

## Ambassadors of Christ Appealing for Reconciliation: The Priest As Minister of Mercy

- Introduction

- Four weeks ago, on the first day of Lent, St. Paul gave the essential Lenten calling: “We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. . . . We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘In an acceptable time I heard you and on the day of salvation I helped you.’ Behold now is a very acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation.”
- The grace of the Lenten season is the grace of reconciliation, the grace of conversion, which means far more than a minor course correction in our life, it means a new life, a death and resurrection within Jesus’ death and resurrection. Every reconciliation is meant to be a resurrection, which is what we heard on Sunday in the Parable of the Prodigal Son when the Father says about his reconciled heir, “My son was dead and has been brought to life again.” That’s why Jesus founded the Sacrament of Confession on Easter Sunday night, breathing on his first priests the Holy Spirit, sending them out just as the Father had sent him as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, and telling them to forgive and retain sins in his name. For us to experience Easter, we must pass through the phase of reconciliation. That’s why Lent is so important as a season in which we focus on reconciliation. And the Church prays that none of us will receive that grace in vain.
- In our first talk, we focused on the Holy Eucharist, which is a sacrament we can receive every day of our life. In this second talk, we turn to the other Sacrament we can and are meant to receive hundreds if not a few thousand times over the course of our life: the great gift of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, which restores our soul to its baptismal splendor. Just like Jesus’ self-giving in the Eucharist is often taken for granted by faithful and even sometimes by priests, so Jesus’ forgiving work in the Sacrament of his Mercy can also be neglected.
- But we know how important it is for him. He tells us in Luke 15. He says that heaven rejoices more for one repentant sinner than for 99 righteous who don’t need to repent. Heaven rejoices more for one repentant sinner than anything, even the fiats of saints who never knew sin or committed mortal sin. That’s why Pope Francis has said, “God’s greatest joy is forgiving!” And we, brothers, are instruments not only to help give God that joy, but witness it, as no one else on earth can, in the confessional.
- I have entitled this talk, “Ambassadors of Christ Appealing for Reconciliation: The Priest As Minister of Mercy” and I hope to get very practical about how effective we are as those ambassadors. I have just finished a seven-year assignment as an attaché to the diplomatic corps of the Holy See at the Holy See’s Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations, where I worked alongside two papal nuncios and interacted with many ambassadors from the 195 countries present. Ambassadors represent the monarchs, the presidents or prime ministers, and the peoples who send them. They are plenipotentiary, they have full powers to represent, speak and act in the name of their governments. We have been made plenipotentiary ambassadors of Christ capable of acting in his person, with his authority, to bring about the reconciliation of the world to the Father. It’s a mind-blowing reality.
- One of the greatest honors of my life was to be named by Pope Francis in 2016 a Missionary of Mercy for the Jubilee Year of Mercy, at the end of which he surprised us all by extending our mandate *usque ad revocationem*. We’ll be meeting with him again the day after Divine Mercy Sunday for the third time. He commissioned 1,142 of us originally, now there are about 600 of us in the world, for a three fold mission, as he described in *Misericordiae Vultus*: to be “above all” persuasive preachers of mercy; to dedicate ourselves in a particular way to hearing confessions, giving us his authority to pardon even those crimes reserved to the Holy See (like desecration of the Eucharist,

physically attacking the Pope, absolving an accomplice against the sixth commandment, directly breaking the seal of confession, recording a confession and divulging its contents); and to be “signs and instruments of God’s forgiveness, . . . living signs of the Father’s readiness to welcome those in search of his pardon” and of the “Church’s maternal solicitude for the people of God.”

- Every priest, ordained as an Ambassador for Christ, is meant to be a Missionary of Mercy, God as it were appealing through us for Reconciliation. And this is just as urgent a task for us as it is for us to be catalysts for Eucharistic revitalization. Even the Church is “mission territory” with regard to the Sacrament of Mercy. Recent surveys have shown that three quarters of Catholics in the U.S., including 38 percent of weekly Mass-going Catholics, do not go to confession even the canonically minimal frequency of once a year. The vast majority of Catholics behave as if they believe that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is an optional and unimportant part of Catholic faith and life. That’s something that we’re called to help remedy.
- Mercy is so much needed today. St. John Paul II and Pope Francis have both emphasized that we are living in a “kairos of mercy,” a time in which God’s loving forgiveness is especially crucial. The reason is because we’re living at a time in which unexpiated guilt is wreaking so much havoc. After two World Wars and the Cold War, the Holocaust, the genocides in Armenia, the Ukraine, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, after the evil destruction we’ve been seeing in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, northern Nigeria, after so many atrocities from tyrannical governments, after the waterfalls of blood flowing from more than two billion abortions worldwide, after the sins that have destroyed so many families, after so much physical and sexual abuse, after lengthy crime logs in newspapers every day, after the scourge of terrorism, after so much hurt and pain, the terrible weight of collective guilt crushes not only individuals but burdens structures and whole societies. The modern world is like one big Lady Macbeth, compulsively washing its hands to remove the blood from them, but there is no earthly detergent powerful enough to take the blemishes away. People can converse with psychiatrists and psychologists, but their words and prescriptions can only help them deal with guilt, not eliminate it. They can confess ourselves to bartenders, but bartenders can only dispense Absolut vodka, not absolution, and inebriation never brings expiation. They can escape reality through distractions and addictions — drugs, sports, entertainment, materialism, food, power, lust, and others — but none can adequately anaesthetize the pain in their soul from the suffering they’ve caused or witnessed. Whether we admit it, whether we realize it, we’re longing for redemption. We’re yearning for a second, third or seventy-times-seventh chance. We’re pining for forgiveness, reconciliation, and a restoration of goodness. We’re hankering for a giant reset button for ourselves and for the world. And if we can’t have that personal and collective do over, then at least we ache for liberation from the past and, like Zacchaeus or Ebenezer Scrooge, for a chance make up for has been done. We want atonement. And God responds to our age’s great desire and need for expiation with his mercy, and we are the ambassadors, the missionaries, of that mercy.
- Becoming more effective ambassadors
  - How do we do that well? The first and obvious answer is that to be good ministers of mercy we must first be good penitents, who realize our need for the Lord’s forgiveness and regularly seek it. I’ve done a lot of clergy days, brothers, as well as priests retreats. I’ll never forget the time when one priest came to me and said, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been 55 years since my last confession.” It’s not uncommon to have priests say it’s been much longer than a year since their last confession. I’m always thrilled when they come back and heaven rejoices with particular joy when they do, but such infrequency really does wreak a pastoral toll on people, because if a priest doesn’t prioritize it personally, he’ll almost never prioritize it pastorally. And the fruits of being a generous confessor hearing many confessions can make us far better penitents. It’s going to be hard for us to grow in holiness if we’re not going to confession at least once a month. Pope Francis has urged us and all the faithful to go every two weeks. We need God’s mercy.
  - What I would like to spend most of our time on during this talk is what the faithful have said to us about becoming more effective confessors. Last May, on behalf of the Missionaries of Mercy in the United States, I did a survey asking for feedback on the Sacrament of Confession. We used Facebook and Twitter, parish bulletins, websites and the rest, to bring it to people’s attention and in a couple of weeks we got 1499 responses before shutting it down. We asked six questions: Besides

absolution, is there anything else you look for when you go to Confession? What have been your best experiences in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation? Have you had any difficult experiences in Confession? What made them difficult? Do you choose a consistent confessor most of the time or do you go to whoever is hearing confessions? Is there a reason behind your choice? What qualities and virtues do you look for in a good confessor? If you were speaking to a group of priest confessors, what advice would you give them to help you to experience more profoundly God's mercy in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation?

- We received incredible feedback on best practices, worst practices, common practices and strange practices. With anonymity, people were very candid. Altogether they gave 8,032 insights that were compiled in a book stretching 328 pages. It's a treasure trove. I hope to synthesize it in an upcoming book I'm working on during these months of sabbatical before I become the Catholic chaplain at Columbia University.
- What did they say they were looking for in a confessor?
  - **Listens** — “Good listener,” “Engaged listener,” “Active listener,” “Reflective listener,” “Listens with his heart,” “Hears not just words but me.”
  - **Welcoming** — “Receptive,” “Easy to talk to,” “Relatable,” “Friendly,” “Accepting,” “Approachable,” “Open-minded,” “Warm,” “Makes eye contact,” “Makes you feel safe,” “Inclusive,” “Nonjudgmental,” “Not critical.”
  - **Available** — “Generous with time,” “Willing to invest himself.”
  - **Compassionate and empathetic** — “Cares about me like Jesus,” “A loving Father,” “Empathizes without trivializing,” “Aware of the penitent's vulnerability,” “Provides tissues.”
  - **Interested** — “Truly present,” “Doesn't seem bored,” “Willing to engage,” “Dialogical,” “Adaptive and versatile,” “Desires to help people feel God's mercy,” “Wants to accompany people,” “Like Jesus, is a friend of sinners.”
  - **Understanding** — “Seeks to understand,” “Down to earth,” “Experienced in life,” “Grounded in the messy realities of life,” “In touch with the world and with his parishioners,” “Meets you where you are,” “Comprehends human failure,” “Understands human struggles,” “Appreciative of the special burdens of women,” “Non-dogmatic.”
  - **Encouraging** — “Comforting,” “Affirming,” “Positive attitude,” “Supportive,” “Consoling,” “Sees the good in me,” “Capable of seeing Christ even in me,” “Optimistic,” “Hopeful,” “Inspiring.”
  - **Peaceful** — “Conveys the peace I seek from God.”
  - **Unassuming** — “Doesn't cookie cut penitents,” “Doesn't stereotype,” “Doesn't think I know the faith well as a convert.”
  - **Patient** — “Doesn't interrupt,” “Willing to take the time,” “Doesn't lose his temper,” “Slow to anger if I don't know the right words.”
  - **Professional** — “Relaxed but not overly casual,” “Not looking to be my friend or therapist,” “Dresses for Confession,” “Serious.”
  - **Competent** — “Psychologically astute,” “Knows resources,” “Can make referrals,” “Understands family dynamics,” “Grasps psychology and mental health,” “Knows Sacred Scripture,” “Knows the Catechism,” “Theologically up-to-date,” “Speaks and understands English well enough.”
  - **Mature** — “Balanced,” “Good human formation,” “Real,” “Temperate,” “Not infantilizing,” “Doesn't obsess about sexual sins”
  - **Prudent** — “Reasonable,” “Wise,” “Objective,” “Tactful.”
  - **Practical** — “Gives clear advice,” “Commonsensual,” “No nonsense.”
  - **Helpful** — “Capable of answering questions and explaining,” “Asks questions,” “Provides feedback,” “Gives loving advice,” “Knowledgeable,” “Logical,” “Insightful,” “Can suggest resources to grow.”
  - **Gives good penances** — “Medicinal penances,” “Creative penances,” “Gives a penance that matches the sin,” “Gives restorative penances.”

- **Sincere** — “Authentic,” “Frank,” “Candid,” “Blunt,” “Willing to tell me the truth,” “Honest,” “Direct,” “Genuine.”
- **Succinct** — “Not long-winded,” “Brief,” “Not too chatty,” “Knows when to speak and remain silent,”
- **Confidential** — “Discreet,” “Doesn’t gossip,” “Maintains the seal.”
- **Happy** — “Joyful,” “Likes his job,” “Happy to be there,” “Smiles,” “Has a sense of humor,” “Loves the Sacrament,” “Loves being a priest, loves God, loves being Catholic,” “Loves bearing God’s mercy,” “Passionate.”
- **Humble** — “Not full of himself,” “Recognizes he is a sinner, too,” “Smells like his sheep,” “Goes to Confession himself,” “Knows he’s not perfect,” “Recognizes he’s a minister, not an arbiter,” “Human,” “Not clerical.”
- **Faithful** — “Strong believer,” “Believes and communicates the faith, not the way he wishes the faith to be,” “Says what the Bible says,” “Doesn’t argue my sins away,” “Knows Catholic moral theology,” “Committed to Vatican II,” “Committed to social justice,” “Gives valid absolution”
- **Holy** — “A good disciple,” “Virtuous,” “Has integrity,” “Grace-filled,” “Madly in love with Jesus,” “Has every-day holiness, not a piety that separates,” “Christ-like,” “Godly,” “Docile to the Holy Spirit,” “Lets God shine through him,” “Ascetic,” “Penitential,” “A friend of the saints.”
- **Prayerful** — “Prays for me,” “Reverent,” “Devout,” “Educated in the mystics,” “Makes the Sacrament a sacred rather than a bureaucratic experience,” “Prays and doesn’t just say the words of absolution,”
- **Vigilant** — “Able to spot abuse.”
- What have been their best experiences?
  - Being reminded of God’s love and mercy
  - When the penance is more clearly tied to the sin and “meaningful”
  - When priests don’t seem to judge, are compassionate, understanding and offer advice without shaming
  - When the priest says “welcome back” or “welcome home” after many years away
  - Offered practical advice in response to a particular sin; getting at the “root”
  - Helping the penitent to forgive him/herself and let go of guilt
  - When priests are patient with repeated sins
  - Responding with empathy to hard situations
  - Saying "How happy is the Lord that you've come to His Father's house seeking His forgiveness."
  - Receiving helpful resources—book recommendations, podcasts, prayer cards— for continual conversion
  - When priests are patient if the penitent cries or is anxious in confession.
- What have been their worst experiences?
  - Being yelled at in the confessional
  - Priests who fall asleep in confession or are on their phones
  - Priest who lack warmth, who express harsh judgment
  - Shaming
  - When priests probe for too much information, especially around sexual sins
  - When they have to rush because there are not enough opportunities to go to confession.
  - Being told that a sin was not a sin
  - Refusing absolution because the priest thought there was “not enough contrition”
  - Saying “is that it? Are you sure?”
  - Failing to use the correct form of absolution
  - Hastily judging a personal/family situation without full knowledge or context
  - Rushing through confession
  - Violating the seal of confession

- I had gone to a priest to talk to him about my fear that I might have cancer in my female organs. I asked him not to say anything to my husband about it until I knew the test results. Three days later, on Sunday, as my husband and I were leaving the church, the priest asked me about whether the tests had come back malignant or benign. I was shocked and felt betrayed. I have tried to go to confession since but I don't feel comfortable.
- My priest violated the seal and gossiped about something I had told him about campus ministry
- Getting angry with a penitent who has been away from confession
- What would they say to confessors?
  - We can break down the input into four categories:
    - What penitents think we should realize and know.
    - What they believe we should do outside of confession.
    - What they think we should do inside confession.
    - What they advise we never do inside confession.
  - What penitents think priests should realize and know.
    - “Prayer is essential to being a holy confessor, to whom people have a legitimate expectation.”
    - “Catholics notice if a priest truly believes.”
    - “It is a blessing and joyful privilege to hear confessions, to be the face of God’s mercy. ... It’s not a mundane task.” “Priests should love the Sacrament.” It is the “greatest gift you can give to someone besides the Eucharist.”
    - “You are able to show only as much mercy as you have allowed yourself to receive from God.
    - How hard it is for many to come. For some, it is the “hardest moment of their life.” Many come as “wounded lions.”
    - “No two confessions are ever the same, even if you’ve heard it all before.” Each person is different and we should embrace that individuality.
    - “Your interactions with the penitent may be remembered forever.” “You have a powerful role in either being the conduit of God's mercy or in destroying people's self confidence and will to do better. First do no harm!” “What you say and how you act can make or break a person’s faith in God and in the Church.”
    - “Confession may be the Church’s one opportunity to reach someone. Don’t waste it.”
    - “Priests are there for God and his forgiveness and priests are the conduits.”
    - “Priests don’t have to have all the answers. God is the answer, not always priests’ advice.”
    - “People yearn to be closer to God and need help.”
    - “You are not an absolution vending machine.”
    - “If you wish to punish, work as a prison guard.”
    - “The Confessor should realize that when his own eternal judgment will depend upon how often and how well he has bestowed God's Mercy upon his people.”
  - What priests should do outside of Confession
    - “Prioritize Confessions over administration.”
    - “Make this sacrament a priority in the life of your parish. Inquire what times work and don’t work, and ask questions to get feedback anonymously.”
    - “You will be exhausted when you choose to offer confession frequently, but it is the key to renewing any parish.”
    - “Make sure your people know that hearing confessions is of great importance to you.”

- Promote frequent confession positively from the pulpit. “Mention your experience as a penitent.” “Remind us of the value and purpose of the Sacrament.” Help people to realize that it’s “not just a Sacrament for mortal sins.”
- “Offer a refresher course on how to make a good confession.”
- Be discreet. “If a priest is a gossip, people won’t trust the seal.”
- Get advice from youth ministers about adolescent development, spirituality, and trends.
- Eliminate the barriers that keep people from coming to Church, because those barriers similarly keep people from confession.
- Only advertise confession times if you’re planning to show up. “Someone who has overcome red and cold sweats to finally show up, only to find out there’s no one there, and no information may never return.”
- What priests should do within confession
  - “Punctuality is pastoral, professional and inspires confidence.” “Be there on time.”
  - “Say a prayer for each penitent.” Pray to their guardian angels and “greet the guardian angel” as the penitent enters. Ask the Holy Spirit for the gifts of “wisdom, knowledge, understanding, mercy, love and patience.”
  - Welcome the penitent and show you’re “glad the person is there.” “Look us in the eye.”
  - “Put into practice in the confessional St. Paul’s words in 1 Cor 13.”
  - “Try your best to model Luke 15”
  - Let the person know you’re listening by “short phrases.” Listen as much to “what the person is not saying.” “Listening is obviously important, but sometimes asking questions is extremely helpful. As a lawyer I have to listen first, and ask enough questions to determine the facts and guide the client’s understanding of the issues.”
  - “Listen more. Talk less. Encourage more. Blame less.”
  - “Please preside, similar to the way you preside at Mass. It’s uncomfortable to have to begin the conversation or the dialogue in the Sacrament.” “Find the delicate balance between moving the long-winded along and not letting the people feel rushed.” “It’s merciful to keep the line moving.”
  - “Please make each person feel as if her confession is the only one you’re hearing.” “Treat me like I’m the only penitent you’ll hear.” “There is only one penitent coming to confession at a time. Pay full attention, as Christ would.” “The doctor may have performed surgery thousands of times but it’s the patient’s first time on the table.”
  - “Choose your words carefully,” because they may have a significant impact on the human being and how the person relates to God.
  - On tone: “Consider what you might say to a good friend or sibling and use that loving approach with the penitent.”
  - “Speak often about God’s desire to save and heal.” “Stress God’s love for everyone.” “Remind us of God’s mercy often, because it’s hard to fathom.” “Offer hope.” “Remind us of our dignity.”
  - “Give more prayer-filled penances.” “Give advice that makes a penitent continue to think after Confession.” “Relate Biblical examples of Jesus’ forgiving.” “Stop treating penance as if it’s paying a traffic fine. Why should prayer be a penance?” “Give works of mercy.”
  - “Treat the words of absolution with the same fidelity as you treat the words of consecration.” “Project a sense of joy when praying the words of absolution!” “Look me in the eye and smile when you’re finished.”
  - Take a short break if you’re tired, “rather than take your fatigue or frustration out on the next penitent.”

- “Don’t hurry the penitent.” “Don’t be in a rush.” “Don’t act like your goal is to move people out quickly.” “Don’t give us a fast-food confession.” “No one wants to feel like a herd of cows going through a gate.” “Please don’t treat confession like an assembly line.”
      - “Don’t take your bad mood out on a penitent.”
      - “Don’t be a robot,” “rote or automatic.”
      - “Never trample on people’s inmost pain.” “Under no circumstances ever degrade the penitent.” “Never shame anyone. People are ashamed enough.”
      - “Don’t treat lay people as if they’re on a lower rung of faith or discipleship.”
      - “Don’t just give me a penance. Give me advice. Otherwise absolution feels like something I could receive from a vending machine.”
      - “Don’t be flippant or overly casual. I expect my confessor to be like my doctor and take me and what he’s doing seriously. Easy-going confessors don’t help much when it comes to calling people to conversion.”
      - “Please understand that, especially for young women, just entering the confessional is a brave and vulnerable act. We’re alone with a man of authority in a private space, perhaps even in an empty Church in the evening, sharing the things we wouldn’t share with anyone else. Please don’t be creepy!”
      - “Please never bring your cell phone into the confessional. It’s like having it on the altar. This is a sacrament and it’s sacred. Priests haven’t had hearing confessions for the first 2,000 years of Christianity. They’re not needed now.” Many have said that they have seen their priests on their phones and some worry, likewise, about the confession being recorded.
    - That’s just a sampling of the 328 pages of feedback. If you’d like to see the results you could go to [CatholicPreaching.com](http://CatholicPreaching.com) and type into the search engine *Merciful Like the Father* and you’ll be able to download it all. What’s found in the survey is so much helpful tips from our faithful about how to be an effective Ambassador for Christ appealing for reconciliation, how to be an efficacious Missionary of Mercy, so that we can make heaven rejoice and penitents on earth receive the love of the one who came so that his joy might be in them and their joy brought to perfection.
  - Conclusion
    - I’d like to finish by returning anew to the patron saint of parish priests, St. John Vianney.
    - He really shows us the priority that the Sacrament of Mercy should have in priestly life. For the last 31 years of his work in Ars, he heard confessions 12-14 hours a day in winter and 16-18 hours in summer. Most non-priests, in hearing those numbers, are amazed at his commitment and dedication, much in the same way that we would admire anyone who worked 18 hour days for decades out of love for his family or those that he was serving. When I was a seminarian and read his biography for the first time, I, too, admired his heroic *commitment* to *prioritizing* the sacrament of confession. But once I was ordained and began to hear confessions myself, especially during penance services, Reconciliation Weekends and retreats, where I could hear for 3-5 hours straight, I began to recognize the heroism and love involved. The closest analogy I would give for Vianney’s stamina would be to running 25-40 miles a *day* ... uphill ... into gale force winds... with ankle weights ... and wrist weights ... in full body armor ... made of lead — and he did it almost every day from the age of 32 to 73. There’s a man named Dean Kamazes who each year runs 50 marathons in 50 consecutive days, whose determination amazes even marathon runners and ironmen triathletes. What St. John Vianney did is the equivalent of running a marathon for the last 11,315 days of his life.
    - People from all over France were making their way to an inaccessible hamlet in the southeastern corner of the country, taking trains and then horse-drawn carts, walking for miles in mud, and waiting in general up to eight days in line to have their confession heard, waiting patiently in a church that was stiflingly warm in summer and ice cold in the winter.
    - Why wouldn’t they take the easy way out and just go to confession to one of the priests close by?

- Moreover, this great exodus to Ars was taking place at a totally unpredicted time, when the Church in France was in great disarray due to the destruction wrought by the French Revolution — which killed many priests and nuns, closed convents and Catholic schools, formed their own clergy to promote secular values — and by the ideas of the Enlightenment, which were hostile to faith not to mention to the sacrament of confession, which were being inculcated into every level of education and culture.
- And yet one day up to 4,000 people arrived to go to this one man to confession, and 120,000 in a year.
- Why were they coming to this emaciated man in a worn cassock, surplice and purple stole in the previously unheard of village of Ars to eight days to spend five minutes with him in the confessional?
- The preliminary answer, the one given by contemporaries at the time, was that they were coming because, as one said, they were encountering “God in a man.”
  - In St. John Vianney, they found more than a man ordained to act in the person of Christ to absolve them of their sins — any priest could do that.
  - They were coming to someone who incarnated the mercy of the Heavenly Father, who shared the Good Shepherd’s zeal to do anything it took to bring back to the fold the one lost sheep, who would rejoice with all the saints in heaven over the repentance of one sinner, and who like Christ would willingly be hammered to the wood of his confessional to save sinners. In him, they encountered not just a confessor who administered God’s power for the forgiveness of sins, but the closest earthly approximation to the holiness of God. That drew them irresistibly and through all types of sacrifices to make the road to Ars the road to Damascus. God used him, however, almost single-handedly, to bring the whole Church of France back to the beauty of his mercy.
  - He once said that he would readily forsake the joys of heaven in order to remain in the confessional for the salvation of others. “Only on the day of judgment” he humbly said, “will one know how many souls were saved in Ars.”
- But the deeper answer, I think is because he “deserved them.”
  - He was willing to endure 10 years of a martyrdom of waiting for people to come, but he was still there.
  - He preached people into the Confessional.
  - But mostly, he prayed for penitents to come.
    - He would spend most of the night in his Church alone with the Lord, begging, “O my God, grant me the conversion of my parish! I consent to suffer whatever you wish for as long as I live.”
    - He would fast and do other types of bodily penance in prayerful reparation to God for the sins others were not confessing.
    - Even after he began to be overwhelmed by the number of penitents, however, he kept praying and doing sacrifices for the conversion of others. While in most matters he was reticent about his own interior life, in terms of his praying for sinners, he was very open, because he wanted to enlist others in the effort to imitate him in praying for those in need of God’s mercy.
    - He said that praying for sinners was the “most beautiful and useful of prayers” because “the just are on the way to heaven, the souls of purgatory are sure to enter there, but the poor sinners” will be lost forever. He said that all devotions are good but “there is no better one” than such prayer for sinners.
    - “What souls we can convert by our prayers,” he said on another occasion. Paraphrasing the Lord’s words to the Prophet Ezekiel, he added, “The one who saves a soul from hell saves this soul and his own as well.”
    - St. John Vianney’s existence, like Christ’s before him, became one great prayer for the miracle of the conversion of sinners. “I am only content,” he said, “when I’m praying for sinners.” One of the reasons for his was that he knew, by what seems to



be a divine intimation, that such prayer pleased God immensely. “The good God has made me see,” he said to one of his friends, “how much he loves that I pray for poor sinners. ... I don’t know if it were really a voice I heard or a dream, but, whatever it was, it woke me up and told me that **to save a soul in the state of sin is more pleasing to God than all sacrifices.** For that reason, I do all my resolutions for penance.”

- His example leads us to ask some deeper questions on this day of recollection?
  - Is offering the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation a real priority to me?
  - If he offered confessions 16-18 hours a day, can I offer it one hour, or two?
  - If people really started to come to confession, such that I had to spend most of my day in the confessional, would I be pleased or stressed, as if there would be something else more important that I would need to be doing?
  - Is there any reason why I can’t really have the love for the Sacrament that St. John Vianney did, out of love for God and for his people?
- Prioritization
  - Back in 1986, St. John Paul II wrote a letter to priests on the bicentennial of St. John Vianney’s birth. In it, he said that the state of the world requires that all priests should imitate the pastor of Ars in making themselves “very available” for the Sacrament of Penance. He asked them to give it “priority over other activities” so that the faithful will realize the value attached to this “most difficult, the most delicate, the most taxing and the most demanding [priestly ministry] of all — especially when priests are in short supply.”
  - He wants us to be “very available”
  - And to give it “priority over other activities.” At a time of pastoral planning, when many of us have to do today what several priests divided in yesterday year, when some of us are responsible for more than one parish and many of us wear multiple hats, he’s asking us to give it priority, “especially when priests are in short supply.”
  - That way the faithful will realize the value of the Sacrament. With the Holy Eucharist, it’s the most important thing we do.
- God has chosen us as his ambassadors, appealing to others to be reconciled to him through us. It’s an awesome gift we have been given. He appeals to us not to receive that grace of God in vain, but to recognize now is the very acceptable time for us to unleash the power of that gift so that others can efficaciously respond to God’s call to conversion, seize the day of salvation, and make heaven erupt with joy.