

## **Sacrament of Reconciliation: Celebrating the Mercy of God**

by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M.

One Sunday afternoon in the 1930s in the parish in Germany where he was pastor, Fr. Bernard Häring was conducting the weekly religious instruction. This particular Sunday he was talking about Confession, and began by asking the congregation: “What is the most important thing about Confession?” A woman in the front pew immediately answered: “Telling your sins to the priest. That’s why we call it confession.” Fr. Häring said, “Confessing your sins is important, but it’s not the most important thing.”

A man towards the back called out: “Contrition! Being sorry for your sins! The whole thing doesn’t work without contrition.” Fr. Häring said, “That’s right, it doesn’t ‘work’ without contrition; but I don’t think that contrition is the most important thing.”

A man over on the left side of church spoke up: “It’s the examination of conscience. Unless you examine your conscience, you don’t know what you have to be sorry for and you don’t know what to confess. Anybody can see that the examination of conscience is the most important thing.” Fr.

Häring wasn’t satisfied with this answer either.

A young woman on the aisle tried: “It’s the penance—giving back the things you stole—unless you do the penance, it doesn’t count.” The congregation could tell by Fr. Häring’s face that he still hadn’t heard the most important thing. An uneasy silence fell over the church as people tried to think.

In the silence a little girl in the third pew said: “Father, I know what’s most important. It’s what Jesus does!” Fr. Häring smiled. She had it right. In this Update, we’re going to emphasize what Jesus does for us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As most of us know, our ritual has been growing through the centuries. I became aware of this back in the 1970s, while I was a student of Fr. Pierre Journel, one of the principal authors of the revised Rite of Penance, a revision mandated by the Second Vatican Council. I learned that we have moved from a time when Baptism and Eucharist were the only sacramental form of Reconciliation to 1) Canonical Penance, whose paradigm (model) is Baptism, to 2) Celtic Penance, whose paradigm is a doctor visit, to 3) Confession, whose paradigm is a legal trial. In the decades after Vatican II, we are in transition to 4) the Sacrament of Reconciliation, whose paradigm is Eucharist.

### Canonical penance

All sins are forgiven when we are plunged into the death and resurrection of Jesus at Baptism. In the early Church, sins committed after Baptism were forgiven by prayer, almsgiving, fasting, self-denial and especially by the Eucharist. But there were times when baptized Christians committed such grave, public and scandalous sins that the community felt it was impossible to share the Eucharist with them.

The Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue the reconciling ministry of Jesus, developed sacramental rites to help these sinners repent, convert and be re-admitted to the Eucharist. These rituals, which we now call “Canonical penance,” were modeled on the rituals for Baptism and the catechumenate. They were public, liturgical and—like Baptism—they could be celebrated only once in a lifetime.

### Celtic penance

In fifth-century Ireland, we find a different type of Penance. Celtic monks were accustomed to seek out a holy person to ask for advice in overcoming their sins—just as today we might go to a doctor to ask for help and advice in overcoming a physical illness.

The Christian would go to a holy monk, tell their sins and ask for healing. Celtic penance was for all sins, not just for grave, public sins. And, unlike Canonical penance, the process was repeatable. The emphasis is not on “telling the sin” but on performing the penance; just as when we go to the doctor the main thing is not “confessing” our illness but doing what the doctor says and taking the medicine so that the illness will be healed.

### Confession

During the seventh century, Irish missionaries brought Celtic penance to Europe, and it eventually became “Confession.” In this expression of the sacrament, confession was to a priest who had the power to give absolution.

The penance the sinner was to perform was greatly reduced; “fast on bread and water for 10 years” became, for example, “say 6 Our Fathers.” The emphasis is on the telling of sins to the priest (confession) and the priest’s words of absolution.

When I made my First Confession (1945) I knew that it was one of the seven sacraments, but my experience of Confession was more a “devotional” experience than a “liturgical” experience. Liturgical elements—vestments, candles, music—were minimal or nonexistent.

At a time when the liturgy was in Latin and only devotional prayers were in the vernacular, in Confession the priest and the penitent spoke to each other in the vernacular. Only the “formula of absolution” was in Latin (but usually I never heard it because the priest said it at the same time I was saying my Act of Contrition). The pope of my youth, Pius XII, in his encyclical letter *Mediator Dei: On The Sacred Liturgy* (1947) writes about Confession in the part of the encyclical entitled “Other Devotions Not Strictly Liturgical Warmly Recommended.”

Apparently, even the pope thought of Confession as devotional prayer!

Like other devotional prayers—the Rosary, the Way of the Cross—Confession, for some Catholics, has continued relatively unaffected by the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. But many Catholics stopped going to Confession during the years following the Council. During the first half of the 20th century, Catholics went to Confession more frequently than they went to

Holy Communion! But then—rather abruptly—around 1965, the long lines for Confession on Saturday afternoons disappeared!

Various explanations are given. Some point to the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968), with its unpopular ban on birth control. Bishops speak of “the loss of a sense of sin.” Some laity report that they have found other ways to experience what they used to receive from Confession: support groups, Bible study, spiritual direction, Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. Some point out that the lines for Confession became shorter as the lines for Holy Communion became longer. Many Catholics began to see Eucharist as the primary sacrament of reconciliation.

Perhaps we are still too close to the event to explain why many people stopped going to Confession. One thing that we know from history is that the rituals by which the Church exercises the ministry of reconciliation are appropriate to the culture of the time: As culture changes, so does the form of the sacrament.

### Vatican II’s revision

The Second Vatican Council looked at the history of the ways in which the Church has exercised the power to forgive sins and, considering the cultural needs of the time, asked that the rituals for the Sacrament of Penance be revised “so that they more clearly express both the nature and the effects of the sacrament” (Constitution on the Liturgy, 72). The revised Rite of Penance was approved by Pope Paul VI in 1973 and was introduced in the United States on the First Sunday of Lent, 1976.

In my pastoral experience as I travel around the country giving workshops and parish missions, I find that the new ritual has not been widely implemented. It was the last of the sacraments to be revised; perhaps after 10 years of liturgical change, we were worn out by so many modifications in the Mass, adult Baptism, etc. Maybe we simply had “renewal fatigue.”

I find four “categories” of expression of the sacrament in parishes today: 1) devotional confession; 2) confession with spiritual direction; 3) a communal Bible service followed by individual confessions; and 4) the communal celebration of the sacrament using the revised ritual, Rite of Penance, chapter 2: “Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.” Let’s take a look at these four. (I know these four categories are an oversimplification and that you will find many variations within each of these categories.)

#### 1) Devotional Confession

I find that many people continue to “go to Confession” just as they did before the new ritual. They come in, kneel behind the screen, repeat the traditional formulas, recite a short list of sins, and then wait for a penance and a brief word of encouragement. They say an “Act of Contrition” and I “give absolution” (with the revised formula, in English). They say, “Thank you, Father,” and leave.

Like most devotions, part of the appeal of this ritual is its familiarity and the fact that it doesn’t change. The encounter between priest and penitent takes only a few minutes; it requires little on

my part as priest except to listen patiently. The penitent goes away with that “good feeling” that we each receive from the performance of our favorite devotions.

## 2) Spiritual direction

Telling my sins to a priest can be an exercise in humility—just as it is often humiliating and embarrassing to “confess” to my doctor that I have done something stupid which has resulted in physical illness. But in both cases, the “confessing” is not an end in itself. When I tell the doctor what’s wrong with me, I expect that doctor to do something that will help me get better.

Growth in the spiritual life is the motive for many Catholics to seek spiritual direction. For some Catholics, Confession is their only opportunity to enter into a conversation with a priest. In this expression of the sacrament, the person comes in and sits down facing me and they tell me of the state of their soul, their sins and the temptations they are facing.

I listen attentively and patiently, and I give a word of encouragement based on the Scriptures; but I try not to give any advice. Unless the person has been seeing me regularly for spiritual direction, I simply do not have enough information to make a good judgment. It is similar to a medical doctor prescribing medicine over the phone without examining the patient. There are times when a doctor might do this—for example, when there is an established relationship between doctor and patient—but even in these situations there is a certain amount of risk for both the patient and the doctor.

Spiritual direction and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are two distinct practices, and each works best in its own context. Spiritual direction is most effective through an established relationship between the person seeking direction and the spiritual director (who may or may not be a priest, by the way).

## 3) Bible service followed by individual Confession

Some parishes have begun the practice (often during Lent and Advent) of gathering the parish or deanery for a “service of the Word”—reading from Scripture, a homily, an examination of conscience and an Act of Contrition—after which several priests go to various parts of the church and hear individual confessions. People come to the priests and “go to Confession,” and then say their penance and return home. (Again, there are many variations in how this is done.)

## 4) Celebrating the mercy of God

The new ritual contains several ways of celebrating the sacrament. The “Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution” might look similar to the “Bible service followed by individual Confession” described above, but it is radically different in its focus and in what it intends to do. The most important change is not in the external ritual; it is much deeper than that.

My first insight into this profound change came from the story I heard many years ago from the late Fr. Bernard Häring, a moral theologian whose ideas were prominent at Vatican II. He's the same German priest whose story was told at the beginning of this Update.

The girl in Fr. Häring's story exclaimed that what's most important about Confession is what Jesus does. Indeed, the focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is on what God does for us. The sacraments are acts of worship. They are celebrations of the Church. The focus is on God, love, community, celebration, joy. This is very different from my memories of the dark confessional, the fear of the priest, the list of sins I didn't understand, the worry about forgetting something—I was focused on what I was doing (confessing) rather than on what God was doing.

Sacraments are the community's celebration of God's mysterious plan of saving love. Jesus of Nazareth is the primordial sacrament, the clearest sign of who God is and how God loves us. We gather to celebrate! We do not celebrate our sinfulness, we celebrate who God is and what God has done in Christ. As St. Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. God has reconciled us to himself through Christ."

The Eucharist, being the source and summit of Christian life, is the model for all the sacraments. As the Eucharist has four movements—gathering, storytelling (liturgy of the Word) meal sharing (liturgy of the Eucharist) and commissioning (the dismissal rites)—the Sacrament of Reconciliation has a similar shape.

Gathering: First of all, we gather as a community and form Church. This is not a "private devotion" but a true liturgical celebration. "Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church...It is to be stressed that whenever rites...make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #26-27).

Storytelling: We then hear those biblical passages which tell of God's abundant love and forgiveness. As we hear the Word of God we remember—and this "remembering" will naturally call forth an attitude of thanks and praise (again, think Eucharist/thanksgiving).

Love that is given calls for love to be returned. As we become more aware of God's abundant love for us, we realize that we have not loved God back nearly as much as God has loved us. This realization is called "the sense of sin." The awareness of our sinfulness comes not from hearing a list of possible sins that we might have committed but rather from hearing of God's abundant love. Only love has the power to draw us to conversion.

Just as at Mass you come forward to receive Holy Communion, at the Sacrament of Reconciliation you come forward to receive individual absolution. You come and stand before the priest and confess your sinfulness; he places his hands on your head and prays the prayer of absolution, assuring you that God loves you, cares for you, forgives you.

Reconciling: Just as meal sharing is central to the Eucharist, reconciling is central in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Hearing the prayer, "...and I absolve you of your sins..." we are moved to an inner acceptance of God's love, even in the face of our own sinfulness. This

acceptance is the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, assuring us of forgiveness and reconciliation. God's love enables us to love ourselves and removes all shame and guilt. Our word of sorrow meets God's word of forgiveness and explodes into shalom, wholeness, peace.

The rite then creates a space in which the community can joyfully and gratefully celebrate these gifts of forgiveness and peace. The priest leads the assembly in a joyful prayer of thanksgiving (again, modeled on the Eucharist, the form for all the sacraments). We praise God for his love and mercy; we sing a hymn or a psalm (many beautiful prayers are given in the revised ritual); we pray the Our Father, asking that God help us to forgive even as God has forgiven us; we share a sign of peace.

Commissioning: Made whole in the sacrament, we are strengthened to go forth to continue the healing ministry of Jesus. The priest offers a concluding prayer, gives a blessing and sends us forth as ambassadors of reconciliation as we sing praise to God.

Even though Vatican II seems like the distant past to many these days, the Church is still incorporating many of the changes the Council began. Reconciliation is still celebrated in a number of different ways, and each has its merits. But however you celebrate the sacrament, remember the most important thing: "what Jesus does."

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