



Meeting #4: Penance and Reconciliation

Theme: Experiencing God's Mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Preparatory Reading and Reflection

Excerpts from:

Misericordiae Vultus

Pope Francis' general audience on February 19, 2014

Membership in the Order of Malta, Regulations & Commentary (2011)

A passage from Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

Formula for absolution

Catherine of Siena prayer

Opening Prayer: Psalm 51

Scripture Reading: Luke 15: 11-31 The Prodigal Son

Discussion questions:

1. What experiences or practices help me understand my need for God's mercy?
2. For some the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be mechanical. How has your experience of the sacrament been different?
3. How can I learn to make a better confession? What things can help me to make a better confession?
4. What preparation do I find most helpful to make this sacrament most beneficial? What might I do *after* confession?
5. What does the parable of the Prodigal Son teach us about God's desire to forgive us?

Closing Prayer: Prayer of the Order

Mercy meeting #4

Excerpts from *Misericordiae Vultus*

(The Pope's Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy)

17. The season of Lent during this Jubilee Year should also be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy. How many pages of Sacred Scripture are appropriate for meditation during the weeks of Lent to help us rediscover the merciful face of the Father! We can repeat the words of the prophet Micah and make them our own: You, O Lord, are a God who takes away iniquity and pardons sin, who does not hold your anger forever, but are pleased to show mercy. You, Lord, will return to us and have pity on your people. You will trample down our sins and toss them into the depths of the sea (cf. 7:18-19).

I will never tire of insisting that confessors be authentic signs of the Father's mercy.... None of us wields power over this Sacrament; rather, we are faithful servants of God's mercy through it. Every confessor must accept the faithful as the father in the parable of the prodigal son: a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance. Confessors are called to embrace the repentant son who comes back home and to express the joy of having him back again. Let us never tire of also going out to the other son who stands outside, incapable of rejoicing, in order to explain to him that his judgement is severe and unjust and meaningless in light of the father's boundless mercy. May confessors not ask useless questions, but like the father in the parable, interrupt the speech prepared ahead of time by the prodigal son, so that confessors will learn to accept the plea for help and mercy pouring from the heart of every penitent. In short, confessors are called to be a sign of the primacy of mercy always, everywhere, and in every situation, no matter what.

22. God's forgiveness knows no bounds. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God makes even more evident his love and its power to destroy all human sin. Reconciliation with God is made possible through the paschal mystery and the mediation of the Church. Thus God is always ready to forgive, and he never tires of forgiving in ways that are continually new and surprising. Nevertheless, all of us know well the experience of sin. We know that we are called to perfection (cf. Mt 5:48), yet we feel the heavy burden of sin. Though we feel the transforming power of grace, we also feel the effects of sin typical of our fallen state. Despite being forgiven, the conflicting consequences of our sins remain. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out; and yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger even than this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.

From Pope Francis' general audience on February 19, 2014

First, the fact that the forgiveness of our sins is not something we can give ourselves. I cannot say: I forgive my sins. Forgiveness is asked for, is asked of another, and in Confession we ask for forgiveness from Jesus. Forgiveness is not the fruit of our own efforts but rather a gift, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit who fills us with the wellspring of mercy and of grace that flows unceasingly from the open heart of the Crucified and Risen Christ. Secondly, it reminds us that we can truly be at peace only if we allow ourselves to be reconciled, in the Lord Jesus, with the Father and with the brethren. And we have all felt this in our hearts, when we have gone to confession with a soul weighed down and with a little sadness; and when we receive Jesus' forgiveness we feel at peace, with that peace of soul which is so beautiful, and which only Jesus can give, only Him.

Excerpt from "Membership in the Order of Malta, Regulations and Commentary" (2011)

5. The Grace of the Sacraments

"Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". By our Baptism each of us is adopted as God's child and brother or sister of Jesus (Gal 4:4-7). We participate in His death and resurrection since *"We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life"* (Rom 6:4). This new life in union with Jesus Christ and in love for God and neighbor, given to us in the holy Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, is constantly renewed within us by the Holy Spirit through the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. The Spirit enables every person to respond to God's call in a unique way, at the same time building up in a special way the Church as the Body of Christ (Rom 12:4-8) in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In the Sacraments of Penance and of the Anointing of the Sick God's grace brings forgiveness, healing and comfort.

"Celebration belongs to God's Kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them. In all three of the parables which Jesus tells to explain why he eats with sinners, God rejoices and invites others to rejoice with him. "Rejoice with me," the shepherd says, "I have found my sheep that was lost." "Rejoice with me," the woman says, "I have found the drachma I lost." "Rejoice with me," the father says, "this son of mine was lost and is found." All these voices are the voices of God. God does not want to keep his joy to himself. He wants everyone to share in it. God's joy is the joy of his angels and his saints; it is the joy of all who belong to the Kingdom."

— [Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*](#)

Consider the formula of absolution used in the Church:

*God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and the 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.*

Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Merciful Lord, it does not surprise me that you forget completely the sins of those who repent. I am not surprised that you remain faithful to those who hate and revile you. The mercy which pours forth from you fills the whole world. It was by your mercy that we were created, and by your mercy that you redeemed us by sending your Son. Your mercy is the light in which sinners find you and good people come back to you. Your mercy is everywhere, even in the depths of hell where you offer to forgive the tortured souls. Your justice is constantly tempered with mercy, so you refuse to punish us as we deserve. O mad Lover! It was not enough for you to take on our humanity; you had to die for us as well.

OPENING PRAYER
PSALM 51 - THE MISERERE: PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love;
in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions.
Thoroughly wash away my guilt;
and from my sin cleanse me.
For I know my transgressions;
my sin is always before me.
Against you, you alone have I sinned;
I have done what is evil in your eyes
So that you are just in your word,
and without reproach in your judgment.
Behold, I was born in guilt,
in sin my mother conceived me.
Behold, you desire true sincerity;
and secretly you teach me wisdom.
Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be pure;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
You will let me hear gladness and joy;
the bones you have crushed will rejoice.
Turn away your face from my sins;
blot out all my iniquities.
A clean heart create for me, God;
renew within me a steadfast spirit.
Do not drive me from before your face,
nor take from me your holy spirit.
Restore to me the gladness of your salvation;
uphold me with a willing spirit.
I will teach the wicked your ways,
that sinners may return to you.
Rescue me from violent bloodshed, God, my saving God,
and my tongue will sing joyfully of your justice.
Lord, you will open my lips;
and my mouth will proclaim your praise.
For you do not desire sacrifice or I would give it;
a burnt offering you would not accept.
My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit;
a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.
Treat Zion kindly according to your good will;
build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will desire the sacrifices of the just,
burnt offering and whole offerings;
then they will offer up young bulls on your altar.

SCRIPTURE READING
THE PRODIGAL SON (LUKE 15:11-31)

Then Jesus said, "A man had two sons.

The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them.

After a few days, the younger son gathered together all he had and left on a journey to a distant country, and there he squandered his wealth with a wild lifestyle.

Then after he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and worked for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He was longing to eat the carob pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have food enough to spare, but here I am dying from hunger!

I will get up and go to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired workers."

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way from home his father saw him, and his heart went out to him; he ran and hugged his son and kissed him.

Then his son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, 'Hurry! Bring the best robe, and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet!

Bring the fattened calf and kill it! Let us eat and celebrate,

because this son of mine was dead, and is alive again - he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.

"Now his older son was in the field. As he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

So he called one of the slaves and asked what was happening.

The slave replied, 'Your brother has returned, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he got his son back safe and sound.'

But the older son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and appealed to him, but he answered his father, 'Look! These many years I have worked like a slave for you, and I never disobeyed your commands. Yet you never gave me even a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends!

But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything that belongs to me is yours. It was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.'" (Luke 15:11-31, NET)

CLOSING PRAYER: MEETING #4
THE DAILY PRAYER OF THE ORDER

Lord Jesus, Thou hast seen fit to enlist me for Thy service in the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. I humbly entreat Thee, through the intercession of the Most Holy Virgin of Philermos, of Saint John the Baptist, of Blessed Fra' Gerard, and of all the Saints, to keep me faithful to the traditions of our Order.

Be it mine to practice and defend the Catholic, the Apostolic, the Roman Faith against the enemies of religion. Be it mine to practice charity towards my neighbors, especially the poor and the sick.

Give me the strength I need to carry out this my resolve, forgetful of myself, learning ever from Thy Holy Gospel a spirit of deep and generous Christian devotion, striving ever to promote God's glory, the world's peace, and all that may benefit the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem.

Amen.