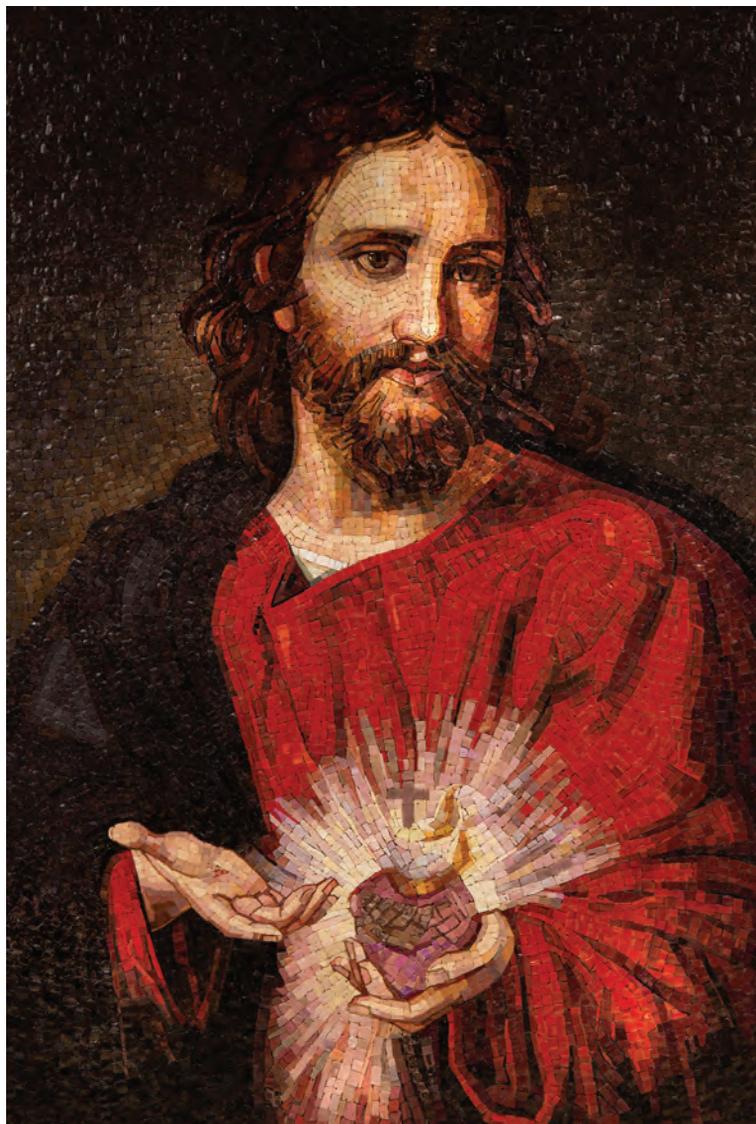


# JESUS CHRIST THE DIVINE PHYSICIAN

A PASTORAL LETTER  
ON THE SACRAMENT  
OF RECONCILIATION

ARCHBISHOP  
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MOST REVEREND ROBERT J. CARLSON  
ARCHBISHOP OF ST. LOUIS

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

As you begin this pastoral letter on Penance, I want to say a few words by way of introduction.

One of the major purposes of the letter is the attempt to move us away from a guilt-centered notion of sin and the sacrament: sin means that we feel guilty, that God is angry, and the Sacrament of Penance is about softening our guilt and God's anger. I want to move us toward a different notion of sin: sin means that something is deeply wounded in us, that we have weakened or ruptured our relationship with God, and the Sacrament of Penance is where God's desire to heal us meets our desire to be healed.

The first section of the letter, on sinfulness, is primarily about helping us grow in our knowledge of how sin works in our lives. In approaching the Sacrament of Penance, I think that many people don't make the crucial distinction between sinful actions and the basic attitudes of heart at the root of those sinful actions. Because we don't make this distinction we don't celebrate the sacrament as fruitfully as we might. We confess the same sinful actions over and over and we don't seem to make any progress in our lives. We conclude that the sacrament isn't doing anything and, out of frustration, we stop coming. But perhaps we aren't making progress because we are dealing with the fruit and not getting to the root of the sinful actions. Through this letter I want to issue an invitation: let the Lord's healing love penetrate to the roots of sin in your life.

The sections on Jesus as healer and the Church's task of continuing Jesus' mission address some of the structures of unbelief that prevent people from celebrating the sacrament regularly. Sometimes a part of our heart doesn't really believe in Jesus' desire to heal us. Other times we don't really believe in the role that our faith plays in that healing. Sometimes a part of our heart doesn't believe that our physical presence at the sacramental

encounter with Jesus matters: it can happen wherever and whenever and however we want. Other times we don't believe in the role played by the sacramental minister, the priest, in the healing encounter. I think we can let Scriptures be our guide in overcoming those barriers of unbelief. As each layer of unbelief is overcome, we will be led more deeply into the fullness of the Church's sacramental tradition.

Finally the letter is punctuated by meditation points. These are not just an afterthought. The meditation points are there to engage your heart, not only your head, in reflecting on the Sacrament of Penance. Rather than just reading the letter and thinking about the Lord, the meditation points will allow us to pray with the "text" of our own hearts and lives, and then draw near to the Lord to experience his healing love.

"(B)y virtue of his divine authority, he gives this power to men to exercise in his name." [Catechism of the Catholic Church 1441](#)

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert J. Carlson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

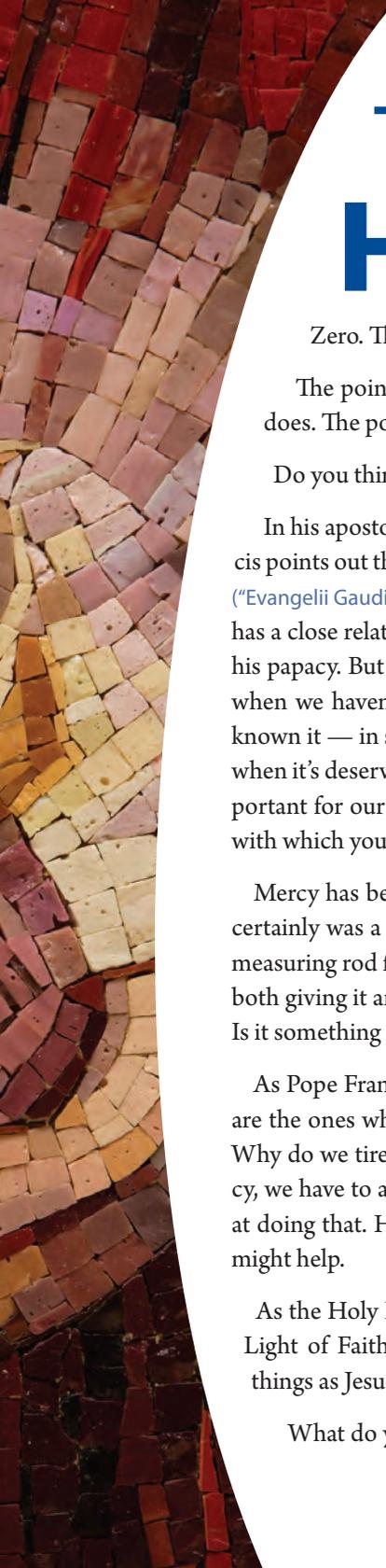
**JESUS CHRIST**  
THE DIVINE PHYSICIAN

**THE WORKING OF SIN  
IN OUR LIVES**

**“(F)or if the sick person is too  
ashamed to show his wound to the  
doctor, the medicine cannot heal  
what it does not know.”**

**Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1456**





## A Revolution of Tenderness

**H**ere's a little Bible trivia: In the Gospels, how many times does someone ask Jesus to forgive his or her sins?

Zero. That's right — it never happens.

The point isn't that Jesus doesn't forgive sins. Obviously, He does. The point is that no one ever asks.

Do you think we can do better?

In his apostolic exhortation, “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis points out that Jesus has called us to “a revolution of tenderness.” (*“Evangelii Gaudium,”* 88) The tenderness for which Pope Francis calls has a close relation to the mercy that has been a special hallmark of his papacy. But it's hard to show the tenderness of mercy to others when we haven't known it ourselves. By contrast: When we have known it — in spite of not deserving it (mercy, after all, isn't mercy when it's deserved) — it's easier to show mercy to others. That's important for our own salvation because, as Jesus said, “The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you.” (*Luke 6:38*)

Mercy has been one of the focal points of the pope's ministry. It certainly was a focal point of Jesus' ministry. It's also an important measuring rod for our own lives. We can ask ourselves: Is mercy — both giving it and receiving it — a central feature of my life or not? Is it something I'm in the habit of giving and receiving?

As Pope Francis reminds us, “God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking His mercy.” (*“Evangelii Gaudium,”* 3) Why do we tire? One of the reasons is, in order to accept His mercy, we have to admit that we've been wrong. We aren't always good at doing that. How can we become better at it? Here's an idea that might help.

As the Holy Father states in his encyclical, “Lumen Fidei” (“The Light of Faith”), “Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus Himself sees them, with His own eyes.”

What do you see when you look at your sins? Failure? Willful

wrongdoing? Things that you'd rather no one else would see?

All of that might be true. But what does Jesus see? He sees an opportunity to bestow mercy — and that's one of His favorite things to do. He sees a place where you and I need Him — and that's where He wants to be. He came a long way to save us. But He won't do it without our consent.

The question becomes: What will we do there, in the place where we need Him? Will we turn to Him in trust and accept His mercy? Or will we turn away from Him in shame, and start down the path to despair? Remember, both Judas and Peter betrayed Jesus. There was no difference between them on that count. The difference between them was that Judas despaired of receiving mercy and Peter didn't. Whose example will we follow?

Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we open ourselves to receive the Lord's mercy. In turn, that allows us to become better instruments of His mercy. And that's crucial if we want to be part of the revolution of tenderness.

## Jesus Christ: the Divine Physician

**"The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that His Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the work of healing and salvation, even among her own members."**

CCC, 1421

Jesus Christ is the great physician — the Divine Physician — of body and soul.

In His public ministry, Jesus reached out, by word and deed, to heal those with illnesses of the body and sicknesses of the soul. (See Mark 2 and Luke 4, where Jesus' public ministry begins with healing episodes.)

In His Passion, death and Resurrection, He conquered sin and death, becoming the source of ultimate healing for all. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave the apostles a share in His own life, so that the healing power of His words and deeds would con-

tinue to be present to the world through them.

In the sacraments, Jesus Himself continues to be present in every time and place, healing us and drawing us into the communion that He shares with the Father and the Spirit. Our daily lives as Christians bear witness to this same healing — receiving it ourselves and sharing it with others.

In light of those truths of the faith, I want to do three things.

First, I want to proclaim the truth again today: The Holy Spirit gives the Church a share in the healing mission of Jesus. The Church exercises that mission in a special way through the sacraments, which we can think of as “words and deeds” by which Jesus Himself — through His Mystical Body, the Church — continues to be present among us with His healing and strengthening power. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Christ is at work in each of the sacraments. He personally addresses every sinner: ‘My son (my daughter), your sins are forgiven.’ He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them.” (CCC, 1484)

Second, I want to issue an invitation to the faithful of the Archdiocese of St. Louis: Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician, invites us to a healing that brings reconciliation and communion — communion with God, with each other and with our own selves. (CCC 1468-9) I have a deep desire for the Catholic faithful of the archdiocese to know the particularity and depth of God’s healing love for them. That healing love is offered in a special way through the Sacrament of Penance. And when you receive God’s healing love, it more readily reaches out to others through you.

Third, I want to challenge each and every one of us to let our words and deeds become, in some way, a daily proclamation of Jesus’ healing mission. We can ask God each day: “Let my life today bear witness to Your desire to bring healing to the places where people are hurting.” Then, instead of turning away from people’s hurts, we can, like a doctor or nurse, develop a special instinct to turn toward them, recognizing the places where God’s healing is needed. The Gospel can become a measuring rod for our words and deeds as we ask, at the end of each day: Has Jesus’ healing ministry reached out through me to touch someone today? And we can ask for the grace to do better tomorrow.

# MEDITATION

## *Behold the Pierced One*

By contemplating the cross, we can come to a greater understanding of the wonder of God's love for us, especially of His ardent desire to heal us. The cross reveals both God's character and the human situation.

To understand how the cross is a revelation of God's character, we ask two questions;

**1) What does the cross tell us about the Father?** The Father must be rich in mercy if He was willing to give "His only Son ... that the world might be saved through Him." (*John 3:16-17*);

**2) What does the cross tell us about the Son?** Jesus, the Son, also must be rich in mercy if He was willing to endure this suffering for the sake of our salvation.

In other words, the face of God revealed on the cross is the face of mercy. And mercy is, in the words of St. John Paul II, "the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and Redeemer." (*Dives in Misericordia*, #13)

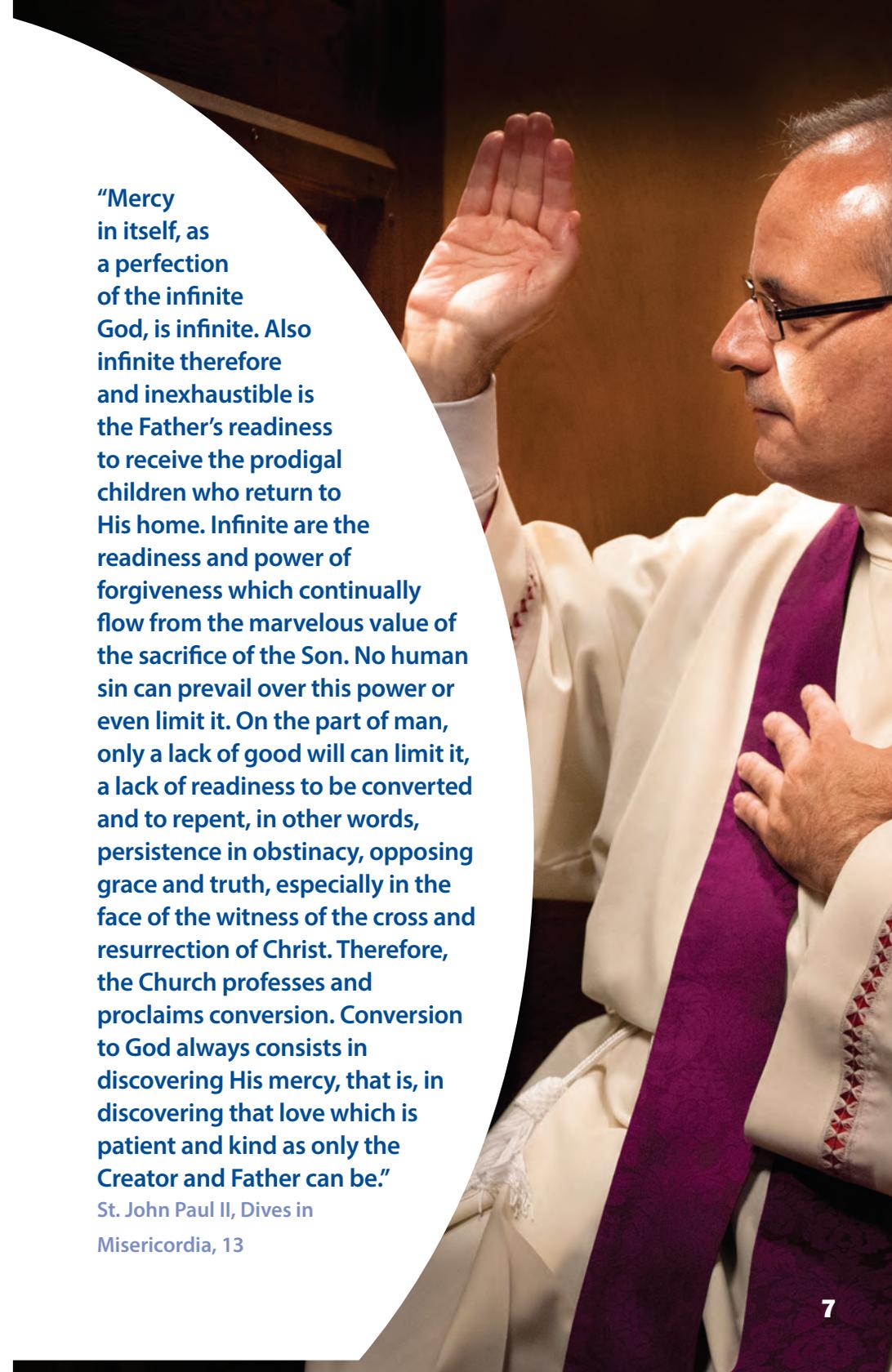
To understand how the cross reveals the human situation, we ask two further questions:

**1) Who must we be such that this — the cross — was necessary for our salvation?** The situation must be dire if something as drastic as the cross was needed for our rescue; **2) Who must we be such that God deemed us worth the price of the cross?** We must be precious in God's eyes if He was willing to sacrifice so much for our sake.

The cross reveals the merciful face of God. It reveals the gravity of the human situation. And it reveals the glory of the human creature's worth.

In quiet reflection ask yourself: How do I sense my worth in God's sight? When I look upon the cross, what do I notice?

"(I)f self-knowledge and the thought of sin aren't seasoned with remembrance of the blood and hope for mercy, the result is bound to be confusion." (*St. Catherine of Siena*)



“Mercy in itself, as a perfection of the infinite God, is infinite. Also infinite therefore and inexhaustible is the Father’s readiness to receive the prodigal children who return to His home. Infinite are the readiness and power of forgiveness which continually flow from the marvelous value of the sacrifice of the Son. No human sin can prevail over this power or even limit it. On the part of man, only a lack of good will can limit it, a lack of readiness to be converted and to repent, in other words, persistence in obstinacy, opposing grace and truth, especially in the face of the witness of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, the Church professes and proclaims conversion. Conversion to God always consists in discovering His mercy, that is, in discovering that love which is patient and kind as only the Creator and Father can be.”

St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 13

## Symptoms of a Soul-Sick World

**M**any signs tell us that something has gone wrong in the world. Public discourse has grown shrill, suspicious and divisive. Violence, both far and near, dominates the headlines. The scourge of pornography has grown, sex trafficking is on our radar, and the exploitation of the human body for marketing has become commonplace. Bullying and its consequences have become an epidemic, requiring a systemic response.

These are but a few examples. There are others. They are symptoms, signs of a soul-sickness that afflicts the world.

What's underneath it all?

The eyes of faith discern a common pattern in the symptoms: a move from communion to isolation. To the Christian believer, this should come as



"Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Mark 2:17

no surprise. Faith tells us that God is a communion of persons, and that He has made us in his image and likeness. Our communion with each other is a sign of the communion of the Trinity, and a foretaste of our sharing that communion in Heaven. (CCC 1878) Knowing that sin pulls us away from the truth of our being, we might have guessed that sin draws us away from communion and into isolation.

Every sin — not only those we think of as social, but also those we tend to think of as purely individual, committed in the privacy of our own computers — pulls us from our call to communion with God and each other, and pulls us into the loneliness of isolation. As a result, the bonds of communion that unite individuals are pulled apart; the bonds that unite society into one body are frayed and broken.

We've tasted the peace that comes from living in communion with God and each other. We've also tasted the anguish and recrimination that come from broken promises, selfishness and fear. There's a longing in the human heart for the joy, peace and serenity of communion. There's a corresponding ache in the human heart when that communion is lacking.

And yet, our own attitudes and actions often lead to our heartache.

Consider a simple analogy: On the physical level, we say we want good health. But, in our actions, we're easily pulled away from the exercise and healthy eating that are needed to achieve and maintain good health. We say we want — yet our actions show that we don't really want — physical health. We are inwardly divided.

So, too, in the spiritual life: We say we want the peace, joy and serenity that come from communion with God and each other. Yet, we're easily pulled into attitudes and actions that destroy the possibility of genuine communion. We say we want — yet our actions show that we don't wholly want — spiritual health. Again, we are inwardly divided.

The situation was well known to St. Paul, who said:

“What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. ... I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” (Romans 7:15, 22)

Faced with such inner division, what will we do? It seems that only a divine physician can heal us.

## Getting to the Roots of Sin

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**W**e know the inward division that St. Paul spoke of when he said:

“What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.” ([Romans 7:15](#))

Faced with such an ancient problem, what will we do?

The first step isn't to chastise ourselves for acting badly. The time will come for that, too, but the first step is simply to admit that we are broken, inwardly divided. St. John Paul II said: “To acknowledge one's sin, indeed — penetrating still more deeply into the consideration of one's own personhood — to recognize oneself as being a sinner, capable of sin and inclined to commit sin, is the essential first step in returning to God.” ([“Reconciliation and Penance,” #13](#))

This interior division needs healing if we are to be made wholly well. C.S. Lewis made a similar point, stating: “(I)t is quite natural, when we start thinking about morality, to begin with the first thing, with social relations. For one thing, the results of bad morality in that sphere are so obvious and press on us every day: war and poverty and graft and lies and shoddy work. ... But though it is natural to begin with all that, if our thinking about morality stops there, we might just as well have not thought at all. Unless we go on to the second thing — the tidying up inside each human being — we are only deceiving ourselves.” ([“Mere Christianity” 71-2](#))

To move to this deeper level, to understand



“(B)y reason of her essential mission, the church feels an obligation to go to the roots of that original wound of sin in order to bring healing.”

St. John Paul II, Reconciliation and Penance,#4

and address the soul-sickness that afflicts the world and ourselves, we have to grasp a crucial distinction. We have to distinguish between the sinful actions that lead us to isolation and the attitudes of heart that motivate our actions. We have to distinguish between the deeds that harm our relationships with God, others and self, and the structures of unbelief that motivate our deeds. Both the fruit and the root need to be brought to the Lord, the divine physician, to receive His healing mercy.

The Sacrament of Confession is a crucial place to do that. But, in the words of one commentator: “What we tend to do when we go to confession is confess our sins — but not the root of the sin. So, our sins are forgiven, but what caused us to sin has not been healed. We think that the sin is what the problem is. But it’s not. The problem is what’s been building up in us in terms of our attitudes, our habits, our weakness, our human condition, that needs regular infusions of God’s grace. We need to look deeper, asking the Holy Spirit, “Come in. Probe my heart. Reveal to me what the real problems are. What are the things that lead to sin? What are the attitudes? Where do I need mercy most? Where do I need healing? What are the things in me at a deep level that need to be healed?” (Vinny Flynn, “A Spiritual Maintenance Agreement”)

If someone with pneumonia only treats their symptoms — fever and a cough — the underlying cause of their illness, an infection in the lungs, might kill them. The same is true of our spiritual health. If we want our souls to be healthy, then we have to let Christ’s healing love penetrate the causes beneath the symptoms of our soul-sickness.

## Temptation and Misdirected Desires

**A**s we probe more deeply into the roots of sin in our lives, we find that we are not only inwardly divided but also tempted. In addition to the weakness inherited as part of fallen human nature, a force of evil also is at work in the world and in our hearts: We are under attack by the enemy of human nature, who is stronger than our human capacity. Every human is susceptible to the strategies of the tempter, who wills our destruction and fears our surrender to God.

One important strategy of temptation involves the misdirection of our desires. This happens when our words and actions express our desires, but in ways that can't possibly satisfy us, and in ways that ultimately lead to greater isolation from God and each other.

How does this trick work?

For example, children sometimes behave badly — not because they want to be bad, but because they are hungry for attention. Their behavior does gain them attention, but not the attention they desired — that's the trick.

Likewise, children sometimes behave well — not because they want to be good, but because they crave affirmation. Their behavior does win them affirmation, but not the unconditional affirmation they desired. Again, that's the trick.

As we grow older, we engage in the same patterns of behavior. Our strategies become more subtle, but the fruits are the same. We are tempted to engage in gossip, and we do — not because we want to gossip but because we want to create a special sense of belonging to an “in-group.” There's the old trick in a new form: Our gossiping does create a kind of in-group. But it's a diminished sense of community and we never feel really secure in it — because as soon as we walk away, they will be talking about us.

Or we are tempted to use drugs and alcohol, and we do — not because we want the drugs and alcohol but because we want to dull the pains of our life and feel good for a while. There's the trick: The drugs and alcohol do dull the pains of life and create a temporary high, but they don't bring us more fully alive in any deep or lasting sense.

Or we are tempted to view pornography, and we do — not because we want to





view pornography but because we desire intimacy with another human being. And viewing pornography does bring a kind of intimacy. But it isn't an intimacy that really satisfies our soul. Tricked again.

Even the good and helpful things we do, often enough, aren't rooted in the pure desire to do good, but in the desire to earn recognition and gain affirmation, or to win the approval and love of others. Good deeds do earn recognition and approval. But our hearts remain restless. We haven't satisfied the deep desire of our soul.

Sometimes, the actions themselves are a problem, and sometimes the actions themselves are commendable. But how often do both good and sinful actions spring from inner attitudes that need healing? When that happens, our action produces fruit that fails to satisfy.

We need to discern what is good and what is sinful not only in our actions but also in our attitudes. Then, we need to present it all to the Lord for His healing. If we do so, our deeds will bear fruit that satisfies the deep desires of our soul — desires that God made to lead us to Him.

# MEDITATION

## *Lord, make me want!*

"Bend my heart to your will and not to love of gain." (Psalms 119:36)

"Sin is precisely this: that I do not want what God wants. And I can't see how this opposition on my part could be broken. I can't see how this prison wall which holds me captive could be pierced through. ... I know precisely what I ought to do. You've often told me yourself, the priest has told me, I have told myself. This, then, is not what is lacking. The will is lacking: the being able to want. There is a will in me that wants, and there is another will in me (the same one) that does not want. 'I do not understand what I do.

For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do ... for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...What a wretched man I am!

Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7) Thus it is that I am rent apart in my innermost will, and the same thing in me that wants is precisely what does not want. And this is why I cry out to from the depths of my Prison of Unwilling: Make Me Want!" (Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar)

Spend some quiet moments alone reflecting on your interior experience:  
**What are the desires and attitudes that motivate my actions?**

**Where do I most desire Jesus' healing love?**

**"Let us trust in the Spirit's power to inspire conversion, to heal every wound, to overcome every division, and to inspire new life and freedom. How much we need these gifts. And how close at hand they are, particularly in the Sacrament of Penance. The liberating power of this sacrament, in which our honest confession of sin is met by God's merciful word of pardon and peace, needs to be rediscovered and re-appropriated by every Catholic. To a great extent, the renewal of the Church in America and throughout the world depends on the renewal of the practice of Penance and the growth in holiness which that sacrament both inspires and accomplishes."**

Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Nationals Stadium, April 17, 2008

## Exposing the Root

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**E**very gardener knows that if he treats only the flower and neglects the root, the weeds that plague the garden will keep coming back. Every physician knows that if she treats only the symptoms of illness and neglects to discover and treat the underlying cause, the patient's ailment might return again and again.

The same is true of spiritual life. The attitudes of our minds and the habits of our hearts are the roots of sinful actions. Alienation and isolation are the fruit that comes from a bad root. We need to expose the root of our sinfulness, not only the fruit, to the healing touch of Christ. (See [Matthew 10: 18-19](#); [Mark 7:21-23](#); [Matthew 12: 33-35](#))

As we learn to recognize good and sinful, not only in our actions but also in our attitudes, we have a choice to make. We can let the healing touch of Christ penetrate our inner attitudes — the desires, fears, shames and griefs in our lives — or we can attempt to manage those inner attitudes ourselves.

If we choose the path of surrender, letting Christ's love become the source of our actions, He will draw us into closer communion with Himself and each other. This is the beginning of the path to Heaven. If we choose the path of self-reliance, we gradually will be overwhelmed as our actions and attitudes draw us into the growing spiral of isolation. This is the beginning of the path to Hell.

However, we need to realize this: The way God helps us is more like water washing over a rock than it is like switching on a light. When we switch on a light, something happens immediately. The process of overcoming sin and sinful attitudes usually takes more time. When we ask for God's help over and over, we open the flood gates of our stony hearts to the water of His grace.

True repentance involves not only an admission of wrong-doing, in which we confess that things aren't right and that our actions and attitudes are (at least partly) responsible for the state of things. True repentance also involves a willingness and a desire to unlearn the habits and change the attitudes that led to the sinful actions. That also takes time and grace. But we can begin by naming the wounded attitudes and desires of our heart when we ask God to heal us in the Sacrament of Penance.

The good news is this: When we surrender a struggle to God in the Sacrament of Penance, He begins to bring healing to the wound. As a result, we can't be

tempted there in the same way again.

Confession can bring healing to the wounded spirit that we experience as part of our fallen nature and as a consequence of living in a state of spiritual warfare. The healing that flows from the sacrament equips us to grow in wholeness and in holiness. It helps us recognize our inner divisions more quickly, and keep our actions rightly ordered. It also gives us the wisdom to recognize more quickly, and resist more completely, the temptations of the evil one.

## Members of One Body

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Our sins aren't just individual actions, a matter of a purely private choice with purely private consequences. Just as the attitudes of our heart and the thoughts of our mind flow outward in actions, so also our individual actions flow outward and affect others. In the words of St. John Paul II: "(B)y virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others ... Consequently one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesiastical body and the whole human family." (*"Reconciliation and Penance," #16*)

Experience tells us that an illness afflicting one part of the body will affect other parts of the body as well. So, too, any sin or weakness or temptation in one part of the Body of Christ will affect other members of the Body.

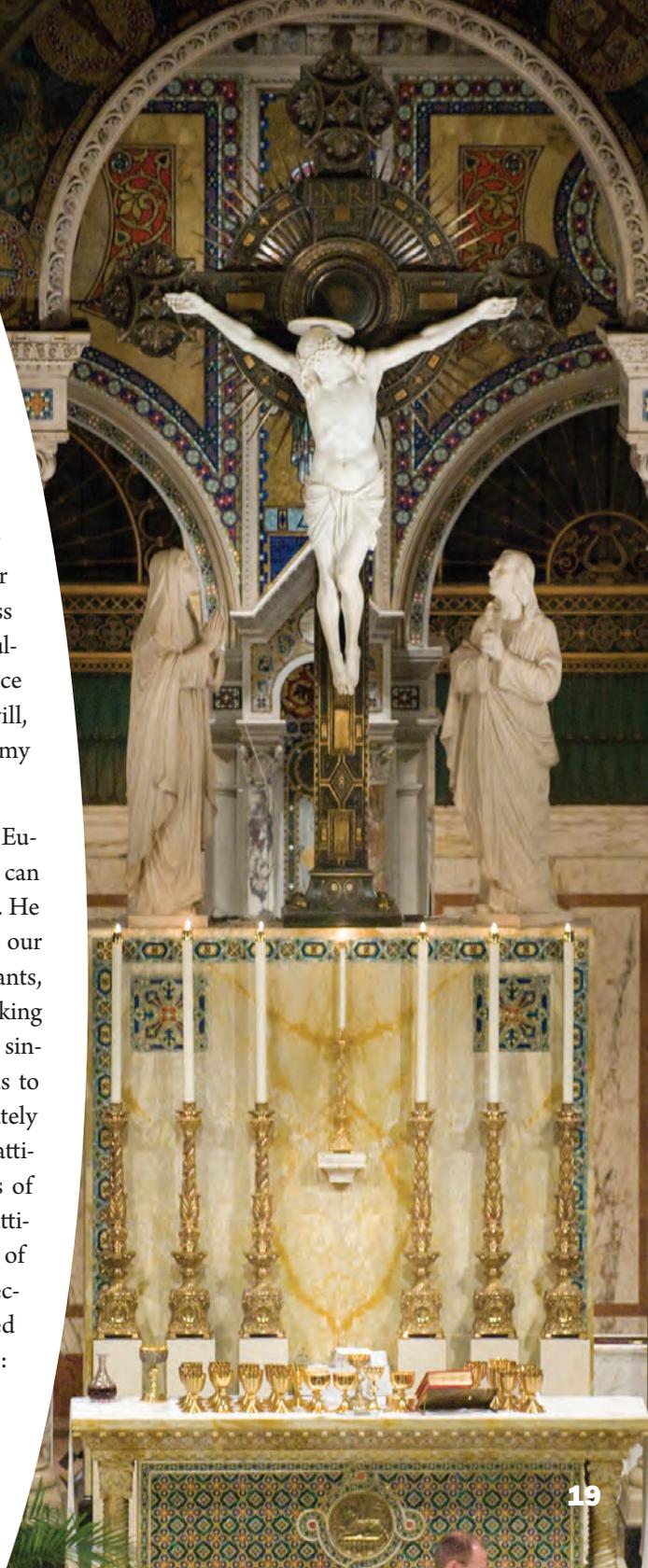
So, on the one hand, the problems of the world are greater than any one of us can account for. On the other hand, the root of the problem lies within each of us.

Admitting that we are inwardly divided, facing the misdirection of our desires toward what doesn't truly satisfy, and realizing the consequences of our brokenness for the world, what can we do?

Our faith gives us direction. Each time we celebrate Mass, we bring the brokenness and sinfulness of our lives and of the world with us. In the Penitential Rite, we confess, to God and to our brothers and sisters, that we have sinned through our

own fault,  
and we ask  
the Lord to  
have mercy on  
us. When we pray  
the Lord's Prayer,  
we ask that our tres-  
passes be forgiven.  
Before we receive Holy  
Communion, we echo  
the words of the Roman  
Centurion and confess  
that we aren't worthy for  
the Lord to enter under  
our roof. But we confess  
our brokenness and sinful-  
ness with utter confid-  
ence that the Lord can, and will,  
"only say the word and my  
soul shall be healed."

Our greatest prayer, the Eu-  
charist, teaches us that we can  
present ourselves to Jesus. He  
can, and wants, to forgive our  
sins. He also can, and wants,  
to heal the ways of thinking  
and feeling that underlie sin-  
ful actions. Jesus wants us to  
receive His love so intimately  
and completely that the atti-  
tudes, desires and virtues of  
His heart become the atti-  
tudes, desires and virtues of  
ours. The Sacrament of Rec-  
onciliation is a privileged  
place in which we cry out:  
"Jesus, heal us."





# MEDITATION

## *Receiving the Heart of Jesus*

I ask you to consider that our Lord Jesus Christ is your true head and that you are a member of His body. He belongs to you as the head belongs to the body. All that is His is yours: breath, heart, body, soul and all His faculties. All of these you must use as if they belonged to you, so that in serving Him you may give Him praise, love and glory. You belong to Him as a member belongs to the head. This is why He earnestly desires you to serve and glorify the Father by using all of your faculties as if they are His.

He belongs to you, but more than that, He longs to be in you, living and ruling in you, as the head lives and rules in the body. He desires that whatever is in Him may live and rule in you: His breath in your breath, His heart in your heart, all the faculties of His soul in the faculties of your soul, so that these words may be fulfilled in you: Glorify God and bear Him in your body, that the life of Jesus may be made manifest in you.

You belong to the Son of God, but more than that, you ought to be in Him as the members are in the head. All that is in you must be incorporated into Him. You must receive life from Him and be ruled by Him. There will be no true life for you except in Him, for He is the one source of true life. Apart from Him, you will find only death and destruction. Let Him be the only source of your movements, of the actions and the strength of your life.

Finally, you are one with Jesus as the body is one with the head. You must, then, have one breath with Him, one soul, one life, one will, one mind, one heart. And He must be your breath, heart, love, life, your all. (St. John Eudes, *From a treatise on the Admirable Heart of Jesus*, Office of Readings, Aug. 19, Feast of St. John Eudes)

**Where have you experienced the virtues of Jesus in the lives and actions of others?**

**What virtues of Jesus do you most want to receive?**

**What virtues of Jesus do you most need to receive?**



**JESUS CHRIST**  
THE DIVINE PHYSICIAN

**JESUS AS**  
**OUR HEALER**

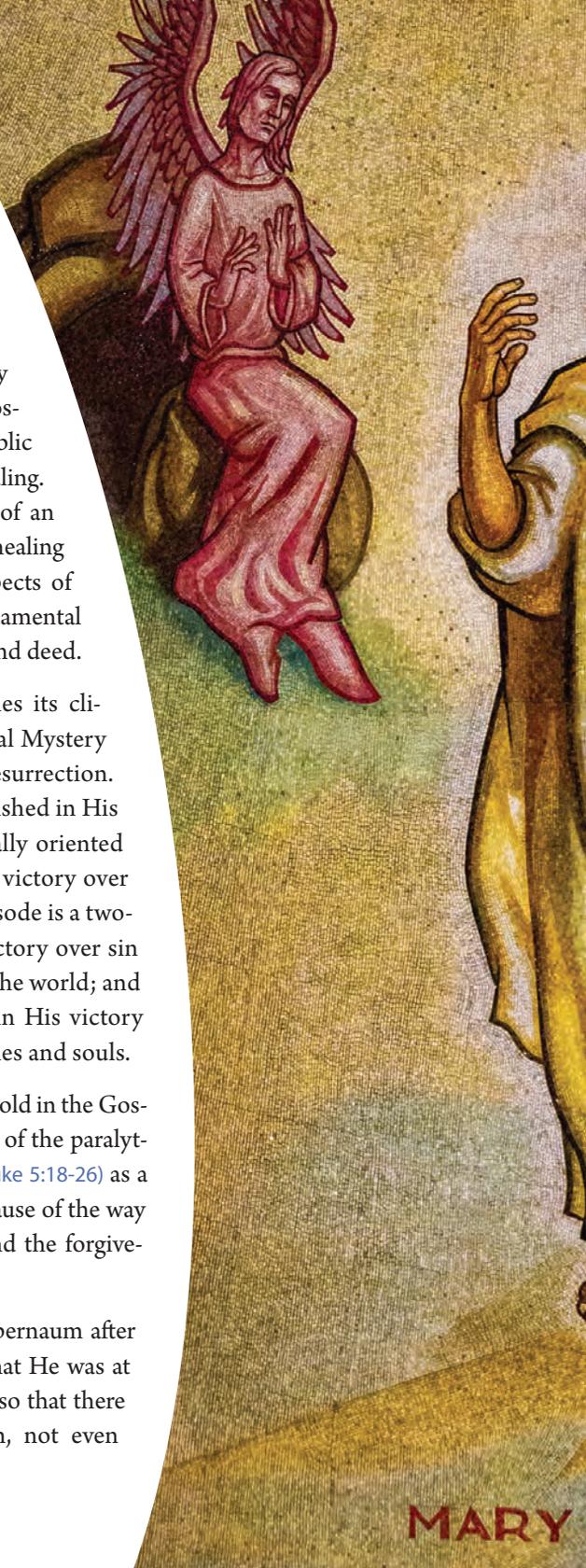
## Jesus the Healer

**T**he Gospels give abundant witness to Jesus' desire and ability to heal those in need. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Jesus' public ministry begins with acts of healing. Whether of an unclean spirit, of an ailing body, or both at once, healing isn't just one among many aspects of Jesus' mission — it's the fundamental pattern behind his every word and deed.

Jesus' healing mission reaches its climax in the events of the Paschal Mystery — His Passion, death, and Resurrection. Every healing that He accomplished in His earthly ministry is fundamentally oriented toward this final and definitive victory over sin and death. Each healing episode is a two-fold sign for us: 1) that His victory over sin and death is already at work in the world; and 2) that He wants us to share in His victory through the healing of our bodies and souls.

Among the stories of healing told in the Gospels, we can look to the healing of the paralytic ([Matthew 9: 1-8](#); [Mark 2:1-12](#); [Luke 5:18-26](#)) as a high point and a prototype because of the way it combines physical healing and the forgiveness of sins.

“When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it became known that He was at home. Many gathered together so that there was no longer room for them, not even





“If we say “We are without sin,” we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing.”

1 John 1: 8-9

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around the door, and He preached the word to them. They came bringing to Him a paralytic carried by four men. Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they opened up the roof above Him. After they had broken through, they let down the mat on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, 'Child, your sins are forgiven.' Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves, 'Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?' Jesus immediately knew in His mind what they were thinking to themselves, so He said, "Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" — He said to the paralytic, 'I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home.' He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this.'"

(Mark 2:1-12)

This episode makes the total character of Jesus' healing mission clear. Whether we are afflicted with infirmities of the body or sicknesses of the soul — or both at once — He came to make us whole. And in His crucifixion and Resurrection, we see that the healing He offers is neither temporary nor partial, but complete and opening up into life eternal.

Different facets of Jesus' healing mission are illuminated by the healing stories contained in the Gospels. A few points I would like to emphasize in a special way, so that we might be drawn more readily to the Sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which we are invited to share in the definitive victory of Jesus over sin and death. In the next few sections, I'll concentrate on three points in particular: 1) Jesus' desire to heal; 2) the role of faith in healing; and 3) the power of Jesus' physical presence.

**"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."**

John 3:14-15

# Jesus' Desire to Heal

I'm focusing on three themes from the healing stories in the Gospels.

The first is that Jesus desires to bring healing. This principle is made abundantly clear in the story about the cleansing of a leper. ([Matthew 8:1-4](#); [Mark 1:40-42](#))

"A leper came to Him (and kneeling down) begged Him and said, 'If you wish, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, He stretched out His hand, touched him, and said to him, 'I do will it. Be made clean.' The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean." ([Mark 1: 40-42](#))

The fact that Jesus' desire to heal extends to the forgiveness of sins is shown — much to the amazement of those present — in the healing of the paralytic, as well as in the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears. ([Luke 7: 36-50](#)) In these stories, Jesus exemplifies the words of St. John Vianney, "God is quicker to forgive than a mother to snatch her child from the fire."

Consider also the story of blind Bartimaeus: "As He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, 'Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.' And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, 'Son of David, have pity on me.' Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him.' So they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take courage; get up, He is calling you.' He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him in reply, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man replied to Him, 'Master, I want to see.' Jesus told him, 'Go your way; your faith has saved you.' Immediately he received his sight and followed Him on the way." ([Mark 10: 46-52](#))

Often, when we read this passage, we focus on Bartimaeus' desire to be healed. That's an important feature of the episode.

But if we focus only on Bartimaeus' desire, we miss something important: Jesus' desire. Jesus desires this conversation with Bartimaeus. He wants to meet Bartimaeus heart to heart. He wants to hear the deepest cry of Bartimaeus' heart, and to grant the healing for which Bartimaeus longs.

The crucial point: Jesus' conversation with Bartimaeus not only is an event

“(F)or if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know.” CCC 1456





that occurred long ago but Jesus longs to repeat this conversation with each of us. He wants to speak with us heart to heart. He wants to hear the deepest cry of our hearts and grant us the healing that we so desire.

Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Jesus' voice echoes down through the ages, saying, "Call them to me." In His sacramental presence through the priest, Jesus repeats His question to us: "What do you want me to do for you?" When we have unburdened our hearts, we will hear Him speak again, saying to us, "Go in peace, your faith has made you well."

Do we believe that Jesus desires our healing? Or do we stay away from the Sacrament of Penance because we aren't sure that Jesus really wants to forgive our sins? Let your heart be converted by the Gospels: Jesus' desire to heal knows no limits. His Passion, which includes His willingness to forgive even those who crucified Him, bears supreme witness to His desire to forgive. Believing this, let us be drawn to the Sacrament of Penance, in which our desire to be healed meets Jesus' desire to heal us.

Take a few moments of quiet. Reflect on the idea of Jesus calling you to Him.  
**What do you want Him to do for you?**

# The Role of Faith in Healing

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**T**he second theme is the pivotal role faith plays in healing.

To the centurion who asked for the healing of his servant, Jesus said, “You may go; as you have believed, let it be done for you.” ([Matthew 8:13](#)) To the woman with a hemorrhage who reached out to touch his cloak, Jesus said, “Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.” ([Mark 5:34](#)) To the blind man who wanted to see, Jesus said, “Have sight; your faith has saved you.” ([Luke 18:42](#))

Again and again in the Gospels, Jesus emphasizes the role of faith in healing. We even are told that Jesus “was not able to perform any mighty deed” in His home town of Nazareth “because of their lack of faith.” ([Mark 6:5](#); [Matthew 13:58](#))

But this raises a difficulty, or at least a question: Why should healing depend on faith? Doesn’t that limit the power of God?

Pause with this point for a moment, so that we can understand the role faith plays in healing.

Consider the parable of the prodigal son. The father waited for his son to return so they might be reconciled to each other. But the father wouldn’t make his son return.

Or consider the unfolding of Jesus’ Passion. Judas and Peter betrayed the Lord. But they still had a choice to make about how to handle their failure. Jesus neither forced them to repent nor forced them to accept His mercy.

We’re in the same situation as the prodigal son; we’re in the same situation as Judas and Peter. We have left our home, squandered our inheritance, betrayed the Lord. But reconciliation still is possible. Even betrayal such as Judas’ can be forgiven. We can’t change what we’ve done in the past. But we still can turn to the Lord for healing in the present.

This is where faith comes into the healing process. Sometimes, we think that if we just try harder, we can make everything all right. But this is a deadly attitude because it focuses our hope on ourselves — our willpower and works. If we rely on ourselves for forgiveness and healing, we will find only what Judas found: despair.

Faith calls us to trust in Jesus' mercy because we can't give ourselves the forgiveness for which we long and hope. The anguish that flows from the notion of self-sufficiency — believing that we can and must fix ourselves — can be healed through His merciful love. Here we can let the words of an ancient hymn become the prayer of our own hearts: "Jesus free me from the unhappy prison where sin holds me captive. Release me from the misery of my self-made aloneness."

Jesus always is ready to heal. But He won't force Himself upon us. Faith bids us to turn our wounds toward Him. Faith bids us to accept the healing He offers.

Do we believe that faith plays a vital role in the forgiveness of sins? Or do we stay away from the Sacrament of Penance because we think that God will heal us without any sign of our consent? Let your heart be converted by the Gospels: Faith is essential to healing because it allows us to turn our wounds toward Jesus, the divine physician, and accept the healing He offers. Believing this, let us be drawn to the Sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, in which we exercise our faith in Jesus' desire to heal us, and allow Him to perform mighty deeds in our lives.







## The Power of Jesus' Physical Presence

**T**he third theme is the fact that Jesus' physical presence is powerful.

On the one hand, Jesus is God, and no one has to wait for God to be present. On the other hand, the Gospels testify to a remarkable fact: People waited for Jesus to come to them, and His physical presence made a difference.

Blind Bartimaeus and the leper waited for Jesus to draw near to them; when He did, they seized the opportunity to ask Him for healing. The centurion and the paralytic went looking for Jesus; when they found Him, they asked for His help.

Time and again, the Gospel stories confront us with this conundrum: Jesus is fully God, unlimited by time and place; yet He is also fully man, and His physical presence to people makes a difference.

Perhaps the most startling account about the power of Jesus' physical presence is the story of the woman afflicted with a hemorrhage (Matthew 9: 20-23; Mark 5: 25-34; Luke 8: 43-48): "A woman suffering hemorrhages for 12 years came up behind Him and touched the tassel on His cloak. She said to herself, 'If only I can touch his cloak, I shall be cured.' Jesus turned around and saw her, and said, 'Courage, daughter! Your faith has saved you.' And from that hour, the woman was cured." (Matthew 9:20-23)

Through all of history, God the Son has been present to the world. Yet, by His Incarnation, He became present in a whole new way. He showed His desire to meet us in the flesh. And many Gospel stories tell us how He chose to heal through sensible signs. (For example, see Mark 7: 31-35, the healing of a deaf man, and

**“Jesus means in Hebrew: ‘God saves.’ At the Annunciation the angel Gabriel gave Him the name Jesus as His proper name, which expresses both his identity and His mission. Since God alone can forgive sins, it is God who, in Jesus His eternal Son made man, will save His people from their sins.”**

CCC 430

John 9: 1-7, the healing of a man born blind.) Then, He gave us the sacraments so that we continue to know His healing touch; not only with our hearts and minds but through sights and sounds, through smell, touch and taste; not only as a distant and ever-receding memory but as an ever-present reality. The same Jesus who walked upon the earth, who was seen and touched by his contemporaries, is present to us through the sensible signs of the sacraments — through water and oil in baptism, through bread and wine in the Eucharist, and through the ministry of the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Because of this, people in every time and place know the healing power of His presence.

Do we believe in the power of Jesus’ presence, tangibly conveyed through the sacraments? Or are we scandalized by this particularity — staying away from Confession because we aren’t convinced that Jesus brings the power of His presence into the particularities of our own time and place through the sacrament? Let our hearts be converted by the Gospels: Jesus desires to be present in the particularities of time and place because there we can turn to Him, touch Him and be healed. Believing this, let us be drawn to the Sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which our desire to touch Him and be healed meets His desire to touch and heal us in the particularities of our own life.

## Extending the Mission of Jesus

In addition to the healing carried out by Jesus Himself, the Gospels also testify that Jesus shared His healing mission with the Apostles. Each of the Synoptic Gospels affirms how Jesus made His power to heal body and soul present to the world through the Apostles:

“Then He summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness. ... ‘Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.’” (Matthew 10:1,8)

“He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. ... They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” (Mark 6:7, 13)

“He summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and He sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (the sick). Then they set out and went from village to village proclaiming the good news and curing diseases everywhere.” (Luke 9:1-2,6)

In these accounts, Jesus empowered the Apostles to carry out acts that He Himself had performed: the healing of unclean spirits and the healing of ailing bodies. This was the first installment or foretaste of the commissioning they received in full measure at Pentecost.

From the beginning, the mission of the Twelve was an extension of the healing mission of Jesus Himself. And just as His physical presence made a difference in the lives of those He touched, so their physical presence made a difference as well.

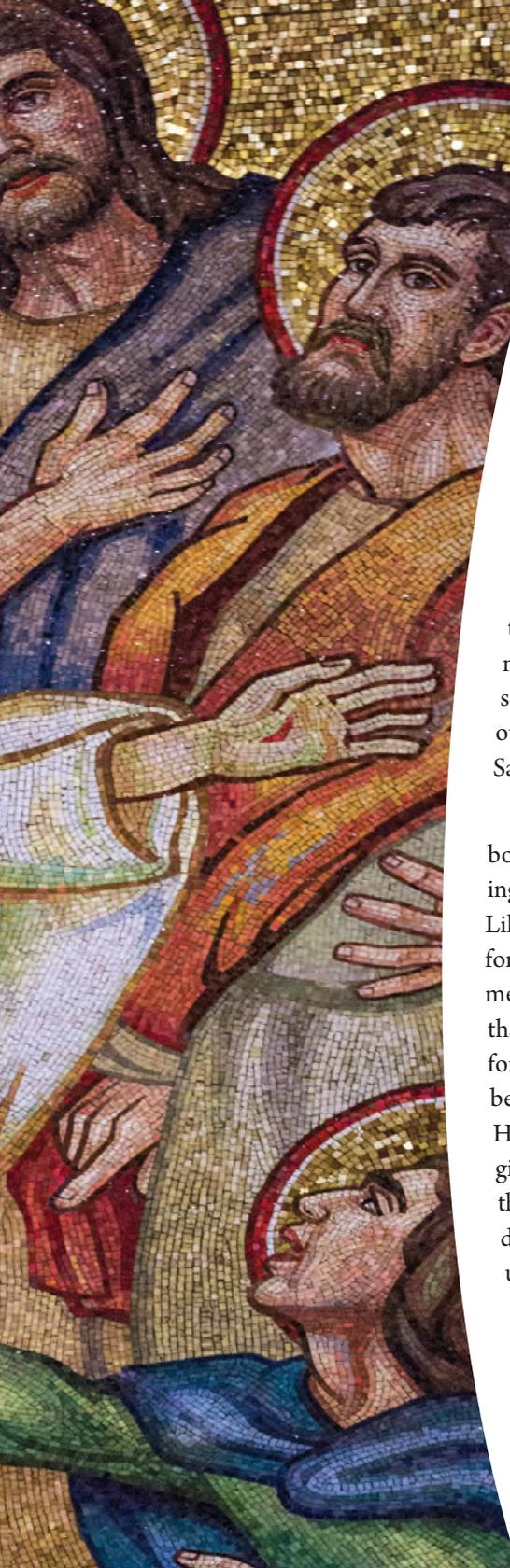
The Gospel of Matthew clearly indicates that Jesus’ intention to share His healing mission with the Apostles included the ministry of forgiving sins.

“I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew. 16:19)

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18)



"The Lord wills that His disciples possess a tremendous power: that His lowly servants accomplish in His name all that he did when He was on earth." St. Ambrose; CCC 983



These words are fulfilled in the Gospel of John: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’” ([John 20:21-3](#))

Each Gospel tells us that Jesus extended his healing mission — including the forgiveness of sins — through the Apostles. And just as His presence made a real difference in people’s lives, so did theirs. That has implications for our need to be physically present at the Sacrament of Penance.

Do we believe that Jesus Himself healed body and soul, but forget that His healing mission was granted to the Apostles? Likewise, do we believe that Jesus Himself forgave sins, but stay away from the Sacrament of Penance because we don’t believe that He gave the Apostles the power to forgive sins in his name? Let your heart be converted by the Gospels: Jesus gave His healing mission — including the forgiveness of sins — to the Apostles and, through them, to the Apostolic Church descended from them. Believing this, let us be drawn to the Sacrament of Penance as a sacrament of healing, a sacrament in which the healing and forgiving power of Jesus Himself is extended to us through the ministry of the Apostolic Church.

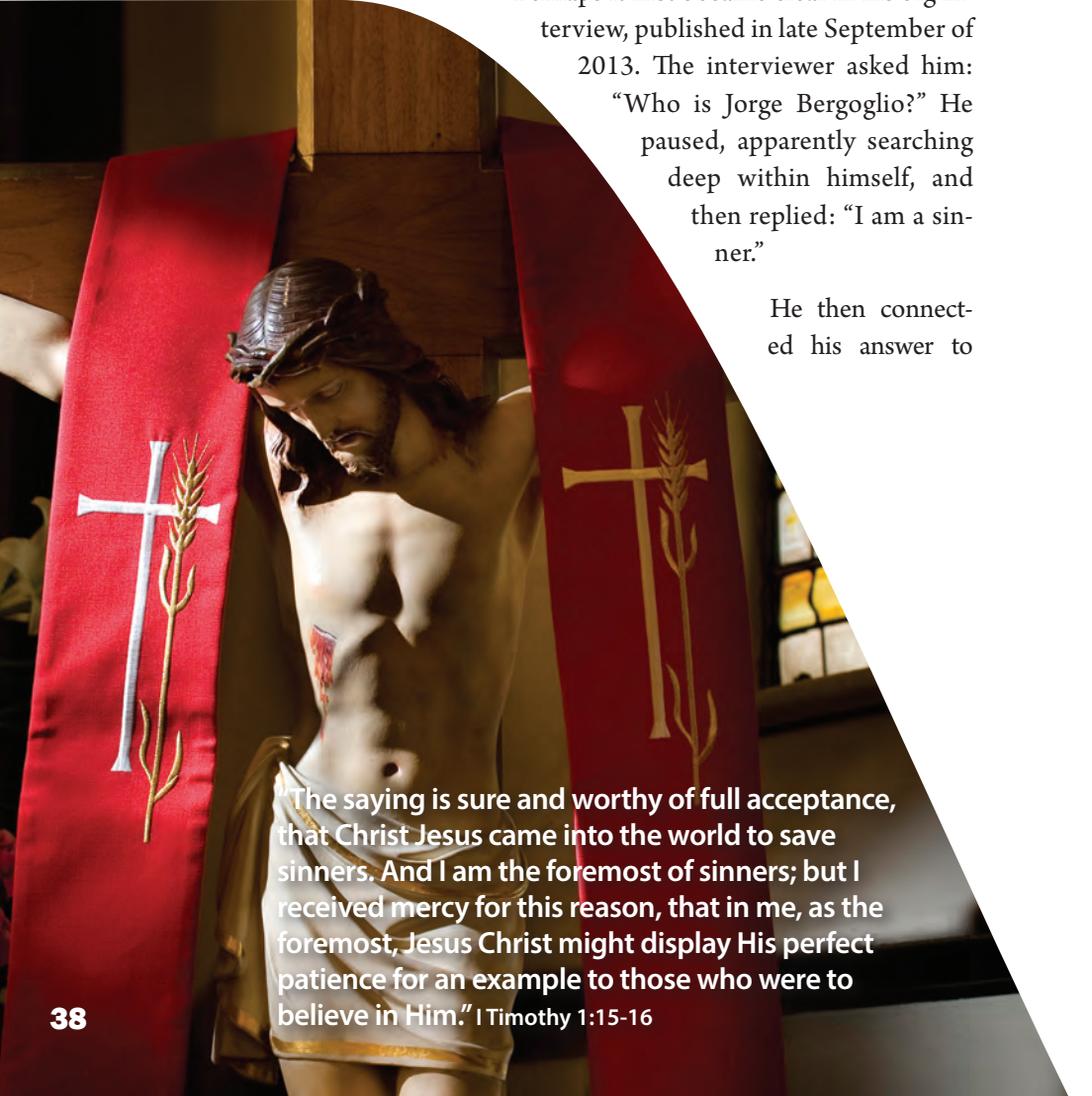
# Mercy and Evangelization

**“W**herever we go, we are called as Christians to proclaim the liberating news that forgiveness for sins committed is possible, that God is greater than our sinfulness, that He freely loves us at all times and that we were made for communion and eternal life.”  
(Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 2014)

Pope Francis has been teaching us something important about the relationship between receiving mercy and proclaiming the good news.

Perhaps it first became clear in his big interview, published in late September of 2013. The interviewer asked him: “Who is Jorge Bergoglio?” He paused, apparently searching deep within himself, and then replied: “I am a sinner.”

He then connected his answer to



“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in Him.” | Timothy 1:15-16

his papal motto — *Miserando atque Eligendo* (by having mercy and by choosing Him). The motto comes from a commentary on the call of St. Matthew. ([Matthew 9.9](#)) Reflecting on a favorite painting of that episode by Caravaggio, the Holy Father said:

“That finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. It is the gesture of Matthew that strikes me: He holds on to his money as if to say, ‘No, not me! No, this money is mine.’ Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned His gaze.”

That’s a beautiful testimony to the pope’s sense of who he is before the Lord. But you might be wondering: What does it have to do with evangelization?

In an address to the Missouri Catholic Conference annual assembly in October 2014, Ed Hogan spoke about this very question. In essence, Hogan said that, like the popes St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis senses the danger of relativism. But his approach to it is quite different from theirs. Instead of combating it in philosophical and theological terms, he seems to approach it psychologically. He senses that people are afraid of God’s judgment because they don’t believe in His mercy. Because of that fear, they find it easier to deny that there is right and wrong than to admit, “I have done wrong.” If they have done wrong, and if there is no mercy, then there is no hope for them.

The pope seems to be saying: The first way to approach this situation isn’t to insist that another person is a sinner. Their psychological defenses will make them unable to hear it. Instead, the first step is to let people know that I am a sinner, and I have received God’s mercy.

When we do that, we let people know that it’s OK to admit that there is right and wrong, and it’s OK to admit that we haven’t lived up to it, because the mercy of the Lord is available to us. We can testify: “I am a sinner. I have stood in the power of His gaze, and I found mercy rather than condemnation there.” Because of that — because of God’s mercy — we can live in hope and joy.

When people see — from our example — that there is mercy for sinners, they will let down their defenses, admit that there is right and wrong, and have hope. This approach to relativism breaks through the psychological defenses.

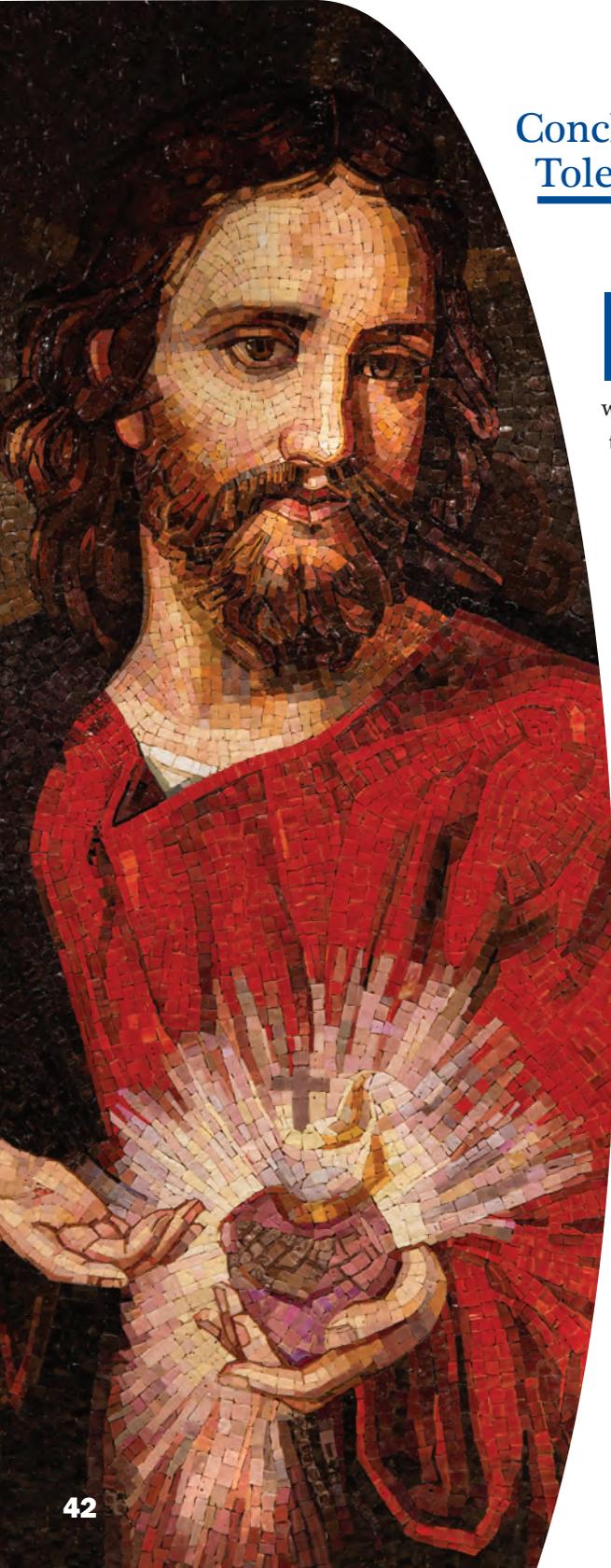
That’s what receiving mercy has to do with evangelization. Receiving the Sacrament of Penance is crucial to proclaiming the Good News. Philosophical and theological clarity are crucial, and we shouldn’t minimize their importance. But our first step is to be witnesses that a sinner can receive mercy.

**“Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.”**

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, # 44







## Conclusion: Tolerance vs. Mercy

In conclusion, I wish to speak about how our culture promotes “tolerance.” We will set aside, for the moment, the fact that it is intolerant on many points. For now, I want to focus on two underlying points. With tolerance: 1) nothing is wrong and 2) no one needs to be forgiven.

Pope Francis, however, has been promoting mercy. By way of contrast, mercy also has two underlying points. With mercy: 1) something is wrong and 2) someone needs to be forgiven.

The question of which approach is more truthful need not be resolved by looking at anyone else’s behavior. It can be resolved by each of us looking at ourselves. We all know that there is something wrong with us, and that we are in need of forgiveness. Never mind the sins of others. Each of us can say, along with Pope Francis: “I am a sinner.”

I venture that each one of us — and every person we meet — longs for mercy. In Christ, God shows us compassion. Each one of us — and every person we run into during our day — thirsts for communion with God. In Christ, we see that God thirsts for communion with us.

Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2560).

The Sacrament of Penance is a continuation of the healing mission of Jesus Himself. The Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, carries this mission to every time and place through her priests, the successors of the Apostles. And each of the faithful, in turn, is called to take that mission to the streets.

But no one can give, at least not with any depth, what he or she hasn't received. We can't respond to the depths of the world's cries with shallow hearts.

By whatever name one wishes to call it — Confession, Penance, Reconciliation — and in all the varying forms it has taken throughout the ages, the underlying reality of this sacrament has remained and still remains the same: It is the privileged way in which our desire to be healed meets God's desire to heal us. It is the privileged way in which the mercy of God meets human misery.

Therefore I want to issue this invitation to the people of the Archdiocese of St. Louis: Come to the Sacrament of Penance. Come to know the particularity and depth of God's healing love for you. Come to meet Christ, the Divine Physician, and receive the healing love He offers. Then be a witness to that healing love to all you encounter.

If you feel ashamed because it's been a long time since you went to confession, I give this special invitation to you. Just as the father of the prodigal son anxiously watched for any sign of his son's return (Luke 15), God is watching and waiting for you. He wants to embrace you, put a cloak over your shoulder and a ring on your finger, and hold a feast in honor of your return. He is waiting to say "This son/daughter of mine was lost and has been found!" I invite you to the joy, the freedom, and the relief that comes from hearing these words spoken to you:

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 of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

# Notes

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