

## Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

### **The Joy of Reconciliation**

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Hi, my name is Elizabeth Ficocelli. I'm a Catholic author, speaker, and radio host, and I'm here to give a presentation called "The Joy of Reconciliation." Before we start though, let's begin with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord, we thank You for the season of Lent, and the opportunity to look into our souls and to make changes we need to make, so that we can strive in holiness and be better disciples of You, and be better equipped to do the work You've created us to do on this earth. And we ask all things in the name of Jesus. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you attended the online retreat during the season of Advent, you heard me speak briefly about the benefits of reconciliation. We're going to dive into that a little deeper though in this presentation today. And so I thank you for being with us. And, you know, we just came off the year of mercy, didn't we? Our hope, Holy Francis, Pope Francis The First has declared a year of mercy. And he was inviting us to experience God's mercy in a very powerful and personal way in our lives, and calling us to be more merciful to others. Not just to selfishly keep that gift of mercy to ourselves, but to absolutely share it with others as Jesus modeled for us. He wanted us to understand better God's mercy, and how it works in our lives, and he was really drawing attention to the sacrament of reconciliation. A great gift and treasure. We have, as Catholics, in our daily walk with the Lord to help heal us, to help strengthen us and protect us. And so he really wanted us to ramp up our use of reconciliation, because he was very aware of how many Catholics do not understand this sacrament, do not utilize it, and so he wanted to bring changes about in that.

There was a time back in Catholic history, in the lives of Catholics, where reconciliation was used weekly. I remember reading an article about a woman who grew up in a day when she could recall every Saturday night, she and her family would walk down the street, attended the church to go to reconciliation. And she also recalled how her mother used to wash the bed linens on Saturday nights. And Saturday night, in the memory of this little girl, was she would climb into her bed,

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and the sheets would all smell fresh and clean, and she felt fresh and clean after having just made the confession, ready to start a new week. And I thought that was a beautiful analogy, but I think it's one that's lost on a lot of Catholics today. And I know over time the church has made changes and enhancements in the sacrament – for instance, they've moved from calling it “penance”, which sounds a little dark, you know, and foreboding, to the word “reconciliation”, which is positive, and hopeful, and healing. We've offered face-to-face confessions, we have that opportunity, and not just the dark grills, and little dark rooms that traditionally have made confession in.

But nonetheless, the lines for confession are considerably shorter, no doubt, than the lines for Holy Communion on Sundays. And so, you know, it's fair to say, I think, that this sacrament has become orphaned, and forgotten, underutilized, and definitely, definitely misunderstood. And I remember talking to a friend of mine who was Cradle Catholic, and I was shocked when he told me he had not been to confession in 20 years. And I was like “Wow, why?” And he said “I really haven't done anything that bad.” And I remember being very blown away by that, because I think to myself “I can't get through a week without doing something that, you know, probably I should talk to a priest about.” You know, 20 years. And I began to realize there was a disconnect going on with Catholics, and I started doing a little more research on Catholics to find out the reasons.

And I think the culture; we have to acknowledge the culture we live in. We're all being raised in this age of moral relativism, which means there's no right and wrong, there's no absolute truth, it's whatever we decide is truth. And of course this is not true, but this is the mentality of the culture. That's not going to help send people to confession, is it? And I think Catholics don't understand a lot about sin, you know. I don't think they understand venial sins vs. mortal sins, because if they did, they would know that simply missing mass on a Sunday without a valid reason is a mortal sin, you know. But I think Catholics don't know that.

I think for some Catholics, there is a lot of anxiety, and shame, and guilt that are attached to the things we've done wrong in the past, and that brings up a lot of icky feelings they don't want to deal with, and that might keep them away from the sacrament. Some of them have shared with me that they had a bad experience with the priest in the confessional. That he was in a bad mood, or gave them, you know, advice that they didn't think was right. Just... it might have been their exit out of the Catholic church. I've met people who said that was the last thing they did in the

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Catholic church, was make a confession. And so we've lost people, and some people don't understand the seal of confidentiality – that what's said in the confessional stays in the confessional. But some people are afraid that maybe that will be leaked out to others, and so that keeps them back from this beautiful sacrament of healing.

A lot of people, this is a big one, a lot of people think that whatever they did back in the day, it is just too big of a sin and God would no way forgive them. In others words, they judge themselves, they play God, and that keeps them away. And I also have spoken to many Catholics who are stumped by the thing that a lot of our non-Catholic brothers and sisters will ask, and that is “Why do we need a priest? God knows me. He knows my heart. He knows what I did wrong, and I know He'll forgive me.” Well, we need that priest because when we sin, we separate ourselves not just from God, but we separate ourselves from the church community because we are the body of Christ. We affect one another. The good we do and the not good we do, it all affects one another, and we need to be reconciled back to the church as well as God, and that's what that priest with the collar around his neck represents. We're being reconciled back to the church. And God's very wise. He knows that we as human beings are not the best judges of ourselves. We're not so objective all the time. So He gave us a priest who has our best spiritual interest in mind, and the priest is there to help us. To recognize our, you know, what we're doing, so that we can change it, and that's why God, you know, through Jesus, breathed on those apostles, gave them the power to loose and bind sins, and that ability, that power, that grace has been passed on to all the way down to our priests today. And so that's why we need this gift.

So... And then I'd like to say it is a gift by the way. And so I try to counter all of these negative feelings, judgments, misconceptions about the sacrament with the idea of what reconciliation really is, and I begin by telling them it's a 2-part gift, as I see it. A 2-fold gift. And the first part of the gift is God's forgiveness, and God's forgiveness is so amazing because, unlike us earthly broken people, God's forgiveness is total. It is complete, there's no strings attached, He doesn't, you know, hold it over our heads. When He forgives, He forgives, and He forgets and wants to move on, and He wants us to do the same. And the other thing is we can never outdo God's mercy, no matter what we've done. The most hardened serial killer out there cannot undo God's mercy, or outdo God's mercy if we're truly sorry and we're asking for the grace of forgiveness. He's there, and He'll give it to us.

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So, forgiveness is one big part of the gift of reconciliation. And the other gift, as I see it, is grace, and grace starts by just getting us to the confessional. I know for me if a certain amount of time goes by I'll be like "Man, I've got to get in that confessional." I can just feel like. It's like... I think of it like taking a spiritual shower. "It's time to take my spiritual shower and go to confession." And that grace is so important on so many levels. So not only does it get us to the confessional in the first place, but I think the grace of the sacrament, by going regularly, begins to give us a little bit better view of ourselves, maybe the way God is seeing us. And we start recognizing behaviors in ourselves, and attitudes behind those behaviors, so we can make the changes we need to make, and become holier people and better disciples of the Lord when we go to confession regularly. We become strengthened. We receive fortitude from this sacrament.

So we get real smart on knowing what those temptations are, we get very clear on what those temptations are, and we start getting better ideas on how to avoid them and minimize them. It doesn't mean because we make a confession we're going to be sinless the rest of our lives. You know, unfortunately, I wish I could say that, but that's not how it works. We are a broken humanity. However, we do become stronger and wiser against the temptations. It's another grace. And finally, I think by going to the sacrament of reconciliation regularly, we begin to become more loving and more forgiving to ourselves, we become gentler with ourselves. I think that's important. You've got to love yourself first before you can love others, right? But we also become, I think, more loving and forgiving to people around us, because we start to see and experience that in ourselves, God's love and mercy in our own lives.

And I remember reading an article once by Vinny Flynn – he is a Catholic author, speaker, a musician – and he was comparing confession to car maintenance, and I thought "Wow, what is this? I've got to read this." And what he was saying basically is that a good car owner knows that you take care in regularly, right? You get those oil changes, you get those checkups, and that keeps your car running smooth so you don't break down on the side of the road. And he said, "People in the Catholic church often wait until their spiritual lives are all broken down and something really bad happens before they run to confession." And he contended that people should approach confession like they do car maintenance. To go regularly for the lesser things, so they don't grow into bigger things that will break us down alongside the road of our spiritual walk with God. And so the whole idea

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of confession serving as spiritual maintenance, and I love that idea, I think that's a great idea.

Another benefit I think that's really important is when we go to confession on a regular basis with that priest, with that confessor who knows us, it begins to provide for us spiritual guidance, or spiritual counseling, or even spiritual direction, even though in a confessional he is not going to be able to spend an hour with us, you know. But I think we begin to get that wisdom from that priest who knows us, who's in relationship with us, who can course correct us, and keep us on the path, and keep us from wandering into dangerous territories.

And, you know, another benefit, the final benefit I want to mention, is a really strong benefit that I think a lot of people don't know about, and that is the power of confession over evil. And we need this in the world today. But I've learned this from Father Gabriele Amorth. He recently passed, but he was the official exorcist for the diocese of Rome for decades. The man performed thousands of exorcisms so, I mean, he had firsthand knowledge of evil. And he wrote in one of his books that a good, heartfelt confession has more power over evil than a full-fledged Roman exorcism. That's outstanding to me!

So when I think about the billion... billion... I think one billion Catholics on the globe today, and how few of them really understand confession and tap into it to release that power, to release that grace regularly in their lives in the world, and when you look at all of the evil around us, and I don't think it's a coincidence. We need to understand these sacraments and release them, because this is how God said He was going to leave His presence with us on the earth. A lot of power against evil in the sacrament.

So you can see there's a lot of benefits to this sacrament. So we want to approach reconciliation as a gift, as a celebration. And I know you're probably listening to me talk about this and you're saying, "Boy, this lady is really gung-ho about confession." Well I'm going to share something with you: This has not always been the way it was. In fact, I will be honest: Confession was the absolute hardest thing I've ever had to do. The hardest part of my embracing my new Catholic faith as a young adult. And ugh, I remember dreading the idea of going into that little dark closet with this guy in the collar, and having to tell him all of these just horrible, mortifying things about myself. I was sure my pastor wouldn't like me

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when he knew who I really was. And so, and a lot of converts can attest to this, I used to go to parishes on the other side of town where the priest wouldn't know me so I could make my confession, you know, sort of, you know, so my own pastor wouldn't know and all that.

And I just never got it. I never understood it was Jesus Christ I was encountering in this sacrament, as we encounter Him in all of the sacraments. I just... it was a foot-dragging miserable experience, I did it once or twice a year because I wanted to be an obedient Catholic, but I never got it. And then finally God helped me get it. And it was in the 90s, when I had just come off of reading the diary of Sister Faustina – she wasn't even canonized back then – and The Divine Mercy Message, and I was going through all of those novenas and chaplets and really embracing this message. But I had not yet really experienced it until that particular year, that particular holy week leading up to that week after Easter, which is today, Divine Mercy Sunday.

I fell from grace in a powerful way and I did something that was humiliating and horrifying, and I just felt so terrible over it. And, as an extra penance, I went to my pastor in my parish to confess this matter, because I just felt like, oh, Judas and Peter all wrapped up in one. The denier, the betrayer, you know. I just felt like the lowly of the lows. And the priest, of course, does what priests do, and he listens, and he gives me advice, and he absolves me, and I still felt like the weight of the world on my shoulders. I still felt like the biggest sinner ever. It just was not penetrating, what happened in that confession.

But here's a miracle that happened: As I was leaving the confessional, it was as if a bucket of water suddenly poured over me and I felt washed clean in an instant. I felt light, and joy-filled, and free of what was holding me back before. I felt... I was just completely blown away by this, and I knew there was no way I conjured that up myself. That was God showing me, "This is what confession is about. This is what My mercy is. You are washed clean. It is the ultimate do over. You start all over again as a new creation in Me." I mean, it was just that powerful. I've written about it, it's worked its way, this story, into presentations, and in articles, and in books. I've had people tell me, when they've heard this story in greater detail, it's brought them back to confession after decades of being away, as many as 40 years of being away, because they never got the sacrament. So that is a great blessing, and although it was a dark and hard experience for me to walk through, the benefits in me and others has been absolutely worth it.

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So, you know, maybe you're a new Catholic like I once was, and you're really struggling with this sacrament, or maybe you're a Catholic who's been away from this sacrament for a long time. Maybe you go to confession, but maybe not as frequently as you think you should, or maybe you're one of those who do go regularly, but you're wondering, "Am I getting everything out of it I can? Is there something I should be doing more?" Well, for all of you I have some tips, and these are some pieces of advice I can help you get the most out of reconciliation with. First of all, my first piece of advice is to set yourself on a schedule and make a routine of this. And I think a good routine is to go monthly to confession. It's a very doable goal, and I can promise you there'll be a lot to talk about in a month's time.

Before you go to confession, spend some time in prayer with the Holy Spirit, and ask Him to show you what it is in your life, at this point, that He wants you to talk about, and to unburden yourself with in confession. It's the examination of conscience. But don't wait until, you know, you're standing in the line for confession. If you know you're going to make a confession this weekend at the regular masses, or if you're making a retreat, or going to a conference and you know confession will be available, prepare for it ahead of time. Spend some time with the Lord. You can use as a guideline the 10 Commandments, you can use the 7 cardinal virtues, you can use the 8 beatitudes. All of these are great guidelines and blueprints on how we should live our lives and be good followers of Jesus. So those are great to make an examination of conscience with.

Another goal for confession is we want to aim to be genuinely sorry; to be remorseful over our sins, and determined to do better. And please don't ever think we are going to shock or stun the priest. I interview priests regularly for my radio show *Answering the Call* on St. Gabriel Catholic radio, AM 820. I know a lot of priests. We've talked about this subject, and they tell me, you know, after the first year or so of being a priest, they have heard it all. So you will not shock them. In fact, they're great counselors because they've heard it all before, and they've been able to give advice and see this advice work. So they're great counselors.

Don't hold back, and don't hold back thinking, "Well, I'll reveal everything, but this one thing is too shameful. I'm going to hang on to it until, like, I know I'm on my deathbed." Because the truth is not all of us will have the benefit of being on a

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deathbed, where we have time to get our spiritual ducks in a row. We may go suddenly. We all know people who have gone suddenly without any time for preparation. So unburden it now. Don't hold on to it.

And finally, forgive yourself, okay. If God is forgiving you, if that priest is giving you absolution and you have genuinely shared what's on your heart, God has forgiven you. You have to let go. It's the evil one who wants to keep us bound to our sins of the past. God wants to free us, He wants to set us about the work that He has in His mind for you to do today. So this is a sacrament, reconciliation. We can receive it over and over and over. It's not like those one-time sacraments, say, of baptism or confirmation. This is a sacrament of healing and strength designed to help us in our day-to-day spiritual journey.

So go off and extend the invitation to others. Invite them. Tell them what the Lord is doing in your life. Because the reality is we're all here to get to heaven, but not just ourselves to heaven, but our loved ones to heaven as well. And what better way than steering them to reconciliation, and letting God work in their lives as He's beginning to work in ours? And go as a family too, a great thing to do as a family.

And the last one I'll leave you with is I will speak sometimes to children who are preparing for their first sacraments – the sacrament of Reconciliation, sacrament of holy communion – and I know they're afraid of reconciliation, and I share my story on a much simpler and safer children's, you know, way to understand it, but they get it. But, you know, I tell them this example. I say "If you are going to have a very special guest come to your house next week. Say it's a king. Say it's a president. A pope. Your favorite NFL quarterback, or your favorite movie star, musician, and they're coming to your house, what would you do to get ready?" And the little kids raise their hands and they say "Oh, we would make special food, and we would clean up the house, and we would put on special clothes, and we would act really well." And I say, "Well, great. Well, guess what? Very soon, the most special guest of all, the king of kings is coming to your house, meaning your heart. He's coming to you in the Eucharist. And the best way we can prepare our homes or our hearts for Him is the sacrament of Reconciliation." And when I say that, the kids get it. Now it's for the rest of us adults to get it too.



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I hope this Lent season you'll find an opportunity to make a confession, and I hope this presentation has helped any misperceptions you may have had, and I hope you reap the benefits. Just remember it is Jesus Christ in that sacrament. His arms are stretched out wide, and He's waiting for you to come back. Let's end with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Lord, we thank You again for this season of Lent, for the great gift of Reconciliation. How You willed that You would be present among us to heal us, because You are the divine healer. Help us to search our souls with the Holy Spirit's grace, and help to reveal anything we need that is holding us back from being who You have created us to be, from doing the work You have intended. And as we ask this as we ask all things, in the name of Christ. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.