One of the more difficult tasks that many of us have to face in the course of our life is to apologize or say we are sorry to someone whom we have hurt or insulted in a serious way, someone with whom, perhaps, we may have broken off all contact.

The longer we put off any kind of effort at reconciliation, the more difficult it becomes. Tragically, this kind of situation arises relatively often in families. The closer we are to others, the more hurtful can our insensitivity to them become.

The apostle Peter offers a wonderful example of someone who has betrayed a friend and more than a friend. Having done so, he has come to experience guilt, sorrow and a longing for reconciliation.

The Gospels tell us more about Peter than about any of the other original disciples of Jesus. He seems to have been a blunt and straightforward kind of person, enthusiastic and perhaps somewhat presumptuous. In spite of that and other failings, he clearly had a capacity for leadership.

Peter’s great failure in his relationship to Jesus came at the time of Jesus’ arrest, condemnation and execution. What makes what Peter did so disappointing was his declaration at the Last Supper that he would lay down his life for Jesus. During that meal, Jesus predicted that those who were intimately involved with him in his mission would deny their association with him. Peter immediately rejects what Jesus is saying. “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you,” he says. To this Jesus replies, “this very night, before the cock grows you will deny me three times.” Impossible, Peter responds. “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.”

We all know the gospel accounts of Peter’s threefold denial of Jesus. A servant girl and other bystanders recognize his Galilean accent and accuse him of being a follower of Jesus. The more the attention of the crowd is focused on Peter, the more vehemently does he deny what they are saying. To the first charge that he was with Jesus, he responds, “I do not know what you are talking about.” A second, similar charge, he denies with an oath. When a bystander comes forward and declares him to be a follower of Jesus, Peter “began to curse and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know the man.’” At that moment, Matthew tells us, the cock crowed. Luke reports that as it does Jesus turns and looks at Peter. Remembering Jesus’ prediction, Peter “went out and wept bitterly.”

Judas, like Peter, denied Jesus. He went even further and agreed to lead the chief priests and other to where they might arrest him. Whatever complex of motives that led Judas to act as he did, money played a certain role in it. Once, however, Jesus was condemned, Judas was overwhelmed with regret. He returned the money to the priests and elders saying, “I have sinned against innocent blood.” Abandoning any hope of forgiveness, Judas despairs and takes his own life.

Although he too might have given in to despair, Peter underwent a conversion. His initial experience of the risen Jesus must have involved for him a sense of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In today’s gospel Peter and a few other disciples seem to have returned, for the moment at least, to their former way of life as fishers. As soon as Peter hears that the mysterious stranger on the shore is Jesus, he jumps into the water and makes for dry land. Like a host, Jesus presides at a breakfast of bread and fish which he has prepared for them. Like most of the meals at which the risen Jesus is present, this one too has Eucharistic overtones about it. The presence of Christ makes every Eucharist a source of reconciliation.

The latter half of the reading focuses on Peter and on his relationship with Jesus. In the conversation that follows, Jesus takes the initiative and asks Peter if he loves him more than the other disciples. Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus then says to him, “Tend my sheep.” It is striking that he does not ask Peter whether he regrets or feels sorrow for what he has done but rather, “do you love me?” Although any genuine conversion involves feelings like guilt, regret, sorrow and a desire to make up in some way for what one has done, Jesus focuses on what marks the end of the process, love.

Three times Jesus asks the same question. By the third time, Peter becomes frustrated and perhaps even insulted. “Lord,” he says, “you know everything, you know that I love you.”

The threefold questioning of Peter recalls his threefold denial of Jesus. It is as if Jesus is forcing Peter to relive his former experience but now in a way that will overcome all that was negative and destructive in it. Such a conversion was essential if Peter was to become the apostle and church leader that he became.

Peter’s story has parallels with the story of many of us. It should encourage us to seek reconciliation with God, yes, but also with family, friends and others whom we might have hurt or harmed in some significant way.