

A LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER
“DO NOT BE AFRAID OF CONFESSION”

**To be read at Mass in all churches and chapels of the Diocese on
the First Sunday of Lent
9th March 2014**

My dear brothers and sisters,

“I would like to ask you – but don’t say it aloud, everyone respond in his or her heart: when was the last time you made your Confession?”

This is the question Pope Francis has recently put to us. The Holy Father continued:

“Everyone think about it ...” Is it *“two days, two weeks, two years, twenty years, forty years?... And if much time has passed, do not lose another day. Go, the priest will be good. Jesus is there, and Jesus is more benevolent than priests. Jesus receives you, he receives you with much love. Be courageous and go to Confession!”* (General Audience of the Holy Father, 19th February 2014).

This is the call of Pope Francis which I wish to echo at the beginning of Lent in this year which we have dedicated in the Diocese to peace and reconciliation (Pastoral Letter for Peace Sunday 19th January 2014).

“Do not be afraid of Confession!” Pope Francis says in his simple and direct teaching. *“When one is in line for Confession,”* he reflects, *we feel those things which weigh on our hearts; “but when one finishes Confession, one leaves free, grand, beautiful, forgiven, candid, happy. This is the beauty of Confession!”*

This is the Sacrament which Christ gives us for our salvation; for the forgiveness of sins after Baptism; and to enable you and me to reach the holiness, the perfection of charity which is the goal of our Christian lives (Lumen Gentium 40).

So, what is it that holds us back from this Sacrament? I think I know from personal experience what can hold us back. Confession is the moment when I have to put aside all illusions about myself and about the state of my Christian life and be ready to say, *“Father, these are my sins.”* It would be so much easier to say: these are someone else’s sins and faults! But, no; this is where I have gone wrong! Confession is a ‘reality check’ when I recognise how far I still have to go in the Christian life and receive the grace to go forward. In our Emeritus Pope Benedict’s words:

“We must accept our frailty but keep on going, not giving up but moving forward and becoming converted ever anew through the Sacrament of Reconciliation for a new start ...”
(Pope Benedict XVI 17th February 2007).

This is surely a moment when you and I are *“led by the Spirit”* (Mt 4:1) to reject the temptations of the Devil, as Our Saviour did in the wilderness. We must never forget the Lord Jesus Himself, God the Son sharing our humanity, was tempted by the Evil One. We, then, must expect to face the same struggle in our lives. The sincere Confession of our sins is the moment when we put aside the illusions we can all so easily entertain about ourselves.

Before Christmas Pope Francis described how he goes to Confession.

“Priests and bishops too have to go to Confession. We are all sinners” the Holy Father explained, *“The Pope is also a sinner. And the Confessor hears what I tell him, he counsels me and forgives me, because we are all in need of this forgiveness.”*

Pope Francis reminds us that confessing our sins can involve shame. But he calls it a “good shame,” for our sins are the one thing of which we should be ashamed! However, it is in the very moment we confess them (in the Holy Father’s words) God sends

“a brother to bestow his pardon, the certainty of his forgiveness in the name of the Church ...”

Through the ministry of the priest, Pope Francis reflects, God holds us

“in a new embrace and regenerates us and allows us to rise again and resume our journey” (General Audience, 20th November 2013).

Today’s Gospel ends with these beautiful words:

“Then the devil left him, and angels appeared and looked after him” (Mt 4:11).

It is a scene of peace following the struggle in the wilderness. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation brings us peace: “Go in peace” the priest says to us.

I am sending Pope Francis’s words of encouragement to you in a leaflet, together with a simple guide on how to go to Confession. During Lent there will be many opportunities to approach this “*great and beautiful Sacrament*”. I have asked your priests to be especially available on Good Friday, as I will be in the Cathedral. With Pope Francis, I invite you to put this question to yourself: How long is it since I was last at Confession? Please do not lose any time. The Holy Father reminds us:

“It is Jesus Himself who awaits us in this great and beautiful Sacrament: have courage and go to Confession!”

With my prayer for you all,

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury