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Mercy and Reconciliation

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One of the most striking images of Pope Francis is a photo taken of him in St. Peter's Basilica. He was scheduled to hear confessions but stopped on his way to go to confession himself. The image of our Holy Father, kneeling down to confess his sins, is a great visual lesson for all of us. We all have need of God's mercy, and he offers it to us freely. But to receive mercy, we must also be open to conversion, a change of life. We must desire and intend to leave behind any and all sin, which keeps us away from living fully in the grace of God. Pope Francis himself says, "We are all sinners. We are all called to a conversion of heart... Let us be transformed by God's mercy."

With the beginning of Lent on Feb. 10, we sense more urgently this need for God's mercy and the need for conversion in our lives. In these intense and powerful weeks of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, God is inviting us to draw ever closer to him and to share more fully in his divine life. He is inviting us to drink deeply of the inexhaustible well of his mercy as often as we can.

As a sign of this mercy, Pope Francis has asked for the observance of "24 Hours for the Lord," an extended period for the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation. Starting on the evening of Friday, Mar. 4 at St. Mary's Cathedral in Fargo, priests will be available for 24 hours straight to offer the sacrament of Reconciliation as a sign that God's mercy is always available and unending. One of the *Missionaries of Mercy* delegated by Pope Francis will be hearing confessions for fourteen hours and preaching a Mission of Mercy at the Cathedral Feb. 20-23. And throughout the season of Lent, other churches in our diocese will also offer extended times of Reconciliation, giving all of us the opportunity to confess our sins and to receive the healing mercy of God through this beautiful sacrament. Jesus said, "I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt. 9:13). Doesn't it make sense that we should respond to that call?

I sincerely hope that this season of Lent will be a time of true conversion for every one of us. Taking our cue from Pope Francis, what better way to experience that conversion than to receive the mercy of God in the sacrament of Reconciliation? Some receive this sacrament regularly, and they will tell us how important it is in their spiritual lives. After all, what could be the downside of experiencing God's mercy as often as possible? But others receive this sacrament rarely or not at all, and I offer them a heartfelt invitation to approach Reconciliation during these weeks of Lent. Perhaps you have fallen out of the habit of going to confession or have forgotten how. Or perhaps you are nervous, and don't know how to put into words the sins of your past life. And maybe you had a bad experience in a previous confession and are reluctant to try again.

Do not allow these or any other obstacles keep you from experiencing God's forgiveness in this holy sacrament. The priest will help you if you ask him, and every priest knows that he, too, is a sinner in need of forgiveness. He is an instrument of the mercy of God, a representative of Jesus, whom Pope Francis calls "the merciful face of the Father." No matter what our sins have been, and no matter the human limitations of the priest confessor, Jesus is there, ready and eager to extend mercy and forgiveness when we come to him with contrition. Our Holy Father tells us, "Put on Christ: he awaits you in the sacrament of Penance, with his mercy he will cure all the wounds caused by sin. Do not be afraid to ask God's forgiveness, because he never tires of forgiving us, like a father who loves us. God is pure mercy!"

There is nothing more liberating than coming from confession with the certainty that our sins are forgiven and that we have received an even richer share in the divine life of our merciful God. Through this forgiveness, we also receive the grace to follow God more faithfully, to turn away from sin, and to love as he loves. God's forgiveness depends on only one thing: our desire to change, to be free from sin and to be reconciled to him. If we truly desire his mercy, then we must also accept the grace of conversion, of moving away from sin and error. Our Lord gave his life for us not to leave us in our sins but to save us from them. As he said to the woman accused of adultery, "Go, and from now on do not sin

anymore” (Jn 8:3). In his mercy, he says the same words to us. Cardinal Gerhard Mueller tells us, “Mercy is a grace that comes from on high and changes our lives: it takes us as we are, but doesn’t leave us as we are. Thank God!”

So once again, I hope that this Lent in the Year of Mercy will be a joyful experience of grace for all of us. Let us invite God to touch our hearts, to transform our lives and to make us truly holy. We need his help, we need his mercy, and there is no better place to find it than in the sacrament of Reconciliation. Pope Francis shows us we have nothing to fear.