

Reconciliation in the Life of the Church

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A quick and inaccurate response to the title of this talk is that reconciliation plays little part in the life of the Church. If the number of people of going to Confession was the criterion, then it would be true. There has undoubtedly been a decline in the use of the sacrament. But it is also true to say that 'Salvation' or 'Reconciliation' is the business of the Church. The church is known as the refuge of sinners with good reason. Of course, it is difficult for human beings to recognise that they are in this need, and it is also very hard to believe that salvation or reconciliation is absolutely free. I am reminded of a sketch in that old television programme, *Candid Camera*, when the presenter, Jonathan Routh, stood in Oxford Street in London, handing out five pound notes to passers-by. Very few accepted them, and many of those who did took one glance, screwed them up and then threw them on the pavement. Only a tiny minority recognised the notes as being genuine, paid their thanks and put them in their pocket. This illustrates the way humanity has received the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ.

Pope John Paul II called, in his recent Apostolic Letter, *Misericordia Dei*, for a rediscovery of the truth that it is in Christ that God shows his compassionate heart. Knowing that forgiveness awaits us in Christ helps the sinner become aware of a 'sense of sin' which has become dulled in today's culture. In saying this John Paul II is reiterating his message made in his post-synodal exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* of 1984, in which he recognised the crisis that was affecting the Sacrament of Penance in certain cultures, not least our own. Perhaps it was because of the effects of the great changes in our culture in the 1960's and 1970's that the sense of sin has been lost, and consequently the perceived need for salvation and reconciliation.

For those of you who are Christians but not Catholic Christians with a strong emphasis on sacraments in the life of your church I need to say something about sacraments. It is well known that St. Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic theologians did not include the treatise *De Ecclesia* in their great works. They would have considered it unnecessary because, in their view, their treatment of the Sacraments covered much the same ground.

Signs of Love

Sacraments are very important to Christians, especially, Catholic Christians, because they celebrate the presence of Christ, and the love of God made visible in Christ, in his physical absence, whilst awaiting the second coming. In the event Jesus did not return in the lifetime of his first followers but his promises still remained. As a result, the early Christians not only *told* the story of Jesus, they also *lived* it out. Like Jesus, they went into the waters of Baptism to symbolise their new life. Like him, they broke bread and shared it as a symbol of God's love and care for them and their love and care for each other. They prayed for each other, laid hands on each other, healed and forgave, just as they had seen Jesus do. And as Jesus was the sacrament of God for them, they, the Church, became the sacrament of Jesus for each other: Through their ritual actions, they revealed the ongoing, living presence of Jesus in the world, just as the Church does today when it celebrates the sacraments. The old Catechism tells us that 'Sacraments are an outward sign of inward grace, ordained by Jesus Christ, by which grace is given to our souls.' In our theology, sacraments bring us into touch with the familiar and the mysterious simultaneously.

The Rite of Reconciliation has restored a very old and very eloquent symbolic action: the priest extending one or both hands over the penitent's head while praying the prayer of absolution. This gesture reinstates the ancient, intimate custom of laying hands on the head of a penitent to symbolise forgiveness, acceptance, healing, comfort, mercy and a symbolic passing on of the power to forgive others as we have been forgiven. The symbolic actions at the heart of the Church's sacraments are all expressions of human intimacy: a bath, a meal, an embrace, a laying on of hands, a touch, a rubbing with oil. These actions do for us what words alone, or abstract thought, cannot do. They put the coming of God in our lives into body language. They help us break open and share with one another the common human experiences that reveal God's presence to us.

The symbolic actions of the sacraments bring us into contact with present realities, in this case the reality that we are forgiven. But the symbolic actions of the sacraments do not stop there. They also bring us in touch with present realities that give hope for the future and have the power to lead us into that future because of particular memories of our church that we carry with us.

Sacraments do not happen only to the individual. Sacraments can be understood completely only in relation to the Body of Christ which is the Church. This communal dimension of sacraments is essential to our understanding of contemporary sacramental theology. It is out of our understanding of Christ as the Sacrament of God and the Church as the sacrament of Christ that we can understand

sacraments as community events. Sacraments can in no way be understood as private “me and God” affairs. Sacraments happen first to the community, the Church. And when something happens to the Church (to paraphrase St. Paul), it happens to the individual. This is why the new rites insist that the sacraments be celebrated in the Christian assembly, with the community present and actively participating. The sacramental symbols are communal symbols that touch us as members of a community. The richness and effectiveness of the symbolism often depends on our degree of participation and responsiveness.

Sacraments do not, in fact cannot, stop with ritual celebration. We have to *be* sacrament to the world – be that visible expression of God’s love and care. Sacraments are extended into the world by people whose sacramental lives shape and reshape themselves, their community and the world. Like the first followers of Jesus, we break bread with and for one another, we pray for each other, we lay hands on one another in love, we heal and forgive. In so doing, we help strengthen the Christian community and offer a model for the building up of the whole human family.

Thus, sacraments neither begin nor end with liturgical celebration. They begin with God’s love and care through Christ to us, the Church. They continue with us, the Church, experiencing and celebrating this love and extending it to the world. The grace of the sacraments is the grace of the Church in service to others. And, in a very real sense, they never end so long as we, the Church, continue to live and celebrate the ongoing symbols of God’s eternal care for all of us. This is the heart of sacramental spirituality: Because of God’s magnanimous love for us, the gift of grace is always there.

Signs of Forgiveness

The Rite of Penance emanating from Vatican II is really not one rite but three: one individual, one communal and one a combination of individual and communal elements. Each of the three forms is fully the Sacrament of Penance. Each signifies and brings about the forgiveness of sin. Each is intimately related to the Eucharist, which celebrates in the great offering of Christ the redemption and reconciliation begun at Baptism. Each incorporates praise and thanksgiving for the mercy of God. And each is a liturgy, a public prayer of the Church.

The essence of the new Rite, however, lies not in its various formats, but in its renewed theology, and particularly in our understanding of that theology. In fact, I would propose that the most fundamental change in the new Rite lies in our change of attitude toward the Sacrament. The new Rite offers a wonderfully fresh emphasis in the celebration of forgiveness and reconciliation. That

fresh, new emphasis begins with the name we now give to the Sacrament.

“Penance,” its most ancient name, focuses on the major part of the ritual action as practiced by the early Church: namely, long years of penitential acts designed to effect a change of heart, followed by the joyful return of the penitent to the ranks of the faithful.

“Confession” became the popular name for this Sacrament during the days of the frequent, private ritual. Again the name suggests the emphasis: self-accusation of guilt and confession of all sins by number and kind to a confessor.

Although the new 1973 Rite is officially titled *The Rite of Penance*, calling the Sacrament Penance seems to be confined only to the title. The name “Rite of Reconciliation” rather than “Rite of Penance” is used throughout the document. This recent name change reveals a dramatic development in the Church’s understanding, practice and theology of sin, contrition and conversion.

Calling the Sacrament “Reconciliation” emphasises that its goal is more inclusive than confession, more inclusive than penance, more inclusive even than forgiveness of sins. Surely, that is all part of the Sacrament, but the real goal is *reconciliation*. To reconcile means to bring together that which is apart; to bind, to heal, to make whole again. Thus, the Sacrament of Reconciliation aims at restoring broken relationships, re-establishing lost harmony and peace with people, with creation and, therefore, with God.

It can be argued that “Reconciliation” is the most theologically and scripturally accurate name for the Sacrament. The roots of the Sacrament lie in the Old Testament concept of atonement, being *at one* again with God and one’s sisters and brothers. Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) still is one of the highest Jewish holidays. Jews celebrate it with acknowledgments of sinfulness, penitential practices, acts of contrition, prayers for mercy and a change of heart – all of which are specified conditions for atonement and reconciliation in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the New Testament, the most radical and central aspect of Jesus’ ministry was his work of reconciliation. The Good News he proclaimed is the news of liberation from all that dehumanises, alienates, oppresses or limits human fulfilment – from all that cuts us off from ourselves, others and God. And Jesus not only preached reconciliation, he embodied it. His very life revealed that God is not an angry judge out to catch us in our sin but a loving and forgiving parent, calling us back and awaiting our return with outstretched arms. It is important to note that the forgiving parent Jesus reveals always takes the initiative, always does the calling back in reconciliation. This is particularly evident in the Parables of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12–13), the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8–10) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32).

When Jesus himself forgives sinners in the Gospels, he does so without accusation, shame or guilt. In the story of the woman caught in adultery, he says, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.” (John 8: 11). Even before sinners recognize their sins, Jesus is accepting of them. He doesn’t disregard Zacchaeus or the woman at the well; rather, he is compassionate. He doesn’t demand that sinners seek or earn forgiveness in order to change God’s attitude toward them; rather forgiveness of sin is a gift, and it is God’s forgiveness that changes the sinner. The realization of God’s constant and overwhelming love reveals to sinners the need to be forgiven. And probably, is the best response to the Candid Camera sketch I referred to at the beginning of this talk. That, as sure as anything, is what happened to Zacchaeus, and when it did salvation came to his home (Luke 19:1–10). And forgiveness doesn’t stop at the sinner’s house. Once forgiven, sinners are empowered to extend to others the gift of forgiveness. “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” Jesus says (Luke 6:37). And he teaches his followers to pray, “forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. . .” (Luke 11:4). When Peter asks how many times he must forgive, Jesus tells him, “seventy times seven times” – in other words, as often as you must and fully (Matthew 18:21–22).

Reconciliation is a demanding vocation. It ultimately cost Jesus his life. And it is our participation in the victory of that reconciling event that we celebrate in the Sacrament. St. Paul explains that Christ’s reconciling ministry is entrusted to us, his Body on earth. By virtue of our Baptism we are called to forgive and accept forgiveness, to continue the work of reconciliation, and to the extent that we respond to that call we will become a new creation, contributing to making all things new again.

“...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come! All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17–19)

For Paul, and for us as well, reconciliation is more than what happens at the moment of sacramental celebration. It is a life-style, a mission, a ministry, and a lifelong process in which all of us as Church are constantly and intimately involved. Reconciliation sums up and embraces the whole of Christian life. It is the common thread woven throughout the fabric of Christianity.

The Introduction to the Rite of Reconciliation stresses this scriptural background and broadened concept of reconciliation, pointing out that reconciliation begins with God’s initiative. It is not something we do for ourselves, rather it is something God does for us.

God does not reconcile us against our will, of course, nor does reconciliation occur without our cooperation and acceptance of God's love and grace. But reconciliation comes first from God's side. God calls us "from darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 19) to be united with Christ and through him with the Creator and the Holy Spirit. This reconciliation initiated by God has the power, if we accept it, to fashion us into a new people who share with Christ a common history, a common journey and a common freedom to move forward into a new way of life.

The new Rite says, in effect, that there is "good news" – even about sin. The good news about sin is that God always forgives, and also that there is now a wonderfully fresh new way to celebrate our experience of that forgiveness. The dominant note in the new Rite of Reconciliation is not fear, sorrow or guilt, but hope, joy and confidence. For many of us who grew up under the tutelage of the *Penny Catechism*, this may be the most notable departure from our past attitude toward the Sacrament.

While the new Rite focuses on God's merciful love for us, the post-Tridentine Rite focused on our sinfulness and self-accusation. The emphasis on making a technically "good" confession to rid ourselves of sin overshadows consideration of the sacrament as a manifestation of God's merciful love.

No wonder so many of us grew up with the false and unscriptural notion that we could earn God's love by obeying all the rules, doing all the technically correct things! In reality God loves, chooses and accepts us *before* we love, choose and accept God. In fact, it is God's love and choice of us – God's grace – which enables and empowers us to turn to and re-turn to God. Emphasizing God's love and compassion is a major characteristic of the new Rite.

Another important feature of the new Rite is this: Besides placing the Sacrament within the history of salvation and within the total life and mission of the Church, it focuses on its relation to Baptism and Eucharist. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is not an isolated event in the individual lives of Christians. It is part of our participation in the total Paschal Mystery and the total life of the penitent Church.

In 1983 when the Synod of Bishops discussed reconciliation, they strongly reiterated this understanding. In their papers, discussions and proposals to the Pope, they sought to establish a link between sacramental reconciliation and the Church's mission of fostering reconciliation in the world. "The Church," they said, "as a sacrament of reconciliation to the world has to be an effective sign of God's mercy."

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is but one element in this ministry of reconciliation of which both the bishops and St. Paul speak. For reconciliation is not confined to, but completed by sacramental celebration. The sacramental celebration of reconciliation is a peak

moment in the Christian's ongoing journey of conversion. That journey begins at Baptism which initiates us into the life, death and resurrection of Christ (the Paschal Mystery); and it finds its fullness and completion in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is the primary sacramental sign of Christ's love for sinners. It is, therefore, *the* great Sacrament of Reconciliation, and it is the sacrifice of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins.

Participation in Eucharist is seen as the culmination of reconciliation. After describing absolution as God's welcome of the penitent, the Introduction to the new Rite says: "This [absolution] is finally expressed in a renewed and more fervent sharing of the Lord's Table, and there is great joy at the banquet of God's Church over the son who has returned from afar."

We could say that all of this is the Church's way of responding to the very human "passages" in our lives. We are initiated, welcomed and accepted into the Christian community through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Then, because the community is made up of sinful human beings who sometimes turn in on themselves and in various ways separate themselves from the community and their God, the Church offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This Sacrament enables those very human people to renew their initiation with a special ritual celebration and return, reconciled to the community and God.

The phrase ritual *celebration* is important in our renewed understanding and attitude toward the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The phrase denotes that the celebration of the Sacrament is a liturgy, that is, a public worship service of the Church, not a private event between priest and penitent or between penitent and God.

The new Rite reinstates the Christian community as the first ministers of the Sacrament. The Introduction makes this clear when it says:

The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors. (para.8)

The Church exists precisely to proclaim and carry on the reconciling work of Christ in today's world, to be a sign of the reconciling Saviour. In order to be that sign, we must abandon the illusion that we are separate, independent selves. The very act of forgiving and reconciling calls for an awareness of relationship with others in community. The entire community of the faithful, all of us, are

intimately involved in providing the faith-filled environment that fosters the continuing process of conversion and reconciliation. We are responsible for welcoming the penitent back in the spirit of the forgiving parent. At the same time, each of us is empowered to approach and celebrate the Sacrament because of the ministry and support of the community in which the sacramental encounter takes place.

God's merciful love is always en-fleshed in people. Words and rituals alone do not touch us at the heart. People do. G. K. Chesterton (I think) put it well when he said that God's Son became human because God knew we could love nothing that we could not put our arms around.

A Sign of Hope?

The present Pope is always hopeful and ever challenging. Are we to read *Misericordia Dei* as a backward step? I don't think so. General Absolution attracted great crowds when first introduced, and by God's providence brought back many people who were away from the church to a practice of their faith. Some were unable to articulate their sinfulness, others had deep and past hurts they could not talk about. The free administration of the sacrament undoubtedly did some good in those early days. It even helped some people return to regular individual confession. But it did nothing to confront the crisis of the sacrament, i.e. that in some countries it was falling into disuse, and that Christians had lost their sense of sin. My own belief is that committed Catholics neither want nor expect communal celebrations of the sacrament with general absolution.

To meet this crisis Pope John Paul II in *Misericordia Dei* has re-emphasised the need for confession of sins and the individual rite. The experience of the Jubilee Year and the many World Youth Days has shown him that the individual rite is requested and that the penitents expect to enumerate their sins. It has also become apparent that confession helps people develop a 'sense of sin', and hence a need for the sacrament. Many Catholics were happy to shed, as a result of Vatican II, the 'catholic guilt' that overshadowed their spiritual lives until then. However they also lost their sense of sin along with the guilt, and *Misericordia Dei* seeks to correct this. Furthermore, many millions of Catholic Christians journey to places of pilgrimages throughout the world, and without exception the sacrament of reconciliation, usually in the individual form, is the highlight of the pilgrimage.

The Catechism points out that individual, integral confession and absolution remain the ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church unless physical or moral impossibility excuses them from this kind of confession. It goes on, "there

are profound reasons for this. Christ is at work in each of the sacraments. He personally addresses every sinner, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.' He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them. He raise them up and reintegrates them into fraternal communion. Personal Confession is thus the most expressive form of reconciliation with God and with the Church." (Cat. 1484)

Does this say it all? I believe that the question remains, where do we go from here? My own experience has shown me that the individual/communal form of the celebration which involves individual confession and absolution, and is very popular in parish life, has been the lasting innovation of the Rite of Penance. Fortunately there are still plenty of priests available to make this possible.

Does this leave those people in irregular marriages and unions out in the cold? It has always been clear that people living in such a habitual state and who do not intend to change their situation cannot validly receive absolution. Is the church pouring salt into the wound? I do not think so. From time to time we reach the limits of our human understanding of the divine will. This may be such a moment. Another would be the matter of intercommunion, yet another the scandal of division within Christ's Body between the different Christian traditions. We just have to accept that there are some things we have to leave to God's mercy. We should always encourage those who cannot receive absolution and hence receive Holy Communion to attend Mass and to live up to as many of their responsibilities as members of Christ's Body as they possibly can. To be present at Mass, to stand at the foot of the cross, is the best place for a sinner to be. It helps to remember that, despite our best efforts, we are all sinners and that one day we will all have to rely on the love and the mercy of God.