NOW IS THE TIME FOR MERCY — PART III:

WHERE CAN WE GO FOR MERCY?

By Fr. George Kosicki, C.S.B.

In Part I of this series the author described Divine Mercy and showed how the revelations of Jesus to Sister Faustina (1931-1938, in Poland) are an urgent and timely update of what Scripture and the Church have always taught about mercy. In Part II he explained how everyone is a recipient of Divine Mercy, especially those most sinful or most afflicted. In this article he tells about the sacrament of Reconciliation as the place of mercy.

On Easter Sunday night Jesus *breathed on his disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained"* (Jn.20:22-23). That was how Jesus assured that His own work of forgiving peoples' sins would be continued in His Church. Since all human beings are weakened from original sin and influenced by sin in the world around us, we need some means by which to be forgiven and healed. God provides it in His Church. The sacrament of Penance (or Reconciliation) is there as the ever-available fount of Divine Mercy.

The Church exhorts us to make frequent use of this sacrament, even monthly, to draw on this infinite fount of mercy. Pope John Paul II has expressed special concern that we make use of the sacrament of Penance to be healed of one of the great sins of our age — the loss of the sense of sin.

In His revelations to Sister Faustina, Jesus spoke repeatedly about using the sacrament of Reconciliation as a "Tribunal of Mercy," wherein we receive a judgement, not of condemnation, but of love.

Tell souls where they are to look for solace; that is, in the Tribunal of Mercy. There the greatest miracles take place (and) are incessantly repeated (Diary 1448).

Generally when we think of a tribunal, we imagine a tribunal of justice, such as courts of law. But in His words to Sister Faustina, Jesus reverses that connotation and calls His sacrament a tribunal of mercy. Thus, we have a clear indication that if the contrite soul appeals to God's mercy, he will not have to face sin's condemnation. It is so easy for us to consider the sacrament of Penance as something to fear; we imagine God keeping track of our sins in order to punish us. His conversations with Sister Faustina express just the opposite: the sacrament is a place of warmth and welcome, of relief and reconciliation for the sincere person. And Jesus made it clear that to avail oneself of the miracle of His mercy a person need not make great pilgrimages or external ceremonies:

...it suffices to come with faith to the feet of my representative and to reveal to him one's misery, and the miracle of Divine Mercy will be fully demonstrated (Diary 1448).

Thus, the interior dispositions of faith and trust are what count most — conversion of the heart.

The sacrament of Reconciliation became a regular and important part of Faustina's life and she grew in her understanding of it. She learned that Confession is much more than just asking and receiving forgiveness.

We should desire two kinds of profit from Holy Confession, she explained: *a) We come to Confession to be healed; b) We come to be educated; like a small child, our soul has constant need of education (Diary 377).*

She realized that this need of our soul for education —through the grace of God and through the guidance of the confessor — is vital to our spiritual growth. We cannot simply rely on ourselves:

...on its own strength, the soul will not go far; it will exert itself greatly and will do nothing for the glory of God; it will err continually, because our mind is darkened and does not know how to discern its own affairs (Diary 377).

Another important lesson Sister learned was to pray for her confessor:

...I came to understand one thing: that I must pray much for each of my confessors, that he might obtain the light of the Holy Spirit, for when I approach the confessional without first praying fervently, the confessor does not understand me very well. Father encouraged me to pray fervently for these intentions, that God would give better knowledge and understanding of the things He is asking of me (Diary 647).

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HOW TO DISPOSE ONESELF

Through Sister Faustina, Christ Himself instructs us how to dispose oneself for the reception of the sacrament:

...when you go to confession, to this fountain of My mercy, the Blood and Water which came forth from My Heart always flow down upon your soul and ennoble it. Every time you go to Confession, immerse yourself entirely in My mercy, with great trust, so that I may pour the bounty of My grace upon your soul (Diary 1602).

Repeatedly, He emphasizes that the confessional is the place of the greatest mercy, and that it is He, Himself, Mercy Incarnate, who waits for us there:

When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I Myself act in your soul. Here the misery of the soul meets the God of Mercy (Diary 1602).

My daughter, just as you prepare in My presence, so also you make your confession before Me. The person of the priest is, for Me, only a screen. Never analyze what sort of a priest it is that I am making use of; open your soul in confession as you would to Me, and I will fill it with My light (Diary 1725).

He stresses, too, that no matter how great our sin, His mercy is greater and can restore us to His grace:

Were a soul like a decaying corpse so that from a human standpoint, there would be no [hope of] restoration and everything would already be lost, it is not so with God. The miracle of Divine Mercy restores that soul in full (Diary 1448).

Our sinfulness, then, cannot keep us from receiving His Mercy. Only our fear and refusal to trust in Him can block His love. So Jesus urges Sister Faustina:

Pray for souls that they be not afraid to approach the tribunal of My Mercy. Do not grow weary of praying for sinners... Tell souls that from this fount of mercy souls draw graces solely with the vessel of trust. If their trust is great, there is no limit to My generosity (Diary 975, 1602).

Our Lord emphasized the importance of the sacrament by making its reception one of the elements for celebrating the Feast of Mercy:

On that day, the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy. The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment (Diary 699).

The sacrament of Penance, therefore, is really the place of mercy. It should not be feared; it should not be neglected. How many souls are living in guilt because of failure to approach this tribunal of mercy! How many souls feel anxious or confused because of failure to receive cleansing and counseling in this sacrament! How many wounded spirits continue to bear hurts — given and received — because of lengthy intervals between the healing power of Confession!

Of course, there are other circumstances where one can receive mercy — in private prayer, in the reconciliation rite of Mass, in the act of forgiving or being forgiven by a neighbor. But none of these carries the specific grace of mercy which Christ gave to the sacrament of Penance and none is so specifically shaped as to readily lead to the experience of mercy. By approaching this sacrament, any repentant soul can be forgiven and can experience the forgiving action of God externalized through the words and gestures of the priest — not just know it in the heart.

Thus, this sacrament can be a beautiful human experience, and — given the essential elements of contrition, confession and doing penance — the soul can have the *certitude* of being completely forgiven by God.

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