



# Merciful Like the Father

*Results of a 2021 Survey  
on Priestly Best Practices  
in the Sacrament of  
Penance and Reconciliation*

**Fr. Roger J. Landry**  
Missionaries of Mercy Conference  
“A Merciful Heart Open to the Whole World”  
Saint Meinrad Archabbey  
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## A Merciful Heart Open to the Whole World

- “Free and heartfelt forgiveness is ... a reflection of God’s own infinite ability to forgive.” (FT 250).
- Virtues of the Good Samaritan who include, integrate and lift up the fallen (77).
- Drawing close in dialogue – approaching, speaking, listening, coming to know, understanding, search for the truth (198)
- True love of neighbor (282)
- “As religious leaders, we are called to be true people of dialogue, ... authentic mediators, ... and artisans of peace” (284)





## Survey

- Carried out May 12-31, 2021 via FaceBook, Twitter, websites, parish bulletins, etc.
- 1,499 responses to six questions. After the excising of a few types of trolls and simple “yes” and “no” answers, we had 8,032 insights and 328 pages.
- Incredible feedback on best practices, worst practices, common practices and strange practices. Many people very candid.
- A lot of the responses are similar, because they describe similar experiences, but they have been retained so that readers can assess how common are the practices to which they attest.





## Six Questions on the Survey

1. Besides absolution, is there anything else you look for when you go to Confession?
2. What have been your best experiences in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation?
3. Have you had any difficult experiences in Confession? What made them difficult?
4. Do you choose a consistent confessor most of the time or do you go to whoever is hearing confessions? Is there a reason behind your choice?
5. What qualities and virtues do you look for in a good confessor?
6. If you were speaking to a group of priest confessors, what advice would you give them to help you to experience more profoundly God's mercy in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation?





## Do You Look For Anything Besides Absolution?

- I broke down the 1,320 individual comments into three categories:
  - Expectations of the Sacrament
  - Expectations of the Setting
  - Expectations of the Confessor
  
- Expectations of the Sacrament
  - Grace
  - An unburdened heart
  - Peace of heart, mind and soul.
  - Joy
  - Spiritual Relief and Renewal





# Do You Look For Anything Besides Absolution?

- Expectations of the Setting
  - Some asked for a face-to-face encounter; others asked for anonymity. The first generally with a chair; the latter generally with a kneeler.
  - An explanation of how the confessional lights work, where people should wait and in what order, which side is face to face and which behind the screen.
  - “Cheat sheets” or “how-to guides” in large print and especially the act of contrition, especially for converts.
  - A private, sound-proof, comfortable space.
  - A private area to complete the penance.
  - Accessibility
  - A priest who shows up on time.
  - Actual time with the priest.
  - If possible, air-conditioning.





# Do You Look For Anything Besides Absolution?

- Expectations of the Confessor
  - Compassionate, empathetic, merciful, understanding
  - Welcoming. Friendly. Kind.
  - Prayerful and down-to-earth
  - Gives a few kind words of exhortation and encouragement. Positive.
  - Validates that I'm worthy of God's love.
  - Joyful, Smiling, Happy to Hear Confessions.
  - Hopeful
  - Humble and recognizes that he, too, is a sinner in need of mercy.
  - Listens. Attentive.
  - Patient. Doesn't rush you.
  - Fatherly.





# Do You Look For Anything Besides Absolution?

- Expectations of the Confessor (*continued*)
  - Conscious that he acts *in persona Christi* and helps you to encounter Christ. Not a robot or transactional.
  - Faithful to, and doesn't water down, the Gospel and Church teaching
  - Wise and generous to give at least brief advice on how to avoid temptations to sin and to grow in holiness.
  - Capable of answering questions to inform conscience and to make better confessions.
  - Understands common mental health issues.
  - Capable of making recommendations of books, podcasts, websites, not to mention to other professionals.
  - Believes in the Sacrament and the absolution he's giving.
  - Gives meaningful penances.





## Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

- The 1,374 responses can be broken down into the following categories:
  - A Chosen Confessor
  - A No-choice Confessor
  - A Few Chosen Confessors
  - Intentionally Different Confessors
  - Chosen locations
  - Chosen times and convenience
- We will look at the reasons behind each category.



# Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

- A Chosen Confessor
  - To whom you can relate on a personal or spiritual basis and with whom you feel more comfortable.
  - Who will listen with kindness and understanding, who cares what you say.
  - Who knows your backstory and blind spots, understands you, and appreciates your repentance
  - With whom you can be in an open, transparent, trusting relationship, who makes you more accountable.
  - Who can give you feedback, consistent direction and wise counsel and address your patterns of behavior.
  - Who has the same theology you do.







## Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

- A Chosen Confessor (*continued*)
  - Who stands well in the place of Jesus. “Not all priests treat the Sacrament of Reconciliation equally.”
  - Who is holy, seeks your holiness and inspires you.
  - Who gives a meaningful penance
  - Who won't “muck up” the words of absolution.
  - “I simply wouldn't risk a random confessor.” “I just don't like potluck when it comes to confessors.”
  - “I look for a confessor like I do a doctor: someone who knows my illnesses and can prescribe healing.”
  - “I like to know what to expect.”



# Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

## ○ A No-Choice Confessor

- “I think it’s cute that the author of this question thinks Catholics have a choice of their confessor!”
- “I wish I could be picky!”
- “My pastor is my only choice.”
- “I usually don’t have a choice.”
- Regardless of a lack of choice, many are very satisfied with their pastor as a confessor.
- “Beggars can’t be choosers.”
- “I feel lucky to have any priest at all available!”







# Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

- A Few Chosen Confessors
  - People have said they go to two, three or four they prefer, generally outside of their parish.
  - “I go to priests I know are intelligent, wise and patient.” “Whom I know are good.” “Who I know will give me grace and peace.” “Who I know will help me live my faith better.”
  - “I fear having a bad experience, so I prefer to go to confessors I know are ‘good.’”



# Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

## ○ Intentionally Different Confessors

- Any priest can give the grace of the Sacrament.
  - “You’re actually confessing to God.”
  - “According to canon law, there’s no difference in the efficacy of the sacrament if the confessor is a drunk old priest or a wise sage. Why should I choose one or the other?”
- Who doesn’t think of your sins when he sees you or doesn’t hear you confess the same sins every time.
- “I go to anyone who doesn’t know me.” “I don’t want to prejudice the priests who know me.”
- “I’m not humble enough to face the priest who hears my worst sins.”
- “I go to anyone behind the screen.” “I choose anonymity.”







## Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

- Intentionally Different Confessors (*continued*)
  - “I go to whoever shows up.” “Luck of the draw.”
  - “I shop around.”
  - “I prefer random confessors.”
  - Some would want – or have had – a regular confessor but then priests are transferred.
  - Some say they go too infrequently to have a regular confessor.
  - “The Lord will guide me to the confessor I need.” “I count on the Holy Spirit to guide me.”
  - Anyone except ... “my pastor” or “three priests I avoid.” “I have a list of priests on my no-confess-list.”



# Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?



- Chosen locations
  - “To a Church I’ll be treated with respect and compassion.”
  - “Any other parish than my own.”
  - “Where I don’t belong or work.”
  - “Places with several priests.”
  - A parish that offers confessions every day.
  - Retreat houses. Monasteries. Shrines. Mall chapels.
  - Penance Services. “I go the fastest moving line at the annual get-your-ticket-punched penance service.”



# Do You Have A Consistent Confessor?

- Chosen times and convenience
  - “I go based on the time, not the priest.”
  - “I go to a place that offers confessions on weeknights.”
  - “Convenience is huge.” “I usually prioritize convenience.”
  - “I go according to my work schedule.”
  - “Time and availability can be challenging me.”
  - “As a mom with kids, I go to whenever and wherever I get the chance.”







## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- The 1,438 responses listed many traits, over and over again. I have identified 26 different ones regularly mentioned.
- There will be some overlap with the “expectations of the priest” we covered in the “Besides absolution, is there anything else you look for when you go to confession?” question.





## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- **Listens** – “Good listener,” “Engaged listener,” “Active listener,” “Reflective listener,” “Listens with his heart,” “Hears not just words but me.”
- **Welcoming** – “Receptive,” “Easy to talk to,” “Relatable,” “Friendly,” “Accepting,” “Approachable,” “Open-minded,” “Warm,” “Makes eye contact,” “Makes you feel safe,” “Inclusive,” “Nonjudgmental,” “Not critical.”
- **Available** – “Generous with time,” “Willing to invest himself.”
- **Compassionate and empathetic** – “Cares about me like Jesus,” “A loving Father,” “Empathizes without trivializing,” “Aware of the penitent’s vulnerability,” “Provides tissues.”





## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- **Interested** – “Truly present,” “Doesn’t seem bored,” “Willing to engage,” “Dialogical,” “Adaptive and versatile,” “Desires to help people feel God’s mercy,” “Wants to accompany people,” “Like Jesus, is a friend of sinners.”
- **Understanding** – “Seeks to understand,” “Down to earth,” “Experienced in life,” “Grounded in the messy realities of life,” “In touch with the world and with his parishioners,” “Meets you where you are,” “Comprehends human failure,” “Understands human struggles,” “Appreciative of the special burdens of women,” “Non-dogmatic.”
- **Encouraging** – “Comforting,” “Affirming,” “Positive attitude,” “Supportive,” “Consoling,” “Sees the good in me,” “Capable of seeing Christ even in me,” “Optimistic,” “Hopeful,” “Inspiring.”
- **Peaceful** – “Conveys the peace I seek from God.”





## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- **Unassuming** – “Doesn’t cookie cut penitents,” “Doesn’t stereotype,” “Doesn’t think I know the faith well as a convert.”
- **Patient** – “Doesn’t interrupt,” “Willing to take the time,” “Doesn’t lose his temper,” “Slow to anger if I don’t know the right words.”
- **Professional** – “Relaxed but not overly casual,” “Not looking to be my friend or therapist,” “Dresses for Confession,” “Serious.”
- **Competent** – “Psychologically astute,” “Knows resources,” “Can make referrals,” “Understands family dynamisms,” “Grasps psychology and mental health,” “Knows Sacred Scripture,” “Knows the Catechism,” “Theologically up-to-date,” “Speaks and understands English well enough.”





## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- **Mature** — “Balanced,” “Good human formation,” “Real,” “Temperate,” “Not infantilizing,” “Doesn’t obsess about sexual sins”
- **Prudent** — “Reasonable,” “Wise,” “Objective,” “Tactful.”
- **Practical** — “Gives clear advice,” “Commonsensical,” “No nonsense.”
- **Helpful** — “Capable of answering questions and explaining,” “Asks questions,” “Provides feedback,” “Gives loving advice,” “Knowledgeable,” “Logical,” “Insightful,” “Can suggest resources to grow.”





## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- Gives good penances — “Medicinal penances,” “Creative penances,” “Gives a penance that matches the sin,” “Gives restorative penances.”
- Sincere — “Authentic,” “Frank,” “Candid,” “Blunt,” “Willing to tell me the truth,” “Honest,” “Direct,” “Genuine.”
- Succinct — “Not long-winded,” “Brief,” “Not too chatty,” “Knows when to speak and remain silent,”
- Confidential — “Discreet,” “Doesn’t gossip,” “Maintains the seal.”





## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- **Happy** — “Joyful,” “Likes his job,” “Happy to be there,” “Smiles,” “Has a sense of humor,” “Loves the Sacrament,” “Loves being a priest, loves God, loves being Catholic,” “Loves bearing God’s mercy,” “Passionate.”
- **Humble** — “Not full of himself,” “Recognizes he is a sinner, too,” “Smells like his sheep,” “Goes to Confession himself,” “Knows he’s not perfect,” “Recognizes he’s a minister, not an arbiter,” “Human,” “Not clerical.”
- **Faithful** — “Strong believer,” “Believes and communicates the faith, not the way he wishes the faith to be,” “Says what the Bible says,” “Doesn’t argue my sins away,” “Knows Catholic moral theology,” “Committed to Vatican II,” “Committed to social justice,” “Gives valid absolution”





## The Qualities of a Good Confessor

- **Holy** – “A good disciple,” “Virtuous,” “Has integrity,” “Grace-filled,” “Madly in love with Jesus,” “Has every-day holiness, not a piety that separates,” “Christ-like,” “Godly,” “Docile to the Holy Spirit,” “Lets God shine through him,” “Ascetic,” “Penitential,” “A friend of the saints.”
- **Prayerful** – “Prays for me,” “Reverent,” “Devout,” “Educated in the mystics,” “Makes the Sacrament a sacred rather than a bureaucratic experience,” “Prays and doesn’t just say the words of absolution,”
- **Vigilant** – “Able to spot abuse.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- The 1,381 responses to this question provide a gold-mine of straight-forward suggestions.
- I highlight here the advice that was given often or advice that I thought was particularly insightful.
- I've broken it down into four categories:
  1. What penitents think we should realize and know.
  2. What they believe we should do outside of confession.
  3. What they think we should do inside confession.
  4. What they advise we never do inside confession.





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should realize and know:
  - “Prayer is essential to being a holy confessor, to whom people have a legitimate expectation.”
  - “Catholics notice if a priest truly believes.”
  - “It is a blessing and joyful privilege to hear confessions, to be the face of God’s mercy. ... It’s not a mundane task.” “Priests should love the Sacrament.” It is the “greatest gift you can give to someone besides the Eucharist.”
  - “You are able to show only as much mercy as you have allowed yourself to receive from God.
  - How hard it is for many to come. For some, it is the “hardest moment of their life.” Many come as “wounded lions.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should realize and know (*continued*):
  - “No two confessions are ever the same, even if you’ve heard it all before.” Each person is different and we should embrace that individuality.
  - “Your interactions with the penitent may be remembered forever.” “You have a powerful role in either being the conduit of God's mercy or in destroying people's self confidence and will to do better. First do no harm!” “What you say and how you act can make or break a person’s faith in God and in the Church.”
  - “Confession may be the Church’s one opportunity to reach someone. Don’t waste it.”
  - “Priests are there for God and his forgiveness and priests are the conduits.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should realize and know  
(*continued*):
  - “Priests don’t have to have all the answers. God is the answer, not always priests’ advice.”
  - “People yearn to be closer to God and need help.”
  - “You are not an absolution vending machine.”
  - “If you wish to punish, work as a prison guard.”
  - “The Confessor should realize that when his own eternal judgment will depend upon how often and how well he has bestowed God's Mercy upon his people.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should do outside of Confession:
  - “Prioritize Confessions over administration.”
  - “Make this sacrament a priority in the life of your parish. Inquire what times work and don’t work, and ask questions to get feedback anonymously.”
  - “You will be exhausted when you choose to offer confession frequently, but it is the key to renewing any parish.”
  - “Make sure your people know that hearing confessions is of great importance to you.”
  - Promote frequent confession positively from the pulpit. “Mention your experience as a penitent.” “Remind us of the value and purpose of the Sacrament.” Help people to realize that it’s “not just a Sacrament for mortal sins.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should do outside of Confession (*continued*):
  - “Offer a refresher course on how to make a good confession.”
  - Be discreet. “If a priest is a gossip, people won’t trust the seal.”
  - Get advice from youth ministers about adolescent development, spirituality, and trends.
  - Eliminate the barriers that keep people from coming to Church, because those barriers similarly keep people from confession.
  - Only advertise confession times if you’re planning to show up. “Someone who has overcome read and cold sweats to finally show up, only to find out there’s no one there, and no information may never return.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should do within Confession:
  - “Punctuality is pastoral, professional and inspires confidence.” “Be there on time.”
  - “Say a prayer for each penitent.” Pray to their guardian angels and “greet the guardian angel” as the penitent enters. Ask the Holy Spirit for the gifts of “wisdom, knowledge, understanding, mercy, love and patience.”
  - Welcome the penitent and show you’re “glad the person is there.” “Look us in the eye.”
  - “Put into practice in the confessional St. Paul’s words in 1 Cor 13.”
  - “Try your best to model Luke 15”
  - Let the person know you’re listening by “short phrases.” Listen as much to “what the person is not saying.” “Listening is obviously important, but sometimes asking questions is extremely helpful. As a lawyer I have to listen first, and ask enough questions to determine the facts and guide the client’s understanding of the issues.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should do within Confession (*continued*):
  - “Listen more. Talk less. Encourage more. Blame less.”
  - “Please preside, similar to the way you preside at Mass. It’s uncomfortable to have to begin the conversation or the dialogue in the Sacrament.” “Find the delicate balance between moving the long-winded along and not letting the people feel rushed.” “It’s merciful to keep the line moving.”
  - “Please make each person feel as if her confession is the only one you’re hearing.” “Treat me like I’m the only penitent you’ll hear.” “There is only one penitent coming to confession at a time. Pay full attention, as Christ would.” “The doctor may have performed surgery thousands of times but it’s the patient’s first time on the table.”
  - “Choose your words carefully,” because they may have a significant impact on the human being and how the person relates to God.
  - On tone: “Consider what you might say to a good friend or sibling and use that loving approach with the penitent.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should do within Confession (*continued*):
  - “Speak often about God’s desire to save and heal.” “Stress God’s love for everyone.” “Remind us of God’s mercy often, because it’s hard to fathom.” “Offer hope.” “Remind us of our dignity.”
  - “Give more prayer-filled penances.” “Give advice that makes a penitent continue to think after Confession.” “Relate Biblical examples of Jesus’ forgiving.” “Stop treating penance as if it’s paying a traffic fine. Why should prayer be a penance?” “Give works of mercy.”
  - “Treat the words of absolution with the same fidelity as you treat the words of consecration.” “Project a sense of joy when praying the words of absolution!” “Look me in the eye and smile when you’re finished.”
  - Take a short break if you’re tired, “rather than take your fatigue or frustration out on the next penitent.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should *not* do within Confession
  - “Don’t hurry the penitent.” “Don’t be in a rush.” “Don’t act like your goal is to move people out quickly.” “Don’t give us a fast-food confession.” “No one wants to feel like a herd of cows going through a gate.” “Please don’t treat confession like an assembly line.”
  - “Don’t take your bad mood out on a penitent.”
  - “Don’t be a robot,” “rote or automatic.”
  - “Never trample on people’s inmost pain.” “Under no circumstances ever degrade the penitent.” “Never shame anyone. People are ashamed enough.”
  - “Don’t treat lay people as if they’re on a lower rung of faith or discipleship.”
  - “Don’t just give me a penance. Give me advice. Otherwise absolution feels like something I could receive from a vending machine.”





## What Would You Say to Confessors?

- What priests should *not* do within Confession (*continued*):
  - “Don’t be flippant or overly casual. I expect my confessor to be like my doctor and take me and what he’s doing seriously. Easy-going confessors don’t help much when it comes to calling people to conversion.”
  - “Please understand that, especially for young women, just entering the confessional is a brave and vulnerable act. We’re alone with a man of authority in a private space, perhaps even in an empty Church in the evening, sharing the things we wouldn’t share with anyone else. Please don’t be creepy!”
  - “Please never bring your cell phone into the confessional. It’s like having it on the altar. This is a sacrament and it’s sacred. Priests haven’t had hearing confessions for the first 2,000 years of Christianity. They’re not needed now.” Many have said that they have seen their priests on their phones and some worry, likewise, about the confession being recorded.





## Tolle et Legge!

- These pieces of advice are just a sampling of what's contained in the book you've been sent and that has been uploaded onto the "Resources" section of the [missionariesofmercyusa.org](http://missionariesofmercyusa.org) website.
- I'd encourage you to take it to your study and prayer, to share it with brother priests, with those you know who are on seminary faculties, and with seminarians preparing, hopefully, to be confess with hearts of mercy open to the whole world!





## Welcome!

I warmly welcome you to this website, put together at the insistence and with the assistance of friends.

During my diaconal ordination, Cardinal Edmund Szoka gave me the following instruction from the Ordination Rite as together we gripped the Book of the Gospels:

*"Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are.  
Believe what you read,  
Teach what you believe,  
Practice what you teach."*

Those words have never lost their resonance.

Since that day -- October 8, 1998 -- I have tried to live up to that commission to be a "herald of the Gospel," by striving to teach what the Church believes, to practice what I preach to others, and to spread with joy and enthusiasm the truth Christ has entrusted to His church -- in and out of season, in and out of the pulpit.

This website is a chronicle of those attempts. You may also follow postings of articles, homilies and teachings on Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

You can also subscribe to the podcast of daily homilies, lectures and talks through Apple Podcasts and Google Podcasts.

It constitutes the "five loaves and two fish" (or even less!) that I have placed into the hands of the Lord as an attempt to feed a hungry crowd, confident that, if He wishes, He can multiply and supplement that meager offering to nourish many more (Jn 6:1-14).

In Christ,  
Fr. Roger J. Landry



### Most Recent Homilies

God's Comfort and the Conversion Required to Receive It, Second Sunday of Advent (B), December 6, 2020

Accepting, Following and Announcing Jesus without Offense, Second Sunday of Advent (EF), December 6, 2020

Walking the Way of the Kingdom Jesus Indicates, First Saturday of Advent, December 5, 2020

Running to Meet Our Light, Strength and Salvation, First Friday of Advent, December 4, 2020

Listening to and Acting on the Long Awaited One's Words, First Thursday of Advent, December 3, 2020

Going Hungry to Meet Christ in a Three-Fold Banquet, First Wednesday of Advent, December 2, 2020

Childlike Eyes to See, First Tuesday of Advent, December 1, 2020

Singing the Song of the Lamb, 34th Wednesday (II), November 25, 2020

Turning to the Lord Who Comes to Judge the Earth, 34th Tuesday (II), November 24, 2020

Following the King and Lamb Wherever He Goes, 34th Monday (II), November 23, 2020

### Most Recent Articles

Our Duty and Salvation, The Anchor, November 27, 2020

Living the Reality of the Kingdom of Christ, National Catholic Register, November 19, 2020

The Knights Our Age Needs, The Anchor, November 13, 2020

Remembering Andrew Walther, November 7, 2020

Just a Parish Priest, The Anchor, October 30, 2020

Coming to Know the Original Three-Dimensional Carlo Acutis, The Anchor, October 16, 2020

A Good Shepherd Full of Christian and Priestly Virtues, The Pilot, October 5, 2020

Returning to the Sacrament of Divine Love, The Anchor, September 18, 2020

The Pastoral Malpractice of Liturgical Abuse, The Anchor, September 4, 2020

The Chosen, The Anchor, August 21, 2020

### Most Recent Talks

Receiving the Lord Jesus as Mary and Joseph, Advent Day of Recollection for the Leonine Forum, December 5, 2020

Novena in Preparation for the Immaculate Conception, Leonine Forum, November 28 to December 8, 2020

Blessed Michael McGivney and the Call to Holiness, McGivney Festival Young Adult Prayer Vigil, October 31, 2020

Apprenticeship in the Art of Living, Duc in Altum Virtual Schools Summit, October 28-30, 2020

Preaching on Marital Love and Accompanying Couples toward the Full Embrace of the Church's Teaching, Diocese of Gary Clergy Convocation, October 20, 2020

The Divorced and Remarried, Challenges and Triumphs in Pastoral Care, Diocese of Gary Clergy Convocation, October 20, 2020

The Heart of the New Evangelization: Meeting, Knowing and Loving Jesus Back, New Zealand Evangelion's in his Name Virtual Conference, October 10-11, 2020

Christian Anthropology: The Human Person in the Modern World, Leonine Forum Opening Lecture, October 8, 2020

Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching, UNSRC Catholic Club, August 27, 2020

Making Better Confessions, Catholic Information Conference, July 24, 2020

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You may download a PDF of the PowerPoint sides of this talk and listen to the audio recording by going to:

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## Discussion

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“A Merciful Heart Open to the Whole World”

Saint Meinrad Archabbey

September 1, 2021