

Pastoral Letter for Lent 2010
The Year for Priests

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Lent is the time to renew the spirit of reconciliation that should be a vital part of our lives every day of the year.

Saint John Vianney, the patron saint of priests, spent hours every day in the confessional and in front of the Blessed Sacrament. He saw what this did for him and for his people. It led him to say that the mercy of God was like an overpowering torrent carrying souls along in its wake.¹

Last Sunday and on Ash Wednesday you heard homilies on the reality of sin and the need we all have for the Sacrament of Penance. The more we accept our own need for that Sacrament, the more will our Lenten prayer, fasting and almsgiving open our hearts to the love of our Merciful Savior.

During the six weeks of Lent, our priests will provide additional hours for Confessions every week and extra time for adoration of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. This means continued opportunities for the spiritual renewal of both the priests and the people of our Diocese, and can be an immense gift to us all.

The late Cardinal Dulles once said: “Too many Catholics of our day seem never to have encountered Christ. They know a certain amount about him from the teaching of the Church, but they lack direct personal familiarity. The hearing of the Gospel, personal prayer and the reception of the Sacraments should establish and deepen that saving relationship.”²

As we pray before the Blessed Sacrament, we can ask Our Lord for the grace also to use the Sacrament of Penance fruitfully. We can never afford to ignore it or to let it become a mere routine, an unthinking repetition of words and not a heartfelt expression of honesty with God. In it we must lay our sins honestly before the Divine Physician, and let Him heal us. We must encounter Him in truth through the minister of the Sacrament.

Jesus offers this sacrament not to chastise and scold, but to reach out and welcome. He does not crush us with the weight of our sins, but through absolution removes them. He unburdens us and offers mercy to wounded hearts. He bestowed this gift upon us through his Apostles. “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them.”³ He continues even now to bestow the same forgiveness through their successors. When we truly realize that it is Jesus who absolves us through the person of the priest, then the Sacrament of Penance has its fullest effect.⁴

Saint John Vianney also said: “When the priest gives absolution... the blood of the good God flows on the soul to wash it and make it as beautiful as it was on the day of its baptism.”⁵ If we really believe this, then we will all the more confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy.⁶

What will we give up for Lent? Why not give up whatever doubts we have about the mercy of Jesus and the power of His Sacraments? If shame or fear have kept us from a full confession of sin, then let us set that fear aside and put ourselves totally in His hands in the sacrament. Saint John Vianney also said: “There are those who say: ‘I have done too much evil, the good God cannot forgive me.’ This would be a great blasphemy. It would put a limit to the mercy of God, and there isn’t one: God’s mercy is infinite.”⁷ To confess our sin is to open our hearts to that mercy.

Through the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, Jesus removes our fears and opens our eyes and hearts to the Father’s plan for us. The late Bishop Saltarelli of Wilmington wrote: “When we rekindle our Eucharistic faith, awe and amazement at the truth of the real presence, our marriages and our families are rekindled in Christ. Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life are rekindled. A missionary spirit, evangelization and effective catechesis at every level are rekindled... resulting in a spiritual springtime.”⁸

Penance, prayer and almsgiving — those hallmarks of Lenten sacrifice — help to strip away the shackles of human slavery to selfishness and open us to the best possible reception of God’s generosity toward us. For those who may have thought of embracing a vocation to the Priesthood, this is a perfect time to reexamine that attraction and to listen to the call of God at a deeper level. Lent is a good time to reflect again on how you can best live your life for God and for others. Be open to His call. If a call comes from Him, then it is also a call to the life that in the end will make you the most happy. He always outdoes us in generosity.

May God shower His blessing on our Diocese. May Mary, the Mother of our Savior, intercede for us with her Son and help us always to live in His mercy and forgiveness. May Lent be a time of special grace and may we never cease to thank God for His goodness.

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Allentown

¹St. John Vianney, *His Patience Awaits Us*, (Book of quotations form Saint John Marie Vianney, Sanctuary of Ars, <http://arsnet.org>, p. 7).

²Avery Dulles, S.J., “John Paul II and the New Evangelization,” Lawrence J. McGinley Lecture, Fordham University, N.Y., December 4-5, 1991, p. 16.

³John 20: 23.

⁴Cf. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene, O.C.D., *Divine Intimacy*, Tan Publishers, Inc., p. 213.

⁵Saint John Vianney, *ibid.*

⁶Cf. Hebrews 4: 16.

⁷Saint John Vianney, *ibid.*

⁸Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli, Pastoral Letter on the Year of Saint Paul, *Origins* – January 31, 2008, Vol. 37, No. 33, pg. 530