

# The Reconciling Ministry of Jesus

I often find it a fruitful exercise to try and insert myself into the time of Jesus to imagine myself among the crowd of His hearers, receiving the message of good news for the first time. By doing this, I find new insights into the person and work of Jesus, and a deeper, more fervent faith and prayer.



The first paragraph of the Introduction to the new Rite of Penance describes the reconciling ministry of Jesus and, in reading it, I again realized the power and joy of those who first benefitted from this ministry.

First, there was the power of Jesus preaching. Jesus came as the finest in a long line of fine preachers. The voice of John the Baptist had prepared the hearts of the people for the coming of the Kingdom of God by "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). And long before John, the many prophets had preached the challenging invitation of return to God.

So when Jesus came to preach the nearness of the Kingdom of God, the exhortation to repentance was not new, but just as powerful. In the spirit of the prophets' own words, Jesus' message cut the people to the heart. The power of His words was so great that it could not be ignored; the good news must be accepted or rejected. This power lay bare the hearts of men and women of His time, so that they became

transparent to themselves, unable to hide behind pretenses.

If that was all there was to Jesus' reconciling work, or course, there would have been few believers! All would have run the other way! But even though Jesus' preaching made sinners transparent to themselves, He never condemned them, degraded or humiliated them. They always found a warm welcome in His company, no matter how the rest of society viewed them.

And this is the second key element of Jesus' ministry of healing forgiveness. Tax-collectors, prostitutes, lepers, sinners of every kind — all found in Christ a place of peace and unburdening and forgiveness. They could approach Him without fear of repudiation. What a motley crew they must have been but, oh, what faith and joy!

Still, none of this would have set off Jesus as anything special. He could have been just another wandering preacher with lots of charisma, if it had not been for the signs of His power to forgive sin, the third important element of His reconciling ministry.

The many miracles of healing the sick and those possessed by demons are signs that "the Kingdom of God is near at hand," with its power to forgive and welcome back all those alienated from the Father. The cure of the paralyzed man let down through the roof by his friends (Mark 2: 1-12) is just one of the many signs of this forgiveness. When some of the bystanders challenge Jesus' right or ability to do this, He responds with the cure of the man. In a sense He says, if I have power to give physical wholeness,

I certainly have power to give spiritual wholeness.

But it doesn't stop there. The final great work of Jesus' reconciling ministry is His self-sacrifice on Calvary and His resurrection from the dead. It is the event through which "God has reconciled the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:18), and has made this gift of reconciliation available to us. This, of course, is solemnized at Jesus' own hands by the new covenant meal, the Eucharist.

These four dimensions of the reconciling ministry of Jesus are so great that they have needed a separate expression in the life of the Church, for it is through the Church that this work of reconciliation continues in the name of Christ. The sacrament of Penance is that sign. It is just an exchange of a few words between sinner and Church (in the person of the priest), but nevertheless a powerful sign of Jesus' challenge, welcome, compassion, healing and reconciliation.

The new Rite of Penance seeks to express that sign even more clearly. The placement of scripture in all the forms of the new rite challenges us, opens our hearts and invites us to repentance as though Jesus was Himself speaking. The warm and friendly welcome and atmosphere encouraged by the rite will easily provide peace and relaxation for the repentant sinner in the name of Christ. The healing touch with the prayer of absolution will return the broken Christian to a new wholeness of spirit.

Therefore, with Saint Paul, "we implore you, in Christ's name be reconciled to God!" Let us together share in His reconciling ministry!

## Followers of Christ Need to Keep Strong

Following is Pope Paul's address at the general audience on Ash Wednesday, March 5.

To give some practical application to our resolution to renew our Christian life effectively, a resolution which we bear in our minds as the operating memory of the Holy Year, we must establish or rather re-establish another principle, in addition to the ones already affirmed, as the foundation of the new spiritual edifice, in which the "civilization of love" must have its room, or rather its workshop, and it is the ascetic effort.



We all know in what it consists. It consists in a habitual effort of good will, a moral tension of conscience, vigilant and persevering, in controlling one's own actions, a normal attitude of self-control, self-mastery, with the intention of unifying the complex psychological mechanism of one's instincts, passions, interests, sentiments, of one's interior and exterior reactions, of one's thoughts, under one guiding command, love of God and one's neighbor, the supreme and vital norm of Christian personality.

Let us recall two facts: we men are complex, polyvalent, polyoperating beings, and it is a principle of natural and Christian wisdom to try continually to set out in a logical and moral order this complicated being of ours, capable in itself of different forms of action and behaviour. Natural, even pagan, wisdom had already felt

this need of *animi concordia*, as Seneca says. And Epictetus also, the humble and great philosopher, taught the harmony between freedom and virtue (cf. his "diatribes," or dissertations, which pleased Leopardi, who made an elegant translation of them.) And then the second essential fact, a mysterious and very real one, original sin, which has left a congenital disorder in man. It brings with it a kind of centrifugal tendency of his faculties, which, without a severe and meditated action of coordination and without divine assistance, no longer recompose the idea figure, that is, holiness, perfection, to which man is called.

We must therefore note as an important part of our program of renewal, the need, we have said, of an ascetic effort. We all know very well that this chapter of the program for renewing our Christian life does not enjoy the favor of public opinion, nor even, sometimes, the due respect of certain teachers, although they describe themselves as moralists and, what is more, Christians. (Some unforeseeable and unjustified reactions to the recent Declaration of our Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "on certain questions concerning sexual ethics" give us a very sad experience of this.)

Today authority, today the law, which propose to us an exterior norm, however much it is in conformity with the interior exigencies of our being, are no longer welcome and often no longer listened to. Spontaneity seems to be the fundamental right of human action. Rousseau triumphs! It cloaked itself, to begin with, in the requirements of personal conscience, often disregarding the fact that psychological con-

sciousness has prevailed over moral consciousness, depriving the latter of its view of the intrinsic and extrinsic obligation that must guide it. Hence the exploding of a blind freedom, an instinct ruled by passion, unbridled delinquency, hence, in a word, the abdication of intelligent and really responsible will.

Our ascetic effort, to perfect moral conduct, will have two phases: a negative one, which the spiritual masters call mortification, fasting, renunciation, spiritual struggle, penance, etc. Let us all remember that this exercise to win back self-mastery, to become fitted for Christian life, has very strong expressions in the Gospel, which must be wisely interpreted, such as the following: "If your right eye is an occasion of sin to you, pluck it out and cast it from you" (Mt 5, 29; the same for the hand: 30). Which St. Paul echoes: "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection" (1 Cor 9, 27).

The other phase of Christian ascetics is positive, aimed, that is, at the strengthening of virtue, characteristic of a follower of Christ. This is the phase of soldiering and in St Paul it is presented in terms of the metaphorical and expressive description of Roman armor: "Take up the armour of God, . . . gird your loins with truth, put on the breastplate of justice . . . etc." (Eph 6, 13-17). It is not possible to be a real Christian without being strong. It is not possible to be strong, even spiritually, without being athletes, that is, without difficult and prolonged exercises (1 Thess 5, 8). And all this to possess that invincible charity which we are seeking above everything: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom 8, 35).

## Natural Family Planning Seen Boon to Marriage

By MARY ANN GINNERTY

**Auburn** — A discussion of natural family planning, sponsored by the Family Planning Center of Cayuga County and the Family Life Committee of the Seneca-Cayuga region, was presented to the Auburn Community Service Workers Association at a luncheon held at Blessed Trinity school on March 10.

Father Edward Palumbos, family

life coordinator for the region, said the art of natural family planning should not be identified with the old rhythm method. This method depends on "observing and interpreting certain physical changes, but is carried out within the context of the couples strengthened personal relationship.

Father Palumbos explained that the method needs a high degree of motivation which must come from the relationship of the couple.

Mrs. Emily Rice-Herrling, from the Family Planning staff, indicated this method has a 92 per cent effectiveness. She outlined the mucous and cervical changes and basal temperature measurements which determine the days of fertility, and explained the charting method.

Father Louis Sirianni, of Sacred Heart parish, announced that a full program will be introduced in the fall. The Family Planning Center

will make referrals to couples practicing this method and suggest natural family planning as one of the options open to families.

### RELIGION CLASSES FOR HANDICAPPED

Mentally handicapped children who attend special classes in public school may be enrolled in a religion course given Saturday mornings at St. Ambrose. They should be registered now for the fall term through Mrs. Ronald Hart, 381-7797.

Selected couples from the area are going through training sessions with Joseph and Delores Smith, a training couple from Rochester.

The program was set up in 1967. Twenty-three pupils from various parishes are taking part currently, in four classes that meet from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. Saturdays, October through April.