world. The Council's guide-lines...of open, respectful and cordial dialogue, yet accompanied by careful discernment and courageous witness to the truth, remain valid and call us to a greater commitment" (taken from *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33-37)

### **Examination of Conscience**

An Examination of Conscience, which can be adapted to local circumstances, is offered here. Other Examinations offered in this booklet could be used instead, or one modelled on the previous extract from *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. The Examination of Conscience can be read by one or more readers. Am I prepared to answer the call to follow Jesus, to place my trust in him above all things? Or do I place my trust in other 'gods', wealth, pleasure and excitement? Do I express my love of God each day in prayer and participate in Mass as often as possible? Do I read the scriptures and try to get involved in parish life? Or do I provide excuses for not getting involved? Do I proclaim my faith or remain silent about the indifference of others? Do I work and pray for Christian unity?

Do I really love my neighbour? Do I treat my marriage partner, friends, work colleagues, and others, with respect, with charity, with an appropriate tenderness and gentleness? Am I ready to forgive others, to say 'sorry' first, or do I bear grudges and harbour resentment? Am I a source of family tension or do I try to bring peace and harmony to the family home? Do I care for those in my family, especially the aged? Do I gossip and damage the character of others? Do I show care and compassion, do I search out those in need? Or do I think helping the poor is somebody else's job? Do I use people in a selfish way? Am I a peacemaker or a peacebreaker?

Do I see everyone in the community as equal? Or do I look down upon those whose skin colour is different, who come from somewhere else, or believe something else? Do I ever express sorrow for religious persecution? Do I speak out against racist jokes and comments?

As an employer, do I pay decent wages, provide a safe and secure working environment, treat my workers as human beings, and acknowledge the role of trade unions? As a worker, do I do a full day's work, fulfilling my obligations to my employer, treat my fellow workers as human beings of equal dignity and value, and carry out my work in the light of my Christian faith? Through my trade union do I seek to redress any injustice? Am I mindful of injustice in the community and the world? Do I try to bring about justice? Have I done anything to call for the reduction of international debt? Ought I to act to help Third World countries develop? Have I contributed to the relief of refugees and victims of disaster? Do I strive and work for a just peace and pray for peace throughout the world?

Am I prepared for a new start with God, a new start at home, and a new start for the world's poor?

### **General Confession**

Before the opportunity for individual confession the people are invited to kneel and join in a general formula for confession. I confess to almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault [they strike their breast] in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do; and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God. There follows a series of penitential intercessions. Let us call to mind God's mercy and acknowledge our sins so that we may obtain his forgiveness. In your mercy forgive our sins against the unity of the Church - [response] make us one in heart and spirit. We have sinned against you and our neighbour - [response] take away our sins by your saving grace. Give us pardon for our sins - [response] and reconciliation with your Church. Have mercy on us, Lord, as we praise and thank you - [response] with your pardon give us also your peace. Restore us, Lord, to your favour, and give us joy in your presence - [response] may our glory be to serve you with all our hearts.

United as one family, let us ask our Father to forgive our sins and to bring us to forgive those who sin against us: Our Father...

Father, our source of life, you know our weaknesses. May we reach out with joy to grasp your hand and follow your Son Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

### **Individual confession**

The people are now invited to go to the priests for individual confession. The priests will offer suitable counsel and the penitent will receive an appropriate penance before reciting the Act of Contrition or Prayer of Sorrow: O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you, and with the help of your grace I will not sin again; or God our Father I thank you for loving me. I am sorry for all my sins, for not loving others and not loving you. Help me to live like Jesus and not sin again. Then the priest extends his hands over the penitent's head or extends his right hand and says the words of Absolution: God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, + and of the Holy Spirit.

*Music during the time of individual confession.*

It is important that some quiet music be played during the time of individual confession. Possibilities include extracts from the soundtrack *The Mission*, by Ennio Morricone, or music from Taizé.

### **Practical and visual symbols**

There are number of ways that a symbolic representation of the sacrament of reconciliation can be portrayed.

- 1) Two bowls might be provided, one containing water, one containing pebbles. As each penitent goes up to confession, they can be asked to pick up a pebble, which they then hold during confession. On their return from the sacrament, having received penance and absolution, the penitent can place their pebble in the bowl containing water - symbol of sins being washed away and the penitent now free from the burden of sin through the sacrament of reconciliation.
- 2) At the start of the service, make sure there are pens and paper in the benches. At the end of the Examination of Conscience, the priest can add: 'We have been called by God to turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel. How are we to respond? [Pause for reflection]. There may be things I need to change, mistakes that I have made. Write

one or two of these on the paper and use that as your basis for confession. After confession, write on the other side of the paper the commitment you will make, how you hope to respond in the future. This can be your commitment to a new start with God, a new start at home, and a new start with the world's poor.'

3) On a table near the lighted Paschal Candle, have a number of votive lights or candles. Invite penitents to light one of these candles on their return from confession - symbol of the darkness of sin being banished by Jesus, light of the world. They can keep this lighted candle with them until the end of the service and take it home with them as a reminder of the Service of Reconciliation.

### **Exhortation**

When individual confessions have been completed, the priest who is presiding over the celebration invites those present to give thanks to God and encourages them to witness to their faith in the life of the church and the community. He might invite those present to offer each other a Sign of Peace.

### **Proclamation of praise for God's mercy**

This can be a hymn of thanksgiving. God forgave my sin (Hymns Old & New 175) Peace, perfect peace (Hymns Old & New 445) Sweet Saviour, bless us (Hymns Old & New 508) Walk with me, oh my Lord (Hymns Old & New 582) You shall cross the barren desert (Hymns Old & New 627) Earthen Vessels (Hymns Old & New with supplement ?)

### **Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving**

Father, you have called us out of the darkness of sin into the light of new life. Grant us a new vision of your glory, and new commitment to your service. May your love grow among us and your kingdom come. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **The Blessing**

May the God the Father bless us, may God the Son come to our aid, and may the Holy Spirit be with us. May the blessing of Almighty God, Father, +, Son, and Holy Spirit come down upon us and remain with us always. Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

### **Reconciliation for the Millennium - Shorter Version**

The Millennium is about Jesus Christ: "...the two thousand years which have passed since the Birth of Christ (prescinding from the question of its precise chronology) represent an extraordinarily great Jubilee, not only for Christians but indirectly for the whole of humanity" (Pope John Paul II, [PJ2]Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 15).

This great Jubilee provides a unique opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation: "...the joy of every Jubilee is above all a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion....[The Church] cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves, through repentance, of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency, and slowness to act. Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today's temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them" (op.cit., 32 & 33). This leaflet is about that conversion and forgiveness of sins. A priest once said, 'The hardest thing about going to confession is going through the door'. Reconciliation for the Millennium is offered to help us all cross that threshold. The Millennium is a time for us all to look at the past and to look towards the future, a time to celebrate the joy of forgiveness.

### **The Sacrament of Penance - What does it contain?**

Just as the Prodigal Son is always loved by his father, so God always loves those who have turned away from him. While the Prodigal Son was still a long way off, his father was looking out for him. This attitude of being loved by God must be at the basis of any approach to the sacrament of reconciliation. We must approach the sacrament confident in God's love for us, for reconciliation is first of all God's initiative: "...the sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who 'first loved us' (1 John 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us, and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly" (Rite of Penance, n.11).

### **Response to God's call**

We should approach the sacrament as a response to God's call. Here is a God who loves us even when we are a long way off, a God who is looking out, waiting for us to return. Reconciliation is a response to that love. In the story of the Prodigal Son it is the moment when the son came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's workers have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will get up and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me then as one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:17-20). Such a move is conversion. It is a change of heart that is on-going, not just one-off. The first step in reconciliation is the realisation that we are loved by God and we must allow him to love us.

### **Examination of Conscience and Confession**

As the Prodigal Son experienced his conversion, he also spoke of his wrongdoing, stating how he had "sinned against God and against you". This is his examination of conscience. He realised the material wealth he craved had not provided the satisfaction he presumed - and so he changes the values he lives by, returning to look for the basic love which he had lost. His conversion brought about an examination of his life-style and attitudes which resulted in his expression of sorrow for what he had done. This process must be part of our everyday lives, leading to confession. What is needed is a shift from the notion of the old 'laundry list of sins'. Here the role of the confessor is so important, since it is his role to look not so much at the symptoms (sins) but at the disease (sinfulness). For the penitent preparing for the sacrament the question is not so much 'What have I done or not done?' but rather 'What sort of person am I?' It is an examination of the attitudes, values and beliefs which cause the sinner to do certain things, rather than just reciting a list of those things.

### **Satisfaction and Absolution**

The final elements of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are called satisfaction followed by absolution given by the priest. 'Satisfaction' is also called 'penance' and it is in this way that the penitent shows his/her desire to make amends for the sins committed. It is a remedy for sin, something to tackle the disease not just keep at bay the symptoms. It must take into account the penitent's personal situation and correspond as far as possible to the gravity and nature of the sins committed. And so at the end of this celebration, the priest says the prayer of absolution. It is not a prayer asking for forgiveness, but one restoring the penitent to God and the community. It is a prayer expressing the fact that the Father "receives the repentant son who comes back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings it back to the sheepfold...and there is great joy at the banquet of God's Church over the son who has returned from afar" (Rite of Penance, n.8d).

### **Preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

Individual confession is regularly celebrated in our churches. You will be able to find the times of confession from the church notice-board or parish newsletter, although the celebration is not limited solely to prescribed times.

#### *Preparing for Reconciliation*

A true celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation calls for thoughtful, prayerful preparation. It is not a matter of simply kneeling for a minute or two outside the confessional before rushing in and reciting a list of sins. A profound 'examination of conscience' deserves more than that.

**1)** Reconciliation is responding to God's love and presence. Let some of these thoughts from Scripture help you. "Have mercy on me, O God, in your love. In your great compassion blot out my sin. Wash me thoroughly of my guilt; cleanse me of evil" Psalm 51(50); "Listen, O Lord, and answer me, for I am afflicted and needy. Preserve my life for I am God-fearing; save your servant who trusts in you. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all day" Psalm 86 (87); "I loved Israel when he was a child; out of Egypt I called my son....Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; yet little did they realise that it was I who cared for them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with leading strings of love, and I became for them as one who eases the yoke upon their neck and stoops down to feed them" (Hosea 11:1,3-4).

**2)** "The penitent should compare his life with the example and commandments of Christ..." (Rite of Penance, 15). The traditional Examination of Conscience is not just a list of possible sins, but a reflection inspired by the life of Christ, the Word of God, and many passages for reflection taken from a variety of sources. "Jesus began his proclamation with the message, 'Change your ways: the kingdom of Heaven is near'" (Matthew 4:17) - How do I hear those words? What does the proclamation mean to me? How might I 'change my ways'? "Jesus answered 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the most important of the commandments. But after this there is another one very similar to it: You shall love your neighbour as your self. The whole Law and the Prophets are founded on these two commandments'" (Matthew 22:37-40) - Do these words of Jesus reflect my relationship with God and my neighbour? Jesus says the whole Law and Prophets are founded on these two commandments: what place do they have in my life and what values do I base my life on? "Jesus said, 'You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because servants do not know what their master is about. Instead I have called you friends, since I have made known to you everything I learned from my Father. You did not choose me; it was I who chose you

and I sent you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (John 15:14-16a) - Would Jesus call me his 'friend' who bears witness to him? What does it mean to be a 'friend' of Jesus? What are the responsibilities that I have as a 'friend' of Jesus? How good am I at carrying them out?

### **CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION**

The sacrament about to be celebrated is an expression of God's love. He is waiting, with open arms, to welcome back the penitent: "Who among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and seek out the lost one till he finds it? And finding it, will he not joyfully carry it home on his shoulders? Then he will call his friends and neighbours together and say: 'Celebrate with me for I have found my lost sheep'. I tell you, just so, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine upright who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:4-7).

#### **Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents**

Reception of the Penitent The Rite of Penance begins with the welcome and greeting from the priest. The Sign of the Cross may be made. The priest is then encouraged to invite the penitent to have trust in God, using his own words or a phrase from Scripture. "At this point, if the penitent is unknown to the priest, it is proper for him to indicate his state in life, the time of his last confession, his difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else which may help the confessor in exercising his ministry" (op. cit. n.44). Liturgy of the Word Just as the Examination of Conscience can be guided by the Word of God, so the Rite of Individual Confession offers the opportunity for a short Scripture reading, including: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, abounding in love and slow to anger. As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his love for those fearing him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove from us our sins" (Psalm 103(102):8,11-12).

#### **Liturgy of Confession**

Part of the priest's role is to help the penitent make a 'good' confession. Sometimes, a penitent might be concerned over whether something is a sin or not, or might be scrupulous about sins already confessed. The priest is there to help, not to judge. Following the confession of sins, the priest's advice will be linked to what has been said. This will be reflected in the penance, which should correspond to the seriousness and nature of the sins. Penance may take the form of prayer, self-denial, or service of others, reflecting the fact that sin and forgiveness have a social aspect. The penitent's sorrow is then expressed in the 'Prayer of Sorrow', or 'Act of Contrition'. The Rite of Penance offers a wide variety, some more well-known than others: 'Father, I have sinned against you and am not worthy to be called your son. Be merciful to me, a sinner'; 'O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you, and with the help of your grace I will not sin again'; 'God our Father, I thank you for loving me. I am sorry for all my sins, for what I have done and for what I have failed to do. I will sincerely try to love you and others in everything I do and say. Help me to walk in your light to-day and always'. The priest then says the prayer of Absolution: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, + and of the Holy Spirit".

#### **Conclusion**

It is suggested that the sacrament of Reconciliation conclude with a simple prayer of praise. The priest may say 'Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good', to which the response is, 'His mercy endures for ever'. The priest then says, 'The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace'. [PJ1] [PJ2] 32