

## A Theological and Pastoral Reflection for the Ministers of the Sacrament

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*Pope Benedict XVI has commended the Bishops of Canada in their promotion of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Father went on to note that sin is “ultimately a weakening of our relationship with God”, and thus involves a loss of human dignity, moral confusion and social disintegration, as well as division and fragmentation. The Episcopal Commission for Theology of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued the following theological and pastoral reflection on the Sacrament of Reconciliation to assist the ministers of the sacrament. At the same time, it is also a timely catechesis for all the faithful.*

### Introduction

1. The following theological reflection is intended to assist pastors as they accompany the faithful on their journey of faith and to help them rediscover and deepen their appreciation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia*, Pope John Paul II invited the Church to show special attention and care toward this sacrament, recognizing it as a celebration of God’s covenant and an expression of “*the certainty that, by the will of Christ, forgiveness is offered to each individual by means of sacramental absolution given by the ministers of penance.*”<sup>2</sup>
2. Over the centuries, the penitential discipline of the Church has undergone a remarkable evolution. There has been considerable variation in the modalities of penitential legislation and practice, given the differing historical situations in which the Church found itself. Generally there are considered to be three great periods in this evolution: the elaboration and codification of a public penitential system, from the 1st to 6th centuries; the “tariff” penance and the Carolingian reform, from the 6th to 12th centuries; and individual confession, from the 13th century on.
3. Each of these three historical periods has been marked by a different pastoral approach and preoccupation. In the first, when there was no private sacramental penance as we know it, the emphasis was on public exclusion from the Eucharist and the requirement of a prolonged public penance. In the second, when the monastic form of penance was extended to the laity, greater importance was placed on the penitential action and the reception of individual

absolution. It was during this period that the role of the minister of reconciliation changed from the patristic notion of *medicus* (doctor/healer) to that of *judex* (judge). Thirdly, in the Middle Ages and with the formalization of penance as one of the seven sacraments, its theology was more systematically developed and articulated, including a new emphasis on the distinction of matter and form. Following the Second Vatican Council, with the *Ordo Poenitentiae*, then the Apostolic Exhortation that came after the Synod of Bishops on penance and reconciliation, and more recently the *Motu Proprio Misericordia Dei*, this sacrament is now more clearly situated within its liturgical, theological and pastoral context.

4. Despite these differences in the way the Sacrament of Reconciliation has been celebrated over the centuries, the underlying faith-conviction of the Church in the necessity of the sacrament has remained constant. The Church has always regarded the Sacrament of Reconciliation as “grounded” in Christ’s Paschal Mystery. The redemptive force of this mystery is what renews the Church, restoring to its communion those who have become alienated from it and making them once again full members of the eucharistic assembly. The Sacrament of Reconciliation has always been regarded as an indispensable support for the continuing transformation into Christ, which is the essence of Christian life.
5. In our present-day context – when fewer faithful are availing themselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation – the Episcopal Commission for Theology would like to assist the ministers of the sacrament. The present reflection, primarily for pastors, is intended to set out its theological foundations and pastoral implications. The hope is to foster a renewed appreciation of both its value and beauty. Such an appreciation is all the more timely since ours is a deeply troubled world, in which the need for reconciliation in so many areas is all too apparent and real. “Reconciliation” is the name used most often today for this sacrament, although the terms “Penance” and “Confession” are still also used. In this document, we give preference to the first designation. Our concern is primarily with the first liturgical form of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, with its profoundly personal character of individual confession. However, our theological reflections apply equally to the other two forms, although it should be pointed out that the third form – collective absolution – is for use in exceptional circumstances and is governed by special norms.

### **Why the Sacrament of Reconciliation?**

6. Initially, reconciliation takes place in a most radical way at Baptism. Baptism is the sacramental sign of our full forgiveness in Jesus Christ and our incorporation into the Christian community. “*This first sacrament pardons all our sins, rescues us from the power of darkness, and brings us to the dignity of adopted children*” (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, *praenotanda*, 2). Any and all subsequent movements of repentance and conversion on the part of the faithful are firmly grounded in and derive their meaning from the Sacrament of Baptism.
7. The Sacrament of Reconciliation, as with Baptism, is the preeminent work and sacrament of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit initiates the process of our incorporation into the Christian community at Baptism and strengthens this in Confirmation, the same Spirit sustains and

renews it in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The new rite explicitly mentions the Holy Spirit no fewer than 20 times. According to the rite, the priest is to extend his hands over the penitent when giving absolution, as a sign that the Holy Spirit is being called down upon the penitent. As the work of the Holy Spirit, this sacrament is not only the remission of sins; it is also an outpouring of the life-giving Spirit which induces in the penitent a deep change of mind and heart, the biblical notion of *metanoia*. It is the Sacrament of Reconciliation that restores and renews an individual's life in the community of believers and the priesthood of the faithful.

8. Contrition – or repentance – and conversion are essential to the process that leads to reconciliation. They are not isolated acts, but part of an ongoing call that must be heeded throughout one's entire faith journey. Seen in this perspective, the Sacrament of Reconciliation bears the authentic seal of growth in Christ. This is because the Reign of God is forever "at hand" and even now is being realized in the person of Jesus Christ. "*The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news*" (Mark 1.15; Matthew 4.17).
9. The very heralding of the coming of the Reign of God contains the call to conversion. Answering Jesus' call, the faithful are constantly growing in the grace of Baptism and so into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The central core of Jesus' teaching, with its stringent demands regarding the Reign of God, is a call to *metanoia*, even though the word "conversion" is not always explicitly used. This summons to repent, to be converted, is addressed to everyone, without distinction but with a sense of urgency. Pope Paul VI, whose definition of conversion was incorporated into the *Ordo Poenitentiae* of 1973, described it this way: "*We can only approach the Kingdom of Christ by metanoia. This is a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge, and arrange one's life according to the holiness and love of God*" (*Ordo Poenitentiae*, no. 6).
10. From a Christian point of view, any talk of sin or of a sense of sin must be seen in the context of the new covenant that was wrought and sealed in the blood of Christ (Luke 22.20). This is the irrevocable alliance in which God proclaims: "*They will be my people and I will be their God*" (Revelation 21.3). Talk of sin can never be divorced from God's infinite and merciful love. We see this time and time again in Scripture and especially in the way Jesus approached the sinners of his day. He always offered them hope and the opportunity to be healed and saved; he was never one to "*break a crushed reed, or quench a smouldering wick*" (Matthew 12.20). Sin not only darkens minds, hearts and lives in ways far beyond our human reckoning; it reveals its insidious face and nature especially when viewed in the light of God's unconditional love and divine forgiveness. It is when we become keenly aware of God's love as pardon and mercy that the real nature of sin is revealed to us.

### **Pastoral implications**

11. If the individual confession of one's sins is seen and understood in the broader context of an ongoing, life-long process of conversion, and as liberation from sin, then the faithful will be less inclined to view individual confession as a formality. In confessing their serious sins in

number and kind, they are to view this as stemming directly from the inner dynamism of their Baptism and from their Christian vocation. When celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, pastors would do well to highlight those aspects and elements that allow the penitents to experience more explicitly the inherent connection between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and their Baptism.

12. Penitents should also be made to understand that the Person encountered in the penitential rite is Jesus Christ, signified in the encounter with the minister of the sacrament. Christ accomplishes for the penitent today the same liberation, purification and transformation that he so often offered the sick and the sinners in the Gospel. The foundation of the sacrament is precisely in those gestures through which the living Christ calls sinners to conversion and restores their friendship with God.
13. All three forms in the *Ordo Poenitentiae* follow the same basic structure: (a) a moment of welcome; (b) a time to reflect on a reading of the Word of God; (c) the confession of sins; (d) a moment of penitential prayer; (e) absolution; and (f) a concluding prayer of thanksgiving. The minister should spend sufficient time with each individual penitent so that the sacrament is experienced as a true celebration – not as a hasty, perfunctory exercise. It should be noted that even in the first form of the rite, the reading of Scripture is never to be omitted. What is new in the rite is the place of Scripture, by which we are called to recognize our sinfulness. This element particularly needs to be put into practice. The pastoral renewal of the first form of the Sacrament of Reconciliation depends on the rediscovery of the importance of the Word of God in the celebration.

#### **Why is confession a “personal” affair?**

14. There are sound theological reasons why the Church insists on the individual confession of one’s sins. God calls each one of us by name. Among all the possible types of human words, there is none more strikingly personal and evocative than our name. When someone calls out our name, our attention is immediately alerted to that person’s presence. We are thereby summoned to engage in a dialogue with the other. My name is what manifests me, expresses me to others, and gives them access to my being. I truly exist only for those who know my name. Nothing is more personal than an individual’s name.
15. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God calls us by name, that is, to a personal and intimate encounter. It is as though God wants to take us aside for a moment – as good friends do – in order to give us his full, undivided attention and forgiving love. In such privileged moments of intimacy, we are summoned to stand before God in our vulnerability, and with all the transparency of our being. It is then, when we come before him in the Sacrament of Reconciliation with our sins, our repentance and our trust, that God can let his face shine on us and grant us grace and peace – the peace that only God can give.
16. The reason we are asked to say or name our sins in confession is twofold. On the one hand, the very fact of naming our sins is a clear indication that we own them, that they are our sins and not those of someone else. It is when we are able to name them that we truly take personal

responsibility for them. At the same time, the requirement to put a name on our sins carries with it a liberating grace. When we can put a finger on our trespasses and call them by name, they lose something of their hold on us. Confessing one's sins is not intended to be a punishment or an exercise in humiliation, although it certainly demands humility. To the contrary, it is an exercise in transparency and one in which, with our cooperation, the Holy Spirit helps us to follow Christ more closely and to bear witness to him who took upon himself our sinful state, although he was without sin (2 Corinthians 5.21).

17. It is important to recall, too, that God offers us pardon even before we ask for it. When we step out of our everyday lives to receive the Lord's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he is the one who takes the initiative in our reconciliation. This divine initiative of which we are the beneficiaries, and not the artisans, comes from our heavenly Father through Christ and the Holy Spirit. As Pope John Paul II so beautifully put it: *"We would not budge from our sin if God had not already offered his forgiveness.... We would not decide to open ourselves to forgiveness if God, through the Holy Spirit, whom Christ gave us, had not already brought about in us sinners the beginning of a change in life which is precisely the desire for and the intention of conversion."*<sup>3</sup> In his Letter to Priests on Holy Thursday 2002, in which he compares confession to Jesus' surprise encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19.5), the Holy Father said: *"Before being a person's journey to God, confession is God's arrival at a person's house."*

### **Pastoral implications**

18. One of the first implications of God's gratuitous initiative is that penitents should not come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation with undue apprehension. They should be encouraged to approach it with a sense of joy and gratitude. It has been said that gratitude is the most infallible sign of the presence of God. Quite rightly did Pope John Paul II associate the celebration of reconciliation with a heart full of gratitude: *"Gratitude must fill our heart, even before being freed from our sins through the absolution of the Church."*<sup>4</sup> Pastors do well to encourage the faithful to regard this sacrament as a genuine act of thanksgiving, a celebration of gladness and immense hope, as an expression of our belief in the "forgiveness of sins," and as a profession of faith in the living and forgiving God which we proclaim in the Creed.
19. A second important pastoral implication should be the question of accountability. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a call to accountability. Whenever we examine our conscience prior to receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we are calling ourselves to accountability. We are taking stock of our life and our responsibilities, as did the Prodigal Son when he stopped long enough to realize the condition to which he had reduced himself after leaving his father's house (cf. Luke 15.17-21). Viewed in this way, the purpose of examining our conscience is not simply intended to help us answer the question "What have I done wrong?" or "What good have I left undone?" More basically, examining our conscience – taking account of our lives – is to remind us, as Saint Paul does, that we do not live or die to ourselves, but to the Lord (cf. Romans 14.7), and that as good stewards of the Lord, each of us is charged with *"the good purpose of building up the neighbour"*(Romans 15.2).<sup>5</sup>

20. Thirdly, as ministers of mercy, pastors should be aware that *“in the celebration of this sacrament, perhaps even more than the others, it is important that the faithful have an intense experience of the face of Christ the Good Shepherd.”*<sup>6</sup> One of the oldest and most cherished models of a priest is unquestionably that of the Good Shepherd. As Pope John Paul II so movingly described in his 2002 Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, *“The minister of pardon, who exemplifies for penitents the face of the Good Shepherd, must express in equal measure the mercy already present and at work and the pardon which brings healing and peace.”*<sup>7</sup>

If the confessor is to do this effectively, if he is to let the face of the Good Shepherd truly shine upon the penitent, he too must avail himself of this sacrament. Only by personally experiencing God’s pardon and mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation can the minister realistically hope to convey a true image of the Good Shepherd to others.

21. Catholic tradition also recognizes that a desensitized conscience is one of the dangers that threatens and assails the Christian believer. The loss of a sense of sin is one of the insidious ways in which the evil sway of sin can overtake an individual and even a community. We lose a sense of sin, for example, when we refuse to take the blame for the wrongs we have done. We all too readily excuse ourselves by thinking that our sinful actions are the results of sins committed by others against us and, therefore, not our fault. *“We prefer to think of ourselves as ‘wounded’ – as victims of sin – rather than as sinners.”*<sup>8</sup>
22. The gradual evolution or shift in the way Catholics have come to perceive and construe sin is also noteworthy. Many regard sin today less as a list of specific nameable acts and more as an entrenched basic attitude that lies at the core of one’s being. This means that special attention is given to those deep attitudinal stances that define our basic relationships with God and with others (for example, in terms of estrangement, alienation and isolation). While sin is viewed as the disruption or breakdown of an original harmony in an existing relationship, it nevertheless reveals its depraved face in concrete particular actions and gestures. These can completely sever the relationship (grave sin) or can injure and thus impoverish the relationship (venial sin). As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: *“Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of a person by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns a person away from God, who is the person’s ultimate end and beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.”*<sup>9</sup>

### **Why does reconciliation have an ecclesial dimension?**

23. *“Embracing sinners in her bosom, the Church is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal”* (Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8). Catholic tradition has always understood sin not only as an offence against God but also against the Christian community. This explains why the Sacrament of Reconciliation does two things simultaneously: it reconciles us with the People of God, the Church, and with God. Reconciliation with God occurs *in* and *through* our reconciliation with the Church. On this point, the report of the International Theological

Commission entitled “Penance and Reconciliation” was clear: *“Thus in sacramental penance the readmission to full sacramental communion with the Church is the sacramental sign of the renewed communion with God.”*<sup>10</sup> We find here, although in different words, the constant firm teaching of the Fathers of the Church: what validates reconciliation with God is our reconciliation with the People of God.

24. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the priest represents both God and the community and, through him, the penitent seeks forgiveness from both. The absolution of the priest, which is also given in the name of the Church, reveals its full meaning when perceived as being an ecclesial act, that is, an action performed by and on behalf of Christ and the Church. This is why the sacrament should be celebrated, as much as possible, in a communal setting. For example, even when the first form of the rite is used, it is preferable to designate a special time when several penitents can come together to celebrate this sacrament. Another way to indicate this communal reality is for the whole community to be present, or at least a number of faithful, as customary also at Baptism. In its decree promulgating the new *Ordo Poenitentiae*, the Congregation for Divine Worship had this to say: *“Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance”* (no. 22; see also the Second Vatican Council Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 27).
25. It should moreover be emphasized that the personal confession of one's sins is never a purely private act. Though sin is an individual human act saying no to God and his will, its effects go far beyond the person who sins. It engages the whole Church and every member of the Church. As Pope John Paul II emphasized, the social nature of this sacrament is such that *“the whole Church – militant, suffering and glorious in heaven – comes to the aid of the penitent and welcomes him again into her bosom, especially as it was the whole Church which had been offended and wounded by his sin.”*<sup>11</sup>

### **Pastoral implications**

26. The faithful must be made aware that sin is never simply a private affair, affecting only the sinner, but has harmful repercussions both throughout and beyond the Church. The great saints and mystics were mindful of the far-reaching consequences of sin. Pope Paul VI expressed it well: *“All wrongdoing involves a disturbance of the universal order which God established; it destroys the wrongdoer's own values, as well as those of the human community.”*<sup>12</sup> Were the notion of sin exposed in all its tragic depth and magnitude – as an unfathomable mystery and not simply a fact to be itemized – then perhaps this sacrament would take on new meaning in the eyes of the faithful.
27. It follows too that, whenever possible, greater use should be made of the second form of the rite (communal celebration with individual confession and individual absolution). This form of the rite has all the elements necessary to foster among the faithful an individual as well as a communal sense of sin. Even more clearly than the first form (individual confession), the second emphasizes the ecclesial dimension of sacramental reconciliation. It is conceivable that

this second form, if utilized more frequently, would resonate more deeply with the religious sensibilities of the faithful.

28. Another important dimension that should be emphasized is the vital connection between penance, on the one hand, and works of peace and justice, on the other. Properly understood, sacramental penance is a summons to engage oneself in works of peace and justice in the world. The evil involved in forms of injustice and forces of oppression, in wars that seem interminable, cries out for the healing and forgiving word of Jesus Christ. The faithful must be made to understand the social implications of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. By gaining a greater awareness of these implications, the faithful will be more readily encouraged to personalize their sense of sin, as individuals and as a community. In short, it would help them assume greater social responsibility for their actions in daily life. This would not only signal a triumph over individualism, but the faithful themselves would come to be seen as living witnesses of reconciliation in today's troubled world.

#### **Why must penance and reconciliation be “ritualized”?**

29. Properly carried out, ritual can be powerful. Its capacity to sustain the life of individuals and communities can hardly be exaggerated. Ritual exists in every culture and in every religion. It is an effective and necessary medium for expressing the deepest meanings and values that make a people who they are. Without ritual participation and the appropriation of the values mediated by ritual, a people soon loses its community coherence and stability, and individuals lose their sense of belonging, meaning and identity. Ritual, by its nature, enables a community to achieve and maintain contact with its origins, its foundational meaning or, as it is sometimes called, its “charter event”. For Christians, this founding event is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the Paschal Mystery. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the ritual action places the penitent in touch with the founding event which is the saving action of Christ who calls the Church into existence and sustains its life.
30. The sacraments of the Church are not arbitrarily imposed on human nature; they correspond, as Saint Thomas pointed out, to the basic needs and stages of the human condition.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, rites and rituals are expressions of a fundamental dimension of human existence. Moreover, in the sacramental order the Rite of Penance marks an important passage in the life of the penitent, a conversion experience, a “turning around” or *metanoia*. Everything that is done in the rite should be made to highlight, celebrate and sacralize this important transitional moment in the penitent's faith journey.

#### **Pastoral implications**

31. In our modern age, people have a diminished sense of ritual and sacramentality, even with regards to the Church's rites and religious symbols. One of the reasons why the faithful have become estranged from the Sacrament of Reconciliation is because celebrations of the penitential rites have too often been mechanical and superficial. The challenge for pastors today is to convey the deep significance of the liturgy. This means exploiting the rich, liturgical



potential that is offered in the rite. Liturgical gestures must be simple yet meaningful. Symbolic actions within the Rite of Penance should be clearly perceived by the faithful as evoking mystery and expressing something beyond the mere external action itself. A symbol has the power to evoke mystery precisely because it addresses itself to the whole person – to the imagination, the will, and the emotions, as well as to the intellect.

32. The faithful must be made to understand that the Rite of Penance is, strictly speaking, a ritual imitation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who makes the penitent's "imitation" real, efficacious and salvific. It is an imitation of death and resurrection, but one that is effectively realized and brought about for the penitent through Christ's own "passage" (Passover) from death to life. As such, like all the sacramental rites of the Church, the Rite of Penance is a ritual re-enactment of, and participation in, the Paschal Mystery of Christ.
33. Thought should also be given to the actual place or space assigned for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with an individual penitent. While it is important to respect those who prefer the traditional confessional, other options are available, such as the reconciliation room or a more open space. The place chosen for the celebration of the sacrament must be a designated area for this purpose, with all the proper dignity that becomes a sacred liturgical space. Ministers of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are to respect whatever option the penitent chooses, whether the confessional, the reconciliation room, or a more open space. We do well to remember that Jesus forgave those who approached him in full public view. Who can forget the moving sight of those numerous young people during World Youth Day who went to confession in the open air of a city park? Are we not always edified by the good example of others?

## **Conclusion**

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from these theological and pastoral reflections is the immense hope that Jesus Christ creates for every sinner. For some, the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be a profound life-changing experience, the occasion of a major conversion. For others, it can mark a steady striving to follow Christ more intimately. Whether as reconciliation or purification, the sacrament is a fountain of hope and grace for everyone in the Church.

Episcopal Commission for Theology  
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

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1. Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Bishops of the Western Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Canada on their *ad limina* visit, 9 October 2006.
2. Pope John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliation and Penance*, no. 30.
3. General Audience, 29 February 1984, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 3 March 1984, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Cf. Kurt Stasiak, *Sacramental Theology: Means of Grace, Way of Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), pp. 111-112.
6. Pope John Paul II, Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 2002, no. 4.
7. *Ibid.*, no. 8. See also Richard Wallot, "Les défis de la miséricorde sacramentelle" in *Liturgie, foi et culture*, Vol. 37, No. 174 (Summer) 2003, pp. 13-21.
8. Irma Zaleski, *Conversion of the Heart: The Way of Repentance* (Toronto: Novalis, 2003), p. 30.
9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1855.
10. Cf. *Origins*, Vol. 13, 12 January 1984, p. 519.
11. *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliation and Penance*, no. 31, IV.
12. Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, no. 2, 1967.
13. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 65.