

The Genius of the Roman Rite

Part 4 – The Sacrament of Penance

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In this series, The Genius of the Roman Rite, various authors have been invited to write about the strengths and flexibility of the development of what we call the Roman Rite. In this article, the fourth in the series, the author reviews best practice in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

A True Celebration

In 1975, in *The Reform of the Liturgy*, Annibale Bugnini wrote:

We must recover the festive aspect of the celebration of penance, an aspect inherent in reconciliation, since every reconciliation is a victory and manifestation of divine love within the history of the world.¹

The forgiveness of sin has been part of the ministry of the Church since its beginning: Christ forgave sinners and expected his disciples to follow his example. Baptism, by water and the Holy Spirit, was the original sacrament of reconciliation, through which all previous sins were forgiven. For those who committed sin afterwards, however, the consequences could be grave, including a form of excommunication. At first, only sins such as murder, adultery and apostasy were considered serious enough to cast the perpetrator out of communion. The possibility of this communion being restored emerged in second-century Rome with a public penance through which the repentant sinner could be forgiven, but this was to be offered only once. For those in danger of death, however, the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) offered the possibility of receiving the Eucharist for repentant sinners. Over the centuries, the public method of penance fell into disuse, and a more private, repeatable method developed in Western Europe around the monasteries, through the pastoral ministry of monks who had discovered this method at monasteries in the East, offering secret absolution as often as it was required, based on a 'tariff-penance' system. Although condemned by several church councils, including that held in Toledo in 589 at which the method was described as 'detestable', this private version of the sacrament took hold and came to be accepted as the normal version by the late middle ages.

Meeting the Pastoral Need

Pastoral concern was at the heart of the developments through this period: in the New Testament, Christ had asked his followers to forgive seventy times seven times (Matt 18:22); sinners who found penance too difficult, or who did not want their crimes to be known by the public, would simply not seek reconciliation from the Church until the very last moment. This widely held attitude led to the theological and pastoral deterioration of the closely related sacrament of the Sick – from a sacrament to be taken home by believers and given to their loved ones, this became an anointing at the 'moment of death' by the priest only, coupled with a final reconciliation – 'Extreme Unction' indeed.

So, by the early twentieth century, the common practice of the sacrament of penance consisted of two forms: the regular offering of private penance for sins committed during the past week, which was often understood in a further abuse or misunderstanding to be a requirement for receiving Holy Communion at Mass on Sunday, and the form of the sacrament joined to that of Anointing as the person prepared for death. Public rituals of penance and reconciliation were unheard of.

Something Missing?

Firstly, the loss of the public ritual meant that there was no communal rite through which the person might express in the liturgy a reconciliation with family and community (the Sign of Peace for the congregation long having disappeared from the celebration of the Mass) – the reconciliation that took place was entirely between the lone penitent and God; sin, and its forgiveness came to be understood in primarily personal terms, rather than communal or social terms.

Secondly, as the ritual took place discretely from other celebrations, the possibility of a variety of rituals and moments of reconciliation (such as the reception of Eucharist) was lost with the strict regulation by the Church after the Council of Trent through Canon Law, rubrics and other regulations, seeking to establish absolute trust in the sacrament; so the sacrament (like the others) had to have strict matter (confession/satisfaction) and form (absolution) to be valid.

Reform: Clearer Expression of the sacrament

The reform of the Rite of Penance took, as its starting point, the instruction from the Constitution on the Liturgy at Vatican II:



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The rites and formularies for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament.²

The Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, hinted at an important element in the revision:

Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from the mercy of God for the offence committed against Him and are at the same time reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins, and which by charity, example, and prayer seeks their conversion.³

Sacrosanctum concilium included other requirements for liturgical reform that had to be included in the considerations of the editors: the rites had to be clear and intelligible,⁴ the sacramental signs should clearly effect what they signify,⁵ the rites should be adapted according to the variety of cultures,⁶ and communal celebrations were to be preferred to private wherever possible.⁷

The first schema (April 1968) recommended:

- a. Communal absolution after individual confession, and
- b. General absolution under certain circumstances.

Real attempts were being made to emphasise the role of the Church comprising the community of believers who were in some way affected by the sin of the penitent, who were present with the penitent offering support through prayer, and who participated in the conversion and renewal of the relationship between sinner and the Church. If a ritual could be developed which brought back something of the flavour of communal reconciliation, from separation through sin back to reaggregation through reconciliation, that would be, it was thought, a definite improvement, and might foster a new and much more positive attitude among the faithful towards the sacrament.

The first schema came under strong criticism from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: the language was too lax, the theology was not in keeping with the Council of Trent, and the suggested formula of absolution (incorporating phrases which spoke of the role of the Church) varied too much from that stipulated by the Council of Trent.

After several months of negotiation and compromise, the final Ritual was promulgated on December 2nd, 1973. The English version was approved in March 1975, to be implemented by February, 1977.

Three Rites In the Reform

The new rite distinguishes three different Rites of Reconciliation:

Individual – Rite I

After the Greeting and the Sign of the Cross, the penitent is invited to trust in God. A short passage of Scripture is proclaimed (though this is optional) after which the confession is heard, counsel may be given and an act of penance is proposed. The

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penitent then prays for forgiveness and the priest gives the absolution while extending the right hand (or both hands, depending on the circumstances).

Communal – Rite II

With individual confession and absolution: this more elaborate rite includes congregational song, an opening prayer, and extensive Liturgy of the Word with a homily and examination of conscience, a general confession and the Lord's Prayer, followed by individual confession and absolution, a communal proclamation of praise and a concluding prayer of thanksgiving.

Communal – Rite III

With general confession and absolution: this rite incorporates all of the elements of Rite II above, but with an additional instruction to the faithful to seek individual confession if they are aware of serious sin, with the implication that there is serious doubt that General Absolution is a sufficient pastoral solution to the predicament of a penitent aware of grave sin.

The Place of Scripture

Notable in these rites is the place of the proclamation of Scripture: the celebration of the sacrament is a response to God's initiative: it is from God that the impulse comes to draw closer and to leave behind all that stands in the way of such a closeness, and to turn away from sin. It is perhaps surprising in this context that reconciliation with the community of the faithful is not signified in either of the communal rites by the Sign of Peace.

The aim of the reconciliation prayer is to show:

the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally, it underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament, because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church.⁸

Communal or Individual Celebration?

As with the other sacraments, the various Rites of Reconciliation try to meet the expectations of the

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bishops at the Second Vatican Council and the wider Church, and to foster a greater participation of the faithful in a reception of the sacrament which brings about a deeper reconciliation with the community. The most significant drawback, however, is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to see the most common and approved version of this sacrament (Rite I) as being within the intentions of the bishops as a celebration of the Church gathered. This *desideratum* was stated clearly:

it is to be stressed that whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred as far as possible to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private. This rule applies with special force to the celebration of Mass and the administration of the sacraments.⁹

The Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, placed the Church within the context of the ministry of the sacrament:

Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from the mercy of God for the offence committed against Him and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins, and which by charity, example and prayer seeks their conversion.¹⁰

How could this reconciliation with the Church be symbolised ritually in a private one-to-one ceremony?

By contrast, the *Introduction to the Rite of Penance* insists that:

individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and with the Church.¹¹

The contrast between the Vatican Council Constitution's language of community and the Church and the more restrictive language of the penance ritual leads one to wonder what direction the celebration and form of this sacrament will take in the future. Pastoral experience would suggest that, particularly in the case of serious sins, and

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in the context of other processes of reconciliation and healing, the sacrament is still a vital part of the pastoral healing ministry of the Church. In addition, arguments in favour of a continuation of the private one-to-one ritual are fundamentally sound: the sinner does, in the case of serious sin, need to have the opportunity to address the reality of the situation in a way that is completely confidential and through which the experience is real and complete. Yet the number of Church members seeking reconciliation through the normal practice of the sacrament of penance has greatly lessened in the last twenty years.

Future Renewal

Ways forward through this downturn in the practice of the sacrament are difficult to discern, since one faces the danger of moving too radically away from discipline and Canon Law on the one hand, or simply 'moving deckchairs on the Titanic' with merely cosmetic solutions on the other. We should begin by acknowledging that many of the faithful regard their presence and participation in weekly Sunday Mass, with its Penitential Rite, its commemoration of the Lord's sacrifice on Calvary in the Eucharistic Prayer, the offering of the Sign of Peace and the reception of Eucharist, as a fulfilling and adequate experience of the reconciliation that is sought between the repentant sinner, God and the Christian community. In his book on the development of the sacrament, James Dallen writes about how the experience of the renewed Eucharistic liturgy has affected our attitude to the sacrament of reconciliation:

The penitential rite in the present Mass is the first such rite since the medieval general absolutions. It and the sign of peace may be significant influences on the number of people confessing, serving as expressions of reconciliation in community for ordinary sinners.¹²

Many have made a decision within their own conscience regarding which sins they consider to be serious acts of defiance against the love of God, and which they do not. The practice of the rites of the sacrament of reconciliation, then, remains for these faithful as a remedy for truly serious sin, though with a greatly reduced regularity.

Reconciliation during Mass?

There are parishes and city centre churches where the practice of the sacrament of reconciliation, in a private confessional during the celebration of Mass, has been going on for years. Although there might be arguments in favour of this, not least the popularity of this combination, in the end this practice detracts from the unity of the celebration of the Eucharist, where the proclamation of the Scripture and homily and prayer in the Liturgy of the Word lead to the celebration of the salvific acts of Christ in the Eucharistic Prayer and the reception of his Body and Blood. The process of creating and celebrating the unity of the people of God in the celebration of Mass is broken if individuals leave the congregation for minutes at a time to participate in a confidential and individual ritual. It would be far better to precede the celebration of Mass with

the offer of the sacrament of reconciliation, if time and availability of priests allow.

The Secretary of the Congregation at the time of the renewal expressed the view that the combination of the two would cause confusion about the distinct character of either sacrament:

The reason for this is the concern to avoid any possible impression that the sacrament of penance is reducible to a moment in the Eucharistic celebration. Such an impression would lessen its importance in the minds of the faithful and detract from the prominence it ought to have. The authorities wanted to preserve the complete autonomy of penance, especially at a time when there is need of a radical renewal in the practice of this sacrament.¹³

Healing the Relationship

The development of rituals for the sacrament of reconciliation will need to incorporate a deeper understanding of the changes brought about as a result of the Second Vatican Council, in which the Church began to move away from legalistic statements and anathemas, and more towards the language of inclusion and pastoral concern, of spiritual healing and growth, and greater awareness of anthropological and sociological insights.¹⁴ At the heart of the sacrament is the desire to heal the relationship between people and God and with one another.

Even in the context of the Rite in its individual form, with the priest and the single penitent, the Church seeks to foster and enact through the sacrament the reconciliation between the penitent and those that have been hurt or offended through sin. This opening up of the context of reconciliation and forgiveness is an important (if as yet incomplete) transformation in the theology of the sacrament. For James Dallen,

it emphasises and reintegrates the personal and ecclesial dimensions of the sacrament of penance. In particular, it integrates the personalist perspective of sacramental theology and the communal emphasis of ecclesiology. It has affinities to widely shared perspectives within contemporary culture, even if, in other situations, it is strongly countercultural.¹⁵

Doing Away with Penance!

Perhaps, then, the word 'penance' needs to be eradicated entirely from the sacrament, to be replaced by the much richer term, 'reconciliation'. Christ seeks to reconcile us to the Father and draws us to true reconciliation with him and with one another within the Church, which is his body. Reconciliation contains within it richer and more complex meanings, including, in particular, the social and ecclesial sense of the sacrament. Rather than dwell on the payment or punishment due for my offence, this word places the emphasis on my relationship to God and to the Body of Christ made up of the members of the Church; and just as the Church is the context of the celebration of all sacramental life; so also with reconciliation. The

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use of the term then helps to reinforce the sense that this is the act of Christ rather than simply the work of the minister of the sacrament.

Christ Brings Reconciliation

German Martinez, in his book on the sacraments, *Signs of Freedom: Theology of the Christian sacraments*¹⁶ discusses this sacrament specifically in terms of the power of the reconciliation that Christ's passion and death bring about. For him, the reconciliation that restores the relationship between humanity and God is:

- a. complete and actual
- b. for all time
- c. God's gracious and free gift.

Thus the conditions of the possibility of our reconciliation to God, and of the restoration of the relationship, have been fulfilled once and for all in the person of the Messiah. This is an event for all time, and applicable in all time. But as humans we are:

- a. living from moment to moment, and
- b. unaware of the presence of this constant reconciliation, and
- c. prone to sin again.

The importance and ongoing significance of the sacramental act of reconciliation, therefore, is that it brings us once more into the realm of our initial redemption through the Cross and Baptism:

The sacrament of reconciliation is an effective realisation, through the contrition of the believer, of the restoring, forgiving, and healing grace of God in Christ's mediation.¹⁷

Christ, the Mediator

Just as sin breaks the covenant relationship between God and us, so the sacramental celebration of reconciliation restores the relationship through Christ, our mediator and priest. As members of his body, the sacrament repairs and renews what has been broken, through a ritual which heals the body, which is the Church. In the ministry of reconciliation, the Church is a living icon of the reconciliation of Christ, what is seen has to be in conformity with what is taking place.

This means that she cannot be unduly rigid, but must heal the wounds of guilt and restore the brokenhearted.¹⁸

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In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among Christ's faithful, it must take root in their whole lives and move them to a more faithful service of God and neighbour.

This is why it is often so helpful to provide the opportunity for face-to-face celebrations of the sacrament for those who wish to experience the minister of the sacrament, not as a faceless voice, but as a living human through whom Christ's ministry of reconciliation takes place. Where appropriate, a gesture of the laying on of hands, either on the head or on a shoulder, can also help to make human and real the conversion and forgiveness that take place in this sacrament of healing and restoration. The reform thereby, even in this private ritual, provides the priest with the possibility of human interaction as a gesture of the presence of the whole community. This gives greater pastoral support to the penitent in the process towards reconciliation and peace. Fr Edward Schillebeeckx has written about the importance of the Second Vatican Council's appeal to the presence of the community in all the sacraments, including this one:

That which Christ as *Kyrios* is doing invisibly through his glorified body in heaven for all men on earth he does visibly for the same men through his earthly body the Church, which is thus the one who 'is always praying and interceding for us' and is the 'holy Saviour'. Even in the sacrament of penance, where we have most lost the communal character of the action, the grace of forgiveness of sins is assured to the penitent because the Church, together with Christ, is praying for him.¹⁹

When will we know that the sacrament is achieving its purpose? It may be that the words of the introduction to the rite were prophetic:

In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among Christ's faithful, it must take root in their whole lives and move them to a more faithful service of God and neighbour.²⁰

A Forward-Looking Pastoral Approach

Thus our approach to this sacrament needs to conform to the understanding of the sacramental life of the Church as a whole since the Second Vatican Council. Without some form of communitarian context the experience of this sacrament is incomplete; otherwise it is left in the pre-Vatican II mind-set – my sin, my penance, my forgiveness from God, with relatively little, or no, sense of the community's involvement, or the context of my relationship with that community (or its members). This is the task, and a most difficult one, still facing pastoral ministers today, for it is not only the sense of community celebration in this sacrament that needs to be scrutinised and re-thought, it is the nature of the Christian community *in toto*, and

particularly in the celebration of the sacraments, that needs to be emphasised once more, for:

full and active participation *by all the people* is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work.²¹

We need to rediscover the early medieval sense of the community supporting the penitent, updated into the experience of Christians supporting one another in the process towards conversion and reconciliation. This can be symbolised in all of our liturgies through better developed ministries of welcome, care for one another, ministry to the sick, a better understanding of the significance of the sign of peace (which perhaps should be obligatory at all community liturgies and must be inserted into Rite II of the Rite of Penance) and so forth. As our social groupings become ever more fragmented, reflection on this sacrament in particular, and a reawakening of its communitarian aspects, would bring much-needed benefit to the Christian community.

1. Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975*, (Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1990) p 683
2. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, (Sc), Decree on the Sacred Liturgy, (Dominican Publications, Dublin 1975), n 72
3. *Lumen gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Dominican Publications, Dublin 1975), n 11
4. Sc n 34
5. Sc n 59
6. Sc nn 27–40, 62
7. Sc nn 26-7
8. *The Roman Ritual – Rite of Penance*, (Collins: Goodliffe Neale, London, 1976), Introduction to the Rite of Penance, n 19
9. Sc nn 26-27
10. *Lumen gentium*, n 11
11. *Introduction to the Rite of Penance* n 31
12. James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, (Pueblo, 1986), p 293, n 4
13. Bugnini, p 683, footnote 36
14. John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?* (Harvard University Press, 2008), see especially pp 290–313
15. Dallen, p 252
16. German Martinez, *Signs of Freedom: Theology of the Christian sacraments*, (Paulist Press, 2004)
17. Martinez, p 197
18. Martinez, p 13
19. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*, (Sheed and Ward, London, 1963), page 68
20. *Introduction to the Rite of Penance*, n 7
21. Sc, n 14, my emphasis.