FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

Confession and the Spiritual Exercises

Eric Jensen

SOME WEEKS AFTER Íñigo de Loyola set out, at the end of February 1522, on his way to the Holy Land, he arrived at the Benedictine abbey of Montserrat and put himself under the guidance of a French confessor, Jean Charon, one of the monks of the abbey.[1] He spent three days examining his conscience and writing down his sins in preparation for a general confession relating to his entire past life. Íñigo's confessor was probably guiding him with the help of a manual, the *Compendio breve de ejercicios espirituales*,[2] based on a work by Montserrat's former Abbot García Jiménez de Cisneros (cousin of Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros). This guidance is probably what influenced Íñigo to delay his pilgrimage. He would spend almost a whole year at the nearby town of Manresa, making Cisneros' Exercises and being instructed in different methods of prayer by his confessor. This little manual seems to have influenced the pilgrim's prayer profoundly and left its traces in the notes that he was compiling as well as in the title that he gave them.[3]

Confession and the Spiritual Exercises

The first spiritual exercise in the *Compendio* is a general confession of the sins of one's whole life, which is precisely the exercise first assigned

[1] See Cándido de Dalmases, *Ignatius of Loyola, Founder of the Jesuits: His Life and Work* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 49, 53.
[2] Javier Melloni, *The Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 8–11. And see Joseph A. Munitiz, 'Introduction: How Did Iñigo Learn to Pray?', in *Ignatian Spirituality: A Selection of Continental Studies in Translation*, edited and translated by Joseph A. Munitiz (Oxford: Way Books, 2015), 1–25, which includes a partial English translation.
[3] See Melloni, *Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola*. In his introduction, the author states that his intention 'is not to establish the literary genesis of the text, but to consider the sources as foundational layers in the Exercises themselves' (ix–x).

The Way, 56/1 (January 2017), 94–101

to Íñigo.[4] In examining the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, we find such a full confession explained in the context of the General Examen of Conscience (Exx 32). This explanation is placed after the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23) and the Particular Examen (Exx 24), near the beginning of the First Week. However, because, in giving the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius came to see that, in making the First Week, 'sins and their malice are understood more intimately', he recommended that the general confession itself be 'best made immediately after the Exercises of the First Week' (Exx 44), rather than before beginning those exercises.

Thus, though no longer given first place (as in the *Compendio*), sacramental confession has nonetheless an important place early in the Ignatian Exercises, and an elaborate explanation of how to prepare for it is given in the text. Though 'the love of the Eternal Lord' (Exx 65) is what underlies the exercises of the First Week, they do focus largely on sin and disorder in creation and in the life of the one who makes them, and so Ignatius suggests that the general confession be made after one has experienced the conversion of mind and heart that comes from a better understanding of sin, of self and of God's mercy (Exx 61).

To ask about the place of confession in the Spiritual Exercises, however, is to enquire not merely about its *placement*, its location in the text, and about the importance that Ignatius attached to this sacrament; it is to seek also to discover for our own times the *purpose* and importance of sacramental confession in the Exercises. This in turn requires a brief look at how the sacrament has developed since Ignatius' day.

Confession in the Church's History

Ladislas Örsy's valuable little book, *The Evolving Church and the Sacrament of Penance*, gives an understanding of the sacrament in the context of a Church that is developing over time.[5] In its long history, sacramental confession has undergone more profound changes than any of the other sacraments. These changes are partly reflected in how the sacrament has been named.

Originally (and still sometimes) known as the sacrament of penance (by association with the severe public penances imposed in ancient times

[4] Melloni, *Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition*, 2–3.

[5] Ladislas Örsy, *The Evolving Church and the Sacrament of Penance* (Denville: Dimension, 1978), 18–51. The author stresses 'the dynamics of change, especially of the development of doctrine and the evolution of the capacity of human persons to know' (41).

The Sacrament of Penance, *detail from the* Seven Sacraments *altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden, 1440–1445*

for public sins), it came to be called confession (after private confession was introduced for private sins). It is sometimes also called the sacrament of conversion, since it makes present the gospel summons to conversion, and it is called the sacrament of forgiveness, because it grants pardon for our sins; in our own day it has come to be called the sacrament of reconciliation.[6] In classifying it as one of two sacraments of healing (the other being the anointing of the sick), the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* focuses on the healing of our relationship with the Christian community, wounded by our sins, and on the healing of our relationship with God, who loves us and welcomes us home.

Confession and Healing

Though healing is one of the effects of the sacrament, it is not mentioned in the ritual formula, and the celebration of the sacrament is focused almost exclusively on the forgiveness of sin. Part of the difficulty with confession as a sacrament of healing lies in making, not an examination of moral conscience (as Ignatius understood it), but rather an examination of *consciousness* or awareness, as the Examen is usually understood in our own day.[7]

An image that some have found helpful is that of a tree from which we are removing dead or diseased leaves. Examining the leaves is somewhat like going over our objective acts, and then carrying a list of defective, dangerous or deadly ones to a confessor. But leaves are connected to branches, and branches are connected to the trunk, and the trunk has roots, some of which are partly above ground but mostly deep below the

[6] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994), nn. 305–306.
[7] See Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 40 n. 38.

surface. It is by going down to the roots of our thoughts and actions—to our earliest experiences, to what is half forgotten or just below the level of consciousness—that we are sometimes able to get in touch with the wounds of our childhood years, to have them healed to some degree, and to be freed from some of our compulsions and disorders—that is, from some of our sinfulness. In making the Spiritual Exercises over thirty days (or thirty weeks in daily life, according to Annotation 19), when we are encouraged to reflect on our entire life history (Exx 56), we may sometimes recall or discover with 'an exclamation of wonder' (Exx 60) the hidden workings of grace bringing wounds to consciousness for healing.

In the First Week's third exercise, the triple colloquy (Exx 63) seeks three graces: the first is to 'feel an interior knowledge of my sins and a hatred for them'; the second is to 'feel the disorder of my actions, so that, hating them, I may correct myself and put myself in order'; the third is 'knowledge of the world in order that, hating it, I may put away from me worldly and vain things'. The movement from sinful actions to the disorder in myself is significant. The sinful actions are what need forgiveness; the disorder requires healing.

The wounds that emerge in making the Ignatian Exercises—and also in other kinds of retreat—are often what precede the deliberate sins and divine mercy that are examined in the First Week. Such wounds may have been caused by rejection (even before birth), abandonment, neglect or abuse (physical, psychological, sexual); or they may have resulted from even mild childhood punishments, which can damage trust in love itself, or from the absence of the affirmation that a child needs from both father and mother. When such things become the source of shame or of misplaced guilt, it can be healing to bring them to a spiritual director. The experience of being really listened to, of being heard and understood, can already bring a measure of healing. To be prayed over with a laying on of hands by a director attuned to the workings of the Spirit can bring even deeper healing. To receive all this in the context of confession celebrated as a sacrament of healing can be more powerful still.

An Experience of Hearing Confession

Some years ago I was introduced to a little booklet entitled *The Power in Penance*.[8] It encouraged reflection on one's life in order to discover

[8] Michael Scanlan, *The Power in Penance: Confession and the Holy Spirit* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1972). The author notes, even at the time of writing, a growing trend: 'Priests and laity are frustrated

one's wounds and then bring them to the sacrament for healing. I was making a retreat at the time, and I was led to look at my own wounded relationship with my sister and to seek healing in this area of my life. Shortly after returning home, I was invited to celebrate a late morning Mass daily for a dozen young religious during the final ten days of a month-long retreat and reflection on the rule of their founder. Towards the end of that time, when I was asked if I could come a little earlier on the following day in order to hear the sisters' confessions, I mentioned at Mass that they might prepare for the sacrament by reflecting on the wounds of their childhood, and I spoke briefly of the need for healing in my own relationship with my sister.

The next morning, Friday, I heard confessions before Mass and after lunch, again on Saturday morning and afternoon, and finally on Sunday morning. I must have spent 45 minutes or more with each of these women. Much of what they brought to the sacrament had little to do with sin. Without violating the seal, I can say that reflecting on the

Image of sorrow carved on a confessional, Church of Our Lady, Bruges

by the seemingly limited effectiveness of the practice of regular confession', and he concludes that 'the expectation of reconciliation would be better fulfilled if both priest and penitent approached confession with a definite anticipation of results and with reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit to change the life of the penitent' (12, 14).

wounds of their childhood freed these young women to talk about things that they had never been able to share with anyone before. To do so in the context of the sacrament, and then to be prayed over both for healing of whatever wounds were still there and for forgiveness of any sinful disorder that might have come from their childhood experience, was something that brought them much relief.

In some cases the healing began during their day or two of reflection on their history in preparation for confession, and was all but completed even before the celebration of the sacrament. What was most conducive to the whole experience of healing was, of course, the month of prayer (in a non-Ignatian retreat) that disposed them to be open to the power of the Spirit at work in their lives and that gave them the 'courage to receive new gifts'.[9] After this experience of hearing confessions, I was left deeply moved and thoroughly persuaded of the power in penance.

The Matter for Confession

This brings us to what is called the matter of the sacrament (as opposed to the form), usually defined as some sin, present or past, which is brought for forgiveness.[10] I would suggest that sin can be seen not simply as a thought, word or deed that is morally disordered, but also as *sinfulness*: a disorder (such as toxic shame)[11] that arises out of wounding experiences. If so, then this kind of disorder can also be included under the rubric of matter for confession. In the Triple Colloquy of the third exercise in the First Week (Exx 63), Ignatius uses the word *disorder* (*el desorden*) as something resulting from sin and almost synonymous with it. Disorder, for Ignatius, is understood in light of the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23), as a matter of the end (God our Lord) and means (all other things on the face of the earth). To choose health or riches or honours as the end for which I live, and to make God into the means of attaining these (through prayer or whatever) is a sinful disorder, a perversion of the order established in creation. However one defines sin, it would seem that,

[9] Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 82.

[10] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 84. 2, states that sins are the remote matter of penance, the proximate matter being the acts of the penitent in confessing them. See also 'Confession, Frequency of', *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), volume 4, 132–133.

[11] See John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame that Binds You* (Deerfield Beach: Health Communications, 1988). In his preface, the author says 'shame as a healthy human emotion can be transformed into shame as a state of being. As a state of being, shame takes over one's whole identity …. Once shame is transformed into an identity, it becomes toxic and dehumanizing.' (vii)

while we seek forgiveness for sin, we also need healing for wounds, and in the sacrament we should ask specifically for the healing that we need.

There is, of course, matter that may require the expertise of a counsellor or a psychotherapist, and occasionally a spiritual director may have to refer a person for this kind of help. Someone who has been sexually abused, someone with a serious addiction, or someone suffering from post-traumatic stress will need care that is usually outside the competence of a spiritual director. But well-managed direction may greatly assist in the healing process, because it explicitly brings God into that process and it is ultimately God's love that heals. In the case of sexual abuse, we are not dealing with someone who has sinned but with someone who has been sinned against. Surely this kind of experience, which is often so shaming, is in need of healing and may be brought for confession. Because there are often many layers of wounding, many layers of healing are also needed. Someone who has been sexually abused should of course seek the help of psychotherapy, which also has a spiritual dimension, but there is a power in the sacrament of penance that goes deeper than psychotherapy. Even while they make use of other therapeutic practices, people must feel free to bring their wounds again and again to the sacrament for healing, without being told, 'You have already confessed this'.

It is ultimately God's love that heals

Confession with Young People

Occasionally student leaders, mostly about seventeen years of age, gather at Loyola House where I work for a weekend retreat led by their own chaplains and counsellors, and two or three priests join them at the end to hear their confessions. Because these boys and girls are so young, their wounds are still close to the surface. It is heart-rending to discover how much pain many of them are carrying. They need to talk this out and weep it out, which they do during the weekend, usually seated in a large circle. The confessors then spend twenty or thirty minutes listening to each one before praying over them individually for healing and giving them absolution.

In some Jesuit schools and colleges, students are not only making weekend retreats but are being encouraged to make the Spiritual Exercises in daily life: it should not be assumed that the Exercises are open only to adults. Staff have been trained to give the Exercises in this way (as suggested in Annotation 19). But it is important to remember that readiness is all, and preparation is paramount.

Confession and the Spiritual Exercises Today

From all this it becomes clear that, in giving the Spiritual Exercises, the celebration of sacramental confession should take place at the moment when it is most needed. Shifting the focus of our attention from forgiveness alone to forgiveness *and* healing, that moment should come when wounds have come to the surface, and when both the director and the one being directed feel there is a need for some sort of spiritual healing. This can happen in any kind of retreat—long or short—that provides a safe setting and that encourages reflection on one's life experience. However, since reflection on one's *whole* life is what Ignatius encourages in the Spiritual Exercises, it is especially in the making of the Exercises that a director should expect wounds of childhood to come to consciousness. Though this often happens during the First Week of the Exercises, it can happen later as well. The one who accompanies the person making the Exercises needs to be attentive to what is going on and needs to find some appropriate way to bring healing to bear when it is needed, whether through a prayerful laying on of hands by a non-ordained director, or through referral to a priest for a healing celebration of sacramental confession, or both.

There are gifts and skills involved, of course, and the most important skill is that of deep listening, a skill which must be acquired over time. The most important gift is trust: trust in the power of the Spirit, which is present and at work, both in the one making the Exercises and in the one giving them. Openness, finally, and the courage to receive new gifts are what is needed by retreat-givers—especially priests, but not only priests, since so many lay people are also involved in giving the Exercises.

Eric Jensen SJ was born and raised in Montreal, where he graduated from Loyola College in 1957. He entered the Jesuit novitiate in Guelph, Ontario, in 1958. He has an MA in English Literature from St Louis University, and he studied theology at Regis College, Toronto. He spent thirty years in Winnipeg, where he taught at Saint Paul's High School and ministered at Saint Ignatius Parish for sixteen years, ten of them as pastor. He returned to Guelph in 2002, and now guides individually directed retreats and training programmes at Loyola House, Ignatius Jesuit Centre. He is the author of *Entering Christ's Prayer: A Retreat in 32 Meditations* (2007). His article, 'The Spanish Autograph or the Latin Vulgate? A Return to the Sources of the Spiritual Exercises', appeared in *The Way* in July 2014.