



PONTIFICAL COUNCIL
FOR THE PROMOTION OF
THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

24 hours for the Lord

Nor do I condemn you (Jn 8:11)



A Pastoral Aid
March 29-30, 2019

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS FOR THE LORD

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Introductory Notes

*As has been the case every year, this pastoral aid seeks to offer some suggestions to enable parishes and Christian communities to prepare to live out the now traditional initiative **Twenty-Four Hours for the Lord**. These proposals can obviously be adapted to satisfy local needs and customs.*

It is necessary to disseminate this initiative with sufficient advance notice, with a view towards not only informing people, but, above all, praying for its success. The proposal should be made known to young people during catechesis in the preceding weeks. It would be appropriate to reach out especially to those who have drifted away from sacramental life. The event represents an excellent opportunity to bring back Catholics who are distant from the Church. It can be supported by way of social media, sending letters of invitation, asking lay people to inform relatives and friends, and handing out fliers, among other possibilities.

*On the evening of March 29 and for all of Saturday, March 30, it would be significant to plan on an extraordinary opening of the church, offering the chance to go to Confession, preferably in the context of a well-organized Eucharistic Adoration. The event could begin Friday night with a Penitential Liturgy to prepare the faithful for Confession and conclude with a celebration of Sunday's Holy Mass on Saturday afternoon. The presence of the **Missionaries of Mercy**, who since the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy have been carrying out their sacramental service, notably contributes to the celebration of this event.*

*In the **first part** of this Pastoral Aid some thoughts are presented which help to reflect on the reasons for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The texts prepare people to experience the encounter with the priest during individual confession in a conscious way and also spur them to overcome the possible forms of resistance which often make their appearance so as to avoid Confession. Texts are provided which illustrate the path towards our own conversion and inspire us to carry out the works of mercy and continue our personal growth after receiving absolution from our sins.*

*The **second part** proposes an outline which may be used during the time churches remain open so that those coming for Confession may be assisted in prayer and meditation through orientations based on the Word of God.*

CONFESSION

“Those approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation receive from the mercy of God forgiveness for the offenses committed against Him and at the same time become reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by sinning and which cooperates in their conversion through charity, example, and prayer.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1422

On Finding Motivation and Overcoming Fears Regarding Confession

From St. Augustine's *Homily 33 on the Adulterous Woman (Jn 8:1-11)*

The Lord has condemned sin, not man. This must be taken into account in order not to separate truth from goodness in the Lord. The Lord is good and upright. Love Him because He is good; fear Him because He is upright....

Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to him a woman caught in adultery and, having her stand in their midst, said to Jesus, "Master, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. Now, Moses, in the Law, ordered us to stone such women. What do you say?" They were asking this to put him to the test, so as to have something to accuse him of (Jn 8:3-6). Accuse him of what? Perhaps that they had caught him, too, in some offense, or that the woman had had something to do with him? In what sense, then, did they want to put him to the test in order to have something to accuse him of? O brothers and sisters, we can certainly admire the extraordinary gentleness of the Lord. ...He has brought us the truth as a doctor, gentleness as a liberator, and justice as a judge. ...And since his enemies, out of envy and rage, proved unable to forgive either truth or gentleness, they staged a scandal for the sake of the third element—that is, justice. What did they do? Since the law ordered that adulterers be stoned—and the law obviously could not order something unjust—whoever maintained something different from what the law ordered had to be deemed unjust. They thus said to each other, "He is regarded as a friend of truth and passes himself off as gentle. We must set up a scandal concerning justice. Let us remind him of what the law decrees for such cases. If he orders that she be stoned, he will not demonstrate gentleness. If he decides that she should be released, he will not safeguard justice. But in order not to belie the reputation for gentleness which has been established among the people, he will most certainly say—they thought—that we must let her go. In that way we shall have something to accuse him of, and, on declaring him guilty of having violated the law, we can tell him, 'You are an enemy of the law. You must answer before Moses—indeed, before the one who gave us the law by means of Moses. You are guilty of an offense punishable by death, and you must be stoned as well, together with the woman.'" With those words and that intention, their envy was inflamed, their desire to accuse him burned, and their will to condemn him was aroused. But who did all of this go against? It was perversity that plotted against uprightness, falsehood against truth, a corrupt heart against a righteous heart, foolishness against wisdom. But how could they have set up traps into which they themselves would not be the first to fall? The Lord in fact responded in such a way as to safeguard justice without contradicting gentleness. He did not fall into the trap set up for him; on the contrary, those who had set it up fell in, those who did not believe in the one who could have freed them from every snare.

What did the Lord Jesus say in reply, then? How did truth reply? How did wisdom reply? How did the very justice against which the calumny was aimed reply? He did not say, "Let her not be stoned!" He would have gone against the law. But he was also careful not to say, "Let her be stoned!" He had come not to lose what he had found, but to seek what was lost (cf. Lk 19:10). How did he reply, then? Observe the reply so filled with justice and at the same time filled with gentleness and truth! *Let whoever among you—he says—that is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her (Jn 8:7).* O reply of Wisdom! How he forced them to come back to their senses immediately! They were caught up in

the external, intent on defaming others instead of scrutinizing themselves in depth. They were concerned about the adulteress and in the meantime lost sight of themselves. Abusers of the law, they demanded the observance of the law by resorting to calumny, not sincerely, as do those who condemn adultery through the example of chastity. "...Let all of you examine yourselves, return within yourselves, present yourselves before the tribunal of your soul, turn yourselves over to your own conscience, and compel yourselves to confess. You know who you are, for no one knows what is proper to a person except the spirit of the person that is within" (cf. 1 Cor 2:11). "Let all of you, turning your gaze inward, discover that you are sinners. Precisely that. Therefore, you either let this woman go or suffer the penalty prescribed by the law together with her." If he had said, "Do not stone the adulteress!" he would have been accused of being unjust; if he had said, "Stone her!" he would not have shown he was gentle. Let us listen to the words of the one who is gentle and just: *Let whoever among you that is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her*. This is the voice of justice: Let the sinner be punished, but not by sinners; let the law be carried out, but not by abusers of the law. This is decidedly the voice of justice. And, stricken by it as if by a powerful arrow, observing themselves and finding themselves to be blameworthy, *they all withdrew, one after another* (Jn 8:9). Only the two of them remained: the miserable woman and mercy. And the Lord, after striking them with the arrow of justice, did not pause to see them fall, but, turning his gaze away from them, *continued writing on the ground with his finger* (Jn 8:8).

The woman thus remained alone, since they had all gone away. Jesus raised his eyes towards her. We have heard the voice of justice, and now we hear the voice of gentleness. I believe that, more than the others, she had been left stricken and terrified by those words she had heard from the Lord: *Let whoever among you that is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her*. In tending to their own business and by their departure itself, thereby confessing that they were guilty, they had left the woman with her great sin to the one who was without sin. And since she had heard those words—*Let whoever among you that is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her*—she expected to be stricken by the one in whom no sin could be found. But he, who had repelled her adversaries with the voice of justice, raising his eyes of gentleness towards her, asked, *Has no one condemned you?* She replied, *No one, sir*. And he said, *Nor do I condemn you*—nor do I, by whom you were perhaps afraid of being condemned, since you have found no sin in me. *Nor do I condemn you*. How, Lord? Do you favor sin, then? Not at all. Listen to what follows: *Go and from this moment on sin no more* (Jn 8:10-11). The Lord thus condemns sin, but not man, for, if he were a supporter of sin, he would say, "Nor do I condemn you; go, live as you please, and you can always count on my absolution, whatever your sin may be; I will free you from every pain of purgatory and the tortures of hell." But he did not speak that way.

Human beings face two contrary dangers to which two opposing sentiments correspond: that of hope and that of despair. Who are the ones who deceive themselves in hoping? Those who say, "God is good and merciful, and I will thus do whatever I please. I can give full rein to my cupidity and satisfy all my desires. And why is this? Because God is merciful, good, and gentle." They are in danger from the abuse of hope. As regards despair, on the other hand, those who, having fallen into serious sins, think they can no longer be forgiven even if they repent, and, considering themselves already destined to damnation, tell themselves, "We are now damned. Why don't we do whatever we please?" It is the psychology of gladiators destined to die. That is why the despairing are dangerous: they no longer

have anything to lose and must, therefore, be watched. Despair kills them, just as presumption kills the others. ...To those who are in danger from despair, then, he offers the gateway of forgiveness; for those who are threatened by false hope and deceive themselves with postponements, he makes the day of death uncertain. You do not know which day will be your last. You are ungrateful. Why don't you use the day which God now gives you for conversion? It is in this sense that the Lord says to the woman, *Nor do I condemn you*: I have destroyed what you have done. Observe what I have commanded you so as to obtain what I have promised you.

Why Should I Go to Confession?

In response to this question, a text by Pope Benedict XVI and the testimony of Olivia Hurst are proposed.

Benedict XVI, *Replies to the Questions of Inmates at Rebibbia*, December 18, 2011

That is a big issue.

Two reasons in particular. First, of course, if I get on my knees and with true love ask God to forgive me, He forgives me. It is the permanent doctrine of the Church that if believers, with true repentance—that is, not only to avoid suffering and hardship, but out of love for goodness and out of love for God—ask for forgiveness, they receive forgiveness from God. Consequently, if I really acknowledge that I have done wrong and in me love for good and the will to do good are reborn, then He grants me repentance over not having acted according to this love, along with my request for God’s forgiveness.

There is also a second reason. Sin is not only a “personal,” individual matter between God and me. Sin always has a social, horizontal dimension. With my personal sin I have also damaged the communion of the Church. I have tarnished humanity, even if perhaps no one knows. And this social, horizontal dimension of sin requires that it be absolved on the level of the human community, too, the communion of the Church, almost bodily. This second dimension of sin, which is not only against God, but concerns the community as well, thus demands the Sacrament. This Sacrament is the great gift in which, by confession, I can free myself from this fault and truly receive forgiveness, also in the sense of being fully readmitted into the communion of the living Church, the Body of Christ. And, consequently, in this sense, absolution by the priest is necessary. The Sacrament is not an imposition which limits God’s goodness, but, on the contrary, an expression of the goodness of God because it demonstrates to me that concretely, too, in the communion of the Church, I have received forgiveness and can begin again.

I would thus say we should bear in mind these two dimensions: the vertical one, with God, and the horizontal one, with the communion of the Church and humanity. The priest’s absolution is necessary to absolve me truly from this bond and reintegrate me completely, in God’s perspective, into his Church, and give me certainty, which is almost bodily, too, sacramental: God forgives me and receives me into the communion of his children. I think we must learn to understand the Sacrament of Reconciliation in this sense: a chance to find, almost bodily, the goodness of the Lord, the certainty of reconciliation.

Testimony on the Power of Reconciliation by Olivia Hurst

“Everyone, face forward against the wall and stay quiet. This will all be over soon.” As we waited in line with sweaty hands and nervous brows, we tried to remember the procedure and pray that the person in front of us would take a little bit longer. One by one, children entered the tiny room until suddenly I was at the head of the line, waiting for my teacher to give me the cue that it was my turn. Once I got the signal, I slowly made my way to the door with the little green light above it, believing that this could very well be the end. If you could not tell, I was a bit of a dramatic second grader! My first reconciliation was with my Catechism class before my first Communion. Everyone was extremely nervous because our priest was an intimidating man, so no one wanted to be the first one to declare their sins to him. The bravest person always went first. After what seemed like an eternity in the confessional, he came out and told the rest of us that it was not nearly as bad as we imagined. He was right; sure, I was still nervous to approach a room to lay out my sins to a man I barely knew, but it wasn’t as painful as my vivid eight-year-old brain imagined. I didn’t know it at the time, but soon I would not only lose my fear of confession, I would also look forward to the sacrament.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers those seeking God’s mercy and forgiveness the opportunity to go to Him with the knowledge that He loves us and wants to forgive us. Reconciliation is the recognition and acceptance of God’s divine mercy. It is a place to go heal wounds of your soul. Jesus said to Saint Maria Faustina, “Tell me about everything, be sincere in dealing with Me, reveal all the wounds of your heart. I will heal them...” We all have wounds in our lives that we need mended. We all have struggles in our lives that we must endure, and we don’t always win. It is in our imperfect human nature that we fall down sometimes. All we have to do in these difficult times is seek the council of God for comfort and understanding through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. One of the greatest gifts the Father has given us is that of forgiveness through this sacrament. Attending reconciliation shows a willingness and desire to receive the love of God in its fullest, most merciful way. For me, reconciliation has become a lifeline to keep me connected to the Father. As a recently graduated senior of high school, I am surrounded by temptation that tries to lead me astray. Sometimes I fall victim to temptation, just as we all do, but I have comfort knowing that in my weakness I can turn to the Father to look for strength and healing in reconciliation.

The time before confession is full of tension because of the weight of sins and burdens between you and God. It’s almost like a fight with a friend. You want nothing more than to resolve the issue and be free from the tension that is between you, but you are scared that your friend might not want to forgive you to resolve the issue. Being in a state of sin is similar to this, except you are not in a fight with God, but with yourself. This internal fight is a constant battle for us to reach a state of grace that we cannot possibly have without Christ and His mercy. Participating in reconciliation is like resolving the issue; once you bring your sins and burdens to Him, you feel free. This freedom is not the ability to do anything you wish with no consequences, but rather freedom from the burden of sin. To me, this freedom feels like flying, knowing that He forgave me even with all my imperfections. It is okay that I am human and make mistakes because I know that God will always be there to offer forgiveness.

For me, confession feels like the warm embrace of a parent soothing a hurt, lost child. He is telling me that He wants to help me and be there for me. He says that I can trust Him because He loves me. There is no condemnation in this embrace, only love. No matter what I have done, the Father will never turn His back on me. He does not condemn us for our humanity. He wants us to be free of our sinfulness. All I have to do to receive this freedom is to open my heart to His healing. Ultimately, reconciliation is not about you and your mistakes, but about Him and His Divine Mercy.

Over the years, I've found that the best way to prepare for confession is to sit in silence, preferably in adoration before the Most Blessed Sacrament, asking God to prepare me to receive his grace and forgiveness. In reflection, I do an examination of conscience rooted in the Ten Commandments and Beatitudes to help me remember my past sins. A priest once told me that reconciliation is not about the priest but about the person confessing and God's mercy, that works through the priest hearing the confession. It was this knowledge that gave me courage to attend confession when I was afraid and still gives me comfort today.

After confession, I want to stay in the state of grace where I am on good terms with God, but I also want to share this feeling and experience with others. I want to show people how good reconciliation is. For most people, confession is intimidating and daunting because no one wants to say what they have done; it is normal to want to keep those things bottled up. What helps me is to look at the stations of the Cross. Jesus falls three times under the weight of the cross, and we fall even more under the burden of our sins. Confession is releasing that burden, knowing that freedom from sin and the feeling of flying comes from reconciliation with the Father. The ultimate state of grace makes it all worth it.

Nearly a decade after my first reconciliation, I am amazed by the unending forgiveness of God. As a small child I was intimidated by my priest, and now as a young adult I see how confession itself is an intimidating sacrament because it challenges our human nature to keep our misgivings bottled up. Despite this, we can approach the confessional confident that in our mistakes we can find healing. I am comforted by the knowledge that He will continue to free me from the burden of sin. Each day Christ invites us to accept his council, "So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help" (Heb 4:16). No sin is greater than God's mercy. God will forgive us as long as we ask Him, so let us seek his mercy with a heart open to his limitless love.

How Should I Prepare for Confession?

When asked about what counsels he would give penitents for a good confession, Pope Francis replied, “They should consider the truth of their lives before God, what they feel, what they think. They should be able to observe themselves and their sin with sincerity. And they should feel themselves to be sinners and let themselves be surprised, amazed by God” (Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy*, pp. 58-59).

POPE FRANCIS’ EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

It consists of asking ourselves about the evil committed and the good omitted in relation to God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

In Relation to God

Do I address God only when I am in need?
Do I take part in the Mass on Sundays and days of obligation?
Do I begin and end my day with prayer?
Have I taken the name of God, Mary, or the saints in vain?
Have I been ashamed to be seen as a Christian?
What do I do to grow spiritually? How? When?
Do I rebel against God’s designs?
Do I expect Him to do my will?

In Relation to Our Neighbor

Am I able to forgive, show compassion for, and help my neighbor?
Have I defamed, robbed, or disdained children and the defenseless?
Am I envious, wrathful, or biased?
Do I take care of the poor and the sick?
Am I ashamed of the humanity of my brother or my sister?
Am I honest and just to everyone or do I foster the “culture of casting aside”?
Have I incited others to do wrong?
Do I observe the Gospel’s moral teaching on marriage and the family?
How do I handle my educational responsibilities towards my children?
Do I honor and respect my parents?
Have I refused newly-conceived life?
Have I extinguished the gift of life?
Have I helped to do so?
Do I respect the environment?

In Relation to Ourselves

Am I a bit worldly and a bit of a believer?

Do I exaggerate in eating, drinking, smoking, and entertainment?
Am I too concerned about my physical health and my possessions?
How do I use my time?
Am I lazy? Do I want to be served?
Do I love and cultivate purity of heart and in thoughts and actions?
Do I think about revenge or hold grudges?
Am I meek and humble, a builder of peace?

How Should I Make a Confession?

When you approach as a penitent, the priest cordially welcomes you with words of encouragement. He renders the merciful Lord present. Together with the priest, make the sign of the cross, saying,

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The priest helps you to open yourself to trust in God with these or similar words:

May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy.

The priest, as circumstances permit, either reads or says from memory a text from Sacred Scripture speaking of the mercy of God and calling us to conversion.

Mt 6:14-15

**If you forgive others for their failings,
your Heavenly Father will also forgive you;
but if you do not forgive others,
neither will your Father forgive your failings.**

At this point you may confess your sins. If necessary, the priest helps you with questions and suitable advice. The priest invites the penitent to manifest repentance by reciting the Act of Contrition or another similar formula:

O my God, I am sorry with all my heart for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because of your just punishments, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to amend my life, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Amen.

Or

Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Or

***Lord, remember your love,
your faithfulness enduring forever.
Do not bear in mind my sins:
remember me in your mercy,
for the sake of your goodness, Lord. (Ps 24:6-7)***

The priest, placing his hands (or at least his right hand) upon the head of the penitent, says,

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 Holy Spirit.**

You respond: Amen.

After absolution the priest continues: Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

You respond: His mercy endures forever.

The priest then takes leave of you, saying: The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.

What Should I Do After Confession?

But do you know where this word, “enthusiasm,” comes from? It comes from the Greek and it means ‘to have something divine within’ or ‘to be within God’. Enthusiasm, when it is healthy, demonstrates this: that someone has something divine and expresses it joyfully.

—Pope Francis

Takashi Nagai was born in Isumo, Japan in 1908, one hundred miles from Hiroshima, to a noble family adhering to the Shinto religion. As a teenager he became convinced that the surrounding world was exclusively material. That conviction grew ever stronger. Some years later Takashi himself stated, “Beginning in secondary school, I had become a prisoner of materialism.”

Like his father, Takashi wanted to be a doctor. His dream started to come true in 1928, when he passed through the gates of the University of Nagasaki. “As soon as I entered the Faculty of Medicine, they had me dissect cadavers.... The wonderful structure of the body as a whole, the detailed organization of even its smallest parts—all of this provoked admiration in me. But what I was handling in that way was never more than matter alone. The soul? A ghost invented by imposters to deceive simple people.”

Two years had passed since the start of those studies. One spring day in 1930 the young student received an urgent telegram. His mother was about to die. He got home on March 29, just in time to look once more into his mother’s eyes. Those wordless glances—more eloquent, though, than all possible discourse and reasoning. “By way of that last, penetrating gaze, my mother demolished the ideological framework I had built for myself. This woman, who had brought me into the world and raised me, this woman, who had never granted herself a moment of rest in her love for me, in the final instants of her life spoke to me quite clearly. Her gaze told me that the human spirit goes on living after death. All of this came as an intuition, an intuition which had the taste of truth.”

Cracks were appearing in the ideological wall. To answer his questions, the young Nagai turned to Blaise Pascal’s *Thoughts*. He was struck by the fact that a scientist and thinker like Pascal not only accepted the existence of a supernatural world, but even chose a profession of faith as the true one. “The soul, eternity.... God. Our great predecessor, the physicist Pascal, had thus accepted these things seriously! That incomparable sage truly believed! What could that Catholic faith be in order for Pascal the scientist to be able to accept it without contradicting science?”

Takashi resumed his studies and found lodging with a Catholic family in Nagasaki. The owner of his new home was named Sadakichi Moriyama. In the Moriyama family, the Catholic faith, brought to Japan by St. Francis Xavier, had been handed on uninterruptedly for centuries. His forebears had conserved and professed it even during periods of bloody persecutions in past times. The family’s witness to faith was just as impressive as reading Pascal. Sadakichi’s young daughter, Maria Midori, invited Nagai to Holy Mass at midnight on December 24, 1932, in keeping with tradition. The young doctor was impressed by the Cathedral of Nagasaki filled with the faithful at midnight. In spite of the prayer and the inexplicable Presence—as he himself stated, “I felt Someone near me that I did not know yet”—he still had doubts and thus did not let himself be convinced of the faith.

One winter day, late in the evening, Takashi was awakened by Sadakichi: his daughter, Maria, was ill, and the father did not know what to do. The doctor rushed into Maria's room and quickly realized the seriousness of the situation: acute appendicitis. Takashi immediately notified the nearest hospital. Not waiting for a vehicle to arrive, he took Maria in his arms and, in spite of the abundant snow, accompanied by the father with a lantern, he headed for the emergency room on foot. He perceived that Maria's body was feverish and her heartbeat accelerated. He knew her life was in danger. On reaching the hospital, he at once performed an appendectomy. The operation proved a success: Maria Midori was saved.

The bonds between the young doctor and the Moriyama family were very deep. When Nagai was mobilized and left for the war against the Chinese in Manchuria, Maria Midori kept in touch and sent him packages. In one of them Takashi found a little catechism, which he read with interest from start to finish.

After a year he came back home, destroyed by the horrors of war. He spoke with priests, one of whom was a Polish Franciscan who had come to Japan to evangelize, Father Massimiliano Maria Kolbe, who between 1931 and 1936 resided precisely in the vicinity of Nagasaki, where he founded a convent. Takashi prayed, took part in the celebrations, and read the Bible, but was still accompanied by doubts concerning faith. The day finally came on which he again turned to Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts*, where he read: "There is enough light for those who wish only to see, and enough darkness for those who take the opposite approach." He suddenly understood everything and at once asked for Baptism. On June 9, 1934 he was baptized with the name of Paul, in honor of St. Paul Miki, a Japanese martyr crucified right there in Nagasaki over three centuries earlier.

In the same year, during daily Mass at 7 a.m., in the presence of a priest and two witnesses, he married Maria Midori. The newlyweds devoted themselves to works of mercy, visiting the poor and the sick in their area. In 1935 their firstborn son was born: Makoto. Then three daughters were born: Ikuko (1937); Sasano (1939), who died after birth; and Kayano (1941).

In 1937, one day after the birth of his first daughter, Takashi was mobilized for the second time because Japan was entering war with China. During his military service his father and his daughter Ikuko died. Paul Nagai came back, discharged from military service in 1940. In spite of the cruelty and horror of war, he remained faithful to the commandment of Christian love. He was famous for his self-sacrifice regarding both Japanese and Chinese victims.

While still studying medicine, Paul lost his hearing in his right ear. In that condition he could not use the stethoscope properly and thus opted for a specialization which did not require the use of hearing: radiology. It was quite a new field at the time, and the devices emitting ionizing radiation were harmful to the health of medical personnel using them daily. The growing number of war victims constantly increased the number of x-rays. In 1944 Takashi defended his doctoral thesis, but at the same time began to notice some worrisome symptoms: changes in his skin, shortness of breath, weariness. In June 1945 he was diagnosed with a swelling of the spleen on account of leukemia. His colleagues foresaw three years of life at the most. He told the news to his wife, and they both decided

to pray. Afterwards Maria said, “Whether you live or die, it is for the glory of God.” Comforted by these words pronounced by his wife, Paul went back to work the next day.

On hearing about the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Paul and Maria decided to send their children, Makot and Kayano, to Matsuyama, which was six kilometers from Nagasaki, where Maria Midori’s mother lived.

On August 9, 1945, at 11:02 a.m., seven hundred meters away from the radiography laboratory, where Takashi worked, the second atomic bomb exploded. After recovering from the impact, he discovered he had been wounded by splinters of glass. He treated himself and remained, as one of the few doctors, in permanent service to the wounded and dying until August 11. Only on that day did he visit his own house, only to find that his wife had died at the moment of the explosion. Her carbonized body remained on the ground. Her hand was clasping a rosary.... Maria Midori died while praying to Mary.

On August 15, 1945 the radio message from the Japanese emperor was broadcast: the war was over. A month later Paul was dying. Already seriously ill with leukemia, his condition was further worsened by the radiation from the atomic bomb. While preparing to die, after receiving the *viaticum*, he felt he should pray to Fr. Massimiliano Kolbe. He turned, then, to Fr. Massimiliano, asking him to intercede before the Lord. The following morning he discovered the remission of the disease. The Lord gave him six more years of life.

Takashi built himself a little cabin from the ruins, where he lived with his two children who had survived. He helped the sick and took in orphans as long as his physical strength permitted. By words and his own example he urged people to come back and rebuild Nagasaki and its area most devastated by the atomic explosion, Urakami, once the site of the largest church in east Asia, the Cathedral dedicated to Mary Immaculate. For Paul the tragedy of the city of Nagasaki was to be interpreted in the light of the faith: “On August 15 the imperial edict which put an end to combat was officially promulgated, and the whole world glimpsed the light of peace. August 15 is also the great feast of the Assumption of Mary. It was not happenstance that the Cathedral in Urakami had been consecrated to her.... Isn’t there perhaps a profound connection between the annihilation of this Christian city and the end of the war? Wasn’t Nagasaki the chosen victim, the immaculate lamb, the holocaust offered on the altar of sacrifice, dying for the sins of all nations during the Second World War?”

The renown of his faith and of his life spent in the service of the needy spread and made him become a reference point and a symbol of rebirth, and he has been called the “Saint of Urakami” or the “Gandhi of Japan.” In 1947 Paul became so ill that he could no longer get out of bed. He started writing his memoirs, his advice for his children, and his best-known work, the book entitled *The Bells of Nagasaki*. As one of the survivors of the atomic holocaust, he was well aware of the possibilities and dangers this new weapon afforded humanity. Such awareness brought him to offer a prayer in the book: “Kneeling in the ashes of the atomic desert, we pray that Urakami will be the last victim of the bomb. The bell is tolling.... O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who turn to you.” In the meantime, a great number of people came to visit him, including Emperor Hirohito and Pope Pius XII’s Special Emissary, Cardinal Norman Thomas Gilroy of Sydney. On May 1, 1951, having just reached the age of forty-three, the Saint of Urakami died at the university, where he was taken at his

request so that the students could study the final moments in the life of a leukemia patient. His process of beatification is currently under way.

Confession and Vocational Discernment

Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, Grand Penitentiary

In harmony with the theme of the Synod of Bishops on young people, let us reflect on the relationship between “Sacramental Confession and Vocational Discernment.” This relationship, while objectively involving all the faithful, certainly takes on special relevance for the age of fundamental choices which provide orientation for one’s whole existence and which support—in the manner of a “fundamental option”—all the other choices a person is called to make.

Let us bear in mind **two “postulates”**:

The first is the observation that *someone who is young* is a person who, as such, has the same anthropological structure as every other person and thus the same multiple, universal needs: beauty, justice, freedom, truth, love, and so on. Needs which, precisely because they are universal, also become values towards which there is a continual inclination.

The second presupposition is provided by recognition of the “opening of the heart” of those approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation, especially if they are young. Perhaps until half a century ago there may have been some people approaching what many describe as “the difficult sacrament” out of mere habit or conditioning from their milieu. Today it is undeniable that there is no longer any factor which culturally attracts people to sacramental reconciliation—quite the contrary. Those coming to Confession, then, are carrying out a free choice and going against the tide. This situation should prompt in the confessor an attitude of profound “appreciation of penitents,” which certainly does not mean appreciating their sin, but their gesture in approaching the sacrament to ask God for forgiveness.

Let us consider a well-known Gospel episode—taken from Mt 19:16-22: Jesus’ encounter with the so-called *rich young man*—in an effort to bring out some aspects which are useful for our subject.

Confession and Vocational Discernment as an “Encounter”

The sacramental dimension, as we well know, is one which constantly refers to **divine action and human action: their encounter**. It is unthinkable to reduce the sacraments to a mere self-manifestation of personal faith, as happens in some contemporary deviations in theological speculation, nor is it possible to dispense with a real involvement of persons, understood in their ontological completeness, in the ecclesial sacramental gesture. The sacraments are actions by Christ and the Church, and the sacramental identity of the Church derives from Jesus of Nazareth’s own human-divine identity: the **hypostatic union itself is the foundation for sacramentality and**

sacramental efficacy, whereas the “fruitfulness of the *agape*” stands in relation to the freedom of the person experiencing the sacramental gesture.

The sacrament, then, may be defined as an *encounter*, with the same theological and personal category we can use to define Christianity itself.

Confessors must always bear in mind that the gesture they are preparing to preside over is, above all, an encounter in which only in appearance the priest and the penitent are the main actors; in reality, it is an **encounter of the penitent with Christ Himself**. This awareness will necessarily shape the human manner of the confessor, who will welcome all penitents—with even greater attention if they are young—with the very charity of Christ, knowing that it is He that our brothers and sisters must encounter; it is He that they must listen to; it is He that they must choose.

Penitents do not always arrive at the confessional with the right question, the rich young man’s question: “Master, what must I do to possess eternal life?” Indeed, very often the questions with which they approach the sacrament are completely different. However, **the confessor’s wisdom must be able to detect the remote echo of the question regarding happiness and fulfillment present in the heart of every person even in expressions that are inadequate and sometimes also distorted and pretentious.**

Accusing ourselves of sins is objectively a moment of crisis, of questioning our judgment, our expressions, what we have done (thoughts, words, actions, and omissions). For this reason, it is indispensable to ask the Holy Spirit for the necessary grace so that the *crisis* will really be transformed into a moment of growth through the encounter with Christ. We know that **before proposing the way of perfection to the young man—the famous “...If you want to be perfect”—Jesus, fixing his gaze upon him, loved him.**

Here we have described the experience of a true encounter, real and thus ontologically edifying, capable of constructing the self, the “new selves” who are the protagonists of history. Only the encounter with God is able to re-construct our being, destroyed by sin; only the sacrament of reconciliation is the new creation able, after Baptism, to reconstruct us fully in the filial relationship with the Father, the fraternal relationship with the Son, and the joy of the Holy Spirit. Penitents, whether or not they are aware of this, are asking the Lord to be re-created, to have their lives transformed, that the power of Jesus Christ the Savior may prevail over evil in them.

In this request by penitents and in the sacramental response they receive, there is enclosed the essence of the real encounter with Christ which reconciliation constitutes. Hence the enormous, holy **responsibility of the priest, in every single confession, with every single penitent, so that the encounter with the Lord will never be obstructed.**

The relational dynamic inherent in the celebration of the Sacrament includes a vocational value. Let us attempt, however, to provide a very general definition of vocation that everyone may be able to identify with: **“Christ and the vocation” is nothing but our relationship with Christ; the form of that relationship is not established by us, but by Him. This is what the substantial**

supernatural character of the so-called “vocational choice” consists of: it is not so much the choice which the self makes as it is the free choice which God makes, establishing the form of the relationship which each person lives out with Him.

The immediate and evident consequence of this relational dynamic is that there is no vocation without an authentic and vital relationship with Christ. In the encounter with Christ the new horizon of existence is disclosed which is also the root of every tension and moral choice; and **the vocation is the way, the form by which one enters into a stable and permanent relationship with Christ, and this form is decided by the Lord.** For this reason, in addressing the apostles, who have already encountered Him, Jesus says, **“It is not you that have chosen me, but I have chosen you”** (*Jn* 15:16).

VIGIL

“In 1973 our Congregation decided to observe Adoration for one hour every day. From that moment on our love for Jesus has become more intimate, our mutual love more understanding, our love for the poor more merciful, and we have seen the number of vocations double.”

From the writings of St. Teresa of Calcutta

Introduction

The Vigil which takes place during *Twenty-Four Hours for the Lord* plays a fundamental role, for it characterizes the whole event. It is desirable for the Vigil to take place with the Exposure of the Most Blessed Sacrament while one or more priests remain available to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

This Vigil is inspired by the words Jesus addressed to the adulteress: “Nor do I condemn you,” stressing freely-granted forgiveness, even though the woman’s sin was evident. The whole passage, where John the Apostle describes the encounter taking place between Jesus and the adulteress, leaves room for numerous reflections. Two aspects are dwelt upon here: the first points to the forgiveness which Jesus is willing to grant each person, no matter what sin has been committed; the second is an invitation to follow the Master of forgiveness and pardon the sins of those who have sinned against us.

The *Twenty-Four Hours for the Lord* event is strictly linked to liturgical time—that is, to the Fourth Sunday of Lent. The joy celebrated on this Sunday, which in former times was called *Laetare* (‘rejoice’), flows from personal conversion, reconciliation with God, and the grace received in the Sacrament of Forgiveness. The Sunday readings (Jos 5:9, 10-12; Ps 33; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3, 11-32) stress the power of forgiveness and the grace of the promised land, concentrating on the story of the prodigal son. The initiative has been placed precisely in the days preceding the Fourth Sunday of Lent to give all the faithful the chance to be reconciled with God and in this way to prepare for Easter, which is nearly at hand.

While the *Twenty-Four Hours for the Lord* event is taking place, it is appropriate to highlight the aforementioned content. The unfolding of the initiative itself and the choice of themes and biblical passages are, however, always left to the discretion of pastors and other organizers, who, in different parts of the world, are more familiar with the needs of the faithful entrusted to their pastoral care.

Experience from previous years indicates that the event usually unfolds in three modalities.

1. In small communities, such as hospitals or parishes/rectorates, with a relatively reduced number of the faithful. In this case the whole event often takes place on Friday evening.

It could begin with the Penitential Liturgy, followed by Exposure of the Most Blessed Sacrament, and, during Eucharistic Adoration, either in silence or accompanied by a prayer group (in keeping with the possibilities and needs of the community), all are invited to sacramental reconciliation with God.

2. In larger parishes (especially in urban areas), in prefectures (and/or vicariates/deaneries), or wherever it is decided to organize the event in several parishes or communities.

It would be appropriate to begin on Friday evening with Holy Mass or a Liturgy of the Word. Then there is Exposure of the Most Blessed Sacrament and Eucharistic Adoration begins, accompanied by

different groups from the parish or by several parishes. Those responsible establish both the whole program for Adoration and its duration, ensuring turns or shifts for Confession by the faithful.

3. In cathedral churches, basilicas, sanctuaries, or parishes and places of worship which are more significant for the local Church and have been carefully selected by the Ordinary or by those responsible.

The event should be organized in more solemn fashion, stressing the universality of the Church celebrating it at the same time all over the world. The church should remain open at night, too, with Eucharistic Adoration accompanied by various prayer groups and communities, taking turns. It is desirable for the Ordinary and the Bishops to be present, at least at the beginning and the end of the event, and to be available for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The constant presence of one or more priests prepared to hear confessions must be ensured.

Whenever possible, a group of the faithful who have been appropriately instructed and prepared could invite the people passing by near the church to enter and take part in the event (especially in centrally-located churches in cities, in downtown areas and those frequented by tourists, or wherever there are large crowds). A simple invitation, a word of welcome, or an explanation of the event often provide the occasion for a much more serious conversation which becomes a real moment for evangelization. Lay persons, particularly those who systematically receive formation in different communities and prayer groups, can frequently provide excellent service in preparation for Confession, dialoguing with people who have not been to church for some time and might feel uncomfortable in direct, immediate contact with a priest.

To adapt the proposal of the Vigil to the special needs of a particular community (parish, hospital chapel, monastery, rectorate, sanctuary, etc.) songs could be selected. For closer examination of the subjects recurring in the biblical texts proposed, preparing a meditation is suggested or choosing some testimonies in keeping with the needs and possibilities of the community itself.

COMMENCEMENT OF THE VIGIL PROPOSING THE PENITENTIAL LITURGY

While the priest and ministers proceed towards the presbytery, the assembly sings the hymn or another suitable song.

GREETING AND MONITION

C: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

R: Amen.

C: May mercy and peace be with you all.

R: And with your spirit.

C: Brothers and sisters, today, too, Jesus in his mercy addresses words of forgiveness to us and invites us to conversion. Let us open our hearts so that the grace of God may work in us. Let us entrust our sisters and our brothers to him, especially those who have drifted away from God, so that, in these twenty-four hours especially devoted, in the whole Church, to reconciliation, they may hear the voice of the Savior: "Nor do I condemn you; go and from now on sin no more."

All pause to gather their thoughts in silent prayer.

C: O God, Father who are good and great in forgiveness, welcome into the embrace of your love all the sons and daughters who return to you in a spirit of repentance; dress them in the splendid robes of salvation so that they may taste your joy at the Paschal Supper of the Lamb. He is God and lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

First Reading Is 43:16-21

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah

Thus says the Lord,
who opened a way through the sea,
a path in the midst of mighty waters,
who led out chariots and horses,
along with an army of valiant troops;
they lie in death and will rise no more,
snuffed out like a wick, extinguished:
"Remember past events no longer,
think no more about what happened before.
Behold, I am doing something new:
It is budding forth right now, can't you see?
I shall make a road even in the desert,
and place rivers on barren plains.
The wild animals will glorify me,
jackals and ostriches,
for providing water in the desert,

rivers in the wastelands,
to quench the thirst of my people, my chosen one.
The people I have shaped for myself
will sing my praises.”

Reader: This is the Word of the Lord
All: Thanks be to God.

Responsorial Psalm (from Ps 102)

R: *The Lord is good and great in love.*

Bless the Lord, my soul.
Let everything in me bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, my soul.
Do not forget all the good he has done.

He forgives all your sins,
heals all your infirmities,
saves your life from the grave,
surrounds you with goodness and mercy.

Merciful and compassionate is the Lord,
slow to anger and great in love.
He does not treat us according to our sins
or repay us as our failings deserve.

As the distance from east to west,
so far does he separate our faults from us.
As a father shows tenderness to his children,
so the Lord is tender with those who fear him.

Gospel Acclamation (Cf. Jl 2:12-13)

Praise and honor to you, Lord Jesus!
Come back to me with all your heart, says the Lord,
for I am merciful and compassionate.
Praise and honor to you, Lord Jesus!

Gospel

C: The Lord be with you.
R: And with your spirit.
C: A reading from the holy Gospel according to John (8:1-11)
R: Glory to you, Lord.

At that time Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, Now, in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. And what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you that is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And, in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. Jesus was thus left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Nor do I condemn you. Go and from now on sin no more."

C: The Gospel of the Lord.

R: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

The homily follows.

GENERAL CONFESSION OF SINS

Following a brief pause for reflection after the homily, the celebrant says:

C: Trusting in the mercy of our Lord, who does not condemn us, but always exhorts us to lead a life of grace, let us confess our sins.

C: Lord, sent by the Father to save the contrite of heart, have mercy on us.

R: *Lord, have mercy.*

C: Christ, who came to call sinners, have mercy on us.

R: *Lord, have mercy.*

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

All rise to their feet.

C: And we now pray together to the Father so that he will forgive us our sins:

R: Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed by thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us,

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

SIGN OF PEACE

C: Dear brothers and sisters, prompted by the words of Jesus, who wishes to forgive our sins if we forgive those who have sinned against us, as a sign of mutual forgiveness, let us offer one another a gesture of reconciliation and peace.

All exchange a sign of peace.

The Exposure of the Most Blessed Sacrament follows in the usual manner, along with Eucharistic Adoration, accompanied according to the provisions made, which will last until the conclusion of *Twenty-Four Hours for the Lord*.

This is the time for confessions and individual absolution.

At the end of the Vigil there is a solemn blessing with the Most Blessed Sacrament. In some places, especially where the *Twenty-Four Hours for the Lord* initiative has been carried out in solemn fashion and concludes Saturday evening, the Holy Mass for the Fourth Sunday of Lent could be celebrated at that time, or First Vespers.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE VIGIL

This text is a proposal which should later be rendered more concrete and inculturated in keeping with local traditions.

In view of the duration of the vigil, the number of participants, organizational possibilities, and other factors, the accompaniment of Eucharistic Adoration could be carried out by taking turns, with a thematic variation every hour.

Durante the celebration of the vigil, moments of silent prayer before the Most Blessed Sacrament should not be lacking.

OUTLINE FOR A TURN

After Exposure of the Most Blessed Sacrament and a moment of silence, the musical group sings a selection. The reading of a biblical passage follows.

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah (1:10-19)

Hear the word of the Lord, princes of Sodom!

Listen to the instruction of our God, people of Gomorrah!

What do I care about the number of your sacrifices? says the Lord.

I have had enough of whole-burnt rams and fat of fatlings.

In the blood of calves, lambs, and goats I find no pleasure.

When you come in to visit me, who asks these things of you?

Trample my courts no more! Bring no more worthless offerings.

Your incense is loathsome to me.

New moon and sabbath, calling of assemblies, octaves of wickedness: these I cannot bear.

I detest your new moons and festivals; they weigh me down. I tire of the load.

When you spread out your hands, I close my eyes to you.

Though you pray even more, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds before my eyes.

Cease doing evil. Learn to do good.

Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow.

Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord:

Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow;

Though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool.

If you are willing, and obey, you shall eat the good things of the land.

Reader: This is the Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Everyone remains in silence.

TESTIMONY/MEDITATION

Testimony of conversion is then presented. This testimony could be provided by a person desiring to share how the Lord has touched his or her heart with the grace of forgiveness, or it could be read (e.g., this pastoral aid contains the testimony of Olivia Hurst on the *Sacrament of Reconciliation*). In the event that it is not possible to present a testimony, a written meditation may be used, such as

St. Clement of Alexandria, Homily on “What Rich Person Will Be Saved?”

Indeed, the gates open to those who have turned to God in truth and with all their hearts, and the Father is delighted to welcome the son who is really converted; true conversion is not to be enslaved by the same things any more, but to have completely uprooted from the soul the sins for which we are condemned to death; in fact, once they are removed, God will come again to dwell in you. He indeed says that the joy and festiveness of the Father and the angels in heaven are great and unsurpassable when a single sinner is converted and repents. He has thus affirmed as well, “I want mercy and not sacrifice. I do not want the death of the sinner, but conversion. And even if your sins are like scarlet wool, I will make them white as snow, and if they are blacker than darkness, by washing them clean I will make them like white wool.”

Only for God, in fact, is it possible to grant the elimination of sins and not “to take our falls into account,” for the Lord commands us, too, to forgive every day our brothers and sisters who repent. If we, who are evil, are able to give good gifts, how much greater in spirit is “the Father of mercies,” the good Father “of every consolation,” full of tenderness and compassion by nature. He awaits those who are converted, and to be converted is truly to stop sinning and not look back any more at what is behind us.

After the testimony/meditation a selection is sung, and everyone remains in silent prayer, which is followed by intercessory prayer in which the whole assembly takes part.

PRAYER FOR THE INTERCESSION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

*Holy Mary of hope,
extend your scapular, like a mantle of protection,
over cities and countries, over mountains and seas,
over men and women, over young people and children,
over the elderly and the sick, over orphans and the afflicted,
over the faithful children and the sheep that have gone astray.
You, that have a family altar in every home,
that have a living altar in every heart,
receive the prayer of your people,
that now consecrates itself once again to you.
Star of the seas and beacon of light,
certain comfort for the pilgrim people,
guide its steps on its earthly journey
so that it may always travel on paths of peace and concord,*

*Gospel roads of progress, justice, and freedom.
Reconcile brothers and sisters in a fraternal embrace.
May hatred and resentment disappear.
May divisions and barriers be overcome.
May conflicts be resolved and wounds healed.
Make Christ our peace.
May his forgiveness renew hearts.
May his word be hope and leaven in society.
He lives and reigns forever and ever.
Amen.*

(Inspired by the Act of Entrusting Chile to Our Lady of Carmel, pronounced by St. John Paul II on April 3, 1987)

There follows singing and a time of silent prayer until the end of this “turn” in the successive periods of prayer.

In keeping with the duration of the whole vigil, this outline may be repeated while varying the biblical passages and songs and alternating testimonies, meditations, and prayers.

In view of the liturgical time of Lent, it would be desirable to include the *Via Crucis* as well. The Holy Rosary and/or the Rosary of Divine Mercy.

Other biblical passages to accompany additional turns in the vigil:

Psalm 51 (a psalm of repentance); Mt 6:1-21 (almsgiving – prayer - fasting); Lk 6:27-38 (love for one’s enemies – do not judge); Lk 24:13-34 (two disciples on the road to Emmaus).

As an alternative for both individual orientation and community celebration, a *lectio divina* can be proposed. An example follows below.

A Proposal ***LECTIO DIVINA***

The Word of God...is listened to

Let us listen to the Word in St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 5:17-21).

“Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all of this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation. God was in fact reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting the trespasses of human beings against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. We are ambassadors for Christ, then, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake, God made him who did not know sin be sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

...and meditated upon

A careful reading of the text reveals some elements of interest, such as the repeated references to reconciliation (verses 18-21), a central theme of the passage, or the forcefulness of the plural “we” with which Paul was certainly seeking to involve those to whom the letter was addressed. The most striking detail is the protagonism of divine action in the work of reconciliation. Whereas the noun “God” appears several times, the reference to “Christ” returns in all the verses in the passage. This concentration on Christ allows us to meditate on three aspects.

a) God has reconciled us to himself **by means of Christ** (v. 18). Original sin has had devastating cosmic consequences and effects decidedly entailing separation, especially because it broke the bonds of friendship with God. To some degree, every time we sin, the same dynamic of placing us at a distance which makes human beings blameworthy—that is, unable to enjoy the benefits of having God as a friend—is reproduced in history. It is not only the human creature, but the whole world that remains distant and needs a way to return to God (cf. Col 1:20). Paul reminds the Christians of Corinth that it was God who took the initiative of reconciling every creature to himself. God is the Reconciler, the one who makes an enemy become a friend and does so through Christ. What this work of reconciliation consists of is explained in verses 19 and 21: in not counting the sins of human beings against them. We must not think of a simple “declaration” of not being guilty or God's not wanting to see sins. The decision not to attribute the sins proceeds from the fact that He, in his infinite mercy, arranged for the Son to take on the human condition of being an enemy. For this reason, it is stated that “God made the one who had not sinned be sin” (v. 21). The term used for sin (*amartia*) has a twofold meaning in biblical Greek, as both transgression against the moral law and a reference to the sacrificial act and the victim making reparation for sin. The latter is the meaning employed by the Apostle. By his sacrifice, Christ reaches the point of the farthest distance from God in order to rebuild from there the bridge leading to his friendship.

For personal and community meditation:

- While contemplating the Crucified Lord, I meditate on this mystery of love: “God made him who did not know sin be sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

b) **In the name of Christ**, we implore you: be reconciled with God (v. 20). The mystery of the work of reconciliation becomes even deeper when the Christian is invited to take part as an ambassador. Indeed, Paul indicates that God also acts through the “service of reconciliation” entrusted to every believer. What does this ministry of reconciliation consist of? It does not mean that it is human beings who implement reconciliation with God, which is always a gift offered by the love donated by Christ; rather, it involves an exhortation to indicate, to recall, and to render comprehensible what God has done for us, to tell others that the bridge of friendship with God has been restored thanks to Christ. For this reason, for Paul the service of reconciliation consists, above all, of having a message (*logos*), telling our brothers and sisters explicitly, “Be reconciled with God,” just as he himself does with those to whom his letter is addressed. This message should be regarded as a basic element of the *kerygma* which all the baptized are called to proclaim, in accordance with their condition as disciples-missionaries. Many initiatives undertaken throughout the world on the occasion of these *Twenty-Four Hours for the Lord* forcefully reproduce this exigency—for example, when young people go out into the squares of cities to meet those passing by and invite them to an encounter with Christ. More than a few, on accepting the invitation, are then led to the Sacrament, where the priest effectively carries out reconciliation in the name of Christ.

For personal or community meditation:

- What does it mean for me to be an ambassador of God and act in the name of Christ?
- During this Lent, what person could I exhort to be reconciled with God?

c) **In Christ** we are new creatures and can become the justice of God (v. 17, 21). The text brings out the effect of the work of divine reconciliation: the reconciled person remains *in* Christ. There returns the Pauline conviction regarding the transforming power of grace, able to introduce the creature into a new condition: no longer the universe of the flesh, but that of the spirit; no longer the slavery of sin, but the freedom of the children of God; no longer the dictates of the law, but the truth of the Gospel. In the same way, whoever lives in Christ is a new creature who has left behind every pact with sin. This newness of life makes possible a “just” relationship with God wherein fear over sin no longer prevails, but trust in always counting on the hand of a friend to lift us up again and console us. By remaining in Christ we can present ourselves as holy, immaculate, and irreprehensible in the sight of God (cf. Col 1:23). Collections of lives of the saints are an excellent source for examples of an existence which is fresh and new and avoids placing trust in our own actions, showing how possible it is to live in friendship with God. In every saint we can recognize the words of the Apostle himself: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Ga 2:20).

For personal or community meditation:

- In my life, what old things have passed away? What new things have appeared?
- What saint surprises me or catches me off guard, for this person's life calls me to emerge from easy-going, anesthetizing mediocrity? (cf. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 138).

...and it is the subject of prayer.

*Lord Jesus,
to the point of patient death
and of the obedient cross,
listen to our entreaty.
You, the innocent one, were accused.
The just one, you were judged.
The holy one, you were condemned.
You, the son of man,
Were tortured,
Crucified, and put to death.
You, the king, were raised up on a cross.
You, life, underwent death.
And you, having died, rose to life.
We are here, O Lord.
We have come as the guilty return
to the scene of their crime.
We have come
as those who followed you,
but also betrayed you,
so often faithful and so often unfaithful.
We have come to beat our breasts,
to ask for your forgiveness,
to implore your mercy.
Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us
and grant us your peace.
Amen.*

—St. Paul VI