

## **Sacrament of Reconciliation: God's Sacrament of Healing for a Wounded World**

Msgr. Joseph Hirsch  
Casa Hogar Juan Pablo II  
Lurín Perú  
Talking Points:

Opening prayer:

*"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit."  
(Psalm 51)*

Today in this reflection on the Sacrament we will have four parts:

**First**, we live in a broken world. I live in a Casa Hogar, an orphanage of children in South America in which the experiences we have are unique and yet we all share in the same human story of searching for hope in a wounded world. Our life is microcosm of the woundedness we find in our own communities and families.

**Secondly**, if we are to share the hope and healing of Jesus Christ, each of us is called to encounter His healing in our own woundedness. Thus, I will share some of my own experience of how this Sacrament has been a source of encounter and healing for me.

**Thirdly**, there are many questions people have regarding Confession/Penance/Reconciliation. I will discuss many of the questions I have encountered in my priesthood and share some insights.

**Fourthly**, I would like to share some retreat notes from my own personal retreats and these serve as sources of working with the children and adults both in the Diocese back home and here in Peru.

### **A. Casa Hogar is a microcosm of the brokenness and need for healing in our world:**

1. In our work with the children at Casa, every child comes with wounds from their young past: Some wounds are more physical like extreme poverty, sickness, malnutrition. Others from lack of formation such as missing years of school.
2. Others are more emotional and involve broken relationships in which mom has had multiple relationships. Little or no dad. Parent and family members who work and the child is left home to make his life in front of the TV or in the street.
3. Some wounds are because of hurts in which the children have experienced: death of family members, violence in the home, addiction, parent and family members in prison. Some children are exposed to wounds caused by deformation—pornography, witnessing sexual activity in family, abuse by family members or by other adults. Some are taught to lie and to steal in order get what they need. In their home entertainment is uncensored and so they have seen it all. Many have seen sex, violence, and every kind of horror movie available. The music genre most often listened to and which little children have the lyrics memorized are songs of Reggaeton. The lyrics are very vulgar and sexually explicit.
4. Almost none of the children who come to us have been baptized nor attend Church. Most are nominally Catholic but know nothing Jesus Christ.

5. Into this world the children are born and shaped and then because of difficult situations find their way to Casa Hogar. Our mission to help them to see their dignity as human beings, to teach them that there is a God who loves them. This alone is very difficult because the children feel that if there is a God then why did He do THIS to them. These children cry out for love and affection and are searching for meaning and hope. They cannot even think about vocation and mission until a foundation and healing take place.
6. At Casa I work with a team of parents(maestros), staff and psychologists to help the children to become integrated at the levels of *intellect, emotion, physical, social* and *spiritual*. We cannot leave any one of these out. I am Director of the Casa Hogar and that is what I do, but who am I? I am pastor and spiritual father and with our team try to bring the love of Jesus Christ into these children's lives so that Jesus can begin the healing process.
7. What we see here at Casa Hogar is really a microcosm of the wounds we all experience in our ministry with people. Today I want to talk especially about the area of spiritual renewal and healing that can come to us through the spiritual restoration of a relationship with Jesus Christ in the Church through the Sacraments and especially through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

**B. Personal witness of encountering the Lord's healing in my life:**

1. What is your experience of Reconciliation as a child? As a child I think we view Confession as a way of doing our spiritual laundry and cleaning our spiritual house. One of the confessions which meant most to me as a child was after I told my brother that I hoped someone would kill him and that he would disappear. My mom had me say the Our Father and stopped me on the part about forgiving us as we forgive others. She had me repeat it about 4 times and then told me to go to Confession. That was one of my better confessions and most unforgettable.
2. But I think we all play a kind of game in which we have sins that are comfortable to tell and other which are not. It is like the backpack where we put in three rocks and then take out two. Put in three more and take out two. Repeat this process about 10 times and you cannot tell the difference when you take out only two at a time. More remain than are removed. When we do this in our spiritual life with Jesus, healing cannot keep up with the weight of our sins and we feel weighted down. I felt this for years because I could not open up and talk to Jesus in Confession.
3. Experience of October 1 and October 28, 1981. I experienced a call to confess that was totally different. I was 26 and in college. I experienced a something like Jesus was telling me that He wanted to do so much with me but couldn't because I kept the doors shut. I felt that He wanted to heal me but I needed to be spiritually honest in Confession. On those days I felt a burning call that was irresistible to go to Confession but not because I felt guilty but rather that God wanted to help heal me.
4. This was the first step in a healing process for me that opened the door finally to the seminary and priesthood. I am convinced that had I not met the Lord's healing in Reconciliation it would have been much harder to find my vocation and mission in the priesthood. In the seminary and beyond I discovered that this Sacrament of Reconciliation helps me always to renew and refresh my friendship and commitment to live a life of discipleship and deeper intimacy with Jesus. Let's take a look at specific questions people often ask about Confession and also how this Sacrament

can help us to seek ever deeper levels of intimacy through self-understanding and healing through Christ.

**C. Common Questions about Confession/Penance/Reconciliation:**

Let's start with the most common questions and then move more and more towards the questions about the healing dimensions of this Sacrament. To each question I will answer with a very short and partial answer. There is always much more to say, but this is a start.

1. Why do I have to confess to a priest? (When I asked this to a priest as a high school student, he asked me, "Can you baptize yourself?")
2. Why can't I go direct to God for forgiveness like my friends who aren't Catholic? (Because the *economy of salvation* which God has always used in the Bible is that His grace is mediated to us through kings, prophets, and priests. Confession reconciles me at other levels and not just with my private offense against God—i.e. self, other, the community and God. Think about it, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation we have direct access to the mercy of God through Jesus Christ, just as we do in the Eucharist. What if someone were to say, I don't want to receive Holy Communion—I prefer going to Jesus Christ directly to be in communion with God? Jesus didn't do it this way.)
3. Where in the Bible does it say that we should confess?  
(John 20.21-23: In the Last Supper Jesus established the New Covenant for the forgiveness of sins. On the night of his resurrection Jesus gives the authority to forgive sins to the Apostles and through ordination to the Church through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.)
4. If God knows my sins, why do I have to confess?  
(God doesn't need it. We need it. Confessing helps us to own up to the fact that we are sinners in need of redemption. Confessing helps us to stop comparing, making excuses and assigning blame.)
5. Can't I just be forgiven in the Confiteor I say at Mass?  
(Yes, for venial sins. Likewise, there are times I can heal myself at home and times I must go to see the doctor.)
6. Confession seems so negative and is looking at all that I am doing wrong. Why?  
(Do I see confession more as reporting my sins or more as medicine that restores/hospital?)
7. Why do I need to confess if I haven't committed something real bad?  
(Do you eat only enough to stay alive or do you eat so as to be healthy? Fr. Benedict Groeschel: "The better the marriage, the more the spouses ask forgiveness. The holiest persons confess more often and those who are distant from God confess less.")
8. I am afraid that Father knows me and will not see me the same again.  
(Do you really think the priest remembers every sin? No. Sometimes we have to remember in order to give counsel again, but actually the priest feels a closer confidence and trust with the

persons who are totally transparent with God in Confession).

9. Father has problems too and I cannot confess to someone whom I think is a sinner or even a hypocrite.  
(To whom are you confessing? To God or the priest. The priest is only a pencil in God's hand. At the same time, we have the freedom to seek out a priest we can trust or that we can confess to anonymously.)
10. Since the scandal in the Church I cannot confess my sins to a priest.  
(It is a scandal what has happened and we priests too are justly angered by the fall from grace of our brother priests. But keep in mind the 100% failure of the Apostles on Holy Thursday night did not cancel Jesus from establishing the New and Eternal Covenant for the forgiveness of sins. The scandal teaches me first of all that if we do not cultivate a strong spiritual life in which we seek constant conversion and renewal, even the best of us can fall from grace and cause scandals. Is priesthood really the problem or is the failure of true priesthood the real problem? Likewise, if I were to argue that I will not encourage the Sacrament of Marriage anymore until married people get their act together and stop all divorce, infidelity and even abuse, I would be committing the same error. Marriage is not the real problem. The failure to live up to the meaning of Marriage is the true problem. In order to live my vocation to priesthood and your vocation to marriage it is essential for all of us to seek a life of renewal and conversion. I need Confession in order to be in direct contact with the healing grace of Jesus Christ. I will not let the fall of Judas take me away from the Church and its Bridegroom, Jesus Christ and the grace and healing He wants to give me through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.)
11. Why a penance? It seems that I am buying forgiveness.  
(The penance reminds me that I need to do something to rebuild the damage I have done, even though it falls far short. Think of a child who pays \$5 dollars of his allowance to make up for breaking a window that costs \$200.00. What does this action really signify?)
12. What use is it to go to Confession over and over confessing the same sin?  
(By confessing regularly, I am able to stay on the road to holiness, e.g. washing the windshield.)
13. Why is it necessary to say when I made my last confession?  
(It helps the priest to understand the context of where you are coming from. If it has been two weeks then he knows it is a routine confession. If it has been 10 years, he knows that he needs to be sure to give you the time you need to share what you are asking of God in this confession. To tell the priest how long it has been actually can help the priest to understand and be a better instrument of the Lord for you).
14. How do I confess? What do I confess?  
(What are the sins that most make you feel guilty and rob you of peace? What are the attitudes that underlie these acts and words? What should you have done that you did not do? What are the games I play with myself so as not to have to face my sins? E.g. rationalize, make excuses, compare, blame, distract myself, work too much, false consolations, etc.)

15. Do I need to number?

(For many sins you won't be able to give a number, like "I swore 643 times." But it helps the priest to understand the degree and intensity of this sin in your life. If it is a serious sin of infidelity number is going to be an important factor.)

16. Do you have to tell everything or can you leave some things out because they are more embarrassing?

(If you have a backpack and fill it with 3 rocks and take out 2, then add three and take out two, then add three and take out two—how many do you have? If you hold back you close the door of your soul to receive the grace of healing that God wants to give. A lot of people go to confession and feel no different because they still have a lot in their spiritual backpack. In short, if I purposely leave out a sin from my confession, am I really allowing God's grace to heal me like He wants to heal me?)

17. What happens if I just cannot confess a certain sin? I have never told anyone ever and I don't plan on doing it.

(We have a drama we do with the students about how Jesus comes to my home and I want to show him my living room and the rooms which are comfortable. He asks about the basement and I refuse to show him, because I am afraid that he will look at me differently. Jesus then asks me to trust him that he can redeem especially this area of my life. I reluctantly take him down. In the basement he encounters my most secret sins and sends them away. In the end I am surprised because I thought I had to live with those secrets the rest of my life. I am freed and redeemed. Pray and ask Jesus to show you how to bring him into the basement of your heart.

From a psychological perspective I understand that a person sometimes requires a long time and a lot of trust to finally be able to confess a deep-seated sin. When we see that a person did not bring up this sin because of a deep psychological wound, confessors will often take even more care that the person is affirmed and consoled in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.)

18. Can the priest ever reveal my sins?

(This would be a very grave sin and the priest can lose his priesthood for doing this. I have young people who tell me, "Father, I will not talk to you about some of my issues unless I am in Confession with you, because then I know you will never talk. I find Confession to be a great gift of confidence and trust for people.)

19. I don't know if I really want to give up this sin just yet. I actually enjoy it and want it, but I know it is destroying me. How much repentance do I have to have to be able to go to Confession?

(Difference between perfect vs. imperfect contrition. I will always like chocolate and I cannot change this reality, but I know that my impulse cannot rule me. In Romans 7 St. Paul says that he knows what he should do but still finds himself doing what is wrong. We all have disordered appetites. If I wait until all my appetites are fully trained, I will die first.)

20. What sins cannot be forgiven?

(The sin that you refuse to ask for God's mercy and pardon. I had the situation of a person who scheduled an abortion for the following week and wanted to go to Confession 7 days before the abortion, so that she would not fall out of the state of grace. I had to explain to her that I cannot forgive a sin that she is about to commit.)

21. What is General Confession? How many times should I do it?

(You confessed as a child at least superficially. It will be good at a later date to look over your life at an adult level to see areas not redeemed and now that you are stronger and better formed you can seek a deeper healing. For me and for many they go through a number of general confessions until they feel the peace that it is enough or that their confessor tells them that now is the time to shut the door to the past.)

22. What are the most common and deepest scars or wounds we encounter as priests?

(As a priest the deepest wounds I see are from family of origin, what are often referred to as the mother and father wounds due to abandonment, rejection and violence, alcoholism, etc. Two areas in which we see so much pain in young people's lives is from sexual abuse, mostly from within their families, early sexual experimentation in the name of love and abortion. In so many young men pornography is taken for granted and really 'normalized'.)

23. Why do I still feel guilty about things in my past?

(It took time to get where you are. It will take time to overcome. When I was going through some difficulties a priest gave me the example of the onion with its many layers or shells. He said that when we commit sin, we then add layer after layer of shame on top of it. When we confess, the sin is forgiven, but many of the layers of shame remain. He suggested that at each confession if I feel that there are still these layers or shells of shame to ask the Lord in my confession for forgiveness of my sins and then for healing of memories.

Sometimes people like to confess the same sin over and over again because they still feel this shame. The fact is, the sin is gone. To confess it over and over again does not help the person. Instead, when I ask for healing from these memories I am reinforcing that I have been forgiven and I am asking the Lord to remove a layer of this hurt each time as I consecrate myself to him in the Sacrament of Healing. With time the Lord will let you know when it is gone. See the scene in the movie of the Mission.)

24. How does God's forgiveness impact my ability to forgive?

(When I experience the mercy of God in my life, this helps me to be more understanding of the weaknesses of others and therefore more willing to forgive them of their failures with me. Also, if my heart is closed through unforgiveness, then God's mercy cannot find a place to enter into my heart.)

25. How can I prepare myself daily so that I can make a good Confession?

(The saints speak about a daily examination of conscience—also known as **Examen**—which is done during the day and at night. It is a prayerful conversation with the Lord in which you invite the Lord to guide, correct, and affirm you. It is not so much that we analyze our behavior. We are really listening in prayer and asking the Lord to speak to us about how we have responded to His graces and how we can continue to grow in love. This daily reflection in prayer will help prepare you better for when you make your regular confession.)

26. How do you discipline your thoughts? Media? Music? Conversations?

(At Casa children use a saying: ‘Sow a thought, reap a desire. Sow a desire, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny’. Also, ‘Our souls are dyed by the color of our leisure thoughts’. The media and music we consume will have an influence on the choices we later choose. How do I discipline myself and in my conversations?)

27. What is spiritual direction? How can I do it when the priest has no time?

(It is a luxury today to have a spiritual director. For most this is not going to be a possibility in a formal manner. But if you have regular confession, then the counsel the priest will offer you will be a brief form of spiritual direction. Retreats are good opportunities to seek a more expanded form of spiritual direction. Currently I find that there are so many resources today on the internet that serve as spiritual guidance. At Casa we are using FORMED as a major tool of formation.)

28. How can Confession work with the Eucharist to help strengthen me?

(Confession gives me an undivided heart so that I can grow in intimacy with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and so in my daily life. A very powerful example in my priesthood has been in working with people who are seeking healing after an abortion. I will explain in the talk.)

**D. Exercise: Here is an example of reflections taken from a number of retreats from the Institute of Priestly Formation. I took this course as a priest when I was feeling a dryness and knew that I needed something more.**

#### Discernment Through Healing: Prayer

*Forgive me my sins, O Lord, forgive me my sins; the sins of my body; my idle sins, my serious voluntary sins; the sins I know, the sins I do not know; the sins I have concealed for so long, and which are now hidden from my memory.*

*I am truly sorry for every sin mortal and venial, for all the sins of my childhood up to the present hour.*

*I know my sins have wounded my relationship with You and with so many others. O my Savior let me be freed from the bonds of evil through your most bitter Passion.*

*O my Jesus forgive and forget what I have been, so that healed and renewed, I might love my life in You and for others.*

*Lord I give You permission to lift to my consciousness those sins for which I need to come to a deeper repentance. Help me to know the sins hidden from my memory or those wounds caused by others but which still need to be named and healed.*

### Discernment Through Healing: Examen

1. Review of my life: What are the important stages in my life? (Write them down.) Where was the Lord at each stage? When did I feel closest to Him? When did I struggle the most? How did He reveal Himself to me? What were my main questions, doubts, fears, hurts, wounds, blessings, relationships? How did they affect me then and how do they continue to affect me in the present?
2. When does the Lord speak to me? How much time do I have for quiet? Recollection? Meditation? Contemplation? Prayer? If the Lord could speak to me about the quality of the time I spend with Him, what would He say? How would I respond?
3. What is happening in my life right now? What are the events and relationships which most affect my life right now both positive and negative? How do they draw me away or bring me closer to the Lord?
4. How do I experience the Lord at this time in my life? Who is Jesus Christ for me? How has Jesus changed my life? Is my faith in Him more in my head? How does my relationship with Him affect me at the heart level? What does it mean for me to call Jesus my Savior? What does it mean for me to say I am God's beloved daughter/son?
5. What do I hope to receive from the Lord? In other words, what grace do I seek from the Lord at this time?
6. What is my favorite Bible passage? What is my favorite Bible story? Why have these passages become my favorites? How do they speak to me? What is the Lord saying to me through these Scriptures?
7. What questions do I want to ask God? What are the questions which remain unanswered in my life? What is the main one?
8. What are the doubts which sometimes come to me about my faith in God? My life? What is my greatest doubt?
9. What are the fears which make it difficult for me to trust in God's Providence and love in my life? What is my greatest fear?
10. How well do I trust others? God? What has happened in my life that has either helped me to trust or has damaged my ability to trust? Have I taken this to prayer?
11. What are the greatest hurts or wounds in my life which have placed obstacles in my ability to receive God's love and to give it to others? What are those wounds which have blocked my ability to rest in a deep love for God and awareness that I am God's son or daughter?

12. What are the wounds which have been caused by others? How is the Lord calling me to a deeper forgiveness of those who have wounded me? Is there still someone whom I need to forgive? Is there a resentment or hurt which the Lord is calling me to let go? How?
13. What are the wounds which I have caused in others? Have I reconciled with that person or persons? As I bring this to prayer, how is the Lord prompting me to take the next step?
14. What are my chief temptations? Why? What is their source? Traditionally we speak of the source of temptation from the world, the flesh, and the devil? What do these mean? Is there anything in my life which has contributed to the intensity of these temptations? Do I avoid people or situations which lead me into temptation? What is the Lord asking of me in the face of these temptations? How do I bring them into my prayer?
15. What are the sins which I have fallen into in my life? What are the addictive habits which have become the repeating sins in my life? How can the Sacrament of Reconciliation help me to overcome such ingrained habits of sin?
16. How does the Lord want to help me to integrate my passions and emotions into who I am as a disciple of Jesus? How do I invite Jesus into my inner sanctuary where I am so vulnerable—to purify my feelings and emotions?
17. *“Our souls are dyed by the color of our leisure thoughts.”* In what ways is the Lord asking to be Lord of my imagination? How can I surrender and consecrate to Him the secrets and wanderings of my imagination? Why should I? Why is this so difficult? How can I bring this to prayer and allow the Lord to truly teach me to be “Pure of Heart”?
18. What are the lies which I have listened to and allowed to seduce me and lead me to become so much less than I am called to be? What murmurings? Accusations? Where do they come from? What do I do when they speak to me? What is the truth which the Lord wants to give to me in response?

Exercise: Identify each lie and then ask the Lord to reveal the truth about myself in response to each lie by praying the prayer below for each lie. Then journal each response you receive in prayer.

*“I ask You Jesus to stand between this lie and me. I reject this lie. In Your Holy Name, Jesus, I cast this lie into Your holy wounds. Pour your Precious Blood over me and seal me, that I may know I am Yours. Tell me the truth as You are the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen”*

19. What are the attitudes which lie under each of the lies in my life?

20. What is the core lie which the Lord wants to heal in my life at this time?

21. What is the core truth which the Lord wants me to receive in this retreat?

22. Blessings: What are the times in which God has revealed himself in me in my life? What are the special moments in which I have experienced the Lord's presence beyond a doubt? (Write them down and bring them to prayer.) What is the Lord saying to me as He reviews these important blessings in my life?

23. What am I most thankful for in my life? How do I show that gratitude to others? To God?

24. How does God see me right now in my life? As I bring this to prayer, what is He saying to me about my weaknesses? Strengths? Successes? Failures? Relationships with others? My relationship with Him?

**Conclusion:** I hope that these reflections on the Sacrament of Reconciliation can help you as a Catholic and as a Catechist to be able to live your life as Disciples in love with Jesus Christ and called to be instruments of His healing for so many in our broken and wounded world. It is a privilege to be on the front line whether in Peru or in our Diocese. We have a saying that "The future is in the hands of our children." As we live our vocation within the Church, we have the sacred mission to prepare the next generation of saints. God bless you all.