

# The Sacrament of Penance - Part II

## Forgiveness and the New Testament

The central teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus came to proclaim the forgiveness of sin and to call men to repentance.



The opening words of Mark's account of the public life of Jesus summarize His teaching: He proclaimed the Good News from God. "The time has come," He said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Good News." New Testament scholars have pointed out the difference — not immediately evident from a casual reading of the New Testament

— between the message of John the Baptist and the message of Jesus. John proclaims: "Repent, for the judgment is at hand." He tells his hearers: "The axe is already laid at the root of the tree." Jesus proclaims: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." That is why Jesus' proclamation, different from John's, is Good News.

This call to repentance, to conversion, to a change of heart for the sake of the Kingdom is the central message of Jesus. Yet this change of heart which Jesus proclaims is itself God's gift to man; for man's conversion is outside the realm of human possibilities without the help of God's grace. Man's conversion, therefore, is the result of God's mercy and forgiveness before it can be the result of man's actions. That is why the central theme of the whole Scripture is God's continuous intervention in human history to free men from sin. This is the Good News proclaimed in the New Testament: that in Jesus Christ God has offered man the gift of His love and forgiveness.

God's gracious gift of love and forgiveness calls for a response on man's part. He must change his heart, his way of thinking

### Guest Columnist

"When Christ had offered a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." (Heb. 10:12) St. John, in the Book of Revelation, describes the way Christ is sitting next to the throne of God: "I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain." (Rev. 5:6) Since Christ offered the sacrifice "once for all," (Rom. 6:10) and since he is now interceding for us in front of the throne of God, he is in a constant state as victim. Two main reasons can be seen in this: 1) to be an everlasting sacrifice to calm the wrath of God; and 2) to remind us that he offered a sacrifice "once for all"; he shed his blood to make us a people for God "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Rev. 5:9)

"Christ does not offer himself repeatedly as the high priest enters the holy place yearly with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all." (Heb. 9: 25-26)

This does not cause us to believe in a static understanding of Christ in the presence of God after his sacrifice as "a Lamb slain in front of the throne of God," (Rev. 5:6), since Christ (as victim) is always interceding for us (Heb. 7:25).

This brings us to a dynamic understanding of the Eucharist and of our Christian life. To think of the "sweet Jesus" and afterwards cheat your neighbor, or to go faithfully to

and acting. This change of heart or conversion is described in many ways in the New Testament: becoming a new creature, a new man in Christ, possessing and being directed by the Spirit of the risen Jesus. In one of His most moving parables Jesus pictures this conversion as the joyful reunion of the prodigal son with his father.

Conversion does not simply involve a change of man's relationship to God. It affects all the relationships in which man finds himself. God's forgiveness responded to by man is no mere legal reality; it is a profound change of heart which manifests itself in the attitudes we take toward others. Jesus taught us to pray: forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us. The parable of the servant who was forgiven a huge debt by his master but who then was unwilling to forgive a small debt to a fellow servant serves as a continual reminder to us that forgiveness of sin demands a change of heart on our part. The forgiveness that God gives cannot be experienced in isolation from our daily life and the manifold relationships in that life. We cannot hope for God's love and mercy, if we close our hearts to our neighbors and the world.

Yes, the teaching of the New Testament makes it clear that the way to forgiveness can never be reduced to a mere juridical listing of sins; it must involve a true conversion, a true change of heart.

Central, then, to the message of Jesus is the proclamation of forgiveness and the call to repentance. The many meals that Jesus took with sinners — much to the scandal of religious leaders of His day — symbolized that He had come as the Reconciliation of God, inviting men to repentance. The many encounters He had with repentant sinners time and again conclude with His words of peace: "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus not only proclaimed the forgiveness of sin; he

actually exercised the ministry of forgiveness.

Since the forgiveness of sin occupied so central a place in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, it is quite understandable that the New Testament would speak of the continuation of this proclamation of forgiveness in the life of the Church. There is, for example, the significant passage in the 9th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, where Matthew tells how Jesus cured the paralytic at Capernaum, after first forgiving his sins. Matthew concludes his narrative with a description of the astonishment of the people; but his words clearly indicate that he is looking far beyond this small Galilean crowd and indeed sees them as representative of generations to come. "A feeling of awe came over the crowd, and they praised God for giving such authority to men."

The Fathers of the Church see in another passage in Matthew (c. 18) God's gift of this power to men — that is, His communication to the Church of the power to forgive sin. It is the passage where Jesus confers on his disciples the authority of binding and loosing: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The Fathers also refer, though less frequently, to the text of John 20:22, where the risen Jesus, after having overcome death, sends the Spirit on the disciples that they may have the power of forgiving sin: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

The history of the Church witnesses to her belief from earliest times that Jesus had conferred upon her the power of forgiving sin committed after baptism. Thus there are references to the Church's power to forgive sin as early as the end of the first century in one of the earliest Church documents, the *Didache*.

(to be continued)

By Father Peter Nobili

## The Precious Blood Today

Father Peter Nobili is assistant pastor of Most Precious Blood Church in Rochester and wrote this as representative of the pastor, Father Sebastian Contegiaco.

church and afterwards be afraid or do nothing to show your faith in your social life, means to live in static Christianity (which is absurd), and which many times brings duality in a person and hypocrisy. Our union with Christ should be total. We should act always Christian, always Christ-like.

When we speak of blood being shed, our

mind goes to wars, riots and revolts which we are witnessing right now. But there is also another way to shed blood which we are even more use to, and, therefore, it strikes us even less. How many children made the heart of their parents bleed, how many parents neglect their children, how many people are starving with no one to help them! Christ's sacrifice took care "once and for all" of the human and animal sacrifices. He shed his blood for our misunderstandings, jealousies, and hatreds. He made us one people and one nation. He signed all of us in the Precious Blood.

## Hope of the Peking Meeting

Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai may not particularly like the thought of it, but Pope Paul invoked God's blessing on the meetings between the Communist Chinese leaders and President Nixon.

The Holy Father asked God to look over the individuals involved in the talks "so that justice and peace may win over the dangers that entangle modern society; which is still so divided in ideas and interests and so ensnared in its own progress."

Even atheists cannot escape experience with God but still there is irony in a papal blessing on the Peking leaders and it is not the only ironical aspect to the meetings.

To see American flags flying over Peking, to hear the Star Spangled Banner played in staccato fashion by a Communist Chinese Army band, to see the President

of the United States reviewing Communist soldiers all boggle the imagination

Pictures of Nixon and Mao on the front page of official Peking newspapers, incredible to begin with, are awesome in possible portent to at least two other nations — the Soviet Union and Nationalist China. How their leaders would love to know what is being said in the head-to-heads between our President and the Chinese premier.

Yet this summit meeting transcends in importance all other political and nationalist activity in this bruised world. Two men sit down to tea and their meeting carries more weight than all of the rest of the nations in the world convening in solemn session at the United Nations. And what is doubly important, more hope.