

The Sacrament of Penance: a Liturgical Event¹

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Introduction

The task of this essay is twofold. The first is to illustrate a fundamental shift in the sacrament of penance as a result of the liturgical reform of Vatican II. Prior to the reform, the sacrament was celebrated as a private event between the penitent and priest-confessor alone. There were, of course, extraordinary occasions when a more general absolution would be given to many, but these would be emergency situations, as before a military battle or a transportation disaster. Apart from these, however, the normal mode of celebration involved just two people, the sinner and the priest or bishop who were authorized to give absolution in the name of Christ.

In the wake of reform, the sacrament has been restored as a liturgical action of the Church with all the significance that such a restoration implies.² Penance was included, if only modestly, in Chapter 3 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (SC) as a liturgical event whose rite and formulas are to be revised.³ The reformed rites themselves have a decidedly liturgical structure: a greeting and opening prayer; readings from scripture and homily or pastoral advice that exhort to conversion and repentance; confession and absolution that lead to a prayer of thanksgiving. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), after noting a variety of forms given in the *Order of Penance* (OP), insists that “regardless of its manner of celebration the sacrament of

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²With regard to the sacrament of penance, two principles in particular need to be kept in mind, in spite of the current discipline of Church order: first, that in all liturgy there are other ministers beside the priest-presider, who have their own specific liturgical ministry or who serve as assistants to others (SC, 28-29); and second, that where a ritual is given that involves full and active participation of all the faithful, that ritual is to be preferred to one which is private or quasi-private (SC, 27).

³“The rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament” (SC, 72).

penance is always, by its very nature, a liturgical action, and therefore an ecclesial and public action.”⁴

This shift to penance as a liturgical action invites the second task. One can not impose a new ritual for celebration in the Church without raising the further question of catechesis. How shall one engage this new ritual form? SC says of penance, as it says of all sacraments, that its purpose is to “sanctify men and women, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God” (SC, 59). It mentions further that the very signs of the sacrament, in this case conversion, confession, absolution, penance and thanksgiving, are there to instruct us, to nourish and strengthen our faith, and themselves to lead us to worship God and to practice charity (ibid).

It can never be enough simply to take the catechesis developed for the pre-reform private sacramental event and expect it to serve the post-conciliar *Order of Penance*. Issues such as the nature of God and of Jesus Christ, and especially of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation, need to be explored anew. The fruit of such exploration, moreover, must become part of the every-day life of Catholic Christians if the liturgical reform of penance is to succeed.

The first part of this essay will explore the shift from private penance to penance as a liturgical act. This will look chiefly at the roles of penitent, priest-confessor and liturgical assembly. How were these understood in the pre-reform rite, and how in the post-conciliar *Order of Penance*? The second part will suggest a brief catechesis for the reformed *Order of Penance* by presenting an understanding of the mercy of God, the friendship of Christ, and the nature of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Part I: Restoring Penance as a Liturgical Act

There are two ways in which the *Order of Penance* might be imagined in light of its more recent past. The first is to see the new ritual in complete continuity with the pre-reform celebration of the sacrament. There are some interesting pieces added, such as the use of scripture and the element of thanksgiving at the end, but when all is said and done, the sacrament continues as it had in the past. With this element of continuity

⁴*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Eng. ed., USCC, 1994; Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 1994), 1482, citing SC, 26-27.

in mind, OP would still be considered an event between priest and penitent. It would still focus on the conversion of the individual and the summons of God to repentance and forgiveness.

The second way to see OP is in light of the *Constitution on the Liturgy* as a liturgical act of the Church. In this case, a simple focus on penitent and priest is hardly enough. SC reminds us that “liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church.... Liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it...” (SC,26). In any liturgical act, it is the entire Church, and specifically this local Church that is gathered as a liturgical assembly, even if it be just the penitent and priest alone, that both enacts the sacrament and is affected by it. It is the whole Church that is summoned to repentance and forgiveness, and the whole Church which is called to reconciliation. The penitent enters into the forgiveness that has been given to the Church, and receives once again that same forgiveness which Christ has won for all.

Because the most recent history of the pre-reformed sacrament was rooted in the 7th century Irish Church,⁵ it is inevitable that the long-standing tradition of private penance would incline people to see continuity rather than discontinuity in the *Order of Penance*. The introductory notes place strong emphasis on the personal call to conversion and forgiveness. They also insist, as does the later CCC, that the ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves to God and to the Church is by “individual, integral confession and absolution.”⁶ Nonetheless, we must avoid putting new wine into old wine skins. The introduction also speaks of the sacrament as an event in which “the Church proclaims its faith, gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ has made us free, and offers its life as a spiritual sacrifice in praise of God’s glory.”⁷ This kind of language is quite foreign to the pre-conciliar private form.

⁵CCC notes: “From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest.... It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practiced down to our day” (1447).

⁶*Order of Penance*, 31; CCC, 1484.

⁷Introduction, OP, 7b.

This first part can best be done as a study in contrasts. We want to preserve what was essential to the sacrament, and what must always be continuous throughout the varied history of its celebration. Yet we must also address the discontinuity that comes from restoring the sacrament as a liturgical act, a discontinuity that is embedded in SC, in the introduction to OP, and in CCC. The contrast between the old and the new will focus on the penitent, the priest and the assembly. How were these understood before the reform, and how afterward?

a) The Penitent,

In the model before reform, the concerns of the penitent were most important. Penitents approached the sacrament because of need, devotion or perhaps merely of habit. In an examination of conscience they focused on the love and mercy of God as they analyzed their sinfulness, set out in their own mind the nature and frequency of their sins, orchestrated in their heart acts of repentance and determination not to sin again, and thus prepared themselves to approach the confessor. This preliminary work before the confession was the task of the individual, helped perhaps by a list of the ten commandments and a list of Church rules, and by a sense of sorrow for not doing what the commandments and rules advised.

The penitent began the sacrament by asking for a blessing that included mention of one's last confession, and then "confessed" his or her sins as prepared for in the examination of conscience. After receiving some pastoral advice and a penance from the priest, the penitent would pray a prayer of forgiveness ("I confess ...") as the priest proclaimed the absolution. A farewell such as "Go in peace" would send the penitent to accomplish his or her penance and thus to conclude the sacramental act.

In the reformed *Order of Penance*, there are two reasons that may guide the penitent to enter its celebration. One continues to be devotion or need that comes from an individual call to conversion and repentance. It is a need that arises from one's personal journey of faith. The other is a need on the part of the Church. It must always proclaim its faith that in Christ all sin has been forgiven. It must give thanks to God for the freedom of such forgiveness, and in thanksgiving come to worship God (OP, 7b). This second is larger than the individual need, and at times could become the more important. But however they are weighed in an individual case, there are always two points of focus: the personal need and the ecclesial need. One is a call to new

beginnings. The other is a summons of remembrance, “less we forget.” Both, however, are involved in the reformed rites of penance.

OP offers three rites for the celebration of the sacrament, the second and third of which clearly have a liturgical structure. The first, which seems deceptively like the pre-reformed rite, nonetheless also has a liturgical structure. There is still the use of scripture to control the celebration, and still the movement through confession and absolution to thanksgiving. What dominates every liturgical act is the proclamation of the word. In the OP, the word we hear concerns God’s view of sin in contrast to our own. The purpose is that we might surrender our view of sin and listen to God’s.⁸ A prior examination of conscience might be useful, but that is quite secondary to the proclamation of the word. The word determines the event, and all that will happen within it.

Both penitent and priest must listen to the word of God. The integrity of the penitent’s act is to hear the word of God and be vulnerable to it, which may or may not be helped by listing the “number and species” of one’s sins. The aim of the priest is to help the penitent be present to the word, so that the forgiveness of Christ that comes from the word through the priest’s ministry may be honestly and deeply felt. “Jesus looked up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again’” (John 8:3-11).

All that will happen in relation to the penitent must come from the word of God: pastoral advice, acts of sorrow, acts of penitence, even words of absolution. Pastoral advice has its primary intention that the penitent be able to hear the words, “neither do I condemn you,” even as they hear the admonition, “do not sin again.” Acts or words of sorrow are not made against an uncertain judgement of God, but against the words and wisdom of Paul: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Cor 5:19). Acts of penitence must have something to do

⁸“The sacrament of penance should begin with a hearing of God’s word, because through his word God calls men to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart” (Intro, OP, 24). The readings should illustrate God’s call to conversion and to union with Christ, reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, and God’s judgment about good and evil.

with one's on-going initiation and conversion to Christ. And words of absolution are nothing less than words of love, mercy and forgiveness.

The final moment in the *Order of Penance* is thanksgiving. It does not leave you by yourself, with only a sense of relief for having been washed clean. Words of thanksgiving are words of wonder and of praise. Wonder and praise for the love which God continues to show to us. Wonder and praise for being set once again as friend and companion with Jesus as he continues to save us and as he is eternally in worship of the Father. Wonder and praise for forgiveness, of course, but even more for the mandate of reconciliation that comes from Jesus' own love: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn 13:34). Finally, wonder and praise for what we become, all of us, because of the love God has for us. God has reconciled us through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18).

b) The priest-confessor

In the days before the Vatican II reform, as the priest or priest-to-be prepared for the ministry of confession, two images shaped his self-understanding. One was the image of judge, for the priest needed to assess the confession itself, and within the confession to respond to the various sins that were acknowledged by the penitent. The other was as healer, guided by the words of John's gospel: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (Jn 22:23).⁹

These two images determined the preparation for priesthood. In the canon law of sacraments they learned what was required for a valid and licit confession. In their studies in moral theology they learned how to respond to the sins that may be confessed. They learned the kind of penances that might be offered for various sins.

⁹Thomas Aquinas highlights the importance of this ministry of healer: "Therefore just as sometimes the physician prudently refrains from giving a medicine sufficiently efficacious to heal the disease, lest a greater danger should arise on account of the weakness of nature, so the priest, moved by Divine instinct, some times refrains from enjoining the entire punishment due to one sin, lest by the severity of the punishment, the sick man come to despair and turn away altogether from repentance." *Summa Theologica*, Supplement, Q 18, Art. 4.

And they learned the formula of absolution. Anything else that might have entered the sacramental act, good or bad, was determined by the temperament of the priest himself.

What of the priest in the reformed rites of penance? He must certainly assess the quality and integrity of the confession if he is to offer a word of healing, but more is required than receiving a list of sins, number and species. The quality of confession has more to do with humility and vulnerability than with itemizing sins. The integrity of confession has more to do with sincerity and openness to God's word than with the accuracy of a list. What is required of the priest is, first of all, a sense of welcome. Then, a sense of being a fellow sinner with the penitent. Finally, a sense of being so vulnerable to the word of God that he has no other word to offer than Christ's own love and mercy. The priest must of course know the teaching of the Church. But even more he must know how the faith journey of the penitent might be invited more deeply into that teaching.

But the role of the priest is larger than judge and larger than medicinal healer. The ministry of priest in any sacrament is first and foremost presider of the liturgical assembly. His first task is to invite the penitent or penitents into prayer. He is to be a presence of Christ, and so to invite all of the assembly into the prayer of Christ. Only there, when the penitent stands in companionship with Jesus, will his or her sins become no longer sins. As presider, his stance to the assembly is as one who offers peace, and that should control his attitude to the sinner, whatever the sinner might confess. As presider, he must listen to the word of God, and then, with the sinner, try to open the word to the life or lives of those before him. Words of advice are more homiletic than judgmental. Words of penance help the penitent in his or her journey of faith. Words of absolution are freeing words, words that should bring the sinner to be grateful and forgiving of others.

The primary image of priest in a penitential assembly should be no different from his image in a Eucharistic assembly, as Christ in our midst inviting us to holiness and to worship God. There are general liturgical norms as to how he should behave as presider, and in the sacrament of penance there are specific norms as well, governed by the call to conversion and repentance and by the love and the mercy of God. But the guiding principle, however it works out with individual presiders, is this: "Pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects" (SC, 11).

c) The role of the assembly

This last piece, on the liturgical assembly, can be easily dispatched for the pre-reformed rite. Explicitly, there was none. The sacrament was between the penitent and priest alone. Implicitly, there were some signals of a community event. People were aware of each other as they waited for confessions to be heard. People were aware of each other as they said their prayers of penance. Words such as excommunication and interdict had some reference to a liturgical assembly, though excommunication was seen as an individual thing (“I cannot receive communion”) and interdict was simply unknown to most.¹⁰

The reformed rite, as a liturgical action, requires a liturgical assembly, whether that assembly is present, as in Rites II and III, or reduced to penitent and priest, as in Rite I. OP is part of Christian initiation, and its celebration is a celebration of the Church, that has an effect on the Church. Repentance itself is a summons to the Church, and is larger than the celebration of the sacrament. OP contains more than the sacrament. There are also scripture services and reconciliation rites that proclaim Christ’s victory over sin and God’s loving mercy to us all. The sacrament takes place within that victory, either as a celebration of remembrance (“lest we forget”), in which the liturgical assembly can take part, or as a celebration of personal need, in which the liturgical assembly can also take part. If we say that sin is not only an offence against God but an offence against the Church, then not only must God respond to one’s sin, but the living Church must respond as well. Remember the Lord’s own prayer: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” (e.g., Mt 6:12). To approach God for forgiveness is also to approach the living Church and ask forgiveness, and as each local community of the Church learns to forgive, it becomes more and more, as Paul proclaimed at Corinth, “ambassadors of Christ, God making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20).

Part II: Catechesis for the *Order of Penance*

¹⁰Even though the priest’s absolution included the phrase: “from every bond of excommunication, suspension and interdict, to the extent of my power and your need.”

It is clear that something has happened to the sacrament of penance. In the days before the reform, frequent confession was a staple in the faith life of Catholics, and a principal ministry of priests. For many reasons, around the time of the Council, that practice suddenly stopped. In fact, one of the major reasons for the reform of the sacrament was to address that shift in behavior. After the reform there has been some increased participation again, but the sacrament is still somewhat floundering.

One issue that needs to be explored is how people relate to God in their lives. Does God have any real significance in one's life? It is hard to understand and experience sin as an offence against God if God isn't a genuine part of one's journey. Yet, even if God is part of the journey, it is important that God be properly imaged. A watchman God who is out to get you is not the God revealed by Christ. A distant God who doesn't care much about human life is also not the God revealed by Christ.

The God of Jesus is like the father in the story of the prodigal son, who waits eagerly for his son to return and prepares a feast when in fact he does. He is like the same father who says to his more faithful son, "you are always with me, everything I have is yours" (Lk 15:31). This God is faithful to his covenant with us no matter what we may or may not do. A God who summons us into his own love, and who is merciful to us when our journey runs awry. A first catechesis for OP is to know, love and follow this most loving God.

A second issue that needs to be examined is our own relationship to Jesus Christ. In John's gospel, Jesus distinguishes between servant and friend, and says to his disciples, "I call you friend" (Jn 15:15). If you truly understand how you treat your friends, you will understand at the very least what it means that Jesus calls us friend.

In the first two weeks of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, there are two movements that are essential to our growth in Christ. The first movement is a focus on our sins with our eyes fixed on the cross. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (Jn 3:16). The task of this first week is to know that even though we be sinners, God's love for us remains unchanged. The second movement is that of the disciple, which asks, "What have I done for Christ, what am I doing for Christ, what will I do for Christ." The first movement alone is somewhat self-centered, but the two together spell out the journey to which all Christians are called. Only on this journey of faith will one discover that which holds one back.

The final issue that needs to be explored is the reality of sin and the nature of forgiveness and reconciliation. There is no point in having a “medicinal” sacrament if people have little sense of what the sacrament is supposed to address. At the same time, where people do have a sense of their own sinfulness, there is still no point in having “medicinal” sacrament if the sacrament itself does not bring about the forgiveness, healing and reconciliation it intends. The promise of the sacrament is to address what people discover is sinful in their lives. As 1 John proclaims: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1:8). The address it gives is first of all forgiveness, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us...” (1 Jn 1:9). And secondly the address it gives is reconciliation, “If we walk in the light ... we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7).

The question is, how does one discover what is sinful in one’s life? There is such a thing as a tradition of moral theology where the collective experience of the Church can identify a range of actions and choices as serious sin, mild sin or no sin. But if this were all a Catholic received, his or her moral life would be restricted to the level of disobedience. “The Church said this is wrong, and I did it nonetheless.” Unfortunately, far too many Catholics live on this level of disobedience alone.

A catechesis that is needed is to speak first of the Christian journey, begun at baptism and continued through life. This is a journey marked by the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, by the journey of love in 1 Corinthians 13 and by the wonders of faith given throughout the Acts of the Apostles. We keep forgetting that we do not discover what is sinful in our lives. God, God’s love for us in Christ and the Holy Spirit unveil for us what stands in the way of our journey of faith. That finally is what sin is about. Only then, as we begin to perceive what stands in our way, and perhaps even to struggle with it, will we begin to name sin in our lives and turn to Christ for help. Then we will have discovered the disease. Then we will find need for a sacrament of healing.

Where the sin lies within the person alone, the personal call to conversion may be all that is required, and for that a personal experience of the sacrament will be sought out. Rite I seems to be designed for this kind of conversion. Where the sin includes relationship with others, reconciliation as well as forgiveness will be looked for, and more communal experiences of the sacrament will be in order. Rites II and possibly III allow for both forgiveness and reconciliation. Where the sin involves a lack of faith, or a need to grow in faith, remembrance is called for, and the Church has many sacramental

offerings that hold out the victory of Christ over all sin and his promise to be with us always. Rite III, penitential services, and especially the Eucharist itself are all services of remembrance. As there are many ways we discover sin in our lives, there are many ways to address those sins. The only condition within the sacramental life of the Church is that in Christ all sin has been overcome.

And what of forgiveness and reconciliation? Theologically, the forgiveness from the sacrament can only come from God who is Father, Son and Spirit. Psychologically, forgiveness involves peace in one's heart, a freedom from what would otherwise hold you back, and a mandate to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven. Theologically, reconciliation is with the Church, which embraces the sinner once again in the communion of the Eucharistic table. Psychologically, reconciliation asks of the local assembly, "can you forgive me as well." Forgiveness of God is something proclaimed by the gospel and offered in the absolution of the sacrament. Forgiveness of oneself is part of the journey of faith. Reconciliation with the Church is easily established by one's participation in the Eucharist. Reconciliation with a local assembly demands that the local assembly grow as forgivers and thus make real the absolution given by the priest.

Concluding remark

This essay explored some of the pieces involved as the sacrament of penance becomes again a liturgical event. Penitent, priest and liturgical assembly are all involved in the transit. It also suggested elements of catechesis that need to become part of the Catholic way of believing and praying if the reform of the sacrament will again become effective in Catholic life. We need to experience sin if we are to look to a sacrament that will serve to heal it. Penitents need to be genuinely penitential. Priests need to be genuine healers. The assembly need to become genuine forgivers, even as they have been forgiven.

The most difficult task we have in the Church is to restore a sense of confidence. Confidence that there is a God who cares and who summons us to our own true humanity. Confidence that there is a Christ who stands with us as friend and companion. Confidence that there are priests who know what it is like to invite people into the friendship of Christ. And confidence that the people of the Church share a common journey, and are willing to help each other on that journey. These are, of course, all human confidences. These must stand humbly before a God who has

revealed to us in Christ that, even when we do not, he continues to have confidence in us.