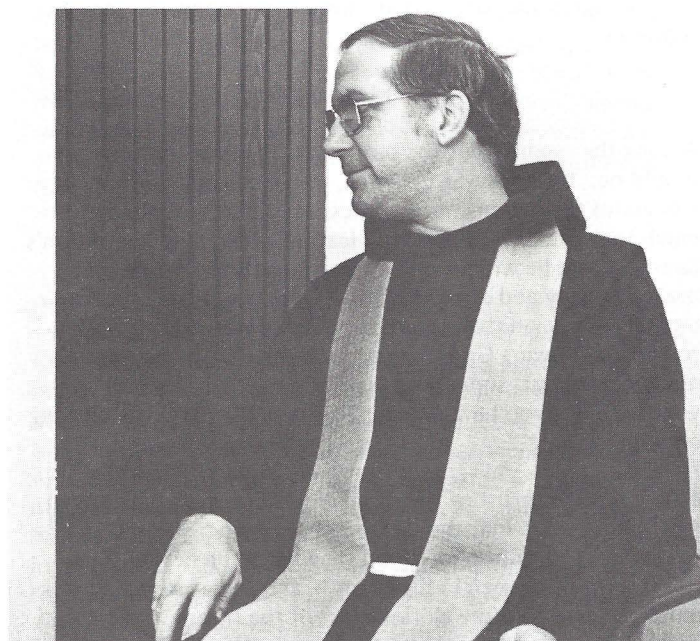


CATHOLIC UPDATE

TODAY'S FAITH IN FOCUS

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HOW TO GO TO CONFESSION

Using the NEW Ritual

by Leonard Foley, O.F.M.

The first question many people ask when they hear there is a new ritual for confession is "Now can we all get general absolution, so we don't have to go into the box?" Or the questioner is at the other extreme and says anxiously: "You mean I have to get up in public and confess my sins?"

The new ritual's answer to both these questions is no. It states: "Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves to God and the Church, unless physical or moral necessity excuses." The ritual then describes this necessity as "grave need, namely when, in view of the number of penitents, sufficient confessors are not available to hear individual confessions properly within a suitable period of time, so that the penitents would, through no fault of their own, have to go without sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time." As for privacy, it is still the same. The penitent confesses individually to the priest, either in the confessional or face to face.

New Understanding Needed

But these are not the basic questions. For one reason and another, many Catholics don't celebrate the sacrament at all or very rarely. Others feel it is a sort of dusting-off-the-angels luxury for holy types. Still other Catholics now ask, as Protestants once did, "Why do I have to confess to another human being?"

It should be said right now that the new ritual, *as ritual*, is not going to answer these problems. Unless there is a thorough re-understanding of sin, God's redeeming work in Christ, reconciliation, Church and sacrament, it is to be feared that the new ritual will fail in its purpose.

In fact, many will probably be disappointed in the new ritual as such. There is not that much difference in the actual external ceremonies and words compared to the old form. If you want to be downright legalistic about it, all the penitent really says in the new rite (besides the confession of sin) is: an Act of Contrition, the Sign of the Cross, Amen (twice) and a response. "His mercy endures forever."

The Spirit and Meaning of the New Rite

Evidently the bishops must have something deeper in mind. The most important part of knowing "How to confess in 1976," therefore, is the capturing of the new outlook behind the revised ritual. If you don't mind, then, I'd like to postpone a discussion of the actual ritual and begin with what I will call the spirit breathing forth from the pages of the fairly large ritual volume published in Rome last year.

Leaders of the Church are telling us that whether for mortal or venial sinfulness this sacrament is a very special and important celebration. It is not something to be taken lightly or routinely,

"The overwhelming truth about the sacrament of reconciliation"

or done merely to make someone "feel better" or to unload a burden of sin in an action that has no relationship with the rest of our lives. In other words, we are being asked to celebrate the sacrament seriously or, in my opinion, not at all.

There are several new emphases in the ritual; none of them is new, though some have perhaps been overshadowed in recent centuries.

A Warm, Forgiving God

Among the essentials of the sacrament, the most obvious should be: God is a warm, loving, forgiving God. The primary fact about the sacrament of confession is that God loves us so much that like "The Hound of Heaven" in Francis Thompson's famous poem he will never stop pursuing us so that he may heal our agony and our aloneness. If we do not have the fundamental realization that we are approaching a merciful God, a passionately loving God, then the sacrament can become merely an ordeal—something you go through, so that when you come out you have a ticket that says that God has nothing on you.

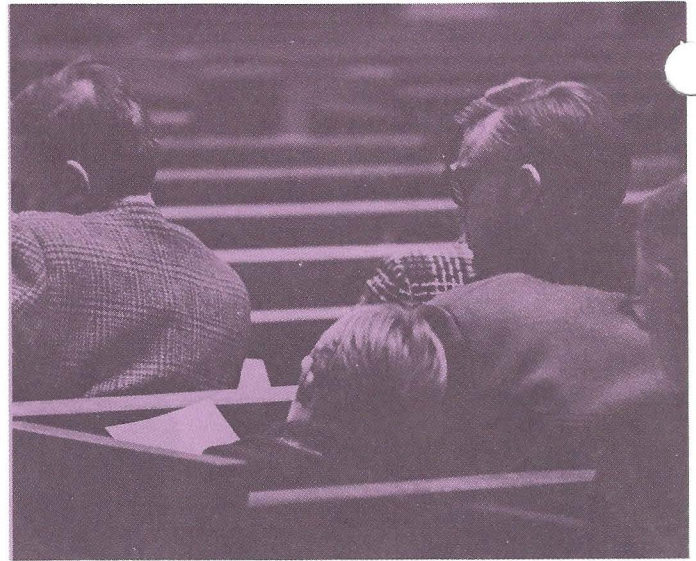
This is not the thrust of the ritual at all. The overall, the overwhelming truth about the sacrament of reconciliation is that God wants to heal us more than we want to be healed. But this God must be seen in his warmth, and therefore we always must come back to the glorious fact of the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. God wanted to speak to us in our language, to touch us with flesh like our own, to look into our eyes with human eyes and to speak to us with human words. And so we have Jesus, the sign that is the Sacrament of the loving God.

If anyone wanted to know how good God was, all he needed to do was to look at Jesus, listen to him and receive his healing. It is the same today. We need to realize that this same divine and human Jesus is eagerly and ardently welcoming us to reconciliation and healing and peace. He is not interested in punishment and bawlings out. We must first experience his love, and it will prompt us to take care of whatever reparation and reform is needed.

Church Must Be Warm

How do we see with our own eyes and hear with our own ears the human-divine warmth of Jesus' love? We see and hear and touch him in that group of people whom he has left behind to be precisely his visible presence, that group of people whom we call the Church. The Church is called to be the convincing sign of God's healing. To the degree that the Church—and that means the local parish—is not a welcoming, forgiving, open, reconciling, Christlike community, they—we—are obstructing the continuing work of Christ on earth today.

The seven individual sacraments are going to be greatly handicapped, (God's work in them, that is) if the sacrament of the Church is not first of all a convincing sign of the never-ending forgiveness and love of the Father and of Jesus and the Spirit. It is the *community* that is involved in reconciliation. The community welcomes all sinners. And so any reform and revision of the ritual of confession must be accompanied by the never-ending reform and purification and Christianization of the community in which all of us sinners live.



Of course, the warmth and the love of the Church must be seen in one particular person, the priest. The community may be warm, but if the priest himself in his celebration of the sacrament does not personally represent, in a convincing way, the love and mercy of Christ, then again the redeeming work of Christ is obstructed.

Yes it is true, as we have always said, the sacrament is valid; that is, something happens even if the priest is unworthy. But not everything happens that God wants to happen unless the priest is the warm, welcoming, kind, patient, understanding Christ. The new ritual therefore mentions at the very beginning that the priest should *welcome* the penitent and speak to him or her kindly. This is not to say priests have never done this. It is, however, to emphasize that this is the atmosphere in which God's grace works best.

A Deeper Look at Sin

A second consideration in studying the new ritual is a deepened understanding of the meaning of sin. Modern theologians have pointed out what mankind has known from the beginning: that sin is not only individual external actions. These particular actions, like unkind words or the hand stealing from the cash register or the arm striking another person, are only the tips of the iceberg. Sinfulness lies deep in our persons. It is not something that we turn on and off like an electric switch. What somebody does at 12:05 represents the attitude he had at noon and 11:30 and 11, and the attitude that he still has at 1 and 2 and 3 o'clock unless he makes a definite effort to change the spirit which is filling his life.

People are sometimes puzzled by this explanation, because one conclusion from it is that a person never really knows when someone *begins* to commit sin or *how far* along the way he or she is. Someone may be developing a sinful attitude which, if allowed to continue will become so serious as to break his relationship with God. But how far he has gone along that line I don't know.

And so in answering the questions of worried parents, the priest may say, "I don't know whether it is a mortal sin for Johnny to miss Mass on Sunday." And the parents reply is:

is that God wants to heal us more than we want to be healed."

"Well, if *you* don't know, then who does?" And next comes:
"It seems that nothing is a sin anymore!"

Sin Is an Attitude, a Spirit

No one is saying that. They are merely saying that sin is a far more pervasive thing than the single, countable, external action that we can see. Sin is a spirit just as faith and love and hope are a spirit. They all go on in a man or woman's heart. They are not, as I have said, turned on and off like electric current.

Sin is the willingness to let my relationship with God be strained, or when the strain goes on long enough, to be broken. That is what we mean by mortal sinfulness: the breaking of a relationship with God. This happens in a person's heart long before it appears in his or her bodily actions.

From "Grocery List" to a Searching of Hearts

What has this to do with the sacrament of reconciliation? First of all, it would seem that we must get away from the "grocery list"—a numerical recitation of things that were perhaps sinful but often were not: "I forgot my morning prayers; I forgot my evening prayers" (To *forget* anything cannot be a sin); "I ate meat on Friday, I thought it was Thursday." (One can never mistakenly commit a sin.) Things like that represent too great a concern with a certain external respectability without an equal concern for the *spirit* which underlies my whole life.

Of course, many of the people who made these "nice" confessions were good people. But even the best people in the world have at least what might be called a minor infection, a certain spirit of venial sinfulness: selfishness, neglect, petty pride, etc. What we need to do is to look into our hearts and see the set of *motives* which prompt almost everything in our lives.

Searching Out the Real Evil

For example, there are people who by temperament are very efficient in running things. That talent can become their sinfulness if they become domineering and have no respect for other people's wishes or feelings or rights. And this one single fact can be the tragedy in their lives and others'. And all the while they may have been confessing that they have forgotten their morning prayers, or they came late for Mass because they had a flat tire. They are totally oblivious to the *real* evil in their lives.

To celebrate the sacrament, then, is first of all to recognize the evil that is in me, to admit it, to separate from it all that is not my fault, all that is mere temptation or emotion, and then to look at my real sinfulness there before me and realize that it is evil, that it is straining—if it has not broken—my relationship to God. Only if I am a sinner do I have any reason to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation.

Sin Is Social

The third great emphasis at least implicit in the new ritual is the socialness of sin. Evil gets hardened in the structures of society, of family life, of individual life. The world is blotched

with the results of some people's sin, making or leaving other people ignorant, poor, deprived of elementary rights, starving physically, emotionally and intellectually. Marriage and family life can settle into routine coldness, breaks in communication, isolation—to the lifelong damage of both spouses and children.

Some sins are evidently social—striking someone in the face, taking his money, ruining his reputation, spreading disease of mind or body. But the deepest reason why sin is social lies in the very way God made us. We are meant to form a loving community, one in which members help (not hinder) each other to reach full development as human beings and as God's family.

Reconciliation Is Central

And that leads us to the central word which the Church is emphasizing in the new ritual: *reconciliation*. When I allow sin to possess my spirit, I become a stranger to myself and to my neighbor and to my God. I no longer sit in the circle of the family. I am the son who has left the father and gone off to seek his own selfish pleasure. *I need reconciliation, forgiveness*. Reconciliation is putting back together what once was one. It is rediscovering unity. It is showing that there is a fundamental agreement between two people who once seemed incompatible. God always wants reconciliation—things to be right again between us. Human nature always *needs* reconciliation, because we cannot be "right" with God if we are not right with our neighbor.

We see here the simple unity of the commandments: Love God-neighbor-self. You can't do one without the other. And if you are unreconciled to one, you are unreconciled to the other.

Jesus formed a reconciled and reconciling Church, his Body, the sign of his forgiveness. If I am a member who has experienced the warmth of this community, I will have no question as to why I can be, or should be, reconciled to God through this sign of Christ. If I do not see this community as the visible expression of Christ today, then all the arguments in the world will not "prove" why I should not simply "go straight to God" for forgiveness.



Using the NEW Ritual

Only if all these elements are present—a realization of the love and mercy of God, a welcoming community, a kindly and understanding priest, my awareness of responsibility for others in my sinfulness—only then will there be flesh and blood on the meager bones of the new ritual. The “bones” of the three modes of celebrating the sacrament are these: The first is the reconciliation of *individual penitents*, that is one priest, one penitent; the second is what we have learned to call the *communal celebration* of the sacrament in which a group of people gather together for prayers and hymns and examination of conscience; then each goes privately and individually to the confessional; and the third is what we have always described as *emergency general absolution*.

Because you as an individual may soon have the opportunity to use the new ritual at your parish, it will be good to look at the rite of *the reconciliation of individual penitents* more in detail. First, there is an *option* of using the traditional confessional or coming face to face with the priest. The ritual asks the priest and penitent to prepare by prayer. Right here we have the key to a fruitful celebration of the sacrament. Imagine the difference it will make if the priest and the penitent, kneeling together in church, perhaps aloud, but at least silently, pray for light, for strength, for healing. The whole atmosphere of the sacrament is then charged with the presence of God.

Words of Welcome and Encouragement by Priest

Next, the priest welcomes the penitent kindly and makes the atmosphere such that the penitent is fully aware that this is the divine welcome of the mercy of God. The penitent then says one of the few things the ritual instructs him or her to say: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Again the priest urges the penitent to have confidence. The confessor may do this in a variety of ways. And this, incidentally, is one of the features of the new ritual. In many of the elements of the sacrament the ritual gives five, six or seven alternatives. This is so the sacrament does not become a hardened ritual.

Recently Father Gerald Broccolo of the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission of Chicago wrote a letter to the bishops complaining about the little leaflets that he anticipates will be coming out telling people how to go to confession—as if there is *one single way*.

Actually there are many alternatives. For instance, as I said, the priest at this point may speak words of encouragement in many different ways.

Scriptural Reading

Next there is the reading of the word of God. This is one of

the emphases of the new ritual. Some selection of the Bible chosen by the penitent or the priest is now read (or it may be read as part of the preparation for the sacrament). Now again if we realize that the Bible is the living, personal, here-and-now voice of God calling us to conversion and to his grace, then this can be a very dramatic and powerful help to contrition and conversion. The reading of the word of God again permits of almost limitless alternatives. The priest or penitent may say a portion of Scripture from memory or may read it. According to circumstances, this may be short or long.

Confession, Penance, Absolution

Then the penitent confesses his or her sins in whatever way seems best. There is nothing new here.

The priest then is called upon to help the penitent make a complete confession if necessary, encourage him or her to true sorrow, give suitable counsel, instruct the penitent if necessary, etc. The priest then imposes a penance, which “may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service of one’s neighbor and works of mercy. These will underscore the social aspect of sin and its forgiveness.

Next the penitent expresses his or her sorrow for sin. This may be done in the traditional Act of Contrition or in the penitent’s own words.

The priest imparts absolution while extending his hand(s) over the penitent. The new formula stresses that reconciliation comes from the Father, shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the death and resurrection of Christ, and stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in forgiveness. It also underlines the fact that reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church. The penitent answers, “Amen.”

The sacrament concludes quickly with a “proclamation of praise” of the mercy of God. The priest says “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,” and the penitent responds, “His mercy endures forever.” The priest then dismisses the penitent in these or similar words: “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.”

And So . . .

Using the new ritual means more than memorizing a few new phrases. We are being called to a deepening of our whole Christian life, particularly its aspects of genuine repentance, a sense of the reconciling Christian community, and the ongoing, life-long process of conversion. Above all, we are called to believe that we really have something to *celebrate*—namely, a visible sign of the reconciliation only God can give, and which he generously offers.

Note: A helpful paperback, **YOUR CONFESSION: USING THE NEW RITUAL**, by the same author, is available from address on front: