

## Session #5: Sacrament of Reconciliation

O sweet encounter.

O delightful experience.

Why is Reconciliation, commonly called Confession, so challenging?

Why does it turn the stomach upside down?

At the very least, it is called *embarrassment*.

Exposing our darkness is painfully difficult,

for it awakens feelings which are not those associated with goodness, i.e. love and joy.

Exposing our darkness obliges us to journey in the land of sadness for a time.

And sadness is the greatest weight for the human heart.

The sadness, by the way, is actually good, for it reveals that we love.

Sadness presupposes love.

To be sad at having sinned means that we love God.

Because of what sadness does, i.e. turn us in on ourselves (you may have noticed!),  
one of the challenges of Reconciliation,

is that of lifting our eyes from ourselves to gaze upon the One who forgives us  
and whose gaze is not the same as ours.

How difficult it is to do,

and how difficult it is to believe that His gaze is not the same as ours, i.e. is *all-merciful*.

We tend to judge ourselves to condemnation, because we know that,

left to our own means, there is insufficient reason to hope.

Jesus does not accuse. Jesus welcomes.

We must exercise the gift of divine hope, which is not based on our resources

but on Jesus' promise of faithful, unconditional assistance

Reconciliation is a sacrament of restoration.

We are reconciled with God, with neighbor, and in a sense, by consequence, with self.

“The whole power of the Sacrament consists in restoring us to God’s grace  
and joining us with him in intimate friendship.” (CCC #1468)

“The Sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about  
a true “spiritual resurrection”. (CCC #1468)

And as John Paul II says,

“The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being,  
where he regains his innermost truth.”

Reconciliation is a sacrament of healing for the heart.

We wound ourselves when we are unloving.

In Reconciliation, Jesus embraces us and floods our hearts with his love  
and these refreshing waters irrigate and heal our wounds.

The recommendation of the unknown author of the medieval work,

“The Cloud of Unknowing”, rings well:

“Lift your sick self, just as you are, and let your desire reach  
to touch the good, gracious God, just as He is, for to touch Him is eternal health.”

This sacrament bears many names,

- depending what we are considering in it
- depending on what aspect is being highlighted

As we read in the Catechism, it can be called the Sacrament of:

- **Conversion:** movement away from sin to God and divine love  
“Conversion is the movement of a contrite heart, drawn  
and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first  
(CCC #1428).
- **Penance:** the inner sorrow of the heart of the one seeking forgiveness
- **Confession:** the act on the part of the penitent in this encounter
- **Forgiveness:** what is given and received, i.e. God’s love
- **Reconciliation:** the wonderful consequence and result of being forgiven

Alright: let's just go for the jugular!

The big question that arises for many of us – if not *all of us* – is

“Why must I confess my sins to a priest?”

“It makes an already difficult thing almost brutal.”

“It often hinders me in the movement of my heart.”

“And if I get a grumpy priest who starts indiscreetly probing,  
it sets me back to negative square two.”

Moreover, Saint James says in his epistle (5:16),

“Confess your sins, one to another” –with no mention of priests.

Thomas Aquinas responds to objections along these lines by pointing to the simple fact that, at the time of his writing, James had in mind what the community, the Church, believed to have previously divinely instituted, i.e. the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The authority to forgive sins had been given to the Apostles,  
and it was already known in the community.

James is, therefore, simply admonishing the community to confess to priests.

Certain things were understood.

We, in retrospect, must contextualize in order to understand correctly.

We ultimately, of course, trust the discernment of the Church, the believing community  
that discerned both the Scriptures and the Sacraments...

One grand way to understand

- why Jesus would give the
- the fittingness of

authority to forgive to sinful men is to reconsider the mystery of *the Church*.

Otherwise, we can “freak”!

The Church, once again, is *us*, i.e. Brothers and Sisters

bound to one another as such by divine love.

The same love that binds us to Christ binds us to one another.

Consequently, our sin not only affects our relationship with God

but also affects our relationship with our Brothers and Sisters.  
We often do not think of this. We think of our sins as a very private affair. WRONG!!!!  
Our sins are an *ecclesial* affair – which does not mean that the whole Church must know.  
It means that our sins somehow impact *the whole body of Christ*,  
i.e. others beyond the specific persons we hurt.  
This is more than the law of karma.  
This is the reality of divine love in the Mystical body.  
“Nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, *the Church*,  
and *the whole world*” (CCC #1488)

If such is the case,  
reconciliation with God is inseparable from reconciliation with the Church,  
and vice versa,  
and reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.  
The “need” for ministers, or rather, the fitting use of ministers  
becomes particularly evident with regards to the Church.

Jesus chooses

- representatives of His Mystical Body
- representatives of those whom we hurt when we sin,  
to whom I must turn so concretely to be reconciled with my Brothers and Sisters.

There may be an added bonus in there being

- a minister of Reconciliation
- this tangible instrument of Christ’s forgiveness.

The added bonus is *hearing with our own ears* that we are forgiven,  
we who struggle at times to believe that we are forgiven.

There may be another added bonus in our confessing to an instrument of God.

It humbles us in a unique way, thus opening our hearts more.

Thomas Aquinas also interestingly says the following:

“The penitent expiates the temporal repercussions of his sin

- by undergoing the shame of confession
- by the power of the keys to which he submits
- by the enjoined satisfaction which the priest moderates according to the kind of sins made known to him in confession.”

(Summa Theologica, supplementum, Q. 6, art. 1, reply 1)

What exactly is this act of “confession”, key on the part of the sinner?

Saint Gregory the Great (+604) says it is “the opening of the wound”.

Saint Augustine says that

“confession lays bare the hidden disease by the hope of pardon”.

And Thomas Aquinas, regarding hope, says that

“confession presupposes love. And he who has love is moved by hope.

Hope, rather than fear, is the real cause of confession.”

Thomas Aquinas also speaks of some of the conditions for or right characteristics of confession.

The list is extensive!

Confession should be:

- **prompt** (without delay)
- **voluntary** (not forced; chosen; coming from the heart)
- **honest**
- **focused** (confessing *sins*, not simple tendencies, not engaging spiritual direction)
- **humble** (with real acknowledgement of weakness)
- **“hopefully tearful”** (with sorrow sustained by hope)
- **pure** (with right intention)
- **courageous** (that nothing be held back)
- **clear** (not vague)
- **complete** (everything acknowledged)
- **frequent** (love is in a hurry!)

These quite simply make sense if confessing is asking forgiveness from *the* Loved One.

The minister in Reconciliation acts very much like the minister in baptism.

[By the way, did you know that, in cases of emergency, you can confess to a layperson? This implies, of course, the intention to go to a priest when possible, so to re-established in full communion with the Church and thus sacramentally.]

The distinction between the *instrument* of grace and the *source* of grace is very clear.

**“I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”**

In Reconciliation we hear and witness,

**“I absolve you in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”**

Such instrumentality is to be distinguished from what we hear and witness

in the Eucharist where the minister, who is always instrument,

acts in a unique way in communion with Christ, *In Persona Christi*: “This is my body.”

It is a bit scary if you think about it.

To see an imperfect human being behind the alter uttering Jesus’ own words,

not portraying but “being” Jesus.

It is intolerable outside of faith.

When did Jesus institute this Sacrament?

In the midst of His ministry, in the midst of healing and teaching

and feeding huge crowds and walking on water (as we read in Matthew’s gospel),

Jesus makes use of Peter’s confession of faith:

Peter responds to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”

To Peter’s response, Jesus declares,

**“I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church,**

**and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.**

**I give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven;**

**Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven**

**And whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”** (Matthew 16:18-19)

How amazingly disproportionate!

Peter makes an act of faith, acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and Son,

And Jesus in turn, in response gives him the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

I might have been tempted to intervene,

“Whoa whoa Jesus, relax. The guy made a nice act of faith, but it’s only normal.

Don’t get carried away in giving him a reward.”

According to Thomas Aquinas,

Jesus made known the efficacy and power of this Sacrament, *after* the Resurrection, when He appears to the disciples in Jerusalem.

**“Thus it is written that the Messiah should suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,**

**and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins,**

**would be preached in His name to all nations.”** (Luke 24:46-47)

The source of power for this Sacrament is the same as that for all of the Sacraments: the Passion of Jesus. Hence, reference to it *prior* to mention of forgiveness of sins.

Of course John reiterates this transmission of authority (in 20:22-23), as well as the One who is source of power in conjunction with the Passion of Jesus:

**"Receive the Holy Spirit.**

**Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."**

Here again, there are many Christians who read this differently

and consequently disagree.

To be honest, I have yet to hear a compelling reading of this other than Catholic reading.

The other readings seemed to dilute

- the power of what Jesus says
- the power of what we believe Jesus entrusts.

The average Protestant reading of this text seems to me to bring to the text a preconceived notion which becomes a prism through which it is read.

The preconceived notion through which our Protestant brethren read is, as mentioned, the, dare I say, limited understanding of mediation and instrumentality.

You may recall how last week we articulated how the Church has come to understand that God makes use of instruments without diminishing intimacy in the process.

In fact, I can recall in theology class the teacher saying

“The more God is merciful, the more he multiplies the instruments”.

With all due respect, that is a far cry from Joel Olsteen!

And even further from Joel Olsteen is the simple fact that, as stated before, we believe that the keys of the Kingdom have outrageously, amazingly been entrusted to the Church in her ministers.

When we sin, we turn away from God, we close the gate.

When we confess our sins to God’s minister, we ask him to use the keys to reopen the gate.

Reconciliation reopens paradise to us.

Now as stated before in every sacrament, or for every sacrament,

we must bring something to the table:

- water for Baptism
- bread and wine for Eucharist
- oil for Confirmation.

What must we bring to the table for Reconciliation?

What does Jesus take hold of so to give Himself to us, that whereby Jesus embraces us?

What is the “matter” of the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

I will give you a hint.

What prompts us to “go to confession”?

Our *sins*!!!! i.e. those various acts that were unloving.

The “matter” for the sacrament of Reconciliation is our sins

and it is in confessing them that Jesus takes hold of us.

As we confess freely, Jesus embraces us. Awesome!!!

Although we may be saddened by our sins,

- we ought to go to confession
- we ought to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation with joy

It is possible if we keep our eyes fixed on the Forgiver.  
It is most appropriate to keep our eyes fixed on the Forgiver.  
We ought always to do so,  
understanding that Jesus seizes this as an opportunity to love us,  
not dwelling whatsoever on our sins.

There *are* effects to our unloving acts, to our sins.  
There are pieces sometimes that must be picked up: temporal repercussions.  
These, however, are not the primary issue.  
Our hearts are restored.  
Think of the parable of the prodigal son.  
The older son, who never left, dwells on the sins of his brother  
and wants the father to make his brother pick up the pieces  
before there be any talk of celebration.  
The father, however, seemingly cannot even understand his son's perspective.  
The father sees his role solely as that of welcoming his penitent son  
and bringing him back to life in his embrace, rejoining him to his heart.  
This parable obliges us to go so much further than we would ever dare  
as regards God's mercy.  
"Only the heart of Christ who knows the depths of his fathers love  
could reveal to us the abyss of his mercy in so simple and beautiful a way" (#1439)

Three questions come to (my!) mind:

1. How effective is God's forgiveness

when we seem to fall into the same sins over and over? One wonders!

This recurrence of sin underscores at least two things.

a. God takes our cooperation seriously because God respects us.

We are not forgiven without us.

And we grow in special ways in cooperating.

b. The mysterious nature of what God allows.

How many of us have begged God to keep us  
from falling into this or that sin, again?

And yet it happens.

Why would god, who is love, allow us to do something unloving  
when we explicitly ask him to keep us from that which is unloving?

It is a very difficult question to answer.

What these "permissions" of God surely oblige is entering into deeper,  
more deliberate dependence on him,

revealing to us that the goal of our Christian life is not first  
moral perfection but intimacy with God,

intimacy that can be had even in the midst of moral chaos.

This, of course, does not mean that we do not strive for moral perfection  
but such striving is not our deepest focus.

c. Forgiveness must be followed by the healing of the effects of sin.

2. What about the troubling petition in the "Our Father":

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"?

Upon first reading, Jesus makes it sound as though our *being forgiven*  
is contingent upon our *forgiving* others.

If this is the case, we are up the creek!

If I were to be forgiven only to the extent that I forgive,

there would be moments when God's forgiveness

only comes to me through an eyedropper.

To answer this, there is an important distinction to be made which allows us not only to get around this but to understand this. The distinction is that between intentions/choice and visible actions. An action is *human* if it engages our person, i.e. if

- it is a willful act
- it is an act that originates in the depths of the human heart.

An action is *complete*, of course, when there is a visible expression.

The Catechism expresses this well regarding conversion (which is an experience of love)

“Without conversion of the heart, outward works of penance remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion merges expression, invisible signs, gestures and works of penance” (#1430)

You have heard the old saying “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”. I am not so sure I agree with this.

The road to hell is paved with *bad* intentions.

*Intending* and *wanting* and *choosing* to love is already loving.

Intending and wanting and choosing to forgive is already forgiving.

Now, if there is complete discrepancy between our intentions and “wantings” and choices and our actions, we could have a problem.

True and deep intentions must gradually gain territory and transform our actions.

But, nonetheless, everything must originate in the depths of the heart if they are to engage our person, and thus be human.

Moreover, we can have wounds and fragilities, and lack the necessary virtue, such that our actions sometimes betray us, betray our intentions.

This is not to excuse but simply to underscore that

- we can never judge—even ourselves
- God first looks at the intentions of our heart.

What we see is not what we get.

And so, with this petition

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”,  
we are not asking God to forgive us in proportion to our forgiving others.

*As we ask* forgiveness, we are expressing our *willingness* to forgive,  
our *intention* to forgive

(and clinging to grace so that our intention might indeed translate to action!)

3. What is the “penance” that the priest gives to us in Reconciliation?

Is it a sort of spanking?

It seems to me that many of us consider it to be punishment. **WRONG!**

It is:

- a. our way of thanking God for his forgiveness
- b. our way of cooperating with the grace of Reconciliation  
that it bear fruit in us
- c. our way of picking up the pieces caused by our sinful acts,  
of healing the temporal repercussions of our sins.

The Catechism clearly states that penance is not penal as we think of it:

“penance helps configure us to Christ....

and the fruits that befit repentance have their efficacy from Christ,

by him they are offered to the Father,

and through him they are accepted by the Father.”

In every aspect of Reconciliation, we are preceded by divine love,

and transformed by divine love

I will close with the words of a controversial figure,

a Congregationalist preacher who dies in 1887, Henry Ward Beecher

**“God pardons like a mother,**

**who kisses the offense into everlasting forgiveness. “**

