



Lenten Pastoral Letter - 22 February 2023

An invitation to experience the Sacrament of Confession

The Taking of Christ (1602) by the leading painter Caravaggio at the height of his powers is now displayed in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. In this masterpiece Caravaggio focuses on Jesus (second from the left) and Judas (third from the left) who has just identified him to the temple guards (the next three figures on the right) with a kiss so as to betray him to them so that they can arrest him. A disciple (far left) is fleeing, leaving Christ. The scene is lit (by the moon?) from the upper left and the man (far right) holding the ineffectual lantern is Caravaggio – he painted himself into the scene – passively observing what is going on.



I invite you to join Caravaggio for some minutes in examining the betrayal and arrest of Jesus. What do you notice?

Dear sisters and brothers,

This Lent, I invite you to experience the mercy and tenderness of God through the beautiful Sacrament of Penance, which is also called the Sacrament of Confession or the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

It might be that you have fallen away from going to Confession or that you go once or twice a year. Lent is a time for new beginnings, for turning again to God and experiencing, as Pope Francis reminds us, that “the style of God is closeness, mercy and tenderness.” This Lent is an opportunity to return to or go even deeper into the gentle, caring, warm embrace of God.



As a part of this invitation, I have asked our priests to preach on different aspects of this most beautiful sacrament for three consecutive weeks and a highlight will be the special six-hour session for Confessions in major centres around the diocese on the vigil of the Annunciation, (Friday, 24th March), similar to a night that was held in the Year of Mercy.

The painting on the front page, *The Taking of Christ* was donated to a Jesuit who had been looking after the spiritual needs of a rich family in the south of Ireland many, many years before. It was hung over the fireplace in a Jesuit presbytery and it had become so darkened by the smoke from the fireplace that they believed it to be only a copy. They couldn't see the beauty behind the deposit of smoke.

When, in 1990, they were renovating the dining room where it hung, the Superior contacted the National Gallery of Ireland and, thinking that even a copy might be of value, asked them to send someone around to have a look at it. Within a week the Jesuits got a call to say that this might in fact be the original of *The Taking of Christ*. As the dirt and discoloured varnish were removed, a glorious painting was revealed.

In a similar way, our sinfulness can be like a layer of grime covering us that slowly builds up over time. Our dignity and worth and our own confidence and joy are slowly diminished in such a way that we don't even notice it happening. The progress can be very subtle. Of course, it might also be the case that our sin is a source of deep shame for us. Either way, sinning obscures our beauty and damages the way we look at ourselves, the way we experience the world and our relationships with each other.

Watching a person, perhaps online, who restores artwork can be very instructive because of the care that is taken. It's very gentle. Every movement must be done delicately. A restorer can't just go in there and rip things off, or tear things apart; they must be subtle. The renewed vibrancy of the image that comes out can take your breath away.



Think of the delicate image of taking a cotton wool ball and gently rubbing the surface of the painting to remove the grime and varnish, and the calm, gentle, compassionate manner of the restorer as they uncover the original images. That provides an insight into the loving way that God restores our image to incredible dignity by just, gentle, merciful love in Confession.

God will never do any damage to us - hang on to that thought. God heals in the most precious, gentle and loving way and slowly but surely reveals our worth in a really profound way. That's why coming to the Sacrament of Penance regularly for the 'daily grime' as well as with sin that is particularly invasive or addictive is so meaningful. God will never force us to do anything, yet over time, God is powerfully, quietly and mildly leading us so the damage is gently overcome.

I plead with you, both to take a chance on and never to give up on this grace-filled sacrament. Come to God openly as you are and let God wash you completely clean. Let God remove your burdens and chains. God's love is stronger than any and all of our sins.



Never, after I have left Confession, have I said to myself "I wish I hadn't gone." I want all of us, through the ministry of the Church, to know the freedom and peace and joy that can only come from experiencing that God has forgiven our sins.

In *The Taking of Christ*, Judas seems not to be able to look at our Lord who is deeply sad in an expression meant for Judas and, perhaps even more so, for us. In this moment, in this look, we realise the terrible sin Judas has committed and perhaps remember times we have betrayed Jesus directly or in others. Perhaps we think of a time that we have failed Jesus in someone he loves by running away out of fear, being a bystander without intervening, or maybe we have been part of a group displaying anger or violence.

The grace in the Sacrament of Confession is a prime way we move from a place of being ashamed, broken and fearful, violent and angry, overly invested in money, betrayal or being a bystander, to a place of being totally forgiven, completely reconciled, knowing we are loved and restored to community.

Some of us might be thinking "I'm the worst person in the world." Others might be disheartened after falling into temptation shortly after going to Confession. Still others might think they're not doing too badly (they haven't committed any mortal sins) and so don't have much to gain from this Sacrament.

Whoever you are, allow God to pick you up. Go back to God and ask for God's grace and gentle, loving, merciful healing in your life that will eventually become transformative. It's not until you get restored that you realise how much brighter and more vibrant you can be. Do not give up on your dream of holiness and being close to God and those you love. There is nothing in our lives that our good God can't address.

Remember, God does not do any violence but gently and lovingly restores our dignity back to its uniqueness. When we leave the sacrament having made an honest confession and desiring to be different, we are completely, absolutely, totally, one hundred percent forgiven by God.

During this coming Lent, I invite you to come to Confession on the vigil of the Annunciation (24 March), to experience the power, freedom and love of God's grace. Your priests will be waiting for you from 6pm to 12 midnight on Friday 24 March in advertised major centres around the diocese.

Yours in Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate,



Mark Edwards OMI
Bishop of Wagga Wagga

**Come and take a chance on God and on the
depth of his love for you.**