

Comment

Even if a sound traditional theology of the sacrament of Penance had been made generally available to Catholics (and it has not), our customary practice would still tend towards an unchristian misinterpretation of the sacrament. Whatever it says in the books, the impression conveyed in practice is that going to confession, with its attendant inconvenience and embarrassment is a price we pay for having our sins deleted, It is a considerably lower price than eternal damnation, and it is vaguely felt that the mercy of God is manifested in this Special Reduction Offer (available for a Limited Period Only, don't miss your chance). But since Freud and others a whole lot of sins have become much more mentionable in polite society so that nowadays even the embarrassment can be quite small and, of course, the penances imposed have for a long time been derisory. This has left a lot of people with the uneasy feeling that the meaning has gone out of the sacrament; it isn't difficult enough any more. They were like the people who felt (often enough they *were* the people who felt) that the mystery had gone out of the Mass when its language became intelligible.

No useful purpose is served by smiling or sneering at such people; for them the older forms of the liturgy satisfied a psychological need, and in this sense they lost something – not something with much relevance to the gospel, but still something that mattered in their lives. Unless the psychological crutch can be replaced by real theological healing nothing at all has been gained and only suffering has been caused.

The feeling, anyway, is that while we were always getting absolution inexpensively, it has now become so cheap as to seem almost valueless. This feeling, not always acknowledged, lies behind some of the wariness about the new rite of Penance, especially in its third form "The Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution". So long as this feeling still persists it may well be wise of the English bishops to be rather cautious about permitting this form of the new rite. They could be right to buy time but, if past experience is anything to go by, the time, alas, will probably be wasted sitting around waiting for all this new stuff to go away; it should of course, be spent in an intensive effort to eradicate superstition and bring people back to a traditional Catholic understanding of grace, conversion and the sacrament of Penance.

The wording of the Decree permitting the use of this form is in any case a little obscure. It allows the rite in case of serious need (*gravis necessitas*) and instances the case, particularly in missionary

areas, where because of a shortage of priests, if there were only individual confession people would have to wait a long time for absolution. But this is given as a very obvious case (*nimirum quando..*), the Decree does not by any means say it is the only one, though it does say that the mere presence of a large number of people is not by itself a sufficient reason for using the general rite. Between these extremes there is surely a large range of 'serious needs', not the least being the need for a form of the rite which will correct a pagan or pelagian understanding of the sacrament. There is, it seems to me, a strong case for introducing the new general rite as *part* of a process of theological re-education.

We have to return to the Catholic teaching that forgiveness is not cheap but absolutely free, that the mercy of God is shown not in the lightness of the conditions for forgiveness but in the fact that there is forgiveness at all. We have to recognize (and this is a piece of traditional Catholicism we can usefully re-learn from our Protestant brethren) both the seriousness of sin (and the 'impossibility' of forgiveness) and the limitless compassion and unconditional forgiveness of God. We must get people (especially ourselves) fully to realise that our celebrating of the sacrament of Penance is part of the miracle of forgiveness that God works in us. We do not go to confession as a condition for having our sins forgiven, we go there because the grace of God inspires us not only to believe in his forgiveness but to celebrate that belief sacramentally. How we celebrate it sacramentally is not a matter of pre-requisites demanded by God before he will forgive us, it is a matter of signs and appropriate human gestures, a matter, amongst other things, of psychology and 'of the symbolic structures of our society.

During its strange history Penance has shown more flexibility and variation of form than any other sacrament except, possibly, marriage, and it would be rash to predict with assurance its future shape. Still, it seems reasonable to suppose that (despite the statement in the Decree that individual and complete confession and absolution remain the '*unicus modus ordinarius*') for the next generation the pattern will be celebration with general confession and absolution combined with the annual individual confession that has been prescribed since the fourth Lateran Council. The era of regular individual confession of grave sins before receiving communion looks as though it may be drawing to its end (even the Decree does not take individual confession absolutely seriously – it prescribes a ritual that would be physically impossible in an ordinary confessional). This in itself would not matter much one way or the other but it could be the occasion for a radically renewed understanding of the forgiveness that lies at the very heart of the gospel.

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