

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



✠ *Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham*
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle



31 January 2013

Pastoral Letter –to be read in all parishes 9 & 10 February 2013

Sacrament of Reconciliation

My dear people,

In October last year the Holy Father chaired a synod in Rome to begin the Year of Faith. The purpose of the Synod was to discuss New Evangelisation - in other words to discuss how *we* can be inspired and how we can inspire *others* to follow Jesus Christ more closely. On a number of occasions during the Synod great emphasis was placed on the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession). I would like to share with you some thoughts about this wonderful gift of healing.

For us to understand this sacrament of confession and reconciliation we need to discover something of who our heavenly Father is. In the book of Jeremiah God speaks to each one of us when he says: "I have loved you with an everlasting love and I am constant in my affection for you". Our God is a God of mercy, a God of compassion, and a God who constantly heals us if we open our hearts to the love that only He can offer.

As I'm sure you have experienced sometimes it can be difficult to open our hearts to the love of God. It can be challenging to come before the Lord and be honest about the things we have done or failed to do. We find ourselves in this condition because of sin. The word sin is a way of describing something that causes us to turn away from God's love; it is something which closes our hearts to God's affection. As a result of our sinfulness we become damaged: gradually we become uneasy with God, uneasy with ourselves and uneasy with others. We can be divided people who are beside ourselves. When we are like this we are not living life to the full, we are not the people we were created to be. However there is a remedy, there is a constant source of mercy which puts us back on track.

We all know that for us to be healed by a doctor we must first describe what we are suffering from. In the same way, and more importantly, in order for the God of compassion to heal us we must enter the sacrament of reconciliation and cry out with our hearts, "Here I am Lord, this is me. This is the kind of person I am. I am weak, selfish, self-centred, hurt, I am wounded, I am broken and I am in need of healing." In this

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intimate moment with Christ we examine ourselves thoroughly so that the love of God can penetrate the depths of our being and we allow Him to bring to the surface all those areas that are hurting and in need of healing. When they surface it is important for us to be totally honest with ourselves and God. The priest then prays one of the most beautiful prayers we have in the Church, in which he says to us, "Through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

In this intimate moment with God we encounter the healing Christ who makes us whole and helps us to look to the future with hope. This sacrament which today can be widely ignored is essential for the future of our Church, for the New Evangelisation and for our own salvation. God's mercy given to us in confession brings us peace, joy and happiness because only as forgiven children of the Father can we enter God's Kingdom.

This week we begin the season of Lent, and so I have asked all Deans to arrange for confessions in as many of the churches in the deanery as possible at the same time on the same day. This is to ensure that there will be an opportunity for you all to participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Lent. I suggested Wednesday from 6pm until 7pm but this may not be possible in every parish. (If this time is a problem for your particular parish then your priest will inform you of another time slot which will remain the same each week).

I too will be available to you for the Sacrament of Reconciliation at St Mary's Cathedral on Saturday 16th and Saturday 23rd February between 2.30 pm and 3.30 pm.

I would like to encourage you - and ask you to encourage one another - to celebrate this sacrament in a very special way throughout this Year of Faith. I can assure you this will bring much joy and happiness into your life. You will be closer to God as a result and you will experience His mercy and compassion in perhaps ways that you have yet to experience.

With my very best wishes

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