

From the PA's Desk

### **The Sacrament of Reconciliation:**

What happened to confession? Have Catholics simply stopped going, and how does one celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation today?

I think a number of things have changed in how Catholics view the Sacrament of Reconciliation today, and although some of these changes are good and positive, it also has contributed to a decline in people feeling the need for individual confession and absolution. The Church wants us to rightly regain the beauty and value of celebrating the sacrament of Penance again, both individually and within the context of a communal reconciliation service with private confession and absolution.

I think a main reason we have seen a decline over the years is because we have a better appreciation of the various ways we can experience God's forgiveness in our day to day lives. Although the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not the only way to receive the Lord's mercy, it still remains a powerful sacramental encounter between God and us, and is a Sacrament of the Church with unseen graces and blessings.

Most Catholics understand that the celebration of the Eucharist is the primary sacrament of forgiveness, for in the Eucharist we remember and make present Jesus' death on the cross and his rising to new life as the premier celebration of God's reconciliation with his people. During the Mass itself (prayed primarily to God the Father), we explicitly ask for God's forgiveness in a number of ways: 1) At the Penitential Rite which concludes with the words by the priest *"May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life."* 2) The Eucharistic Prayer itself speaks of our reconciliation with the Lord. 3) The *"Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us"* prayer. 4) The Lord's Prayer in which we say *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."*

We also know that when we forgive each other's sins, that too can be an authentic expression of God's forgiveness at work in the world. When we pray privately and ask forgiveness in the quietness of our heart, that also can be a real way to experience God's reconciliation.

Regardless of how things have changed, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is still a powerful and real way for us to celebrate a God who is always merciful and forgiving to those who seek his blessings.

I can't help but think that maybe some of the reservation about going to confession privately is that people are not sure what or how to say their confession. There is indeed probably a difference in how we celebrate it (even privately) today, and what we probably say to the priest as we are making our confession. **Years ago a confession looked and sounded like this: *"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been six weeks since my last confession. I lost my patience three times; I lied twice; I missed Mass once; I had impure thoughts twice and gossiped about my neighbor four times."***

Sound familiar? The above confession reflects an understanding of the moral life and sin that prevailed among Catholics for centuries. But in the last 50 years, many changes have been occurring in the way we think about morality and sin. These changes have resulted in part from new ways of understanding what it means to be human. They also come from rediscovering old ideas that the Bible and Jesus taught about how we ought to relate to God and one another.

There was a time when Catholics thought that living morally was mostly a matter of obeying the law—either that of the Bible or the Church. Sin was seen as primarily as a crime. Catholic theology has since come to

realize that the legal model is deficient, because we want to stretch people farther than what can be prescribed by law. Laws by themselves don't address the important realities of the heart, such as our attitudes and intentions. Jesus reminded us that what comes from the heart is what makes one sinful. Sinful actions are like the tip of an iceberg being held above the surface by a wayward heart. The legal model also tends to make the moral life too centered on one's self.

The newer models of morality focus on the quality of our relationships based on St. Paul's teachings that we make up the body of Christ in the world, and we are part of a network of relationships that joins each of us in responsibility to others and to all of creation.

A new look at the moral life has been informed by the biblical renewal in the Church and by some philosophical shifts within the Church and society. Together these shifts support a relational model of the moral life. The relational model emphasizes personal responsibility for protecting the bonds of peace and justice that sustain human relationships. The legal model of sin was law-oriented, minimalistic, act-centered, and focused on the question: What am I doing? The relational model of sin is value-oriented, focused on the quality of our relationships with others, stresses conversion, and focuses on the question: Who am I becoming?

Given this development, what might a contemporary confession sound like that reflects the relational model of the moral life? **Today, it probably sounds more like this: *"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been six weeks since my last confession. I am a husband, a father of three teenage children, and I hold an executive position in a large computer firm. Over the past month I have allowed love to grow cold at home and in my work. At home, I have been inattentive to my wife and children as I allowed my new projects at work to consume most of my time and attention. I have spent more time at work and little time with the family. At work, I have selfishly neglected to disclose some data which my colleagues needed for a new project. I wanted to gain the glory. I have also failed to support a female colleague who was clearly being sexually harassed and I failed to confront those who were doing the harassing. I think a good penance for me, Father, would be to take the family on a picnic this week and to make a special effort to affirm my junior colleagues for the great work they have been doing."***

This penitent senses how he is affecting the quality of life and love in his primary relationships. He also knows what he can do to show conversion and a change of heart. His confession reflects contemporary theology's emphasis on responsibility to others over the traditional overemphasis on what is allowed or forbidden by law. Rather than focusing just on committing sinful acts, it shows that sin is also an omission, a failure to do what ought to be done.

Contemporary morality encourages us to look at the roots of our sins, and pay attention to things such as greed, violence, corruption, resentment, poverty, sexism, and oppression of others. The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes Scripture to make its point in saying: "None of us lives for oneself (Rom 14:7); "If one member suffers, all suffer together; Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Cor 12: 26-27)

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is an opportunity and invitation to heal the brokenness in our lives and set relationships right again. Therefore celebrations of parish Communal Reconciliation Services (with private confession and absolution) within seasons such as Advent and Lent are perfect opportunities to focus not only on our sins against God, but also as a way to heal our relational sins which always affect somebody else. After all, reconciliation with God implies reconciliation with other persons as well.