

The Tender Mercy of Our God
A Pastoral Letter to the People of God of San Antonio
On Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Christian Life

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To my brother bishops and priests, my first collaborators in the priestly ministry; to my brother deacons, co-workers in the ministry of service; to my brothers and sisters in consecrated life, living testimony of faithful commitment and apostolic life; to all the faithful, called to holiness and mission in ordinary life:

1. Having recently celebrated the second anniversary of my installation as your archbishop, I thank the Father of mercies for the privilege of being able to serve you. What a blessing you are in my life and ministry! Your faith and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ inspires me every day. In your love, which you show in so many acts of charity and mercy, I see the power of his Holy Spirit at work in our world.

I write to you at the start of Lent in the hopes that together in this holy season we might renew our faith and rediscover the joy of our salvation, the joy that comes with knowing our Lord's forgiveness. We experience this joy personally, intimately, every time we open our hearts to Jesus in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

2. Reconciliation is the heart of the Gospel. It is the meaning and purpose of Christ's work, the work he continues today through the ministry of his Church. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ," St. Paul tells us (2 Cor. 5:9). The world was estranged from God, alienated from him by sin. But Christ died for us on the cross even though we are sinners. And by this great proof of his love, we have reconciliation with God.

This is the good news of the Gospel. The Gospel is a message of reconciliation—that by Christ's passion and resurrection God has forgiven all our trespasses and set us free from sin and death.

This great truth means we no longer have to be slaves to our selfishness and our sins. With God's help, we can strive every day to leave behind our old lives and become more like Jesus. We receive the grace and the power to live as God's own beloved sons and daughters—to love as Jesus loved, to put away jealousy and division, to forgive our brothers and sisters as he has forgiven us. Because we have been reconciled to God, we do not have to perish but can have eternal life.

The Joy of the Jubilee

3. God's mercy and reconciliation are also beautiful themes to consider as we enter the final weeks of this Jubilee Year in which we have been celebrating the 275th anniversary of our San Fernando Cathedral.

Every jubilee is a season of mercy, a time that God gives us to make a new beginning. Our Jubilee has been no exception. The founders of our great Cathedral were missionaries of God's mercy and reconciliation! And as we honor the sacrifices of those heroic immigrant families, we want to rededicate ourselves to living the Gospel they toiled to plant in this new world.

4. That Gospel is not a list of rules or even a philosophy of life. It is the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, who out of love for us died that we might live with God.

As I said in my first pastoral letter, we must try with every passing day to know and love Jesus more deeply. We must be formed in the faith so that we can "know Jesus better—establishing and deepening a personal relationship with him in order to be his follower and his friend."¹

To grow in knowledge and love of Jesus means we must grow in our "*knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of . . . sins, because of the tender mercy of our God*" (Luke 1:77).

5. This is the meaning of our Jubilee Year. As the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, wrote: "The joy of every jubilee is above all *a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion.*"²

Penance and Reconciliation is the jubilee sacrament. It brings us the joy of forgiveness, the joy of conversion. By his ordination, the priest is granted sacred power to share in the priesthood of Christ. The priest is anointed with the Holy Spirit and given a new and special character that enables him to act *in persona Christi Capitis*—in the person of Christ, who is the head of his Church.³ This means that in the confessional, the priest, by the grace of God, speaks with the very voice of Christ.

What we hear in the confessional, then, are our Lord's own words of healing and pardon, addressed to our individual circumstances. What once Jesus said to the man paralyzed by sin, he says to each of us, who are also weakened and disabled by our sins: "Courage child, your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2).⁴ Like the woman ashamed and condemned to

¹ *To Grow in Knowledge and Love of Jesus Christ*, Pastoral Letter (February 15, 2006), 6, 9.

² *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Apostolic Letter on the Coming of the Third Millennium (November 10, 1994), 32.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of the Priest (December 7, 1965), 2. See also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1548.

⁴ *Catechism*, nos. 1423, 1989.

death because of her sins, we are filled with gratitude for his words, which save and set us free: “Go, and do not sin again” (John 8:11).

The Grace of Forgiveness

6. My brothers and sisters, it is time for all of us to rediscover this living sign of the Lord’s forgiveness and our reconciliation with God. Like the Eucharist, this sacrament has the power to heal and change us. It has the power to heal and change our world. There can be no peace in our hearts or in the world unless we learn again how to say we are sorry to our Father, and unless we learn again to forgive those who trespass against us.

Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, has rightly said: “[T]he core of the spiritual crisis of our times is the obscuration of the grace of forgiveness.”⁵ This grace awaits us, in all its clarity and beauty, in the confessional.

7. Few of us are egregious, wicked sinners. But all of us are sinners. This is the testimony of sacred Scripture. “All have sinned,” St. Paul said simply (Rom. 3:23). The Scriptures tell us that even the righteous person stumbles and falls seven times, which means daily (Prov. 24:16; Luke 17:4).

We know this about ourselves. We want to do good but we find it hard to do the right thing all the time. We can be so weak at times, so selfish. How often we fall short in our devotion to God, in the little duties of love we owe to our families, loved ones, and neighbors. Even a great saint like Paul was humbled by his weakness and his tendencies toward sin: “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” (Rom. 7:15–19, 22–23).

8. Our Lord understood this about us, too. He knew all about human nature (John 2:25). He came among us to save his people from sin (Matt. 1:21). He poured out his blood on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, to take away the sin of the world (Matt. 26:28; John 1:29).

Each of us experiences this forgiveness in baptism, which cleanses us from the original sin of our first human parents and reconciles us to God, making it possible for us to live as his sons and daughters.

9. But our human nature remains weak and subject to temptation. For this reason, our Lord established the Sacrament of Penance, giving his apostles the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins in his name (Matt. 16:19; John 20:23).

⁵ *Called to Communion* (Ignatius Press, 1996), 149.

He left us this sacrament as a remedy—to restore us to the innocence of our baptism, to give us the spiritual strength we need to struggle against our sinful tendencies and temptations, and to continue our conversion toward the Lord and his ways.

10. Since the time of the apostles, the Church’s saints have always yearned for the grace that comes in this sacrament. For the saints, it is an essential means for gaining true self-knowledge and understanding, for overcoming obstacles to grace, and for growing in holiness.

I think of the touching story of that great witness to the faith, Blessed Damien of Molokai. A solitary missionary to the lepers in Hawaii, for some years he would travel roughly 150 miles to make his regular confession. Later, he was forbidden contact with the outside world for fear of spreading the disease. His religious superior sailed to the islands to hear his confession but was forbidden by the ship’s captain to leave the boat. Yet Damien, in his desire for the sacrament, rowed out into the harbor and called out his confession to the superior, who heard it and granted absolution while leaning over the railing of the ship’s deck.⁶

This is the power of the sacrament, my brothers and sisters! With the saints we should passionately desire this true meeting with Jesus.

To Recover the Sense of Sin

11. I know that many of you confess your sins frequently as part of your ordinary practice of the faith. There is no question, however, that in recent times this sacrament has experienced an unfortunate decline. The reasons for this decline are complicated.⁷

The most basic reason, I believe, is that our world has lost the sense of the sacred. Increasingly we live in a highly secularized environment in which there is no room for God or for considerations of what might lie beyond this material world. In such an environment, traditional beliefs—in the reality of sin, in God-given laws and moral norms, in each soul’s accountability before God—have come to be seen as outdated and even wrong and hurtful to the individual.

We must recover the sense of sin that has been lost by the world today. To deny the reality of God and sin is to deny our own human experience and the testimony of the Gospel. As the apostle John wrote, “If we say, ‘We are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8).

12. We sin when we abuse the divine gift of freedom with which we were born. God created us with the freedom to choose—either to love him or not to love him. All our sins

⁶ Vital Jourdain, *The Heart of Father Damien* (Bruce Publishing, 1955), 109.

⁷ For an examination of the root causes of the “loss of the sense of sin,” see Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today (December 2, 1984), 18.

can be described as failures to love God, failures caused by our selfish desires and attitudes. That is why St. Augustine defined sin as “love of oneself even to contempt of God.”⁸

When we sin we “disown” God as our Father, we reject our relationship as his sons and daughters. As a result, we hurt ourselves because we were made to be his children and to live by his grace. We also injure our fellowship with others because, in denying God’s fatherhood, in effect we deny that we are sisters and brothers to one another. This is why our personal sins always have consequences in society.

Despite what many would have us believe, *there is no sin that is “victimless” or private.* We are bound to one another by our common humanity, and when we sin we weaken these bonds. The persistence of our individual sins can lead to *social sins*—to situations in society and even political and economic structures that are sinful.⁹

13. Jesus and his apostles listed many different types of sins.¹⁰ “All wrongdoing is sin,” the apostle John said (1 John 5:17). Our everyday faults, also known as “venial” sins, weaken our love for God and for our neighbor, but they do not deprive us ultimately of his grace and friendship.¹¹

Certain sins, however, can cause the love in our hearts to grow cold and die. These sins involve transgressions of God’s laws as set forth in the Ten Commandments. The commandments define our obligations to love God and our neighbors. Our Lord said that if we want to enter into eternal life we must keep the commandments (Matt. 19:16–19). However, if we choose to break one of these commandments with full knowledge that what we are doing is sinful, we commit “mortal” or deadly sin (1 John 5:16–17). “One commits a mortal sin when there are simultaneously present: grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent.”¹²

Mortal sins destroy the bonds of grace and love that unite us to God and to his Church. We must confess these sins and seek God’s forgiveness in the sacrament of

⁸ *The City of God*, Bk. 14, chap. 28; *Catechism*, no. 1849–1850.

⁹ *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 16; Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Encyclical Letter for the Twentieth Anniversary of “Populorum Progressio” (December 30, 1987), 36–39; *Catechism*, 1869.

¹⁰ Matt. 15:19–20; Gal. 5:1–21; Rom. 1:28–32; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Eph. 5:3–5; *Catechism*, nos. 1852–1853.

¹¹ *Catechism*, nos. 1458, 1855, 1862–1863.

¹² *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 395. As the *Catechism* explains (nos. 1858–1859): “*Grave matter* is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: “Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother” (Mark 10:19). The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger. Mortal sin requires *full knowledge* and *complete consent*. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God’s law. It also implies a consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart (Mark 3:5–6; Luke 16:19–31) do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.”

reconciliation. Failure to seek God’s mercy in the sacrament puts our eternal souls at risk, and can result in our spiritual death.¹³

14. I realize that such language about sin and judgment is rarely heard anymore. Under the influence of our highly secularized society, we have lost that lively awareness of what the Church’s tradition calls the “four last things”: death, judgment, hell, and heaven.¹⁴

But we are called to a mature faith, my brothers and sisters. We want to stand confidently before our Lord, with full assurance that we know his will for our lives (1 Cor. 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Col. 4:12). We must not let ourselves be confused or led astray by a culture that would have us avoid truths of the Gospel we might find challenging or uncomfortable.

15. It is true that our merciful Father has created each of us out of love and that he desires to make us holy and to live in communion and friendship with us, beginning in this world and continuing for all eternity in the world to come. This is the beautiful hope of our faith.

But our Lord made clear that evil and sin could thwart our path to heaven. He described sin as a kind of voluntary slavery (John 8:34) and warned that it could ruin us if we do not open ourselves to his Gospel (Luke 13:3, 5). He taught that we could freely choose to say “no” to God and to exclude ourselves from communion with him—even for all eternity.¹⁵ At the end of our lives, we will be judged by our love for God and for our neighbor.¹⁶

16. However, let us not reduce the Gospel to something negative. Jesus did not come only to warn us about the wages of sin. He came not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:16–17). He wants every one to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). That is why he left us this powerful sacrament by which we are reconciled to God—so that none of us would be lost, so that all of us would come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

17. Jesus came to bring us a new and abundant life (John 10:10–11). To enter into this new life means we must move beyond a fearful or merely legalistic approach to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

It remains an essential law of the Church that we must confess our serious sins once a year, and that if we have committed mortal sin we must receive the sacrament before

¹³ *Catechism*, nos. 1446, 1856, 1861.

¹⁴ *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 26.

¹⁵ Matt. 5:22,29; 10:28; 13:42,50; 25:41. See also Acts 10:42; John 5:22, 27; *Catechism*, nos. 1034–1035, 1037; Pope John Paul II, General Audience (July 28, 1999).

¹⁶ Luke 16:19–31; Matt. 25:31–46; *Catechism*, no. 1470.

coming again to communion.¹⁷ But we must never forget that this sacrament is also a positive spiritual weapon given to us by our Lord to help us in our journey to holiness and communion with God.

18. I can testify from my own life to the healing power of this sacrament received regularly. I invite you too, my brothers and sisters, to experience this for yourselves. Regular celebration of this sacrament will help you form your conscience; it will give you strength in your daily fight against sin; and it will help you to gain the full freedom that is yours as children of God.¹⁸

I especially appeal to parents: take your children regularly to confession; as they confess their own sins, let them also see you going to confession. This will have a tremendous impact on their formation as young Christian men and women, and it will yield many blessings of generosity and understanding in your family life.

The Story of Every Christian Life

19. In this Jubilee Year, we must again find our lives written in the Gospels. The story of every Christian life can be found in the parable of the merciful father and the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). In this story we discover the meaning of sin, and how we are forgiven and reconciled to the Father through the sacrament of the Church.

When we sin, we are like the son in the parable—who leaves his father’s house and proceeds to squander his inheritance. Each of us was made a child and heir of God in baptism (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:29). By sinning we freely choose to reject this heritage, and to instead live apart from our Father’s house—away from God and outside of the laws of his Church.

20. Notice that the prodigal son's squandering of his inheritance is not merely a private affair. His personal dissipation participates in larger societal vices (Luke 15:13, 30). This is the way it is with sin. The darkness of our individual sins leads to a darkening and coarsening of the social fabric.

God will never force us to love him. He respects our freedom and dignity too much for that. Like the father in the parable, he allows us to turn our backs on him, and he will not compel us to return. We must come back of our own accord. This requires that first we recognize that we have sinned against him and need his forgiveness.

21. To admit our guilt is hard to do in this culture. We tend today to think of guilt only in terms of personal psychology or in terms of our relationships with other people. We may “feel guilty” about something we have said or done to our neighbors, or about something we have left unsaid or undone.

¹⁷ *Catechism*, nos. 1385, 1457.

¹⁸ *Order of Penance*, 6; *Catechism*, no. 1458.

Under the influence of our secularized culture, we have a much harder time admitting that we have offended God. We find it difficult to say personally, as we do in the *Confiteor* of the Mass: “I have sinned, through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.”

22. That is why it is essential to see our sins in their true light. Like the prodigal son, we must “come to [our] senses” (Luke 15:17). We must examine our consciences, as the prodigal son does. A good way to do this is by reading the Word of God and comparing our attitudes and actions to the standards of the Gospel.¹⁹

Our Lord said we must love God with our whole hearts, and love one another as he has loved us. An examination of conscience asks: How well are you living by this measure? What obstacles prevent you from keeping his commandments? What do you need to do differently? What sins and smaller failings must you avoid? What resolutions do you need to make?

I hope that all of you will get into the habit of examining your conscience every day. This exam is not intended to burden you with guilt feelings. To the contrary, it will help free you from sinful and bad tendencies and it will help keep you on the straight path to the Father. Through this daily exam, you will be able to see yourselves more clearly—as God sees you—and you will be more open to the movements of his grace in your soul.

The Mystery of Reconciliation

23. Our Lord has called us, not only to resist sin, but also to become holy and perfect as God our Father is holy and perfect (Matt. 5:7; 1 Pet. 2:16). In this daily journey of conversion, “the mystery of reconciliation made present in the sacrament is the point of arrival and departure,” as Pope John Paul said.²⁰

In going to confession we are like the prodigal son, finally aware of our sinfulness, responding to the call of our conscience, arising and going to our Father. Through the sacred ministry of the priest in the confessional, the Father in his compassion stretches out his arms to welcome and embrace us.

Just as the prodigal son confessed in the tender embrace of his Father’s arms, we tell our Father in the confessional: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and you; I no longer deserve to be called your son” (Luke 15:18,21). In the confessional, we tell our Father what we have done and left undone, how sorry we are for these things, and how we are resolved, with the help of his grace, not to sin again.

¹⁹ Some passages of particular help for an examination of conscience include: Matt. 5:21–31, 38–48; 6:24; 7:1–5,12, 21–23; Rom. 12:1–2, 9:21; 13:8–10; Gal. 5:1, 13–26. *Catechism*, no. 1454.

²⁰ General Audience (September 22, 1999).

24. Every confession is a very personal, private, and emotional encounter with God. The “personalism” of the sacrament is related to one of the most beautiful and consoling truths of our religion. Before the womb our Father knew each one of us, personally, by name (Jer. 1:5; Isa. 43:1; Eph. 1:4–5). Even the hairs on our heads are numbered (Matt. 10:30). Each of us can say, as St. Paul did, that Jesus has “loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20).

We are loved personally. And we sin personally. That is why our Lord desires to hear each of our confessions personally. Thus, it is the ancient teaching and practice of the Church that we must confess our sins individually and receive absolution personally from the priest, except in extreme cases of grave necessity.²¹

25. God knows all things. Even apart from our confession he knows our sins and he knows when we are truly sorry for our sins. Why then must we confess our sins to his priest? Because in the mystery of his saving plan, the Father has established confession as the normal means by which he wishes to grant us his forgiveness.

But the sacrament is not something that we receive only because God commands it. When the apostle James taught about confession, he described it as a work of divine healing: “Confess your sins . . . that you may be healed” (James 5:14–16).

The sacrament is a remedy for what ails us. And what ails every one is sin. Our hearts hunger for his forgiveness, for the peace that comes with knowing that we have been pardoned and reconciled to God, for the assurance that we have been given a clean slate and a fresh start. This peace and assurance can only be granted to us through our encounter with the Lord in the sacrament.

26. We need personal confession to keep us honest about ourselves. As our Lord showed us, often we are not the best judges of our own character. We find it much easier to judge and find fault in others than to take stock of our own failings before God (Luke 6:37, 41–42). Often our pride gets in the way, rendering us prone to make excuses or to justify ourselves before God (Luke 18:9–14).

Only in the confessional are we “exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account” (Heb. 4:13). In the confessional, he looks upon us with love, calling us to an ever-deepening discipleship: “You are lacking in one thing . . . Come, follow me” (Mark 10:17–22).

27. In the sacrament, what the apostle John promised is true: “If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing” (1 John 1:9).

²¹ Pope John Paul II, *Misericordia Dei*, Apostolic Letter in the Form of *Motu Proprio* on Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (April 7, 2002); Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Circular Letter on the Integrity of the Sacrament of Penance* (March 20, 2000). *Catechism*, no. 1483.

In the confessional, it is not the priest who forgives us, but the Father of mercies through the ministry of his Church.²² And in the sacrament he raises us, his children, from spiritual death.²³ That is why the father in our Lord's parable declares: "This son of mine was dead, and has come to life again. . . . [H]e was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:24,32).

The sacrament also reconciles us with his Church. This, too, is expressed in our parable. Like the prodigal son, we are welcomed home to the Church, and invited to share in the festival of joyful reconciliation, the banquet of the Father, the feast of the Eucharist.

28. This is the beautiful surprise that awaits those who have been away from this sacrament for too long.

What you will discover is that surprise of grace that St. Ambrose of Milan described so well in meditating on the parable of the prodigal son: "See, the Father comes out to meet you . . . and give you a kiss, the pledge of love and tenderness. . . . You are afraid of hearing words filled with anger, and he prepares a banquet for you."²⁴

29. If it has been too long since you last went to confession, come back! If you have loved ones who need to be reconciled to God and the Church, urge them to return to their Father in the sacrament of confession.

Our Father loves us in ways that we could never imagine possible. No matter how far you have wandered astray by sin, the Father is ready to forgive you—if you will only turn to him in repentance. He will forgive all those who come to him in true sorrow for their sins.

Our Lord revealed this great truth to us—in the mystery of the Father's mercy, there is more rejoicing in heaven at the repentance of one sinner than over ninety-nine people who have no need of repentance (Luke 15:7).

30. I urge all of you, my brothers and sisters, go to confession more often. Make it a regular part of your spiritual lives. Even if you are not aware of mortal or serious sins, frequent confession of your small sins will help you strip away the veils of self-deception and will help you grow in your love for our Lord.

Pope Benedict has said beautifully: "It is true: our sins are always the same. But we clean our homes, our rooms, at least once a week, even if the dirt is always the same, in order to live in cleanliness, in order to start again. Otherwise, the dirt might not be seen but it

²² Pope Benedict XVI, Homily. Mass of Priestly Ordination, Pentecost Sunday (May 15, 2005); *Order of Penance*, 46; *Catechism*, no. 1449.

²³ *Catechism*, 1468.

²⁴ *Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel*, 7.

builds up. Something similar can be said about the soul. For . . . if I never go to confession, my soul is neglected. . . . In the end, I am always pleased with myself and no longer understand that I must always work hard to improve, that I must make progress. And this cleansing of the soul which Jesus gives us in the Sacrament of Confession helps us to make our consciences more alert, more open, and hence, it also helps us to mature spiritually as human persons.”²⁵

The Spirit of Reconciliation in a Culture of Revenge

31. Part of the mature spirituality to which we are called is the adoption of a penitential spirit. We must set aside all the prejudices and wrong notions we have about penance. Penance is not a stern punishment, a gloomy duty we owe because we have sinned. Certainly it is true that we must atone or “make things right” when we have sinned. It is also true that our “charity covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). But penance is far more than that.

The spirit of penance is an expression of our joy and thanks at being liberated from our sins. Jesus sets us free to love and calls us to produce good fruits as proof of our repentance (Luke 3:8). Through our penitential practices—our prayers, services, and sacrifices—we fulfill our Lord’s new commandment to love others as he loved us (John 15:12).

30. Jesus calls us to be merciful to our brothers and sisters as our heavenly Father has been merciful to us (Luke 6:36; Matt. 5:48). He calls us to forgive those who trespass against us as the Father forgives our trespasses against him (Matt. 6:12, 14–15). And our Lord warned us that we couldn’t expect forgiveness and mercy from the Father unless we are willing to forgive our brothers from the heart (Matt. 18:35).

Living as children of the Father who is rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4), we must be apostles of reconciliation in a world that is angry and violent, in a culture of blame and revenge.

31. *How far our world has fallen from the ideal of the Gospel!* We are haunted by the specter of terrorism. But the terrorist mindset is rooted in a very basic refusal to forgive. The terrorist instead harbors anger and bitterness for the wrongs he believes to have been done to him. He seeks not reconciliation but violent revenge, even against the unsuspecting innocent.

In our own country, we also see signs of an emerging culture of revenge. So much of our politics is polarized and angry. So many of the messages in our media are aimed at stirring up divisions and resentments against individuals or groups in our society. Instead of trying to settle their differences through conversation and compromise, more and more people are turning to the legal system, seeking to have judges and juries punish their adversaries or push their agendas.

²⁵ Catechetical Meeting with Children Who Had Received their First Communion During the Year (October 15, 2005).

32. Only the sincere and mutual search for forgiveness and reconciliation can bring us the peace and satisfaction we seek in our world today. That is why I believe that a rediscovery of the sacrament of forgiveness would be a prophetic sign.

The reconciliation that the entire world longs for begins in the confessional. The confessional is the great school of mercy. It is in the confessional that the saints and martyrs learned and received the strength to love their enemies and forgive their persecutors.

33. *We must keep the stories of our saints and blessed alive in our land!* Our American Catholic culture and heritage is one of peace, justice, mercy, and reconciliation. In this heritage—in our saints, sacraments, and traditions—we find values that our culture has forgotten but desperately needs to remember.

Let us remind our culture of people like Blessed Luis Magna Servin, one of our newest American blessed, a devoted husband and father, martyred in Mexico in 1928. Facing a firing squad, he was able to speak words of forgiveness to the soldiers about to execute him: “I pardon you and I promise you that on arriving in the presence of God you are the first ones I will intercede for. Viva Cristo Rey! Viva Santa Maria de Guadalupe!”²⁶

34. This is the spirit that our country needs and our world needs. As Christians, we must bear witness to what it means to be reconciled to God and to our brothers and sisters.

We are blessed here in San Antonio to have a true culture of peace and reconciliation. Our city is made up of a wide array of cultures and peoples living together with mutual acceptance and respect. In large part, I think this is due to our city’s deep Catholic roots, which promote a belief in the dignity of the human person. This belief is reflected in our long history of service in our Catholic hospitals, schools, and charities. San Antonio is also a model for how people of different faiths and religions can get along, growing in mutual understanding and working together for the common good.

These are things we should be proud of. And this culture of reconciliation is an example we have to offer to the rest of the nation, my brothers and sisters. In this great Jubilee Year of our Cathedral, let us “renew our apostolic zeal, our missionary call, and become truly apostles of Jesus Christ. For the love of God we have to love our neighbors. We have to show our love in concrete works of mercy—welcoming the immigrant, healing the brokenhearted, raising up the lowly, fighting for the unborn and the family.”²⁷

As a sign and witness to this culture, I believe we also must renew our appreciation and practice of what our Catholic tradition has called the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

²⁶ Ann Ball, *Faces of Holiness II* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2001), 46.

²⁷ Homily. Holy Mass Celebrating the 275th Anniversary of San Fernando Cathedral (March 9, 2006).

The *corporal works of mercy* are: to feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; visit the sick; visit the imprisoned; and bury the dead. The *spiritual works of mercy* are: to counsel the doubtful; instruct the ignorant; admonish sinners; comfort the afflicted; forgive offenses; bear wrongs patiently; and pray for the living and the dead.

Let us begin our practice of mercy in our homes. Love and mercy must begin in the family. Let us make time to listen, to spend time together, and to try to understand one another. Let us begin to practice forgiveness in all our relationships—as husbands and wives, parents and children, as neighbors and citizens. If we commit ourselves to being people of mercy and love then we can find solutions to every problem in our homes and in our world.

Through our cheerful witness to these works of mercy, let us live among our brothers and sisters as a sign that in Christ all might have mercy, peace, and love in abundance (Jude 2).

Ministers of the Father’s Mercy

35. I would like to close this letter with a word of fraternal greeting and exhortation to my brother priests, my first collaborators in this great sacrament of the Jubilee.

My brothers, we have been entrusted with the “ministry of reconciliation” given to the apostles (2 Cor. 5:18). What he spoke to the twelve in that upper room on the first Easter night, Christ has spoken to each of us: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (John 20:22–23).

36. Your spiritual fatherhood is the sign and instrument of the Father’s mercy in the world. You are ministers of his mercy, making that mercy real and present in people’s lives.

This is an awesome and demanding responsibility, as you well know. But how beautiful the privilege of being the *confessor*, of standing in the place of the Good Shepherd, of guiding souls along the narrow path that leads to holiness and heaven.

In your ministry *in persona Christi Capitis*, you guard and guarantee our people’s sacred right to confess their sins personally to our Lord, and to hear personally our Lord’s words of pardon and peace.²⁸ In the gift and mystery of your priestly calling you are servants of God’s forgiveness.

To you, our people entrust the most delicate and private matters of their hearts and souls, with full confidence that what they say will remain absolutely secret, “sealed” in absolute

²⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Encyclical Letter (March 4, 1979), 20.

confidentiality by your solemn vow of silence in the sacrament.²⁹ Your dialogues with penitents are sacred conversations that must always be marked by deep respect and sensitivity, as you guide them to full honesty in the disclosure of their sins, and to complete openness to God’s healing grace.

37. I wish to make my own the words that Pope John Paul II spoke to priests nearly 20 years ago during his pastoral visit to San Antonio: “The *ministry of reconciliation* is a fundamental part of the Church’s life and mission. . . . Do everything possible to make the administration of this sacrament *a primary aspect* of [your] service to God’s people. There can be no substitute for the means of grace which Christ himself has placed in our hands.”³⁰

I urge you, my brothers, to rediscover the power of this sacrament. In order to lead others to fight sin and to strive for holiness, you must yourselves be faithful penitents. Let your joy and trust in this sacrament then animate your sacred calling as ministers of mercy.

38. The time has come also, my brothers, for bold new initiatives to make this encounter with the merciful heart of our Father more widely available. We need a new preaching and a new catechesis to bring people back to this fountain of the Lord’s grace and healing. This will call for even more creativity and self-sacrifice from you.

We know from experience that large numbers of the faithful come to confess their sins when parishes find ways to accommodate their busy lifestyles and work schedules. My brothers, please consider setting aside more of your time to hear confessions during the lunch hours of the workday as well as in the late afternoons and early evenings when the workday for many has ended.

Also, I hope that you will encourage “family friendly” confession times so that husbands and wives may come together with their children to experience this sacrament of healing and growth.

I am confident that your efforts to renew this sacrament will bear great fruits in our Church and in our world. For it is true: “Every confessional is a special and blessed place from which there is born new and uncontaminated a reconciled individual—a reconciled world.”³¹

Your Father is Merciful

39. My brothers and sisters of the people of God in San Antonio, what Jesus Christ told us is true: “Your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

²⁹ *Catechism*, nos. 1466–1467.

³⁰ Homily. Holy Mass Celebrated at Westover Hills (September 13, 1987), 5–6.

³¹ *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 31.

This is our Lord's promise to us, a promise that is fulfilled in every celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. That is why I urge you again in this Jubilee Year, in this great season of new possibilities and new beginnings: "Be reconciled to God!" (2 Cor. 5:20).

Let us go out confidently to meet the Lord who comes to us in this great sacrament of hope, this great source of grace and divine life. We have nothing to be afraid of. It is our Lord who awaits us—to heal us, to set us free, to grant us peace!

"Let us go forth with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). This exhortation I chose for my Episcopal motto. And in this Jubilee Year, I find it a fitting prayer for our Archdiocese. May all of us have the confidence in our Father's mercy to seek his forgiveness and to receive the grace he longs to give to us.

I ask the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Our Lady of La Candelaria, to whom our San Fernando Cathedral are dedicated. When Our Lady appeared to St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin, she called herself the "merciful Mother of all who live united in this land."

In this Jubilee Year, let us turn to the Mother of Mercy, the Mother of the Americas. Let us ask our Holy Mother to pray for us sinners, and to guide us along the path back to our Father's house.

+ The Most Rev. José H. Gomez, S.T.D.
Archbishop of San Antonio

Given in San Antonio, at the Pastoral Center, on February 21, Ash Wednesday, in the Year of our Lord 2007, the second of my episcopacy.