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# Attaining Moral Knowledge in the Church and Models of Adult Learning

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*The sacrament of reconciliation has fallen into disuse among Roman Catholics. For the Holy See this signifies a loss of a sense of sin and reconciliation, rightly connecting moral consciousness and faith in salvation with sacramental celebration. Cultural studies underscore the importance of ritual practices as an essential element of religion's ability to deal with the experience of moral evil. However, decline in the frequency of confession may also be complicated by indifference among North American Catholics to current roles and power relations in the Church. In light of moral individualism in society and new ways of envisioning the Church fostered by Vatican II, the challenge of moral education in the Church is complex, but hopeful. Effective religious education, responsive to the situation of contemporary Catholics, will seek innovative approaches that are rooted in the tradition and developed in communities of living faith. The essay suggests that theories of transformative learning and communities of practice offer helpful models for responding to the crisis of sin and reconciliation in Roman Catholicism.*

## Introduction

In *Misericordia Dei* (On Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance), John Paul II (2002) expressed his concern that the Church had drifted from its moral moorings. In an effort to help Catholics deal with the crisis of the sense of sin and the crisis of reconciliation, he set out clear parameters for the practice of the sacrament of reconciliation. Most notably he limited the use of general absolution to extraordinary circumstances, and strictly forbade “any practice which restricts confession to a generic accusation of sin” (§3). Some may see this as a rollback to a purely juridical understanding of confession or reverting to some type of clerical control of the moral behavior and judgments of the laity. However, understood as a disciplinary clarification, this directive has a limited, though considered purpose: to refocus Catholics on the meaning of sin. A fair reading of *Misericordia Dei* requires attention to the earlier *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*

(On Reconciliation and Penance), where John Paul II (1984) articulated a more nuanced approach to the sacrament of reconciliation and a rich appreciation of the subtle complexity of the sinful in human experience.

John Paul II (1984) argued that a sense of sin and desire for repentance is essential to the Christian response of faith in Jesus' proclamation to "repent and believe in the Good News" (Mk 1:15). Acknowledging that the sacramental rite "certainly does not contain all possible ideas of conversion and reconciliation," John Paul II attributes the crisis in the sacrament of penance primarily to "the obscuring of the moral and religious conscience" and to the misunderstanding that one can easily and habitually "obtain forgiveness directly from God" (§28), making the sacramental action itself seem superfluous. Thus, the decline in the practice of individual confession signals a loss of sensitivity by Catholics to the call of Christ, to the reality of sin in the world, and to the full meaning of the Church as the sacrament of the reconciliation of the world to God. In spite of the late pontiff's teachings, there is little evidence that his words have been heard or acted upon.

It is obvious that too much has happened in the Church and in postmodern culture to imagine that simply a disciplinary or doctrinal approach to relearning the meaning of sin would have any significant effect. There seems instead to be a growing disconnect between the traditional understanding of sin, implied in the ritual of individual confession, and the daily experience of evil in our world. John Paul II (1984) was not unaware of this disconnect. Moreover, he warned that an overwhelming sense of social evil, while raising awareness of the social mission of the Church, also "leads more or less unconsciously to the watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin" (§16).

The Magisterium—the authoritative teaching function of the Roman Catholic Church—is an expression of pastoral wisdom that identifies issues that are of central importance to the Catholic faith. It sets challenges for Catholic learning and pastoral practice. The Magisterium does not replace the creativity and responsibility of local churches to find conceptual clarity regarding sin and reconciliation and to use this crisis as an opportunity to discern what belonging to a community of faith and discipleship require. In fact, John Paul II (1984) encouraged local churches to engage in open dialogue about sin and morality as a means of "profound renewal of their own consciences and lives, in the light of the redemption and salvation accomplished by Christ and entrusted to the ministry of his Church" (§25). That kind of dialogue is a true catechesis, whose methods reflect a practical understanding of how adults come to know and, consequently, how to support moral learning. "Authentic dialogue...always [occurs] with profound respect for consciences and with patience and at a step-by-step pace indispensable for

modern conditions” (§25). Effective religious learning will pay attention to the need to find effective ways to stimulate inquiry—a necessary condition, as Lonergan (1967) reminds us, for understanding faith-based knowledge and for taking responsibility for what we know.

Religious teaching and learning do not exist in the abstract. Even particular teachings, aimed at correcting specific misunderstandings and practices, are only understood in a context of the life experience of the people who receive them. Religious and moral knowledge is purposeful, emanating in actions that embody faith, responses appropriate to the Gospel, goals to be attained, and hopes to be sustained that open the knower to the grace of salvation.

The effectiveness of learning that is situated in life depends on a substratum of functional and effective communication within the Church—a dialogical or communicative infrastructure that, to a great extent, is missing. In the face of the complexity and pervasiveness of evil in the world, ordinary Catholics react with frustration and a heightened sense of powerlessness. The Christian faithful need settings and opportunities where they can process what they are experiencing, arrive at a clearer moral understanding of what is going on, and feel empowered to respond in a way that contributes to their own moral integrity. Without those learning opportunities, moral consciousness among Church members can easily become dissipated. Catholics need to find a unifying voice among themselves and a place of dialogue, where their concerns can be heard and responded to by the hierarchy (O’Brien, 2003). Indeed, John Paul II (1995) saw dialogue as a kind of “examination of conscience” (§34), through which the Church becomes aware, not only of the sinfulness of its members, but also of the sinful structures existing in the Church itself.

Teaching that is primarily dogmatic and removed from the experience of the potential learners may make some beliefs and rules clearer, but it is not sufficient. The Magisterium is not a teaching method, in the sense of current learning theory. Simply repeating or even explaining John Paul II’s words does not bring about the desired transformation of understanding and practice that is essential to authentic discipleship and Christian practice. This is particularly true when the potential learners are Catholics who have moved away, not only from the confessional model of reconciliation, but from the notion of the moral authority of the Church.

John Paul II identified a legitimate concern. A shared moral sense is essential to any religion that wants to have an impact on the world. This is more urgent when the Church sees itself as a sacrament and instrument of the salvation of the world (Vatican Council II, 1965). While the crisis of sin and reconciliation is real, it is considerably more complex than a crisis of

understanding and practice. The situation of the Church today reflects a crisis of moral authority and a resistance to power relationships implicit in the ritual of confession. Religious educators are charged with developing and implementing programs that respond to the Church's need to regain its moral consciousness and sacramental efficacy. Their task is to be attentive to the Church's authoritative teachings, while finding ways to discover and respond to the moral crisis as experienced by the laity. It requires sensitivity, wisdom, and vision that draw on the insights from the human sciences, while remaining faithful to Scripture and the living tradition of the Catholic Church.

### **The Crisis of Moral Authority and Resistance to Ritual**

One reason for the decline of individual confession is that Catholics experience moral evil as something far greater than their own personal sins. The scandal of pedophile priests, for example, was disheartening and demoralizing and made us aware of the existence of sin as a larger reality within which we live. The revelation of cover-ups on the part of several bishops was more difficult to comprehend. The Catholic laity needed a place to express their moral outrage. Private confession did not provide the ritual help to regain moral equilibrium or a forum where they could share their pain. When that moral anguish of Catholics is intensified by their leaders' apparent preference for control and institutional solidarity, it becomes difficult to accept even the highest papal utterances on morality or to submit to a rite of confession administered by a clergy-become-suspect.

It would be shortsighted, however, to attribute the crisis of the sacrament of penance to the particular failures of a few bishops and priests. In order to assess the tasks involved in developing a Gospel-based and pastorally effective sense of sin and repentance, and in rediscovering the sacramental role in shaping moral knowledge in the Church, religious educators need to grasp this new situation in its broader context.

### ***Moral Drift***

John Paul II's concern over the declining sense of sin and reconciliation in the Church was not an accusation. He was not suggesting that Catholics are living lives more sinful than in the past. Instead, John Paul II (1984) raised the issue of the dulling of conscience, of the awareness of one's own sinfulness, and the inability to relate one's personal sinfulness to the "division and rupture" in society (§18). The massive scale of social disorder, from political corruption to terrorism, from criminal violence to continued racism, feeds a growing sense of powerlessness in the face of moral evil. This, in turn, leads to an abdication

of responsibility for that “abuse of our own freedom,” which “in the light of faith, we call...sin” (§2). Hurt and division penetrate also into the life of the Church, as the stories of priestly betrayal and cover-ups reveal.

Moreover, life in a mass-mediated, postmodern culture exerts a defining influence on how Catholics view themselves, their Church, and morality. Consciousness of other cultures; other ethnic, religious, and moral worlds; and other value systems and ways of doing things spawns moral relativism and feeds uncertainty and distrust of any single authoritative teaching or normative institution (Vattimo, 1992). As a result many Catholics experience a moral homelessness and try to make do with a patchwork of religious and ethical truisms that constitute their own way of coping with a situation of evil in the world that has become unmanageable (Schweitzer, 2004).

Catholics find themselves caught “between the Christian [moral and sacramental] tradition and contemporary experience” (Schweitzer, 2004, p. 122). Certainly, since the late 1960s, many Catholics have moved from a stance of dissent on official, authoritative teachings of their Church to one of ignoring them (D’Antonio, 1994). Also, the practice of individual confession has moved “more and more to the margins of Catholic ritual life” (Favazza, 1998, p. 210). Catholics, who no longer see the benefit of exposing their moral lives to the judgment of a priest, also experience a lessening of faith in the Church’s moral leadership. This gap between Catholics and the Church’s authoritative moral teaching is, according to some observers, “at the heart of the crisis in contemporary Catholicism” (Hoose, 2002, p. 108).

In the absence of compelling moral authority, individual Catholics are handed over to the authority of their own conscience. However, many are finding that the world is too complex to comprehend and they are not up to grasping the multilayered dimensions of human responsibility. When moral knowledge and responsibility are left solely to the discretion of the individual, something essential to Catholic life is lost (Tanner, 1997).

D’Antonio (1994) documents an increasing number of Catholics who treat the moral authority of the Church as irrelevant and want autonomy in deciding what is right and wrong. D’Antonio suggests there is a growing consensus toward an alternate moral view at the grassroots level of the Church, ready to discover “the truth about morals...through experience, and through shared decision-making” (p. 380). While it remains to be seen whether such optimism is warranted, this research identifies a critical area where the Church’s educational ministry can be proactive.

### ***Rituals and Moral Understanding***

Cultural studies highlight two points relevant to understanding the present situation in the Church. First, rituals are necessary for any religion to deal credibly and effectively with the problem of evil. Second, rituals are expressive and performative practices that engage the religious and moral imagination, facilitating new understanding of evil and morality in the light of faith (Carley, 2005). When John Paul II spoke of the loss of the sense of sin and of the rituals of reconciliation as a serious crisis in the Church, his statement reflected a basic anthropological insight—the connection between worldview and ethos is essential to the identity and function of religion. The vitality of religion in human societies is directly dependent on its ability to mobilize its adherents in meaningful and effective responses to moral evil. In the face of behaviors and events that become disorienting religious dilemmas, people's beliefs about how the world is and the nature of ultimate reality are challenged. Religious adherents then must learn how to reinterpret their beliefs in new circumstances and to respond to the moral evil appropriately. This kind of transformation—cognitive and emotional—occurs through ritual performance and symbolic actions that not only make clear the nature of immorality, but also teach people what to do about it. Ritual is a learning experience rooted in a situation that makes learning both relevant and necessary.

Geertz (1973) describes religion as a system of symbols through which men and women gain a confident sense of the general order of existence. They do this with such a degree of factuality that the symbols become the source of “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” in believers (p. 90). Symbols facilitate a religious understanding of the world and teach how to deal with the myriad events and experiences that come into conflict with the beliefs and morals of the community.

When the irrationality of injustice and intolerability of suffering that is part of everyday life stretches people's ability to comprehend or endure, both the structure of their belief and the reality of their world are threatened. Rituals are performed at critical times to reactivate the interpretive force of the symbols and to restore a harmony between belief and experience. In this way, religion supports a community's confidence in its ability to make sound moral judgments. When religion no longer does this, it risks pushing the community toward moral chaos. Ritual thus serves to integrate a religion's interpretive worldview and the tone, character, and quality of its adherents' lives. In this perspective, religion and the privatization of morality are not compatible.

Moral norms derive their authority from the religious worldview and are reinforced and reinterpreted through rituals that maintain a powerful,

pervasive emotive confidence in that ultimate understanding of reality. Moral knowledge is not purely rational, but involves emotional dimensions of meaning. When events or situations occur that place the believed worldview in doubt,

the religious response...is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience. (Geertz, 1973, p. 108)

Turner's (1969) studies of African tribes show how a community's ability to understand and respond to evil is constitutive of its religious identity and ethical resilience. Moral evil is to be grasped more as a religious paradox that is harmful to the good of the community than as the moral lapse of an individual. Experiencing events and actions that threaten the common good raises fears and concerns within the whole community. Whatever the origin of the threat (nature, departed spirits, or human malevolence), religious rituals teach people and guide their response. Moral evil is something that happens to and is the charge of the entire community. Symbols and their efficacious performance originate in and are enforced collectively. Through rituals the group regains its sense of identity, restores its values, and affirms the truths that protect right relations among its members and with the larger world.

Geertz (1973) and Turner (1969) demonstrate the role of ritual in constructing practical moral knowledge and the link between ritual and the interpretation of human experience. The sacrament of reconciliation, however, does more than engage the participants in an interpretive process. Through the reconciling action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, penance and reconciliation are an experience in faith not only of personal forgiveness, but also of God's reconciling of the world to Himself. If ritual efficacy in general is restorative of moral and social order, then sacramental forms of reconciliation—practiced in and shared by the local community—are essential to the vitality of the Church. They are critical to that ongoing learning on the local level necessary for the local church to realize its potential and call to be a visible sacrament of the redemption of the world.

### ***The Crisis of Ritual and Community Cohesion***

The so-called crisis of sin and reconciliation may, at a deeper level, be a sign of a silent, but seismic shift in how Catholics view power and react to control in the Church. Following Douglas (1982), Favazza (1998) suggests that



rituals are most effective where there is strong group identity and tight social control. Traditionally, Catholics have viewed the sacraments as the means of salvation. Confession, in particular, supported the social power of the clergy in the Church. The confession of sin as the transgression of “firmly established ideological and behavioral norms...reestablished the boundaries of identity [and] the control of the hierarchical system” (p. 213). Absolution and access to the Eucharist depended on the judgment of the priest. From this perspective, it is no wonder that Catholics flocked to confession, but also that rituals could be seen as “strategies of control” (p. 231).

Drawing on the insights of anthropologist Bell (1992), Favazza (1998) adds that rituals may also be viewed as actions empowering the “ritual specialists” (p. 217), placing them clearly in control of the means of salvation. When controllers of ritual attribute their authority over the rites to divine ordination, they risk placing their ecclesiastical role out of the reach of the faithful.

The rigidly defined and hierarchically controlled social order in the Church has dissipated since Vatican II. The tight social cohesion that immigrant Catholics depended on to survive is no longer needed. The rule-driven uniformity of Catholic practice has been abandoned. In this context, it is not surprising that a sacramental ritual at the heart of a now outdated Catholic identity would slip to the fringe of Catholic observance. According to Favazza (1998), Catholics in discarding individual confession are rejecting the older power relations in the Church. They no longer accept that priests or bishops have authority over their lives. To maintain the traditional confession practice would tacitly assent to the old order. Favazza goes so far as to suggest that the decline in confession is a (dis)use of ritual to renegotiate relationships of power within the Church.

If the decline in the sacrament of confession is an indicator of the people’s cry for a Church that is more helpful to them in navigating their faith in unsettling and unprecedented historical, social, and cultural circumstances, then there is something more complex than a crisis of sin and reconciliation at work. An understanding of the crucial role played by symbol and ritual in maintaining and transmitting religion should remind us that the objectives of restoring a sense of sin and reconciliation in the Church will not be achieved by instructing and directing Catholics to start going to confession again. In fact, the sense of sin and reconciliation that seems to be missing in Catholicism cannot be regained apart from developing in the believing community some shared sense of the disturbance sin brings to the social, religious order and the disorientation that its unquestioned presence causes in relation to the worldview at the core of Christian faith.

The practical loss of the sacrament of penance leaves the Church without the kind of ritual through which Catholics can come to understand sin and learn how to respond to the presence of evil in the world and within their own faith-community. Moreover, without communal rites of reconciliation, the individual lacks an essential means of faith development and of affirming his or her belonging to a believing community. A growing indifference to the Church's moral teaching authority cuts Catholics off from their traditional source of moral knowledge and offers no replacement.

One of the primary goals of restoring individual confession is to help the believer regain an understanding of sin and penance. The expectation of such an outcome places unwarranted confidence in the educational capacity of private confession, because it bypasses the root problem: the loss of a community understanding of sin and the communal ability to distinguish between good and evil and to discern the appropriate response. Institutional structures that promote compliance overpower communal and transformative opportunities for learning. An authoritarian approach to Church morality does not begin to address the problem it raises. Instead, by removing the process of moral knowledge and responsibility from the faith communities, through experience and reflection good and evil can be socially understood, values that are central to the Church's identity and vitality are put at risk. Institutional symbols squeeze out communal and transformative ones.

### **The Broader Context of Change**

In order to appreciate the depth of the situation facing religious educators, it is necessary to move the discussion to the cultural situation of the Church in North America. A subjective approach to conscience, a relativistic understanding of moral evil, and an insistence on individual rights coupled with an illusion of innocence make it indispensable for religious educators to design what the International Council for Catechesis (1990) describes as "models and itineraries" (§65) that open the way to moral dialogue and shared moral knowledge, and help answer the question: How are we responsible for a moral chaos that seems so far out of our control?

#### ***A Culture of Moral Individualism***

The pluralism and diversity of society is mirrored in the Church. In civil society people insist on less authority and governance in favor of more autonomy in the form of economic freedom, political freedom, and most recently moral freedom. The construal of moral freedom as a civil right underscores both the difficulty of attaining moral consensus and the necessity of creating moral

dialogue. Because the issue of moral authority/moral freedom is not unique to the Roman Catholic Church, it should not be addressed exclusively on the basis of Church discipline or of ecclesiastical authority. Indeed, to respond to the problem from such a perspective ignores the social and cultural context that it is trying to influence.

Walzer (1991) correlates the “growing [moral] disorganization of American society” with the disappearance “of lively, engaged, and effective men and women—where the honour of ‘action’ belongs to the many and not to the few” (p. 304). Moreover, there is little chance that its citizens could again become a single community of patriots and citizens committed to a basic set of public values, because

the communitarian life is not the real life of many people in the modern world. This is so in two senses. First, though the power of the democratic state has grown enormously...the rule of the demos is in significant ways illusory.... Second, despite the single-mindedness of the republican ideology, politics rarely engages the full attention of the citizens who are supposed to be its chief protagonists. (p. 294)

In other words, without an infrastructure for effective social dialogue, the question of public morals and values cannot be resolved, nor can it be addressed.

Wolfe (2001) also finds a connection between the lack of common moral cause and the emergence of moral freedom as a civil liberty. A fierce attachment to the principle that “individuals should determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life” (p. 195) describes the defining virtue of the moral philosophy of Americans. The “right course of action” (p. 195) is based on what people think will meet their individual needs. Without a constructive, communally binding set of common moral ideals or moral substratum, the right to dissent replaces social cohesion. “Society becomes possible only to the degree to which the ‘no’ that the conscience speaks to the individual becomes generalized to society as a whole” (p. 205).

The inherent problems of civil order and moral freedom are captured by the observation that “the individual is freed to build his own philosophy and values, his own life style, and his own culture” without regard for tradition or context (Reich, 1995, p. 241). The polarization of civic loyalty and individual freedom leaves a legacy that, in Wolfe’s (2001) judgment, “confuses two different phenomena. One is the freedom to choose how to live. The other is the freedom to consider oneself unbound by rules” (p. 224).

### *Is There an Alternative?*

Wolfe (2001) contends that public opinion does not easily recognize the problems that arise when the freedom to choose implies freedom from any socially unifying moral standard. A high esteem for moral freedom and “a deeply held populist suspicion of authority” (p. 226) compound the difficulty. Calls to return to the “religious and civil traditions that shaped America’s founding and provided the inspiration for great leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.” (p. 221) lack the power to reconstruct a shared moral consciousness. The difficulty of creating a productive moral dialogue in such a climate is formidable. The problem, however, reveals the solution. Facilitating moral discourse is and, in Wolfe’s judgment, must be thought of “as a challenge to be met rather than as a condition to be cured” (p. 230). Any hope of constructing a shared moral knowledge in society necessarily will involve finding effective ways through which its participants “play a role in creating the morality by which they will be guided” (p. 226).

However, the community’s ability to identify collective goals and interpret certain kinds of behaviors as virtuous is dependent on its ability to move away from what Etzioni (1996) calls a moral order based on “the aggregation of individual preferences” (p. 4). Moral knowledge and cohesiveness in societies lies in a precarious balance between autonomy and authority. Drucker (1993) finds in the metaphor of “knowledge society” (p. 6) a basis for rethinking the problem. If “traditional communities no longer have much integrating power [and] they cannot survive the mobility which knowledge confers on the individual” (p. 94), then new communitarian/communicative forms are necessary to prevent moral meltdown. This is evident in corporate life, where the inability of persons to transfer their own personal sense of morality to the business world and corporate society leaves companies vulnerable to disloyalty and bad ethics and the public open to harm (Bird, 1996). Working from the knowledge society paradigm, international corporations are finding they benefit from local, historical knowledge when they respect the ability and right of local groups to identify their own task, to act autonomously, to be creative, and to teach what they learn (Drucker, 1993). This notion of a knowledge society offers some promise of achievable change in the form of the development of communities of moral knowledge.

As the Church endeavors to regain a credible sense of sin and reconciliation, it acts in a milieu resistant to such apparent centralization or universalizing of moral knowledge. It is the task and challenge of adult religious education to create contexts and opportunities for the kind of discourse that

moves its participants out of the meaning systems in which moral isolation and individual preferences appear to be the last expression of freedom.

### **The Significance of the Second Vatican Council's Vision of the Church**

The present crisis of authority in the Church—particularly in regard to the Church's moral magisterium—has been latent since the early days of modernism. What at first sight might seem like a decisive, though quiet rejection of Catholic morality can be attributed to, but not blamed on, the Second Vatican Council.

The Councils' program of reform emerged in the process of the Council itself. The vision and commitment of bishops from around the world defined responsibility for the Church. As they discerned the purpose and possibility of the Council in the debates, the bishops sent back prepared drafts, found new starting points for exploration, and revised their agenda. In Vatican II, the Church began to act as the world church, called to live in a secular and pluralistic society, where it carries out its mission and makes itself present in cultures as diverse as the peoples of the world (Rahner, 1981b). The Church cannot exist apart from the world, protected by infallible leadership and a closed system of sacraments. Instead, the world is seen as the destiny of the Church. The Church embraces the world as it is, as the only world it knows (Rahner, 1972).

An identity shift of such proportions greatly disturbs familiar habits of thought and requires new approaches to making meaning and discerning values. It calls for transformations—unanticipated and unplanned for—in how the Church thinks about power and authority, how it makes its decisions; in a word: how it governs itself.

Achieving the Council's vision of the Church depends on Catholics embarking on a passage driven by a free and personal commitment, won in the struggle to come to terms with their faith in a pluralistic milieu. Articulating what this faith means for Christian moral practice requires creativity in theological understanding. Diversity becomes inevitable. The Church becomes plural, many churches, a community of communities—local, specific, and contingent. Their status as churches depends less on the ecclesiastical institution and its authority and more on their ability to constitute themselves again and again through faith and practice, historically discerned and realized as grace. These local churches accept as their own the responsibility and authority to be a tangible sign of the world's salvation. It is the guarantee—concrete and accessible in the world—of the victory of Jesus, the ultimate meaning and the absolute future of the world (Rahner, 1981a).

This notion of the Church as sign of this eschatological salvation is a pivotal concept that brings together the challenge of decentralizing authority in the institutional Church (and the urgency with which the laity must take responsibility for this to occur) and the critical issue of moral knowledge. To articulate a meaningful sense of sin and hope in the world, there is need for local, accessible communities to interpret and engage the Church's solidarity with the "joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time" (Vatican Council II, 1965, §1). A crisis of sin and reconciliation in the Church is, from this perspective, a symptom of the unforeseen difficulty of moving away from a natural law view of the Church and its authority to one of engagement with history and society. It is not simply the doctrinal understanding of sin that eludes the grasp of many Catholics; it is the interpretive horizon itself that leaves them baffled.

Adult religious education programs that focus on content and concepts risk getting stuck inside the old paradigms. Content approaches alone lack the capacity to bring about the transformation in knowledge they desire, because they are not suited for facilitating the profound changes involved in the new self-consciousness required in individual Catholics and the local communities where they belong.

### **Adult Learning Theory: Gaining and Using Moral Knowledge**

The Catholic Church, at least in North America, is in danger of losing touch with the ritual means of activating the symbols and narratives integral to its ability to speak intelligently about human morality and common purpose. A liberal approach that tries to reconcile an endless stream of divergent ethical opinions with each other and the moral tradition of Catholicism feeds into the moral subjectivism and relativism characteristic of Western culture. A return to authoritarian leadership is not an option. The notion of a dynamic, emergent Church makes it clear that the Catholic faithful must see their tradition in terms of their own lives and their communities if they are to hope to resolve the crisis of moral meaning (Kinast, 1999). This calls for a new learning paradigm that is open to the complexity and strength of evil in the world, the diversity of Christian practice, and the unifying movement of belief in redemption—a paradigm that can support Christians in their journey into an undisclosed future requiring the imagination and creative rationality that is born of dialogue (Magill, 1991, 1992).

Moral knowledge is most adequately understood as historical knowledge. This is how the meaning of sin and salvation is disclosed in the biblical narratives, where virtue and vice, fidelity and sin, alienation and reconciliation are

discovered in the confusion, hardship, and tragedy of human experience. In Scripture, moral knowledge is construed not as a doctrine, but as a faith-filled response to the unpredictable unfolding of events in “the drama of salvation” (Schwager, 1999, p. 146). Moral knowledge is not “pure knowledge detached from any particular kind of being” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 314) because through it, we come to know ourselves as moral agents and recognize individual and collective human responsibility. The purpose of moral knowledge is, thus, “to govern [human] action;” it is “concerned with what is not always the same but can also be different” (p. 314).

Religious educators, pastoral ministers, and leaders in Catholic education face a formidable task. It cannot be met all at once, but must be responded to incrementally. There are two critical issues to attend to: The first is the need of the Church to build communities of faith, where moral consciousness and commitment can develop and make good the Church’s potential to be the sacrament of salvation of the world (Vatican Council II, 1965). A renewed sense of sin and of the symbols of reconciliation are integral to that task. Second, the willingness of the Catholic faithful to engage in learning that is essential to such a transformation must be adequately weighed. This kind of learning implies the transformation of people and of communities. While it represents a vital need of the universal Church, the institution cannot drive the process or dictate the agenda. In this regard, religious education must take seriously the potential of knowledge-based communities as models for moral learning.

### **Moral Knowledge and Transformative Learning**

In developing workable models for adult learning, religious educators can build on the insights of transformative learning theory. Mezirow (1981, 1991) focuses on the process of perspective transformation in relation to the life experience of adult learners. Perspective or meaning scheme indicates the structure of beliefs, attitudes, and values that constitute our habits of perception—the habitual way of interpreting and evaluating that limits our ability to see and understand what is happening. Transformative learning aims at changing inhibiting cognitive-social reactive patterns, and finding new ways “to control our experience rather than be controlled by it” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 2). Changes in how we approach life occur through a transformational process that arises out of experience, are driven by critical thinking, and lead to the construction of a more adequate interpretive horizon.

While criticism of Mezirow’s theory indicates that it is neither normative nor adequate for structuring and facilitating adult learning experiences (Taylor, 1997), the discussion underscores the need to conceptualize the

process of perspective transformation and attend to its dynamics when developing learning programs that involve the learner with her/his own systems of belief and meaning. Turning to local communities to relearn and teach the meaning of sin, to settle on what reconciliation involves in the particularity of their situation, and to rediscover the sacramental means of expressing relevant ways of Christian discipleship, moves the focus of learning from doctrine and application to the lives of the participants and their commitment to making sense out of their experience in faith.

Transformative learning begins with a disorienting dilemma, some sort of crisis that throws one's habitual ways of thought and response into question. Each day all of us experience many reminders of the sin of the world. War and terrorism, the greed of corporate fraud, the betrayal of insider trading, the gratuitous suffering and death in third world countries, the increasing force and arbitrariness of crime—all of these are more than information we receive daily from the media. They are realities that shake our sense of moral confidence and belief in a moral order. In the Catholic context, the *de facto* neglect of the sacrament of reconciliation deprives the community of a shared center for experiencing the vision and the strength to become a counterforce to the evil that indirectly or directly disrupts our lives. Without confidence in the Church's leaders to interpret the moral dimensions of the situation, and lacking the sacramental rites that reconcile and empower the community, many Catholics experience not a sudden, but a cumulative disorienting dilemma from which new learning can proceed.

A learning process that can correlate evil in the world and the suffering and pain of people must be able to examine the assumptions that separate morality into private and public spheres, which perpetuate the alienation of faith and life and relegate rituals of reconciliation to individual confession. Critical thinking can facilitate insight into the inadequacy of the traditional and often already rejected faith schemes, but is often met with strong emotional resistance and denial. More than cognitive conflicts, these reactions underscore the spiritual dimensions of learning. In this phase, the trans-rational power of Scripture, the role of the emotions in disclosing truth, and confidence in the imagination as a vehicle of creative perspective-change are of special importance in adult learning that is based in and motivated by faith (Dirkx, 1997).

Sharing stories and concerns leads to a sense of reality, supplies a foundation on which to respond, and contributes toward placing experience at the core of learning and making participants responsible for advancing the critical process. They thus come to recognize and confess their own knowledge of sin, experienced as attitudes, behaviors, dispositions, and actions at variance with Catholic beliefs. At the same time, they come to recognize and



understand the values and virtues necessary for the Church to be a sign of salvation in the world. When the learners come to know what repentance and reconciliation entail, they are in a position to rediscover the ritual expressions that can activate the symbols of faith and their transformative power. The theory of transformative learning yields insights into how this process can be facilitated and supported by religious educators.

### ***Transformative Learning and Communities of Practice***

Finding ways to facilitate the practical transformation of the process of moral knowing in the Church from a command-obey structure to one of communitarian practice has proven notoriously problematic. Broad descriptions of the Church as a “community of moral discourse” (Curran, 1993, p. 46) or as a “community of interpretation” that publicly debates issues of justice and conceptions of goodness (Fiorenza, 1992, p. 66), refer more to the Church as a whole, than to local communities. While providing a theological justification for the possibility and necessity of moral dialogue among believers, they fail to offer any practical pedagogy for structuring the dialogue and using it to create authentic and compelling moral consciousness in the local community.

Adult learning groups that talk about Christian moral practice, the meaning of sin, and the aims of ritual reconciliation require learning models that facilitate both personal and shared transformation. This is learning that occurs within a mixed context of local church and the larger cultural milieu. In developing moral knowledge, informed by Christian faith, learners take responsibility for saying what it means to be a moral Christian: coming to understand human situations and actions as moral or immoral, confronting internal disagreements, and learning to live with differences without losing their sense of wholeness. At the same time, they are claiming local autonomy, without jettisoning the claims of central authority—creating the conditions for dialogue between the less formal cutting edge of the Church and the administrative center, which acts as custodian of the deposit of the faith. Local autonomy and the sense of the universality of the Church are both necessary. Neither model can replace the other. The relationship of the two is maintained in tensive balance. As Turner (1969) observes, “behavior in accordance with one model tends to ‘drift away’ from behavior in terms of the other” (p. 131). In order for each of these modalities to be strong and healthy, effective and mutual communication and interaction is required.

This kind of transformative process of discernment needs a practical venue and a pedagogically effective structure for learning in community and creating local knowledge that moves and animates believers to live a

committed Christian moral life. Wenger and Snyder (2000) describe the process of community learning as one of forming a community of practice. In a community of practice, learning is situated, that is, the actual experience of the participants and their interpersonal relationships are integral to knowledge construction. The interaction of commitment and of sharing experiences and knowledge in an open and hopeful manner becomes the medium of learning, fostering new insights and ways of understanding. Where the context of learning is a shared concern, the knowledge produced becomes the living knowledge and shared wisdom of that community, reflective of the relationships forged and relevant not only to each participant, but to the community as a whole. Shared learning is a social practice, occurring within “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

Communities of practice build the capacity of an organization to become better at what it does. While the terminology comes from the business sector, the notion of community of practice is transferable to other forms of learning. In *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Palmer (1998) describes learning as participation in a community of truth, where participants are joined by the “grace of great things” (p. 106). Gathered as both learners and teachers, in disagreement and dialogue, we come to know the reality that draws us together through participative knowledge—awareness of ourselves as participants, in community with others, of the human realities that claim our attention. Communities of practice, or of truth, are thus self-forming, self-motivating, and—when the time arrives—self-disbanding. They construct knowledge by meeting, spending time together, and sharing information, insight, and advice. The knowledge they generate they also accumulate. They share a process and purpose that forms ties and “over time they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5).

Communities in which Christians wrestle with issues of sin and reconciliation and the meaning of Christian discipleship in their world are more than discussion clubs. They are effective agents of change in relation both to those who participate and the larger organizations—parishes, schools, Catholic agencies—of which they are part. They are not primarily about the distribution of power or restructuring roles and functions within the ecclesiastical organization, yet they can “fundamentally [transform] the landscape of an organization” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 20).

Religious educators wishing to build on the promise of communities of practice will pay attention to their structural elements: domain, community,

and practice. Domain refers to the reason why people are meeting and their area of concern. In our case, the question of following the Gospel, of being church in the world today is the commitment that “inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning, and gives meaning to their actions” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28). Community creates the social fabric of change, the social capital fostered by the interaction, the continuity, the reciprocity among members, and the values experienced. Practice specifies the knowledge that is developed, shared, and maintained by the community as well as a set of socially defined ways of learning.

A local community—a parish, a school, or agency staff—that commits to engage in developing an authentic Christian moral consciousness discovers that it is a gathering of people with differing, sometimes opposing approaches to interpreting and responding to moral evil. A process of group formation that respects and builds on diversity while respecting the mystery and doctrine of Christian faith is essential to building true learning communities. Here we discover the transformative power of learning as the participants move through a process of confrontation, searching, imagination, openness, and shared understanding of the mystery of sin and reconciliation that revitalizes faith and strengthens commitment (Loder, 1981). Loder offers a model that provides scaffolding for both creative community and transformative learning not unlike Mezirow’s, but with an explicit faith dimension.

The concept of community of practice provides adult learners and religious educators with a model for designing local learning opportunities for schools, parishes, and Catholic organizations that provide a venue and environment for transformative learning. This model allows for movement within the learners and within the group, in which the curious or shy have an equal role to play with the convinced and outspoken, learning not a curriculum, but how to join the discussion, eventually sharing in and contributing to the knowledge that makes up the shared moral consciousness of a particular local faith community.

Learning opportunities based on the insights of both transformative learning and communities of practice build on the participants’ faith commitments and are not the result of an external mandate. Although they may be facilitated at first, leadership emerges from within the community. Along with developing “a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, languages, stories, and documents that community members share” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 29), the members may develop a vocational self-consciousness—an understanding of the community as responsible for Christ’s presence in the world through the Church—that is integral to retaining their identity and purpose. Through adult education initiatives aimed at moral knowledge and based on

the principles of transformative learning and communities of practice, participants learn how to deal with the issues in human society that challenge their Christian identity and force them to rethink their central symbols, such as the Kingdom of God. Such experience-based learning will generate socially defined ways of doing things; a set of common approaches and shared values that give particular and local content to what it means to be Church.

### **Conclusion**

Roman Catholicism is changing. At the same time, the power and complexity of evil in the world is profoundly threatening our traditional construal of the moral order. Forms of transformative and shared learning belong to the essential means of addressing the crisis of the sense of sin both in Western culture and the Church. The prevailing image of the Church remains legalistic and authoritarian, its morality found in a strict ethical system interpreted by an overpowering Magisterium and curial apparatus. However, more and more Catholics consider themselves not bound by what they see as imposed norms and behaviors, whose transgression requires confession and ritual absolution. As a result, contact between Catholics and their religious symbols is obscured to the point that “the institutional Church, rather than the Risen Christ, [becomes] the over-arching symbol” of morality (Muldoon & Veltri, 1995, p. 36). Approaches embedded in communities of practice and transformative learning theory allow religious educators to deal with the necessary connection between the problem of moral knowledge and the question of discipleship, as well as the unraveling of a once unquestioned structure of roles and relations in the Church.

Catholics want to move away from a one-sided view of authority and to discover a new vision of the Church. Local religious education initiatives can make a significant contribution to resolving the crisis of sin and reconciliation in the Church. It is imperative that Catholics not get preoccupied with the apparent impasse caused by the perceived autocratic structure of official power. Catholics today need to be creative in finding ways to take responsibility for the Church. Following the direction of John Paul II (1984), for the Church “to actively engage in seeking its own internal [moral] communion” (§25), Catholics can engage in a catechesis, without handing over all responsibility for the Church to its officeholders and hierarchical institutions or ignoring the authentic authority of the tradition of faith and the universal community of believers that the pope and bishops uphold.

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