



PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP FREDRIK HANSEN TO THE FAITHFUL IN THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF OSLO ON THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Praise be to Jesus Christ! Praise be to his holy name!

1. *In this year's Lenten mandate*¹, I urgently exhorted all the faithful to go to confession during these holy forty days. To further strengthen the place of confession in our local Church, I wish to use this pastoral letter to expound upon some fundamental points concerning the sacrament, sin, and God's mercy, as well as to offer some practical advice.

Confession in the Church's Doctrine

2. The sacraments belong to the liturgical life of the Church and are meant «to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and ... to give worship to God».² The seven sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, the Anointing of the Sick, Penance, Matrimony, and Holy Orders—were all instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ³ and are therefore by no means arbitrary. The sacraments are willed by God and flow from Jesus' saving work.

3. Furthermore, the sacraments are «efficacious signs... perceptible to the senses.»⁴ They are concrete, traceable, and visible. As the celebration of the sacraments takes place, we simultaneously receive grace through them. Grace is God's gift to us humans,⁵ a gift that sustains us on our «way to holiness.»⁶ The sacraments are therefore rightfully referred to as means of grace and means of salvation. In the Sacrament of Penance, we receive forgiveness for the offenses, the sins, we have committed.⁷

Sin and God's Mercy

4. To understand this forgiveness, we must recognize what sin is and what it does to us. We confess in every Mass that sin consists of «thoughts, words, what I have done, and what I have failed to do»⁸ that violates God's law. By sinning, we attempt to usurp God's place and set ourselves up as judges over good and evil, just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden.⁹

¹ BISHOP FREDRIK HANSEN, *Lenten Mandate 2026 for the Catholic Diocese of Oslo, February 14, 2026*.

² SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1114. See also COUNCIL OF TRENT, *Introduction to the Seventh Session, March 3, 1547*.

⁴ *Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* 224.

⁵ See Eph 2:6.

⁶ *Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* 231.

⁷ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, 11.

⁸ *Roman Missal*, Penitential Act.

⁹ Gen 3:1-7.

5. Every sin damages our relationship and bond with God, with the Church, and with our fellow human beings. Grave sins,¹⁰ also known as mortal sins, completely *sever* these bonds. Venial sins do not sever the bonds, but they *weaken* them.¹¹ If we sever our bonds to God, to the Church, and to our fellow human beings, we are left entirely alone, like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable.¹² Saint Paul writes plainly: «the wages of sin is death».¹³ Sin is therefore far more destructive in our lives than we might often realize.

6. Enlightened by Jesus' powerful words, however, we live in the hope that sin need not have the final word in our lives. In confession, God forgives us in his mercy, restores divine life within us, and brings us back into friendship with him and communion with the Church. As we read in the First Letter of John: «If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.»¹⁴

7. We do not go to confession to dwell on our mistakes, but rather to encounter God's unfathomable mercy and to receive his forgiveness and peace. For if there is one thing our faith proclaims clearly, it is that God is rich in mercy and rejoices over every single sinner who repents. The Book of Psalms points out that «as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is [God's] steadfast love toward those who fear him,»¹⁵ and Saint Luke writes that when the repentant prodigal son was reconciled with his father, «they began to make merry».¹⁶

Going to Confession

8. The path to confession should therefore be short and unobstructed. This is a path we should walk regularly, and one we must run every single time we have committed grave sins. If we remain in sin, outside the state of grace, we are left standing alone. That often leads to further sins. Sin should therefore instead provoke within us a zeal to confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness. The Church also prescribes, and it bears repeating here, that anyone who is conscious of grave sin must refrain from receiving Communion.¹⁷

9. Every member of the faithful should routinely go to confession. In doing so, we are trained to examine our lives for venial sins, to ever more deeply understand God's law, and to zealously seek the holiness to which the Lord calls us: «You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.»¹⁸ A good habit of confession means going more than once a year. I therefore take the liberty of urging all the faithful to go to confession at least three times a year: during Lent, in the summer before St. Olaf's Day (Olsok), and during Advent.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1855-1861.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1862-1863.

¹² Luke 15:11-32.

¹³ Rom 6:23.

¹⁴ 1 John 1:9.

¹⁵ Ps 103:11.

¹⁶ Luke 15:24b.

¹⁷ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 916.

¹⁸ Matt 5:48

10. It is important to prepare well for confession and thereby fulfil the sacrament's requirements: that we truly have *contrition* for our sins, humbly *confess* them, and faithfully *perform our penance*.¹⁹ This process begins with us thoroughly reflecting on our lives in silence and prayer, identifying which sins need to be confessed and what specifically we are to present in the confessional. To assist with this self-examination, the use of a guide to confession, the Ten Commandments, or other central biblical texts is highly recommended.

A Few Words to the Faithful and to the Priests

11. Dear faithful! Many find it difficult to go to confession. Perhaps it has been a very long time since your last confession. Perhaps you are unsure of what to say, how to say it, or how the priest will react. Perhaps you do not remember how to begin or how the ritual is conducted. Perhaps you are carrying sins that are so burdensome or seem so unforgivable that the journey to the confessional feels like an endless uphill climb. As a bishop, I feel a profound obligation to assist the faithful who, for these or other reasons, are hesitant to go to confession. Therefore, I ask you to write to me about what makes going to confession difficult for you, so that together we can make the Sacrament of Penance a living part of the lives of all the faithful.

12. Dear brothers in the presbyteral order! We know the greatness of the Sacrament of Penance and how crucial it is in our own lives and the lives of the faithful. Therefore, I urge you, as well as myself, to lead by example and to regularly and faithfully go to confession ourselves. Let us furthermore make confession even more accessible, free from anxiety and easier to approach, and, to an even greater degree, a living encounter with God's infinite mercy. To further this effort, I will ask the Council of Priests to propose concrete suggestions on how we can strengthen confession in our local Church in the months and years to come.

13. One week remains until we go up to Jerusalem together with Our Lord. From the mysteries of Easter, not least Jesus' death on the wood of the cross for our sins, shines forth the victory over death and sin. This victory becomes a concrete reality within us through the Sacrament of Penance. May it ever increasingly be our aid as we live as disciples of the Lord.

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¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1450-1460.