



## ‘Be reconciled to God’

July 26, 2002

*A catechesis for participants in World Youth Day 2002, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.*

Since you all belong to the Internet generation, I don't need to tell you how many of us use email not only for our personal, regular communication, but also for what I'd call "well-intentioned spamming." I mean those long, emotional messages, or heartwarming stories, that try to summarize all the wisdom of the world in a few words.

One e-mail I got recently said the following:

"When I was a boy, I wanted to change the world. When I was a teenager, I wanted to change my country. When I was a young adult I wanted to change my community. When I was married, I wanted to change my family. Now I am old, and I am struggling now to change myself." This is wisdom born of human foolishness.

The person finally realized the reason why he had not changed the world now that he was old was because he had not started changing himself when he was young. One should never abandon the dream of changing the world – but you need to start from the beginning by changing yourself.

Powerful people normally try to reshape the world by making legal, social or political changes. Sometimes this results in very important reforms, like protecting religious freedom or doing away with slavery or apartheid. But sometimes the cure is worse than the disease. The atomic bomb ended the Second World War, but two entire cities died in the process. Adolph Hitler ended unemployment and hunger in Germany, but the system he created went on to murder millions of innocent people.

In contrast, the Church has been insisting for 2,000 years that we need to change the human heart before we can truly change the world, and in preaching that, she's been systematically despised and rejected for what her critics call a "lack of realism." A lack of realism. That's a pretty serious charge in a world that has serious problems. But it's a fair challenge. The Church claims that our social, political and economic structures can never fundamentally change if human beings don't change first. Is that ultimately "unrealistic?"

For many years my home diocese, the Archdiocese of Denver, had a mission church in Monteria, Colombia. Colombians have a very simple but eloquent saying: "It's useless to change the baby's diaper if you don't wash the baby." Every parent knows what I mean from personal experience, but it also just makes common sense. It's obvious that, if the human person is not clean, the structures surrounding him will sooner or later be unclean as well.

Unfortunately, like a great French philosopher once said, common sense seems to be one of the *least* common senses of the modern age.

But I believe all of you here today are different, and I'll tell you why. Many of you have come a very long way to pray, celebrate your faith and meet with the Successor of the Apostles in the person of the Holy Father. We're here because we believe – in fact, we know – that the reconciliation the world so badly needs, the reconciliation needed in our countries, our communities and even our families, will never come about if we're not first reconciled to God and each other.

Let's remember when the drama of humanity started. It's very clear in the Book of Genesis. There's one particular passage whose message often escapes us.

I'm referring to Genesis, 3, 1-5. Here's what it says:

*"Now the serpent was craftier than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'"*

Let me ask a question before I continue: Was the serpent's statement true? Did God tell Adam and Eve that they could not eat *from any tree*? No, that's not what God said. God said, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Now, why did the serpent ask this misleading question? We know the serpent wasn't a fool. In fact, Genesis says that he was "more crafty than any beast of the field".

But let's go on with the passage.

*"The woman said to the serpent, 'From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'"*

Eve has taken the serpent's bait by entering into a dialogue with the temptation. The serpent was extremely clever. He needed first to imply that God was "exaggerating" with His rules, then move to the open proposal that God must be wrong:

*"The serpent said to the woman, 'You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'"*

Now let me ask you something: Did Eve become like God? Are we like God? Of course not; just look at our newspapers. The serpent's goal was to break the most important bond in every human being's life: our relationship with God, our loving Creator. Look at the terrible consequences of that deceit – the human person suddenly loses his best friend, his Creator, and because of sin, sees his Father as an opponent, a threat, a powerful adversary.

Since Adam & Eve, because of that dramatic choice in Eden, solitude replaces friendship, fear replaces confidence, hate replaces love, and God is seen as an enemy, while His commandments – which He gave us for our own benefit – are seen, at best, as "unrealistic."

All the evil in the world, all our personal dramas of sin, all injustices, all distortions in human relationships, all damages to the environment — all of them are rooted in that moment when our first parents decided to turn their backs on God.

But since God is generous and loves the human person – contrary to the propaganda the devil is always trying to sell us — He chose to send us a Redeemer, a Reconciler. Even more: He sent us *the* Reconciler: His own Son, Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus came — to reconcile us back with the Father.

This is what the Apostle Paul means when he writes in 2 Cor 5: 18-19:

*"... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."*

We should especially pay attention to how St. Paul ends this passage: *"we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!"* St. Paul has to beg us to be reconciled with God because reconciliation, in many ways, is tremendously counter-cultural. And not just today. It has always been so.

Pope John Paul II himself acknowledged this in his message for the World Day of Peace this past January. Writing after the dramatic events of September 11, he insisted that peace could never be achieved without justice, which is something most of us already know, but he went even further: He said, *"there is no peace without forgiveness."*

Forgiveness is hard. To forgive another is not merely to "understand" another. If someone punches you in the nose and then explains to you that he has a muscular disorder that prevents him from controlling his movements, you may not seek revenge, not because you forgive, but because you understand.

Forgiveness is different. Forgiveness renounces revenge and responds with love even when we know the other person really wanted to do us evil.

This is what the Holy Father means when he writes that *"human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to the limitations and egoism of individuals and groups"*, therefore it must be completed by the *"forgiveness which heals and rebuilds troubled human relations from their foundations."*

The Holy Father says even more, and this is a key for us in our discussions today:

*"Forgiveness is not a proposal that can be immediately understood or easily accepted; in many ways it is a paradoxical message. Forgiveness in fact always involves an apparent short-term loss for a real long-term gain. Violence is the exact opposite; opting as it does for an apparent short-term gain, it involves a real and permanent loss. Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage, both in granting it and in accepting it. It may seem in some way to diminish us, but in fact it leads us to a fuller and richer humanity, more radiant with the splendor of the Creator".*

In other words, with revenge, "When you seem to win, you lose; when you seem to lose, you win."

Jesus Himself said: *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?"* (Lk 9: 24)

Jesus, in His mercy, has given us, through His Church, the means to achieve reconciliation, first with God, the source of any possible reconciliation, and then with our fellow human beings, ourselves and with all creation.

For that purpose He gave us the Sacraments and, in particular, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the one we usually know as Penance.

Some years ago, during a meeting of the world's bishops called by Pope John Paul to discuss the Sacrament of Reconciliation, one of the guest experts mentioned that fewer and fewer people go to confession because the world has lost the sense of sin. But one of the bishops disagreed, saying exactly the opposite: that Catholics have lost the sense of sin because they've stopped going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As a bishop, I'm often surprised by the fact that so many people take Communion at Mass that we need extraordinary ministers to handle the crowds. At the same time, we don't have extraordinary ministers of Reconciliation and our confessionals are often quite empty. Either Catholics today are all saints, or they've lost their sense of the critical importance of this sacrament.

I think we know which is the more likely answer, and we need to change that, beginning today, beginning with ourselves.

No renewal of the Church is ever possible without it beginning first in our own hearts. It begins in *personal* repentance, *personal* conversion, *personal* renewal. And for that personal renewal, Jesus gave us a priceless resource that Catholics have been misusing or not using at all for years: the Sacrament of Penance.

During my life as priest, I've heard just about every inventive excuse you can imagine that people think up to avoid facing Jesus, to avoid acknowledging their sin. But Christ's teaching is clear through His Church: Confession is the regular way to be reconciled to God after sin has broken our connection with Him. At the same time, it's the starting point for any true transformation of our personal relationships; the starting point for any true transformation of the wider world.

As the Holy Father says, "*the most precious result of the forgiveness obtained in the Sacrament of Penance consists in reconciliation with God, which takes place in the inmost heart of the son who was lost and found again, which every penitent is. But it has to be added that this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations which repair the breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his own true identity. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way attacked and wounded. He is reconciled with the church. He is reconciled with all creation*".

When we understand all the fruits God gives us through the Sacrament of Penance, how can we turn our backs on it and walk away?

God is inviting each of you today to be reconciled to Him and to each other – and, through being reconciled, to become agents of His reconciliation and peace to the whole world.

That new life, that missionary mandate we all share, begins in the confessional. Confession is where God invites us to *examine our consciences*, not as a kind of psychological torture, but as a sincere comparison with the moral law God Himself wrote on our hearts, in the light of the truths taught by the Church and Jesus Christ. And when we understand that only God is perfectly good, this examination will lead us to *contrition*, a clear and deep rejection of the sins we have committed, and a *resolution* not to commit them again.

Humbled by the knowledge of our sins, after receiving the *absolution* from the priest, who acts in the name Jesus Christ, we are invited to crown the sacrament with some form of *satisfaction for our sins* or "penance." This is not because we think we can repay God for the priceless gift of forgiveness, but because the grace we receive unleashes in us the personal commitment to begin a new life.

*My dear young friends: We can indeed change the world. It's not a dream. It's not unrealistic. It's our duty. But if you want to change the world, start by changing yourself. If you want to change the world, go to meet Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and begin from there. You're young, yes, but history is passing, so begin now! Begin today. You have no time to lose. Christ needs you.*