

Catholic

UPDATE

© 2023 LIGUORI
PUBLICATIONS,
A REDEMPTORIST
MINISTRY.

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE
LIGUORI, MO
63057-9999

800-325-9521
LIGUORI.ORG

PHOTOCOPYING
PROHIBITED.

C0906A

Sacrament of Reconciliation

CELEBRATING THE MERCY OF GOD

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION

One Sunday in the 1930s, Redemptorist Fr. Bernard Häring was conducting the weekly religious instruction. He began by asking the congregation: “What is the most important thing about confession?” A woman in the front pew 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 toward 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 contrition is the most important thing.”

A man on the left 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.” 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,



CNS PHOTO / MIKE CRUPP, CATHOLIC COURIER

it doesn’t count.” The congregation could tell Fr. Häring still hadn’t heard the most important thing. An uneasy silence fell over the church.

In the silence, a little girl in the third pew said: “Father, I know what’s most important. It’s what Jesus does!” Father Häring smiled. She had it right. Let’s explore Jesus’ role in reconciliation and the gift he offers us in the sacrament.

Our ritual for reconciliation has grown through the centuries. We've moved from a time when baptism and Eucharist were the only sacramental form of reconciliation to (1) **canonical penance**, modeled on baptism, to (2) **Celtic penance**, modeled on a doctor visit, to (3) **confession**, modeled on a legal trial, to (4) the **sacrament of reconciliation**, modeled on Eucharist.

1. CANONICAL PENANCE

All sins are forgiven when we're 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 readmitted 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—could be celebrated only once in a lifetime.

2. CELTIC PENANCE

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

The Christian would go to a holy monk, tell his sins, and ask for healing. Celtic penance was for all sins, not just grave, public sins. Unlike canonical penance, the process was repeatable. The emphasis wasn't on "telling the sin" but on performing the penance; just as when we go to the doctor, the main thing isn't "confessing" our illness but doing what the doctor says so that the illness will be healed.

3. CONFESSION

During the seventh century, Irish missionaries brought Celtic penance to Europe, and it eventually became "confession." In this expression of the sacrament, a person confessed to a priest who had the power to give absolution. The penance the sinner was to perform was greatly reduced; for example "fast on bread and water for ten years" became "say six Our Fathers." The emphasis was on the telling of sins to the priest (confession) and the priest's words of absolution.

Although a sacrament, some confessions are more "devotional" than "liturgical." At these confessions, liturgical elements—vestments, candles, music—are minimal or nonexistent. 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 (1962–65).



CNS PHOTO / GREGORY A. SHEMITZ

WHAT DO I SAY TO THE PRIEST?

Simply come forward and admit your sinfulness. Perhaps the Scriptures that were just proclaimed made you aware of an area in which you haven't loved enough. "Father, I'm like the older son in the Gospel you read, and I'm not ready to forgive others." Or, "Father, I'm often impatient with my family." Or, "Father, I have sinned and I wish absolution."

While the rituals for celebrating the sacrament were designed primarily to reconcile grave sinners, most Catholics celebrate reconciliation not because they're cut off from the Church but because they seek to grow in God's love. In those cases in which a person is in grave sin—has broken their love relationship with God by a seriously grave action, committed with full knowledge and consent—the Church requires these mortal sins to be named explicitly, number and type, in the sacrament of reconciliation (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1857).

After returning to his father, the prodigal son no doubt shared the regular family meals with his father and brother. But after such a serious break in family harmony, there first had to be a special feast celebrating his return. Similarly, the Church first celebrates the sacrament of reconciliation with those who have separated themselves from God and the Church by serious sin before they share in the Eucharist.

4. VATICAN II'S REVISION

The Second Vatican Council looked at the history of the ways 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 Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], 72). The revised Rite of Penance was approved in 1973 and introduced in the United States in 1976.

However, the new ritual hasn't been widely implemented in parishes nationwide. Often, four expressions of the sacrament occur 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**. These categories are an oversimplification; you may find variations within each.

DEVOTIONAL CONFESSION

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 the priest gives absolution (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 the priest's part except to listen patiently. The penitent goes away with that good feeling we receive from performing our favorite devotions.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Telling sins to a priest can be an exercise in humility—just as it's often humiliating and embarrassing to “confess” to a doctor when we've done something stupid that's resulted in physical illness. In both cases, the “confessing” isn't all that transpires. When we tell the doctor what's wrong, we expect the doctor to do something to help us get better.

Growth in the spiritual life is the motive for many Catholics to seek spiritual direction. For some, confession is their only opportunity to enter into a conversation with a priest. In this expression of the sacrament, the person comes in, sits down facing

me, and tells me of the state of their soul, their sins, and the temptations they're facing.

Some priests listen attentively and patiently and give a word of encouragement based on the Scriptures, but they try not to give any advice. Unless the person has been seeing a particular priest regularly for spiritual direction, a brief confession doesn't give him enough information to make a good judgment. It's 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's an established relationship between doctor and patient—but even in these situations, there's a certain amount of risk for both the patient and the doctor.

Spiritual direction and the sacrament of reconciliation are two distinct practices. 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).

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.

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's radically different in its focus and intention. The most important change isn't in the external ritual; it's much deeper than that.

An insight into this profound change can be found in the story recounted earlier from the late Fr. Bernard Häring, a moral theologian whose ideas were prominent at Vatican II. The girl in his 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 past experiences of the dark confessional, fear of the priest, the list of sins,

DIG DEEPER

What's the connection between the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist?

Why should reconciliation be thought of in a positive light?

How often should you receive the sacrament of reconciliation? Why?

worry about forgetting something. The penitent could become focused on the doing (confessing) rather than on what *God* was doing (forgiving, reconciling).

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 don't celebrate our sinfulness; we celebrate who God is and what God has done in Christ. As St. Paul said, "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation....[God] has reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17–18).

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** (dismissal rites)—the sacrament of reconciliation has a similar shape.

GATHERING We gather as a community and form Church. This isn't a private devotion but a true liturgical celebration, as we find in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: "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" (SC 26–27).

STORYTELLING We hear those biblical passages that tell of God's abundant love and forgiveness. As we hear the word of God, we remember—and this remembering calls forth an attitude of thanks and praise.

Love that's given calls for love to be returned. As we become more aware of God's abundant love for us, we realize we haven't loved God back nearly as much as God has loved us. This is "the sense of sin." The awareness of our sinfulness comes not from hearing a list of possible sins we might have committed but 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, 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, "I...absolve you from all your sins," we're moved to an inner acceptance of God's love,

...Whoever is in Christ is a new creation.

Behold, new things have come
...All this is from God, who
has reconciled us to himself
through Christ and given us the
ministry of reconciliation. God
was reconciling the world to
himself in Christ, not counting
their trespasses against them
and entrusting to us the
message of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:17–19

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. We praise God for his love and mercy, sing a hymn or psalm, pray the Our Father, and share a sign of peace.

COMMISSIONING Made whole in the sacrament, we're 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, 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. However you celebrate the sacrament, remember the most important thing is what Jesus does.

Please share or recycle this *Catholic Update*. 

Subscribe to *Catholic Update* today at Subscriptions.Liguori.org. Individual and bulk subscriptions are offered to suit your needs. More than 350 issues of *Catholic Update* are available, with discounts provided for larger quantities. See the complete list at Liguori.org/Catholic-Update.