

## A Source of Reconciliation and Joy

### The Sacrament of Penance

There's an old joke about a carpenter who went to confession after he had been stealing lumber from his job site. He confessed his sins, and the priest said, "For your penance, make a novena." The carpenter replied, "I'm not quite sure what a novena is, Father, but if you have the blueprints, I have the lumber!"

The story is good for a laugh, but it makes a good point. It raises the question of whether in the Sacrament of Penance anything good can come from our guilt and our sins. Notice the use of the term *penance* rather than *confession*. Confession is just one moment in the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. Confession probably gets the most attention because it's the scariest part—no one likes to have his or her sins brought into the light—even if it's in the darkness of a confessional. Perhaps in the past the Church focused too much on the telling of the sins and too little on the joy to be gained through the healing that comes through an encounter with the mercy and forgiveness of God. Confession is an important step on the way to forgiveness, but it's shortsighted to let this one aspect stand for the whole gift.

#### Here's what the Sacrament of Penance actually offers:

- restoration to honesty—no more need to rationalize
- restoration to integrity—no more need to have secret or unacknowledged parts of your life
- relief from unproductive guilt—transformation of remorse into living a new life. The purpose of this sacrament is not punishment but true reconciliation with God and the community.
- an encounter with God—meeting God in humility (not humiliation!) and weakness
- spiritual guidance—no need to struggle with your moral issues alone
- inner peace—no longer having to live a life at war with yourself
- strength in meeting future challenges and temptations
- grace—rediscovering, as did the prodigal son, your Father's unconditional love.

Why should you not be afraid of this sacrament? The best reason is that God longs to forgive you. Remember, God knows that you are much more than the worst thing you've ever done.

