

GOD'S MERCY
AND
LOVING PRESENCE



A Pastoral Letter
to the
Clergy, Religious and Laity
of the
Archdiocese of Washington

BY
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God's Mercy and Loving Presence

In what has become an archdiocesan tradition, once again this year we will renew the Lenten pastoral initiative, "The Light is On for You." This unified outreach by parishes across the Archdiocese of Washington invites the faithful to celebrate the forgiveness of sins through the sacrament of reconciliation and to renew their relationship with our merciful Lord.

Shortly after the first "The Light is On for You" effort in 2007, a priest from another diocese contacted me. He was visiting Washington on business and, as he put it, "got stuck behind a bus" in D.C. rush hour traffic. That fact alone could generate sufficient cause for repentance and confession. The bus had an advertisement for "The Light is On for You." He was so intrigued that as soon as he got back to his diocese and rectory, he went online to learn more about it. Last year, his diocese initiated a similar program. In fact, many other dioceses throughout the United States and even Canada have initiated their own efforts to renew the sacrament of reconciliation based on "The Light is On for You." This year, we welcome the participation of the parishes in the Diocese of Arlington.

This letter renews the invitation that every pastor in this archdiocese makes to the faithful to join in the Lenten spiritual journey to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation or, as we have traditionally said, "go to confession," during the season that recalls our Lord's passion and death.

As I reflected in the pastoral letter, *God's Mercy and the Sacrament of Penance* (2007), introducing "The Light is On for You" pastoral initiative, it is by Christ's passion and

death that we are made whole. "In one of the most familiar and cherished forms of the Way of the Cross, we find this invitation to prayer: 'We adore you, O Christ and we praise you.' The people reply, 'Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.' In this brief exchange, Saint Alphonsus Liguori captures the essence of the article of the creed which proclaims that Jesus Christ 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.'"

The Catholic Church teaches that Jesus truly saved us by deeds performed in his human nature, by his obedient love, by his patient endurance, as well as by his offering his life as "a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28). It was in his humanity that Jesus took on our sin and by dying atoned for it. The tragic consequences of Adam's sin could have no other remedy than the merit of the one Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ, who reconciled us to God in his own blood.

The Church professes the forgiveness of sins. Not only did Jesus give himself up to death on the cross to wash away our sins, but after his Resurrection he extended to the Church the power to apply the redemption he won on the cross. He blessed his Church with the extraordinary authority to forgive sin.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that our faith in the forgiveness of sins is tied in with faith in the Holy Spirit, the Church and the communion of saints. "It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his Apostles that the risen Christ conferred on them his own divine power to forgive sins: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' " (976).

This Lent, we will once again recognize the opportunity to experience God's mercy and forgiveness. After consultation

with the Priest Council, it was decided to expand the emphasis of this year's "The Light is On for You" program to include Eucharistic Adoration.

In the 2008 pastoral letter, *Reflections on God's Mercy and Our Forgiveness*, I noted that there is an essential link between the sacrament of penance and the Eucharist. "Apart from the Eucharist there simply is no greater gift that the Church can give for a people than the gift of reconciliation." The Eucharist is the one sacrifice of Christ offered for the forgiveness of sins, "This is my body which will be given up for you....This is the cup of my blood... It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven."

The faith of the Church in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist goes back to the words of Christ himself, as recorded in the Gospel of Saint John. In the Eucharistic discourse after the multiplication of the loaves, our Lord contrasted ordinary bread with the bread that is not of this world but which contains eternal life for those who eat it. He said: "I am the bread of life...I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (Jn 6:48, 51).

What Jesus offers us is his continuing, enduring presence every time we celebrate the Eucharist. The bread becomes his body and the wine becomes his blood. The way in which Jesus is present in the Eucharist cannot be explained in physical terms because it transcends the ordinary necessities of space and measurement.

In explaining this doctrine of the faith, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes the Council of Trent as it summarized our Catholic belief. "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species

of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and the wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation" (1376).

The real presence of Christ endures after the celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy. It is for this reason that there is a tabernacle in Church. Once communion has been distributed, the remaining hosts are placed in the tabernacle to provide viaticum (literally, food for the journey), communion for those who turn to the Church in their final hour, and also to provide a focal point for prayer and worship of Christ in his Eucharistic presence.

With the passage of time, reverent reflection led the Church to enrich its Eucharistic devotion. Faith that Jesus is truly present in the sacrament led believers to worship Christ dwelling with us permanently in the sacrament. Wherever the sacrament is, there is Christ, who is our Lord and our God: hence, he is ever to be worshipped in this mystery. Such worship is expressed in many ways: in genuflection, in adoration of the Eucharist and in the many forms of Eucharistic devotion that nourish faith.

In an effort to highlight our communion in Christ as his body and to provide an opportunity for renewed devotion to Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament, this year it is proposed that the Blessed Sacrament be exposed in church during the period of time that the priest, as a part of "The Light is On for You," is in the confessional. One of the ideas supporting this proposal is that we, as pastors of souls, not only invite our faithful to a renewal of the sacrament

of reconciliation but also to a renewal of their faith in and devotion to the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

While the practicalities will vary in each local situation, parishes are encouraged to have a small group of people committed to adoration (perhaps for periods of a half-hour each) to cover the hour and a half of the time each Wednesday evening during Lent, 6:30 p.m.-8:00 p.m., when the priest is hearing confessions.

The priest would begin with the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, invite the faithful to quiet, private prayer before the Sacrament and then proceed to the designated area for confessions. Devotional materials will be prepared by archdiocesan staff so that those who come to church for exposition, confession or both, have a convenient prayer aid. Following the time allotted for confessions, the priest would repose the Blessed Sacrament and conclude the service. He may choose to do so with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

As in the past, additional appropriate materials will be made available to all the parishes and information will be online at www.the-light-is-on.org. Among these resources will be religious education supplements, homiletic aids and the helpful brochure widely distributed in the past which includes a “how to” guide for going to confession, including a detachable Act of Contrition.

The deepest spiritual joy each of us can sense is the freedom from whatever would separate us from God and the restoration of our friendship with so loving and merciful a Father who sees each of us with all of the forgiveness and love lavished on the prodigal son.

As we together enter this Lenten season and prepare to celebrate the joy of Easter, may this be a time of interior renewal and heightened Eucharistic devotion for each of us, and for the archdiocese as a whole, a renewal that will be deepened to the extent that we commit ourselves to God's mercy, to the reconciliation that we all desire and need and to a heightened reverence and appreciation for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

With every good wish and pledge of prayers for all the clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Archdiocese of Washington, I am

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name "Donald Wuerl".

Archbishop of Washington

January 3, 2010
The Epiphany of Our Lord