



## **FOURTH PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE JUBILEE OF 2025**

### **RECONCILIATION: A PASSAGE TO HOPE**

Dear brothers and sisters,

In my last Pastoral Letter I promised to address the important question of sin as well as the beauty of repentance. We are now in the season of Lent, a time dedicated to these very themes, and so I would like to offer this fourth pastoral letter as a reflection on the greatness of the mercy of God and how we can live in that mercy. The sin in our life does not have the last word: we are called to spiritual flourishing!

What is a sin?

The word “sin”, in its most basic definition, means an “evil moral choice”. So while the word “sin” might not be heard much outside of a church context, the reality of sin is something we encounter every day—even coming from ourselves.

First of all, sin is a choice. We believe that free will exists, and is a gift from God. To become like God, as I mentioned in my second pastoral letter, we must not just experience others’ love, but be able to return it. That said, love cannot be forced or manipulated, or else it is false. Love necessarily flows from inner freedom. This means that our free will has been given to us as a basic precondition of sharing in the divine nature and becoming like God.

Of course, not every choice we make has to have a moral quality. Some choices are based on simple tastes, for example. When we go to a buffet restaurant, all sorts of food choices are presented to us, but picking what to put on our plate is not usually a moral choice. That said, sometimes choices do have a moral quality, and when we choose badly, it is a sin.

So what makes a choice evil? Simply put, it is when the choice is a selfish one. Free will exists to empower us to love, and love is always something other-centred. When instead we become self-centred, and our choices reflect that, those choices have a sinful content.

It is not always easy to see when a specific choice is selfish, as those choices are often wrapped in partial or false compassion. Also, we are often very quick at giving excuses for bad behaviour. But that does not mean that evil moral choices don't exist. The simple fact that there are laws to define certain behaviours as crimes is proof that society as a whole accepts some choices are better than others.

Where does sin come from?

Imagine for a moment an ancient society where all people were, in their choices, only motivated by love, not selfishness. Mutual care and trust would be the rule, in all things. Now imagine that one person in that society turned to selfishness and began to sin. At first, that person would benefit greatly from others' love, taking others for granted and getting a free ride from their generosity. Indeed, some people might be deeply wounded and victimized. As people began to perceive this threat, however, defensiveness would set in, and controversy would erupt as the society tried to understand this new, odd behaviour. The selfish person might be able to successfully manipulate this confusion, winning some to his or her side. Alliance building would begin, eventually splitting the society into factions. The mutual security and progress that love promised would be undone by the actions of just one or a few people. Love would always be the desired goal, but love that was totally trusting would too easily be naive. Mutual love would too easily become mutual caution, suspicion and mutual judgment.

As Catholics, we believe that something like this happened at the dawn of humanity. As the first people emerged, we were living in harmony with God and with each other. Indeed, that harmony was part of the image and likeness of God in us. But soon a temptation to sin emerged, followed by the choice to sin, and division set in. And because God is love, and sin is the opposite of love, it also created a separation between us and God.

Because this sin happened at the origins of humanity, we call it "original sin". The Bible describes it in symbolic terms in the book of Genesis, chapter 3, where our first parents, called Adam and Eve, eat a forbidden fruit. We do not really know what their names were, as "Adam" and "Eve" are likely symbolic names, and the eating of the fruit is probably also a symbol of that first sin, whatever it was. But we do believe that this first sin did happen, at some point in history,

and that it damaged our relationship with God and with each other, with its consequences passing through the generations.

The most serious of these consequences is the loss of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit is, in effect, the love present in the Holy Trinity poured into our hearts. Our soul is like a vessel, meant to contain that presence. In the case of lesser sins, called venial sins, our soul is wounded, and is weakened in our ability to accept and return God's love in us. In the case of greater sins, called mortal sins, our soul no longer contains that indwelling presence. This is what happened with Adam and Eve.

Their sin, however, has consequences for us too: we are born in a spiritually weakened state, which is called the "state of original sin" (as opposed to the actual original sin at the dawn of humanity). What this means is that we can still have free will to choose to love, and we can aspire to do good, but we need God's help to truly accomplish it. We will look at how original sin is transmitted from one generation to the next in a future pastoral letter, but the fact of it is incontrovertible. After all, how can we, as limited beings, know what is truly the right choice in every situation? How can we even know we aren't letting ourselves be motivated by our occasional selfishness, giving ourselves justifications for bad behaviour? Once the negative effects of sin are present, we need God's help to escape them.

### The repairing of sin

There are, of course, a great many possible evil moral choices. Some relate to our relationship with God, and others to our relationship to each other or to society, or even to the respect we owe ourselves as beings created in the image of God. Some choices are more gravely sinful than others, depending on the nature of the act, the context of it, and so on. But regardless of the specific qualities of the underlying sin, all sins, no matter what they are, share a common feature: once committed, they create a corresponding duty. It is the duty to repent.

Repentance, like sin, is another religious-sounding word, but one that is pretty easy to understand. It is composed of four main things: taking responsibility; apologizing; making amends; and striving to not do it again.

1. When we sin, we need to take responsibility for our evil choices. It is too easy to shift blame on others for the bad things we do. But after all, if it really was a sin, our free will was involved, and therefore our responsibility is engaged. Deflection and evasion are the opposite of repentance.

2. Once we have taken responsibility, we need to apologize. We need to express our regret and sorrow for what has happened, and for our part in it. This goes a long way to healing damaged relationships, and to healing our souls.
3. Of course, no apology is sincere without an acknowledgement of the negative consequences of our sin. We must therefore attempt to make amends, as best we can, as a way to repair the damage our sin has caused.
4. Finally, the most significant amendment we can make is that of our own life. Sometimes sins flow from bad habits, and while we may regret the sin, apologize over and over, and regularly seek to repair the damage done, repentance would not be complete without a sincere promise—and effort—to break that negative habit and not do the sin again.

Repentance can be directed to our human relationships, as well as our relationship with God. Lived well, it is a very noble and even holy thing. It isn't always easy, because it requires us to be humble, and to take the chance that maybe the person we have hurt will not accept our apology and our sincere efforts to make amends. That, however, is on them. The duty to repent, even without knowing how it will play out in the end, still remains as a necessary response common to all sins.

Are there any unforgivable sins?

I have occasionally met people so filled with guilt for what they have done that they wonder if they can ever be forgiven. Forgiveness between people obviously depends on the victim being willing to pardon, but in the case of God we can be assured that, no matter how great our sin is, God is always ready to forgive. This is a key part of the gospel of Jesus.

That said, Jesus did mention that there was one “eternal sin” which could not be forgiven. The Bible calls it the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, Jesus taught that “people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mk 3: 28-29).

What is this “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”? It is not any particular sin, but rather the choice of impenitence. As I said above, all sins share one thing in common: the moment it is committed, a sin creates the duty to repent. Any sin can be forgiven by God, except a sin for which we refuse to repent.

We can always change our minds, of course, while we are still alive, and come to God seeking forgiveness even for sins committed many years ago. Jesus teaches that there is great

joy in heaven when we repent, so this should encourage us to never hesitate to seek to be reconciled. But let us not fool ourselves. Heaven is an experience of the perfection of love, both received and given. Refusing to repent means we are placing ourselves above those we hurt, God included. That is why it is a “blasphemy”, and why its consequences can be eternal. There is no place in heaven for selfishness.

This, I should add, is why purgatory exists. As the Bible says, nothing impure can enter into eternal life (cf. Rev. 21: 27). But who of us is totally pure when we come to judgment? Purgatory is a great blessing: it is a final chance for us to be purified of our residual selfishness, even after we have died, so that we are fully prepared for the fullness of the divine life waiting for us. Everyone in purgatory gets to heaven eventually, and we can be strengthened by the prayers of others and of the Church to pass through the experience more effectively. That said, even access to purgatory presumes an interior willingness to repent from sin, however imperfectly, so we must not neglect that duty to turn away from sin.

#### The Church and repentance

Every year the Church gives us the special season of Lent to undertake our spiritual preparation for Easter. This is meant to be a season of penance. On Ash Wednesday, when the ashes are placed on our head, we hear the words “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”, or “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.” The Bible readings we hear throughout Lent remind us of the importance of the duty of penance. This does not mean Lent is a season of feeling guilty all the time, or of punishing ourselves, but rather that it is a time to take an honest look at ourselves and give ourselves permission to approach God once again and seek forgiveness for our sins.

God has blessed the Church with the means to make that forgiveness real. The fundamental sacrament of forgiveness of sins is Baptism. An adult who is baptized is effectively asking to enter into a relationship with God so total that it is the starting point of heaven here on Earth. It has, as one of its effects, the forgiveness of all past sins, no matter how grave, as well as a strengthening of the soul to such an extent that purgatory is instantaneous. But Baptism is not just about removing evil from our soul, but replacing it with good. With Baptism the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which God has desired for us since the days of the first human beings, is restored. This is why we baptise babies. They do not have any personal sins, but the lack of this indwelling is the “original sin” we all have from the moment of our conception. It is this lack of grace which Baptism corrects.

People are sometimes surprised to learn that Baptism is the fundamental sacrament of forgiveness of sins. After all, isn't that what the sacrament of Reconciliation is for? But Reconciliation is actually a sacrament by which we repent of our post-baptismal sins and ask God to restore us to the state we enjoyed on the day of our Baptism. We spiritually benefit, therefore, from bringing all sins, no matter their gravity, to this sacrament, but grave sins, in particular, must be brought to confession as the expression of sincere repentance for them.

Confirmation, too, is a sacrament that brings reconciliation. As we know, sin divides: it divided our earliest ancestors, and it even can divide Christians today. Confirmation is the sacrament that founds the unity of the Church and which helps overcome any divisions. People who were baptised into a Protestant church and who seek unity with the Catholic Church, for example, are received by the profession of faith and the sacrament of Confirmation.

The Eucharist is also a sacrament of repentance. As we know, real repentance involves not just saying sorry and making amends, but also working on ourselves to always be faithful to our commitment to God and to grow in our relationship with him and with those he loves. The Eucharist is a key part of that process. Every time we go to Mass we hear the Bible readings and an explanation of our faith, thus growing in our knowledge, and we deepen our union with the Lord through communion. When we leave Mass we are meant to be just a little bit more charitable each time, united with each other and living according to the vision of a loving community that God had originally intended for humanity.

As we begin to feel the fragility of our life, the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick acts as the completion of Christian penance. Penance is something we should do throughout our life, as it helps us to discipline our desires and keeps us grounded in the reality of our spiritual frailty. The offering up of our sufferings, bearing with them patiently as we try to resolve them, is a very powerful form of penance. The Anointing of the Sick consecrates those efforts and that attitude, and provides the strengthening for the final expiation of sin. In other words, just as Reconciliation renews the forgiveness of sins, the Anointing of the Sick provides the strengthening of the soul needed to pass through the final purification before entering into the divine life.

There are so many other ways that our spiritual tradition encourages us to live the fullness of mercy, both from God and for each other. The Church is always a community of sinners, so we will always find imperfections and (sadly) sometimes even grave evil there, but at its best the Church is a community of sinners striving to become saints. Indeed, the Church is called to be the seed of a humanity restored to grace, as God always intended it to be. But for

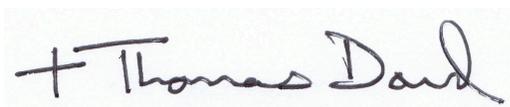
that to be the case, we must be renewed. It starts with us, as people living in grace and repentance.

## Living Lent

This year our season of Lent is being lived in the context of the Jubilee of Hope. Pope Francis has invited all of us to a renewal of the sacrament of Reconciliation in our lives, as well as the opportunity to live the jubilee indulgence, especially through times of personal pilgrimage. Now that the weather is improving I will soon be declaring which locations within our diocese will be our privileged sites of pilgrimage. But more important than any journey we can do with our feet is the journey we must do with our heart.

For this reason, I invite all of us to live the sacraments this Lent, and in particular, for those of us who are Catholics, the sacrament of Reconciliation. No matter how long it might have been, or even if it is the very first time, confession is good for the soul! For our priests, I encourage you to make generous efforts to make the sacrament of Reconciliation available to your people. We are so privileged to be the ministers that God sends so that people may experience the repentance and reconciliation God calls them to and wishes for them.

My next pastoral letter will have as its theme key days of Holy Week. We will look straight on at the terrible depths of, by looking at the example of Judas. Then, we will together look at Christ on the cross, seeing his passion as an expression of the depths of the love of God for us. We will also look at his death and resurrection, seeing how Christ's descent into Hell and subsequent resurrection was not just for him, but for all of us. These are the mysteries that help us see just how much God wants to share his divine life with us.



+Thomas Dowd  
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Ash Wednesday





## QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Before reflecting on these questions, you should know that Catholic priests are trained to help people understand their moral life. Whether you are Catholic or not, if you want to speak with a Catholic priest about issues arising from these questions, you are most welcome to do so.

- Am I the kind of person who readily admits my faults, or do I get defensive about them?  
How sensitive is my conscience?
- Do I forgive others easily? Do I put conditions on the forgiveness I offer?
- How have I experienced forgiveness from others? How have I experienced God's forgiveness?
- To whom in my life do I need to apologize? In what ways do I need to make amends for past sins?
- What negative moral habits do I have? What steps can I take (or am I taking) to try and avoid falling into habitual sins?
- Are there any choices I have made in my life that I am ashamed of, or that I feel guilty about? Are there choices I have made that I hope others in my life do not learn about?
- Have I approached God for forgiveness? In that ways?
- (For Catholics) When was the last time I went to confession to live the sacrament of Reconciliation? What is my plan for returning again to the sacrament, and for making it a regular part of my spiritual life?