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## COME BE RECONCILED: PENANCE SERVICES FOR CHILDREN

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*Reconciliation is one of the dominant themes of this Jubilee Year 2000. This article explores the theology of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, situates it in an ecclesial context, and offers practical advice for celebrating the sacrament with children. All three forms of the Rite of Reconciliation receive attention, analysis, and critique.*

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing the Church as the new millennium dawns is the renewal of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Of all the sacraments in the Church, the Sacrament of Reconciliation—its understanding, practice, and place in the lives of both young and old—seems to be confused or distorted. The diminished presence of this sacrament in the faith lives of people concerns Church officials, educators, and ministers and has spawned various suggestions and solutions from all sides to reverse the current trend. Even Pope John Paul II has made reconciliation a central theme of the new millennium and the year 2000.

Catholics today do not experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation for many reasons ranging from the traditional (i.e., fear, guilt, and shame) to more contemporary positions such as a lack of a sense of sin, the sacrament is not needed, or “I can say I am sorry to God on my own.” Regardless of the reasons given for not experiencing the sacrament, most Catholics express and believe that there is value, benefit, and need for this sacrament in their lives. Thus the dilemma: how to mesh the perceived need, value, and benefit of the sacrament with current lived experience, not only in the old, but in young children as well.

This article will explore the Sacrament of Reconciliation and its celebration with young children. However, before attempting to discuss the celebration of Reconciliation with children, it will be helpful to explore the understanding and meaning of reconciliation in our own relationships with each other and in the Church. The initial step in this process, however, should be to look at the traditional and most popular definition of a sacrament.

## DEFINING SACRAMENT

The sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are an integral and essential component of the Church and our faith. In fact, one of the fundamental and primary ways of understanding the Church is as a sacrament. In its broadest sense, a sacrament is "any manifestation of God's power and love in space and time" (McBrien, 1995, p. 1146). A sacrament is "a visible sign of the invisible presence and activity of God" (p. 1148). Thus, Jesus Christ, born as a human person, is "the historically real and actual presence of the victorious mercy of God" (Rahner, 1974, p. 14). Jesus is the primordial or fundamental sacrament of God (Osborne, 1988). Therefore the Church, as "the continuance, the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God's salvific will" (Rahner, 1974, p. 18) is the fundamental sacrament of Christ.

Within the Roman Catholic Church there are also actions that explicitly, but not exclusively, manifest the presence of Christ and give identity and understanding to the Church (Osborne, 1988). These are the seven sacraments of the Church.

The sacraments are not simply actions which the Church performs, or means by which the Church makes grace available. They are expressions of the nature and mission of the Church. They are privileged moments when the Church manifests itself as Church. (McBrien, 1995, pp. 788-789)

Perhaps the best definition of the seven sacraments comes from the traditional definition that most Catholics were taught. A sacrament is "an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace" (*Baltimore Catechism*, 1941, p. 19). In some respects, this definition is not a bad definition. However, it is important to perceive this definition in the context of understanding Jesus as the primordial sacrament and the Church as the basic sacrament. To accomplish this, it is best to look more closely at the three phrases that make up this definition.

The first phrase is "an outward sign." Sacraments are actions. They are activities that involve and engage the Church. At each and every celebration of a sacrament an outward action occurs: the pouring of water (Baptism); anointing with oil (Anointing of the Sick and Confirmation); the sharing of

bread and wine (Eucharist); the laying on of hands (Ordination and Reconciliation); the exchange of rings (Marriage). These are outward signs that are enacted for the Church that, in turn, require a response. In essence, they are experienced within the ongoing life of the Church as a means to continue to renew the life of the Church.

The second phrase of the definition is “instituted by Christ.” A traditional understanding of this part of the definition would hold to the idea that Christ dictated a list of the seven sacraments to the disciples. However, in contrast, a contemporary and fuller awareness of this phrase begins with the understanding of Jesus as the primordial sacrament. By this it is meant that Jesus, through the words and actions of His life, is the complete manifestation of God’s love for humankind. In other words, “in his humanity, Jesus is the sacrament of all that God gives to men and women: his grace, his forgiveness, his love, his presence” (Osborne, 1988, p. 48). Thus, the love that is shared in marriage, the presence in Eucharist, and the forgiveness in Reconciliation are realities that arise out of the life and actions of Jesus. Therefore they are “instituted by Christ” in that they arise from the words, actions, and deeds of Jesus—the primordial sacrament.

The final phrase, “to give grace,” perhaps is most problematic. A traditional understanding views grace in a quantitative nature. Grace was the “material” we received from God each time we received a sacrament. Therefore, one’s life was spent with the hope and quest of acquiring the needed amount of grace to attain eternal life. This view unfortunately poses various consequences that manipulate and reduce sacraments to mere magical events. The sacraments do give grace. However, one needs to look at the concept of grace not from a quantitative point of view but from a qualitative perspective. Grace is God’s love for humankind. This love is unconditional, unchanging, and everlasting. It is a love that human beings have been imbued with by virtue of being created in the likeness and image of God. Grace is what God is doing, has done, and continues to do in the life of each of us. However in the course of human nature and life, humans forget or disregard God’s unconditional love in a variety of ways (i.e., sin) and therefore need to be reminded of this ever-present, ongoing gift of love from God. Sacraments do just that.

## UNDERSTANDING RECONCILIATION

It is now possible to talk about the understanding and meaning of reconciliation. At its very root, reconciliation, both sacramentally and outside the sacrament, is that process through which human beings realize their sinfulness and in doing so, turn back to God and become more fully aware of God’s love and forgiveness. Reconciliation is the “conversion of all human life, behavior, social structures, values, relationships and expectations to the will of God in

creation and grace” (Hellwig, 1994, p. 275). To be reconciled to God and to the community sacramentally or otherwise, one must engage in what can be termed the “reconciliation process.” This process is what we human beings do in our own reconciling moments of life. It consists of three steps.

The first stage is to recognize and admit one’s sinfulness or wrongdoing. Sinfulness is a fundamental part of our existence. By virtue of being human and imperfect, we sin. Sin is the doing of some action or possessing an attitude that makes our relationship with God and one another “wrong.” Reconciliation is the “making right” of our relationships that we have made wrong by our actions and attitudes. Thus, fundamental to making our relationships “right” is first to realize and admit our wrongdoing.

The second step to experiencing reconciliation is to say, “I am sorry.” It is only through accomplishing stage one that we can express remorse. The traditional sacramental way of saying, “I am sorry,” is through the Act of Contrition. Unfortunately, more attention was often paid to remembering the prayer than to the meaning of the prayer. Saying “I am sorry” remains essential to the process, and must be an expression of sorrowfulness made with conviction, sincerity, and meaning and not merely the recitation of words. In other words, to be reconciled one’s expression of sorrow must come from the heart.

Finally, the third part of the reconciliation process is conversion and growth. Traditionally this was referred to as “penance” and more often than not, penance usually meant the recitation of a multiplicity of prayers. It has been suggested that a more healthy way to understand penance is through the concept of conversion and growth. If reconciliation is the healing and making right of those things we do not like about ourselves, then it only makes sense that as one engages in reconciliation one attempts to improve and grow as a person. In other words, reconciliation needs to be seen as a process that engages us in becoming better human beings. Thus, the implication is that through reconciliation one enacts the desire to grow more deeply into his or her right relationship with God and the community and is converted to becoming more like Jesus—the model of reconciliation. Therefore, reconciliation necessarily involves some sort of action on the part of the individual that leads to continued growth, conversion, and acceptance of the love of God in one’s life.

## **THE THEOLOGY OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION**

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is referred to in the documents of the Second Vatican Council only a handful of times. The two most significant references can be found in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican Council, 1964), and in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican

Council, 1975). The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states, "The rite and formulae of Penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament" (#72). The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* states those who celebrate the sacrament "obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed...and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded...and by charity, by example, and by prayers, labor for their conversion" (#11).

The new rite for the Sacrament of Reconciliation was promulgated on December 2, 1973. The general criteria for the renewal of the sacrament were taken from the references noted above (Osborne, 1990). In his book *Reconciliation and Justification*, Kenan Osborne, O.F.M., concisely summarizes four key theological ideas that characterize the new rite. The first key theological insight that he notes is the shift in the naming of the sacrament from Confession or Penance to Reconciliation (Osborne, 1990, p. 205). According to Sottocornola,

reconciliation seems to make more evident the essential content of the sacrament...rather than penance, a word which stresses...some work to be done, or confession which highlights only one aspect of the process. The term reconciliation seemed to represent the entire process by its focus on the culminating moment. Reconciliation is indeed a process; it is not instantaneous. (as cited in Osborne, 1990, pp. 205-206)

A second key insight is the historical, communal, and social nature of sin and the sacrament (Osborne, 1990). The Introduction to the Rite begins by speaking of the role of Christ as the ultimate reconciler and the Church "as a locus of reconciliation" (1990, p. 206). The emphasis upon the need to continually recognize one's sinfulness and be reconciled retains a significant presence. This is keenly expressed in the Introduction itself. "The Church, which includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy and always in need of purification constantly pursues repentance and renewal" (National Council of Catholic Bishops, 1975, #3). Likewise, the communal and social nature of sin and reconciliation is also emphasized.

In fact, men frequently join together to commit injustice. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that they...may work with all men of good will for justice and peace in the world. (National Council of Catholic Bishops, 1975, #5)

A third insight is the relationship of Reconciliation to Baptism and Eucharist (Osborne, 1990). The Introduction to the Rite of Reconciliation expresses explicitly the reconciling power of baptism as "the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" (National Council of Catholic Bishops, 1975, #2). Likewise, in the same article, the Eucharist is also mentioned as a moment of

reconciliation as well. Osborne (1990) concisely points out that the Sacrament of Reconciliation enjoys a special affinity with Baptism and Eucharist, and draws the conclusion that “the theology of the sacrament of reconciliation must both be baptismal and Eucharistic. Without such relationships...the theology of the sacrament of reconciliation is essentially misleading” (p. 219).

The final insight hinges upon the understanding of the sacramentality of Christ and the Church. “The new rite of penance situates the renewed sacrament of reconciliation precisely in the Christ-event as a reconciling event” (Osborne, 1990, pp. 212-213). In other words, Jesus is the ultimate reconciler and the essence of reconciliation is taken from the life and actions of Christ. Thus, the Church as the sacrament of Christ must be a reconciling community as well as a reconciled community of believers modeled on the life of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also deals with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The treatment of the sacrament in the *Catechism* begins rooted in the vision of Vatican II. The *Catechism* implies that “the essential issue in the understanding of the sacrament of penance is redemption...the conversion of all human life, behavior, social structures, values, relationships and expectations to the will of God in creation and grace” (Hellwig, 1994, p. 275).

In conclusion, one can see that the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the theology behind it have been given significant attention. They are grounded in the communal ongoing forgiveness and love of God manifested within the community of believers. This being said, it is time to explore briefly the three rites of Reconciliation in the Church.

## THE RITES OF RECONCILIATION

Currently within the Church the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the way to enact sacramentally the reconciliation process between the members of the community to God and one another. Within the Rite of Reconciliation there are three forms by which the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be celebrated:

- Form 1: The Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents, popularly referred to as individual confession.
- Form 2: The Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution, popularly referred to as communal Reconciliation.
- Form 3: The Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution, popularly referred to as general absolution. (Fernandez, 1991, p. 63)

The overall structure of each form follows the same pattern:

- Introductory Rites and Welcome
- Celebration of the Word of God
- Rite of Reconciliation
  - contrition
  - confession
  - act of penance (satisfaction)
  - absolution
- Concluding Rites
  - proclamation of God's praise and mercy (Kiefer, McManus, Jeep, & Mitchell, 1975, pp. 65, 90, 123)

Form 1 is currently the operative and normative way to receive sacramental Reconciliation in the Church today. This form is characterized by the one-to-one interaction between the penitent and the ordained minister. An ongoing debate continues about the strengths and weaknesses of this form as well as the ecclesial image it presents.

On the one hand, the individualistic nature of this form tends to minimize or reduce the communal and social nature of sin and reconciliation that the renewed rite emphasizes (Kennedy, 1987). Penitents confess their sinfulness and are reconciled individually and privately without the tangible support and presence of the community. Yet on the other hand, "although it is clearly minimal...the encounter of penitent and priest in individual penance constitutes a worshipping community in which Christ is present. The person of the minister reveals the compassion and forgiveness of Christ offered through the community" (Kennedy, 1987, pp. 132, 138). The point is that this form tends to centralize the presence of the community in the person of the minister. Furthermore, the presence of the Church is also symbolically and solely enacted in and through the ordained minister. One needs to ask, is this the best way for the Church's presence to be realized? Obviously it is not, since the Church is not solely embodied in the ordained minister. In reality, it is the community of faith rooted in the life of Christ, of which the ordained minister is a part, which reconciles the penitent. It is clear, however, that in Form 1 the presence of the Church as the reconciling community is realized vicariously in and through the individual ordained minister. Likewise, the emphasis upon the sinfulness of the penitent is equally individual and the social and communal nature is absent as well.

In Form 3 the opposite is the case. Form 3 highly stresses the communal dimension of one's sinfulness and reconciliation while sacrificing, to a certain degree, the individuality of the penitent. In Form 3 we are "dramatically reminded that sin is not merely a private failing, but a collective experience which affects the entire Body of Christ" (Foley, 1987, p. 148). Thus, Form 3 would appear to best accomplish the communal and ecclesial character of the sacrament: the Church as penitent and the Church as a reconciling community.



On the other hand, some would argue that the strong communal and social emphasis of sin and reconciliation found in this form tends to dismiss or diminish one's personal responsibility for sin and the need to be reconciled personally back to God and the community. An act of personal individual confession and reconciliation is "a need of the heart. It is a manifestation and sign of an authentic conversion" (Fernandez, 1991, p. 82). Form 3 seems to swallow up the personal or individual expression of one's sinfulness. As a result, this could promote a similar understanding of Church. The Church is made up of individuals who collectively form the Body of Christ. Yet individuals are also an essential part of the Body of Christ responsible for their actions, commitment, and beliefs. In other words, each member of the Church is separate but not separated from the rest of the members of the Church. Regardless, current Church restrictions prevent Form 3 from being celebrated in a full and active way. General Absolution, as Form 3 is commonly referred to, is not permitted as a normative way of celebrating the sacrament among the faithful at the current time. In conclusion, it would seem that the most viable and meaningful celebration of the sacrament is one that promotes a balance of both the communal and individual dimensions.

Form 2 of the Rite attempts to mesh both the individual and communal dimensions of the sacrament. On the one hand, this form respects the communal nature of sin and reconciliation. It calls the community together to recognize the sinful and broken nature of the community of faith. On the other hand, it also respects the individual nature and responsibility of one's sinfulness and the need to be reconciled. This form allows one individually to express sorrow for his or her sinfulness and seek reconciliation in the visible presence of a community through the mediation of the presiding minister and the community. Thus, Form 2 seems to best satisfy the "nature and effect" of the sacrament called for in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican Council, 1964) as well as "obtain pardon from God and be reconciled with the Church" as charged by the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican Council, 1975, #11). It also seems to best express a balanced understanding of Church as individuals personally responsible for their sinfulness and reconciliation, yet intimately joined with others to form and be a reconciling community.

## **CELEBRATING RECONCILIATION WITH CHILDREN**

In light of what has been said, it becomes obvious that the way to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, particularly with children, would be by properly celebrating Form 2 of the Rite. Unfortunately, most experiences of Form 2 of the Rite are indeed not Form 2 but in reality Form 1 with a prayer or Word service attached to it. Therefore, the first challenge is fully to incorporate a correct celebration of communal Reconciliation. Communal

Reconciliation is exactly that: a communal celebration of reconciliation among the individual participants to God and to each other.

First and foremost would be planning the celebration around one of many appropriate themes that could help focus and connect the celebration of Reconciliation to children. The theme of the celebration should speak to the level of the children participating. Some appropriate themes that could be developed for middle school and junior high children, in addition to the many themes afforded by the liturgical year and seasons in the Church, might be healing, new life, washing clean, darkness to light, and service to one another. For primary grade children, themes such as Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus the Healer, or Jesus loves little children, as well as Lent and Advent themes, are all acceptable. The unique and exciting aspect of this approach is that one can become very creative in planning the ceremony. The theme should not overshadow the purpose of the celebration, which is reconciliation, but should support, give focus, and en flesh the reconciling moment. The theme should then be carried out in the songs, readings, responses, and participatory parts of the ceremony as well.

The ceremony could begin with an opening song; a Word service from Scripture similar to Sunday consisting of a reading, response, and Gospel selection; a reflection or homily; and then an examination of conscience. After the examination of conscience a "general confession of sin" would follow. This should be a communal recognition of sinfulness and sorrowfulness by the gathered community. This part of the service could be enacted through various creative ways of prayer, song, or gesture. It is important, however, that this remain a communal action done by all present. Its purpose is to recognize the communal and social nature of sin and the need for healing. This is similar to the Penitential Rite at Sunday Mass whereby all present communally acknowledge their wrongdoing and their desire for healing and forgiveness from God and each other.

After the general confession of sin would come the "individual confession and absolution" part of the ceremony. This action could be accomplished by having those participating come down the aisles of the church to the ordained minister similar to the way one would approach for Eucharist, anointing, Marriage, or initiation. There would be a brief engagement between the minister and penitent where the confession of sins and absolution would take place. It is significant that this be done in front of the assembled community, once again to show the communal nature of sin and reconciliation. Upon completion of this conversation it would be important for children to mark the forgiveness and renewal of life from God with some sort of tangible activity such as lighting a candle, washing each others' hands, planting a new seed, receiving a flower, or placing a piece of artwork in the sanctuary. For older children, such activities as journalizing, writing a reflection, or meditating on ways to become better Christian people would all be

appropriate. Keep in mind that the purpose of these activities is to reinforce the conversion and growth received through the sacrament. The emphasis of these activities should always center on the conversion and desires toward becoming better Christians. As a result, these activities should reinforce the positive love and mercy of God rather than being of penitential character. Any type of activity of a personal nature (journalizing, reflections) should remain personal with the participant. It would be inappropriate to ask for any type of sharing or engaging in conversations about written matter. The service would then end with the call for conversion and growth in one's life to become more like Christ and the concluding rites that might consist of the Lord's Prayer, closing prayer, petitions, or sign of peace and song.

## CONCLUSION

Some important points must remain in the forefront of our minds and hearts as we engage and celebrate communal Reconciliation. First, reconciliation is a good and healthy process that we engage in throughout our lives and one that we need to engage in with God as well. It needs to begin with children and continue throughout our lives. A good, healthy, positive experience of this sacrament as a child will insure the continuing presence of this sacrament as an adult. Second, as people both young and old, we need to recognize our shortcomings and faults in order to grow and develop into more authentic human beings. Reconciliation can help to accomplish this and allows us to become more like Christ. Third, recognition of sinfulness is not a bad thing. On the contrary, it is good because it allows us to grow in our relationship to God and one another. Fourth, the purpose of sacramental Reconciliation is not to point out to us how bad we are as people, but to engage us on how we might become better. Finally, and perhaps the most challenging point, the way in which we celebrate sacramental Reconciliation must be in community. Communal Reconciliation needs to become the normal operative way of celebrating Reconciliation in the Church. Until this happens the understanding of reconciliation will remain impoverished and the celebration of the sacrament will continue to wane. What better way to start the renewal of the Sacrament of Reconciliation than with our children!

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