Christmas is fast approaching, as we are reminded by many decorations and preparations that we have to face. As Catholics, we are called not to forget the essential: the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus. Upon arriving in Bethlehem, his parents did not find a home and had to settle for a stable. Today we can welcome the Lord by preparing in our hearts a home worthy of him. To this end, the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance is a fundamental resource.

Dear Diocesans, I invite you to rediscover and to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance as a personal encounter with the Lord though his priest. Jesus in fact encountered people in their specific situation: Madgalena was not Peter or Zacchaeus. The Church maintains Jesus’ attitude in administrating the sacraments to each person individually: each person is unique.

Our age is sensitive to interpersonal relationships, to personalized service. With the sacrament of forgiveness, we have available an exceptional possibility for touching what constitutes the most intimate reality of our lives, their fundamental framework.

The priest exercises in fact a ministry similar to that of a doctor, who does not care for crowds nor prescribe the same medication for everyone. Jesus himself suggests this resemblance: *“Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. ... I did not come to call the righteous but sinners”* (Mt 9: 10-13). Canon 978 § 1 has the same perspective: “*In hearing confessions the priest is to remember that he is equally a judge and a physician and has been established by God as a minister of divine justice and mercy, so that he has regard for the divine honour and the salvation of souls*”.

The doctor believes that health is possible and he helps the person to recover it; the priest believes in the holiness offered and helps his brothers and sisters to attain it.

When he (she) meets the doctor, the sick person brings his (her) problems to him and describes the symptoms of his (her) illness. The doctor comes up with a judgment, a diagnosis. He identifies the illness, after which he can prescribe the required medication, propose a surgical intervention or recommend a particular diet or lifestyle change. However, the doctor can do nothing if the sick person does not respond to his proposals.

The priest acts similarly: the person exposes his (her) difficulties in living out the Gospel, thereby telling the truth about himself (herself). The priest proposes a path of conversion, of deepening a connection with the Lord with a view to greater consistency of life.

The great therapeutic intervention is the grace of the sacrament of forgiveness through which the Lord communicates his love that goes beyond the fault and moves toward a better life.

May this season of Advent and of spiritual preparation to Christmas help us to taste and see the graces of the mercy that the Lord offers us.

✠ Serge Poitras

Bishop of Timmins

Feast of St. Andrew, the Apostle