On what do you spend your time? On what would you like to spend your time? Where do Church documents ask us to spend our time? What best serves our parishioners? In my experience, these questions do not always have the same answer. Recent Clergy Update articles have focused on the upcoming reception of the new translation of the third typical edition of the Roman Missal. We needed this focus for obvious reasons, especially to invite the renewal of liturgical life and priestly spirituality that can come by praying with new texts and images. Such renewal will require time spent praying these texts alone and with others.

Time is a precious commodity for most—if not all—of us. I know that I plan to spend much of my time in the next year reading, praying with, and unpacking the new texts, images, and melodies that will become part of our liturgical repertoire. Why? So that I might invite the entire liturgical assembly to receive them in ways that will elicit deeper meaning and a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. I like to spend my time preparing for preaching and presiding. However, doing so because I need to pray with entirely new texts is a challenge. The document The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy, released by the Congregation for the Clergy on Ash Wednesday 2011, reminds us:

The priestly munera (duties) are closely joined to each other for the spiritual good of the faithful: “In the Church, and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ—the head and shepherd—authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation—particularly in Baptism, Penance, and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock, which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit.”

This letter makes clear that preparing for and celebrating the Eucharist are connected places where the Church asks us to spend our time. It also reminds us that being available to celebrate the sacrament of Penance and offering spiritual direction make additional claims on our time and attention so that people might experience the mercy of God and grow more like the Christ we put on in Baptism and promise to live every time we are dismissed from the Mass.

The Sacrament of Penance

In my experience, people are not exactly clamoring to celebrate the sacrament of Penance on an individual basis, but that may be changing slowly. The number of people who come to celebrate the “Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents” seems to be increasing in the
two parishes where I am privileged to serve as a weekend presider, and a significant number of people also come to celebrate the “Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution” during Advent and Lent, which bespeak a desire to experience the healing mercy of Christ, the Divine Physician. I believe that this is true because we live in a broken world and a broken Church. People feel at odds with God, themselves, and the Church. The Clergy Congregation’s document states that “the effects of the grace of the sacrament are: reconciliation with God (restoration of peace and friendship with him), reconciliation with the Church (reintegration with the communion of saints), and reconciliation with self (unification of one’s own heart).” People are hungry for wholeness and holiness. People want to experience concrete union with God, belonging to the Body of Christ, and healing where they feel torn within. This is the journey of our life of faith. This is the journey to which we are called every Lent when we hear: “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

The two times at which I feel most humbled in my ordained priestly ministry are when celebrating the sacrament of Penance with someone who has felt free enough to be totally honest before God and who experiences the gift of mercy beyond what she or he imagined and when celebrating the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick with someone thirsting for Christ’s healing touch. The Congregation’s document names those experiences for me in this way: “The service of reconciliation, authentically exercised, will invite us to live in harmony with the heart of Christ. This is a pastoral ‘priority’ since it requires living the charity of the Good Shepherd, living ‘his love for [hu]mankind even to the point of giving up his life as a victim for them.’” As the Congregation’s text says later, we are to represent Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Divine Physician. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us:

The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

As ministers of these sacraments, we are instruments of healing and salvation in a broken world. It is not surprising that the Congregation for the Clergy calls us to make, as a priority of our time and energy, celebrating the sacrament of Penance and inviting the people of God to do so by means of a pastoral strategy for renewing this sacrament.

PRIORITIES AND TIME

Time is a precious commodity. How can I make room for yet another “priority,” when there are not enough hours in a day for what I must already do? What are the benefits to the people I serve, to me, to building up of the Body of Christ? Could it be...
that one response to the “clergy shortage” is the invitation to reflect on what I need to make a priority because it is part of ordained ministry in the Church’s life? Or what I like to do that could be done by a lay person with gifts for that ministry? Or what I would gladly hand over to another staff member or volunteer, if only I could help people realize that I need not be the one involved in carrying out a certain ministry or task? We certainly cannot keep adding “priorities” to already full plates, but with the help of staff, pastoral councils, brother priests, and spiritual directors, we can assess what needs to be done by whom and how. This would be a real gift not only to us but also to all with whom we minister and to all whom we serve.

What the Congregation says about celebrating the sacrament of Penance and offering spiritual direction is true for us all: “In all these various ways of celebrating the sacrament of Penance, the most important thing is to assist the penitent in conforming . . . to Christ.” The life of faith calls all of us to live Jesus more clearly. Presiding and preaching at the Eucharist, celebrating the sacrament of Penance, and celebrating the other sacraments of the Church are part of the munera that belong to the ordained in our present discipline. We also need time for personal and communal reflection on the Word of God; prayer in private and in common; and the devotional life as means to preside, preach, and witness Christ authentically. Making time to prioritize energy so as to use the gifts that I have been given and called to use in ordained ministry will free me to let go of those elements of pastoral work that I can while embracing those that will benefit the people I serve and me. Sometimes that requires letting go of something that I love doing but can’t continue to do if I am going to take on another priority. This involves a real loss that I must honor, grieve over, and bury so that I may rise again, renewed. It’s called the Paschal Mystery.

The document from the Congregation also reminds us that we cannot give what we have not received:

The ministry of being a “spiritual counselor and physician” is not just one of forgiving sins but of guiding and orienting the Christian life to correspond generously with God’s loving plan for us. When the priest responds generously to this plan, that effective flowering of the graces which the Holy Spirit gives to his Church in every age becomes possible.

We need to be both confessor and penitent, director and directed. As confessors we perform a liturgical act (The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy, 41), celebrating the sacrament of Penance is part of our ministry of presiding and preaching. As a penitent member of the Body of Christ, we celebrate the sacrament as salve for our souls. This sacrament and the spiritual direction that occurs within its celebration, by
means of our Sunday preaching, and in one-on-one relationships, invite us to the healing and wholeness that Jesus came to reveal in his earthly ministry. Jesus gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, voice to the mute, movement to the crippled, and forgiveness to the sinner. At times we need healing. At other times we are instruments of healing. At all times Christ invites, heals, empowers, and strengthens us all through the power of the Holy Spirit.

**EYES TO SEE**

The eyes with which one reads *The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy: An Aid for Confessors and Spiritual Directors* will determine whether or not one finds it to be inspiring, challenging, helpful, one more document to place on one’s bookshelf, or a combination of all these possibilities. I recommend reading it with an open mind and heart, as an invitation to liturgical and spiritual renewal. Our time is precious. Our ministry is needed. How we engage these two realities in dialogue will make all the difference to the healing and wholeness which our Church and our world need so desperately today and always.

**Notes**

6. Ibid., 136.