

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

“The Light is On for You in the Diocese of Des Moines”

In a visit to the Youth Group at Assumption Parish in Granger a young person asked me very directly: “Bishop, where and how often do you go to the Sacrament of Penance?”

Nothing like direct accountability!

I responded that I take advantage of the periods of recollection which are integrated into the national gatherings of the U.S. bishops. I also celebrate the Sacrament when I gather with my Jesuit spiritual director. Finally, when in Rome, I always make time for the Sacrament at St. Peter’s Basilica.

Unfortunately, the sacrament of Penance has decreased in usage in the last four decades or so. It is recognized as being so valuable, however, that a push is being made by bishops across our country urging return to and renewal in the sacrament.

The reasons for such encouragement are many. Sin is alienation from God. The more we sin and the more we sin seriously, the colder our relationship with God becomes until it is deeply frozen. Thaw begins when we have some perception of the havoc which is created in our lives which are evermore devoid of God’s presence.

It is in moments of enlightenment that we begin to realize how empty our lives from God have become in this state of separation. It is then that we begin returning to sanity and a yearning for a healthy life style which hearkens us back to where we find contentment and peace.

When we go to Confession, we place the evil in our lives directly before us. We identify it. Then in a sacramental moment we hand it over to Jesus. He takes it from us, relieving us of the pain and guilt. Applying the power of the paschal mystery, his death and resurrection, Jesus eradicates the sin and extends forgiveness and initiates the process of healing.

Like all sacramental experience, the presence of God is conveyed in a tangible way to accommodate our human perspective. As the priest speaks, the words of Jesus play softly in the background, “whose sins you shall forgive are forgiven, whose sins you shall return are returned.” The priest speaks the words of absolution. Through the priest we hear and participate in the actions of Jesus. Inevitably, the outcome of the occasion is uplifting, it is liberating, and it initiates a new beginning.

In order to accomplish this renewal of the Sacrament of penance, the Diocese of Des Moines over the course of the next two years –the seasons of Lent in 2013 and 2014 will place special emphasis on instruction of the sacrament and offer more times for its

celebration. Specific times during the season of Lent will be proposed – hence, the theme, “The Light is On.”

The diocesan director of Worship, Kyle Lechtenberg, is coordinating the assembly of a website that will provide helpful resources for growing in understanding and appreciation of the Sacrament. These materials can be accessed on the website address: www.dmdiocese.org/alightforyou. Information for the penitent and confessor as well can be found there.

It is strongly recommended that in our parishes this Lent there be significant instruction and discussion on the sacrament in homilies and other gatherings. Integral to the renewed emphasis on the Sacrament is providing opportunity for its in-depth celebration and experience. In this vein, our priests are encouraged to set aside the same evening every week during Lent in each particular parish to facilitate utilization of this sacramental encounter.

The *Pastoral Exhortation on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation*, from the United States Bishops follows:

“Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

“Peace be with you!” With these words, the Risen Lord greeted his frightened Apostles in the Upper Room on the day of his Resurrection. They were troubled, anxious, and fearful – much like each one of us at some point in our lives. Christ repeated the words, “Peace be with you.” But then he added, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them” (Jn 20:19-23).

What an extraordinary gift! The Risen Lord was proclaiming that all the suffering he had just endured was in order to make available the gifts of salvation and forgiveness. He wanted the Apostles to receive these gifts. He wanted them to become apostles of this forgiveness to others.

In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, also called confession, we meet the Lord, who wants to grant forgiveness and the grace to live a renewed life in him. In this sacrament, he prepares us to receive him free from serious sin, with a lively faith, earnest hope, and sacrificial love in the Eucharist. The Church sees confession as so important that she requires that every Catholic go at least once a year.¹ The Church also encourages frequent confession in order to grow closer to Christ Jesus and his Body, the Church. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we seek forgiveness and repentance, let go of patterns of sin, grow in the life of virtue, and witness to a joyful conversion. Since the graces of the sacrament are so similar to the purpose of the New Evangelization, Pope Benedict XVI has said, “The New Evangelization . . . begins in the confessional!”²

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, os. 1457-1458.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Annual Course on the Internal Forum Organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/march/documetns/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120309_penitenzieria-apostolica_en.html.

We bishops and priests are eager to help you if you experience difficulty, hesitation, or uncertainty about approaching the Lord in this sacrament. If you have not received this healing sacrament in a long time, we are ready to welcome you. We, whom Christ has ordained to minister this forgiveness in his name, are also approaching this sacrament, as both penitents and ministers, throughout our lives and at this special moment of grace during Lent. We want to offer ourselves to you as forgiven sinners seeking to serve in the Lord's name.

During Lent – in addition to the various penitential services during which individual confession takes place – we bishops and priests will be making ourselves available often for the individual celebration of this sacrament. We pray that through the work of the Holy Spirit, all Catholics – clergy and laity- will respond to the call of the New Evangelization to encounter Christ in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Come to the Lord and experience the extraordinary grace of his forgiveness!”