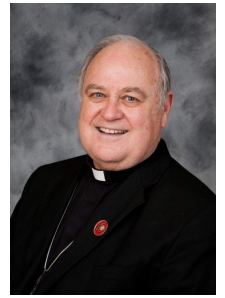




Message from
Bishop Robert W. Muench
Diocese of Baton Rouge



Dearly Beloved in Christ:

Many years ago the Diocese of Baton Rouge was one of the first to follow a Lenten initiative begun in the Archdiocese of Washington entitled *The Light is ON for You*. It involves opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) to be available. Since then countless people have taken advantage of this venture. A list of places and times in our diocese where it will be specially celebrated this Lent is available on February 16, 2018 in the *Catholic Commentator* Lent pull-out section. Materials and videos to assist you in this process will be available for download on February 9, 2018 on the web at <https://evangcatbr.org/life>.

Sacred Scripture records: “If we say: ‘We have not sinned,’ we make God a liar” (I John 1:10). “For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” (Romans 7:18-19). “Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8). Thus we have the words of three apostles (John, Paul and Peter) testifying how difficult it is to be sinless. I trust we all can be honest enough with ourselves to admit we all are sinners (as is every living human being). Now the next question is: “What should we do about it?”

Pope Francis has continued the emphasis of St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict in promoting the teaching of God’s benevolent, abundant mercy. The current Holy Father has reminded priests that the confessional is not to be a torture chamber and that God never tires of forgiving us, but we can tire of asking for his forgiveness. One of the last things Jesus did before dying on the cross was to forgive the repentant thief (Luke 23: 40-43).

While asking forgiveness can be very humbling (though not meant to be humiliating), the receipt of the forgiveness brings about a sense of comfort, peace and joy. It also frees us from any sense of guilt and shame. This is the hope of every priest for any penitent whose confession he receives. The priest confessor wants to support and assist the penitent, offering consolation, hope and encouragement, whether the confession involves a serious failure that happened once or more, or a sin that has become habitual, or consists of some less serious breach. The priest is there to represent Jesus to you. Jesus was so compassionate and sensitive to people who were prone to sin, as contrasted to those Pharisees who were hypocritical and felt because they kept the external requirements of the law they were justified. The Pharisees complained that Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners – Jesus said: “I have come not for the self-righteous, but for sinners” (Luke 16:2, 7).

When the Pharisees brought the adulterous woman to him, asking whether she should be stoned as the Mosaic law prescribed, Jesus turned the tables on them and reassured the frightened, remorseful woman (John 8:1-11). Jesus taught the Parable of the Merciful Father whose younger son wanted his inheritance right away (instead of waiting for it upon his father’s death, when it would be expected), squandered it, and returned home in hopes of being accepted as a slave, where the Father embraced and celebrated his return – much to the chagrin of his older brother who felt his younger brother was being rewarded for his misbehavior (Luke 15:11-32). Remember the words of Jesus: “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine people who have no need of repentance” (Luke 15:7). The absolute confidentiality of whatever sins (great or small, many or few) you confess to the priest is assured and the consolation and joy it provides are beyond description in human language.

Let me express a word to those who have not gone to confession recently or at all, or not made what is called an “integral” confession (confessing your most serious or mortal sins). I understand your fear, anxiety and hesitancy. I understand you may worry: “What will the priest think of me?” Recall the story of how Jesus treated with dignity the Samaritan woman at the well (John Chapter 4), whom he told he knew she had been married five times and was not married to the man with whom she was living! Remember how Jesus mercifully reacted to the woman caught in adultery (John Chapter 8) and brought before him: “Is there no one to accuse you?” he asked her after he exploited the hypocrisy of the Pharisees by challenging any of them without sin to “cast the first stone.” We priests are called to represent the merciful Jesus to you, especially individually in Confession and collectively in the Eucharist. As a priest (and I know other priests feel the same) I would have more fear facing Jesus at the end of life in judgment if I had dealt harshly with anyone trying to overcome sinful temptations than almost anything else.

But there’s more. The peace, relief, comfort, joy, and the happiness of someone who has made a sincere and honest confession are indescribable. The “good feeling” can last for days, if not weeks. The “heavy burden” of carrying the interior guilt that can accompany our sins (recognized or repressed) is gloriously lifted in an honest confession of sin, where we personally experience (encounter) the risen Christ dwelling within us. What a glorious development it is to know that even though we may fail again, God gives us the perfect means (Confession) of having the effect of sin removed from us.

Know how much any priest available for this purpose will respect, admire, support and affirm you. Over a hundred times does the Sacred Scripture record: “Do not be afraid; peace be with you.” Whether you have received Confession recently or not, hardly at all, or ever; whether your sins be more or less severe, God not only wants you to intellectually know, but also to personally experience his unconditional love for you. Whether you are comfortable with the format or feel insecure: trust God; trust the priest; trust yourself. I assure you, you will be glad you did.

In Jesus’ personal, and my own, love for you,

+ Robert W. Muench

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