

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Sin and Sacramental Reconciliation, II

THE SACRAMENT OF penance or reconciliation presents a particular challenge in our times not only to Catholics at large and to confessors especially but also to liturgical scholars and theologians. This is partly due to the changing sense of sin¹ but also due to more extensive knowledge of the historical development of sacramental reconciliation² and to a new focus in sacramental theology.³ Because of the diminishing numbers of sacramental confessions observed in many places, this may seem like a time of tragic decadence and indifference, but it may also be seen as a time of extraordinary opportunity.

As was discussed in the earlier part of this article,⁴ the sense of sin for many Catholics today might best be thought of not as lost or diminished but as more subtle because more mature. There is far less sense of breaking rules and therefore having to pay a prescribed (and more or less arbitrary) penalty. Rather, there is a sense of disorientation and lack of focus with a consequent longing (sometimes not very consistent and not very effective) to get one's life and desires and relationships back into perspective and also to get the society in which one lives back into perspective. This implies a particular kind of examination of conscience, which does not consist of checking off one's life and behaviour against a predetermined list of 'do's' and 'don'ts'. Such an examination consists rather of a continuous and progressively more sensitive discernment of what it means to live as a true follower of Jesus Christ.

As is immediately evident, this sense of sin and sinfulness is at odds with a sacramental practice and theory focused on precise recall and acknowledgment of sinful actions, with specificity not only as to number and species but also as to degree of culpability in terms of clarity of knowledge and fullness of consent.⁵ This dissonance of ritual practice with contemporary experience has been felt for a long time, but it has reached a new peak with the growing awareness that there are other actions and encounters in the Church which also mediate conversion and reconciliation. The liturgical movement and the renewal of biblical and patristic scholarship have contributed both to the problem and to the solution, more particularly by what they have discovered of the history of sacramental reconciliation since apostolic times.⁶

While it is, of course, true that our sacramental system owes its origin to the symbolism and ritual that Jesus himself drew from Jewish sources and adapted for his disciples, it is no longer possible to assert in the face of the historical evidence that our present pattern of seven sacraments, in the forms which the rites have today, can be traced to the authorship of Jesus or even to apostolic times. The sacraments can be said to be instituted by

Jesus Christ, not in a juridical, constitutional sense, but in a more fluid, organic way. This much is inescapably the testimony of history. Of the sacrament of penance or reconciliation in particular, we know that it has changed its shape dramatically in the course of the centuries.

There has always been a need for ritual expressions of conversion and of reconciliation and forgiveness among Christians as among all other peoples. However, Christians of the earliest centuries clearly saw the Church itself, in its entirety, as the great sacrament of conversion and of reconciliation, for membership of the Church brings people into intimate relationship with Jesus Christ as redeemer and mediator between God and the human community. Therefore, the eucharist, the action which constitutes the core and foundation of the Church, is the all-embracing ritual of conversion and reconciliation. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is very explicit about this and very concrete in the conclusions which it draws from this concerning the exigence of changed relationships among believers that is contained in the eucharistic action and assembly.

In the course of the centuries, this aspect of eucharist has not been forgotten for we have incorporated explicit repentance rites in our celebrations. The Lord's prayer was recognized as one such from early times, and indeed Christians were also urged to pray the Lord's prayer three times daily as a continual expression of repentance for 'daily sins' and of forgiveness of one another.⁷ Similar explicit repentance and mutual reconciliation rites include the passing of the *pax* or greeting of peace. Best known in our own times is the expression of repentance and the prayer of absolution included in the entrance rite of the eucharistic celebration.

In early centuries, however, the key sacrament of repentance, conversion and reconciliation for each individual Christian was baptism. In the restored rite for christian initiation of adults, this aspect has again come clearly into view. In those early centuries in which most baptisms were of adults, the Church was necessarily a community of personal and deeply committed believers. Their entrance into Church membership was actually or potentially cause for persecution and death, and it was a turning not made lightly. This turning away from the way of life of the surrounding society and towards a new and transformed life in Christ was at that time so dramatic in its nature and consequences that it must have seemed indeed like a rebirth. Sin, for these converts, was a whole way of life, of relationships, values and expectations, rather than a series of discrete actions that could be numbered and specified. Sin was defined and identified by the change between the old way of life and the new.⁸

It is not surprising, in that context, that in the earliest centuries there was a strong sense that when once the great transition 'from death to life' had been made, there should be no need for further rituals of repentance and reconciliation than those already mentioned above, which respond to the inevitable 'daily' sins of a community of people still within the struggle of history, yearning for the fullness of God's reign to be re-established in the

world. Yet it is also not surprising, in a history of sin and betrayals, that not all those who were baptized were faithful and constant in their christian allegiance. The earliest examples we find of special rituals of exclusion from the community, for a period of penance followed by a ritual of re-entry or reconciliation, appear to have been concerned mainly with betrayal of the christian community in time of persecution.⁹ The earliest response to this seems to have been consternation and puzzlement over the discovery that anyone who had once entered the realm of Christ's grace could later be radically unfaithful. There was considerable argument as to whether it was right to readmit such persons. However, even in cases where they were not readmitted, they were advised to pray for God's forgiveness and do good works. In other words, the meaning of the rite was in its reconciliation with the community of believers, and it seems that God's forgiveness was not understood to be dependent on readmission to the community.

By the time of Augustine of Hippo, in the early fifth century, there is evidence that others besides conspicuous public sinners were expected to avail themselves of the public rite of exclusion, penance and reconciliation. These others were expected to confess to the bishop privately the cause they had to enroll among the penitents. There is also evidence that the conditions had become so harsh and the role of the penitent so ignominious that few presented themselves and many who acknowledged serious sin postponed penance to their deathbeds. Eventually, other rites of reconciliation took their place beside the old tradition of public penance. Some of these seem surprising today, such as the spanish rite of the Good Friday *indulgentia*, a lengthy and strenuous communal penance celebration at the end of which a general absolution was granted.¹⁰

A serious problem in this practice of the ancient Church was the fact that it divided Church members into the sinners and the righteous, a distinction that is obviously contrary to the gospel teachings of Jesus. This anomaly had been noticed particularly by the desert fathers and it was evidently troubling others, including certain spanish bishops, who initiated the practice of devotional enrolment in the ranks of the penitents on their deathbeds. Following the custom of the monastic communities, the celtic and british Churches did not practise the rite of public enrolment in the ranks of penitents, but encouraged all to confess their sins privately in the context of seeking spiritual direction. They confessed to holy persons, not necessarily bishops, and apparently not necessarily ordained as priests. Gregory the Great, in his letters to Augustine of Canterbury, authorized the continuance of this practice in place of the roman rite of public penance, and the custom spread to the european continent, where it gradually replaced the roman rite in spite of vigorous episcopal efforts to maintain the latter.

When the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 made a combined or compromise rite of reconciliation mandatory for all, it left many problems that had not been foreseen. Among these problems were the fact that even devotional

confessions were now made a matter of judicial process rather than spiritual direction in a continuing conversion. That invited the misunderstanding that the process somehow substituted for a genuine conversion in real life. It suggested the analogy of wiping the slate clean from time to time, as though the ritual by itself could change a person's standing before God without any existential change in the person. Eventually this spilled over into the many abuses connected with indulgences against which the sixteenth-century reformers so vigorously protested.

There were the further problems that the parish priests of the Middle Ages, to whom the faithful were supposed to confess at least all their grave sins very specifically at least once a year, were in many cases not at all qualified to be good confessors, and that people cannot be commanded to undergo serious conversions on schedule. In other words, there was much in this pattern of sacramental reconciliation that would cheapen it and make it rather trivial in the spiritual lives of Christians. The coming of the friars, the continued influence of the monasteries, and eventually the reforms connected with the Council of Trent, all did much to try to correct this, but it must be admitted that many of us in our own life-time have experienced the routine of parish confessions as something less than effective spiritual direction in a continuing personal conversion.

The reformed and varied rite for the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, that was offered by the commission which set to work on it after the Second Vatican Council, has tried to take into account this history of the sacrament with its adaptations and its wider possibilities. But the commission was concerned not only with the historical shapes of the rite but also with the development of the theology of the sacrament. It tried to recapture the understanding from the early Church that the ecclesial or communal aspect of reconciliation is central and that reconciliation with or within the community is precisely that which mediates the conversion. The formulae used before the twelfth century were such that the minister of the sacramental reconciliation did not claim to absolve from sin in the sense of dispensing God's forgiveness but only claimed power to absolve from any further Church penalties or penances and therefore to reconcile 'with the altar', that is to readmit to eucharistic communion. To this was added a prayer that God would forgive. Reasonably enough, there seems to have been a sense that an assurance that God forgave was more appropriate, but this was carried further into the claim to forgive in God's name by virtue of the power bestowed by the Church. This all tended to establish the understanding of a judicial procedure.¹¹

The theology of the sacrament of penance, as most of us learned it, would not have led us to question the focus of this in any way. We were accustomed to heavy emphasis on the efficacy of the sacraments *ex opere operato*. We understood that they effected what they signified because instituted by Christ, and it now seems in retrospect that we accepted the formula too easily without asking what it meant and in particular without

asking *how* the sacraments were supposed to effect what they signified. The studies of the liturgical movement gradually brought us back to the realization that they were supposed to effect *by signifying*. In other words there was supposed to be a spontaneous and organic connection between the *sacramentum tantum* and the *res et sacramentum*, that is the sign simply in itself and that mediating reality which is already the reality to which the sign points but which at the same time is also a sign pointing further.

In the case of the sacrament of reconciliation, the rite is certainly the *sacramentum tantum*, but it is a sign that should genuinely and existentially signify for those who participate. That means that the *res et sacramentum*, the yet visible but already spiritual reality towards which the sign draws the participants, must shape the sign itself. But this *res et sacramentum* is on the one hand the reconciliation or reassertion and strengthening of the bond with the Church, the community of salvation, and on the other hand the personal conversion of the individual which that community of salvation makes possible. And this is sign in its turn, because it testifies to the invisible reality of the reconciliation and progressively more intense intimacy with God. But this means that the sign is efficacious when what is signified is really the welcome and continuing invitation into the fullness of community and the assurance of the possibility of authentic continuing conversion by the offer of support in such a conversion. The pattern of the sign must be something very different from the model of the slate that is wiped clean, because this latter model implies that no real change is expected.

It is with this understanding of the importance of the ecclesial dimension and of the dynamic character of the action that the postconciliar liturgical commission reintroduced a variety of approaches in the three forms of the new rite. Thus the communal penance celebration with general absolution, whose use is permitted so seldom and with such stringent restrictions and qualifications, is not simply an easy option that excuses the lax and disinterested from the burden and exigence of confessing while still allowing them to consider themselves Church members in good standing. Rather it is a form which vividly expresses individual responsibility for the sin of society at large and communal responsibility for the sins of individuals. It does this because the congregation meditates on scripture readings together, prays together, acknowledges sin and sinfulness together and receives a common and communal assurance of the possibility of conversion in complex matters involving social structures and multiple relationships. Moreover, in such a communal penance celebration, it is possible by the choice of readings, prayers, chants and thoughtful homilies, to invite the members of the congregation to a bolder vision of the conversion in Christ that is necessary and possible. Individual penitents, making an individual examination of conscience, are more likely to ask themselves how their lives conform to their existing understanding of the demands and promises of the gospel. In a communal celebration there is a better opportunity to challenge

the understanding itself as to whether it might be too petty or one-sided.

On the other hand, the new rite does not intend to let go of these advantages in the form that retains individual confession. By calling for a context of scripture reading and meditation and of wider ranging conversation between confessor and penitent, the commission tried to retain or recapture the advantages of spiritual direction and of personal accountability expressed in a more specific and detailed way. Yet the intent is also that the communal dimension should never be absent. Indeed the ideal practice for devout and seriously committed Christians may very well be a combination of these two forms of the rite, not on the same occasion but at different times.

However, what is actually available to most Catholics at present is the combined rite including a brief, hasty confession, probably to someone who knows little or nothing of the penitent's life and circumstances, or the individual rite with something less than the leisurely scripture reading and meditation and conversation that is intended in this form of the rite. We are in a time of transition which is always difficult. The continued insistence on individual confession as mandatory at least for those who are aware of having sinned gravely, carries the disadvantage that the implication of judicial process continues to resonate through all celebrations of the sacrament and to obscure the focus of spiritual direction for those who really seek it, while vainly commanding those who are not coming any longer in any case.

Because one cannot command conversions, much less dictate the manner and time and circumstances for them, and because the risk of reducing sacramental reconciliation to something utterly trivial is real and devastating in its consequences, it would seem that a far more important effort at present is that of recovering that ancient celtic and british tradition of spiritual direction.¹² It is primarily in the context of spiritual direction that the sign of the individual rite of reconciliation can effectively signify. This implies that the form of the rite is observed correctly according to the new directives, that is, that there should be a broader range of conversation between confessor and penitent in the context of which a confession of sin and sinfulness can be both meaningful to the confessor and progressively revelatory to the penitent. In other words it implies a reversal of the pattern most of us have known; rather than seeking, or giving, spiritual direction in the context of a confession of sin, it suggests the making or hearing of a confession of sin in the context of spiritual direction. The importance and consequences of this new ordering in the new rite appear not to have been widely appreciated so far.

Perhaps the importance of the scripture reading as context for the conversation has not been well understood either. It is not just an optional embellishment to create the mood of prayer and repentance. Its function is among other things to signify that it is not sufficient to examine one's conduct by the light of one's understanding of the gospel, but that it is also

necessary to examine one's understanding of the gospel to seek deeper and better understanding. The function of the scripture reading is also to signify progressively just what that deeper meaning of the gospel is. In other words, the purpose of the scripture reading and meditation is to introduce that dynamic of continuing conversion and ecclesial impact into individual confessions which they are otherwise likely to lack. In particular, the scripture reading is more apt to keep the social responsibility, the dimension of social justice and peace, in focus in individual confessions.

It would seem in conclusion, that despite decreasing numbers of individual confessions, or perhaps even partly because of the decrease, we are at a moment of significant opportunities to reshape the practices of sacramental reconciliation so that the signs will truly and effectively signify continuing redemption and conversion.

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NOTES

¹ Cf Part 1 of this article, Theological Trends, 'Contemporary reflection on sin', in *The Way* (July 1984), Vol 24, no 3, pp 217-23.

² The best collected sources for that history in English appear still to be: Watkins, Oscar D.: *A history of penance*, 2 vols (London, 1920); and Palmer, Paul F.: *Sources of christian theology*, Vol. II, *Sacraments and forgiveness* (Westminster, MD, 1959). For a brief summary of the history and a fuller bibliography, see Hellwig, Monika K.: *Sign of reconciliation and conversion* (Wilmington, DE, 1982, distributed outside the USA by Gill and Macmillan).

³ This is evident in *Sacrosanctum concilium* of Vatican II. For bibliography of contemporary authors on the subject, see Hellwig, *op. cit.*

⁴ See *The Way* (July 1984), Vol 24, no 3, pp 217-23.

⁵ Cf Fagan, Sean *Has sin changed?* (Wilmington, DE, 1977).

⁶ Cf Watkins, *op. cit.*

⁷ Cf Diekmann, Godfrey: 'Reconciliation through the prayer of the community', in Mitchell, Nathan, ed.: *The rite of penance: commentaries*, Vol III (Washington DC, 1978).

⁸ This is clearly evident in patristic writings from the *Didache* and *Letter of Barnabas* to the mystagogical and catechetical writings of Ambrose, Cyril of Jerusalem and Augustine.

⁹ See Hellwig, *op. cit.*, bibliography for chapter II.

¹⁰ Cf Watkins, *op. cit.*, Vol II, pp 713-14.

¹¹ Cf Anciaux, Paul: *The sacrament of penance* (New York, 1962), pp 67 ff.

¹² For interesting information and perspectives on that tradition, see *Soul friend* by anglican author Kenneth Leech (London, 1977).