National Bulletin on Liturgy

Volume 29-Number 145  Summer 1996

The Reconciling Church
The Reconciling Church
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Reconciling Church.................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciling Individuals or Reconciling Church?..........................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and the Reform of Penance..........................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twentieth-Century Reform of Penance.......................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Ministries of Reconciliation..................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciling Individuals and Reconciling Groups.......................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catechesis for Conversion and Pastoral Strategies......................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening the Church into Authentic Speech...............................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amen...............................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pall..........................................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Worship Without a Resident Priest in Days Past................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Reconciling Church

The great need for reconciliation cries out from news broadcasts and newspapers every day. It is a desperate need in so many parts of our world and so many segments of our society. It is a great need within the church as well. Pope John Paul II sees reconciliation as a special cause as the second millenium draws to a close.

In all these areas of concern, reconciliation is much more than the sacrament of penance, and yet is not unrelated to this sacrament. In all these areas of need, the whole life and being of the church as penitent, reconciled community and sacrament of reconciliation is involved.

It is especially appropriate, therefore, that the Western Liturgical Conference chose this subject as the theme of its 1995 annual meeting. And no better presenter could have been found than James Dallen. We are privileged in this issue of the Bulletin to publish his presentations on The Reconciling Church.

Previous issues have also considered this subject:

• Call to Penance, no. 42 (1974)
• Reconciliation and Forgiveness, no. 52 (1975)
• Reconciliation in Our Life, no. 88 (1983)
• Reconciliation in our Broken World, no. 135 (1993)
• “Call to Communal Repentance: The Jewish Experience,” by Lucy Thorson, no. 144 (1996).

This issue of the Bulletin also continues our series of articles on preaching. The last such article was “Cardinal Bernardin on Preaching” in no. 142 (1995). Finally, there is a short article on the important liturgical acclamation, Amen.
Reconciling Individuals
or A Reconciling Church?

James Dallen is a presbyter of the Diocese of Salina, Kansas, and professor of
theology at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. His previous books on
reconciliation include The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance (1986)
and (with Joseph Favazza) Removing the Barriers: The Practice of Reconciliation
(1991). He delivered the following presentations to the 1995 annual meeting of
the Western Liturgical Conference in Saskatoon, and has kindly given permission
to publish them here.

Too often when we turn our attention to the sacrament of penance and reconcilia­
tion we fail to set a context. Generally we are concerned about reconciling individ­
uals to Church and to God – encouraging them to celebrate the sacrament or
bemoaning the fact that they don’t, debating the different forms of the sacrament
or criticizing styles of celebration. Before we can even begin to consider such top­
ics we must first set the context and make clear that our central concern is not
reconciling individuals but a reconciling Church.

Two words point to the realities we are concerned with: “reconciliation” and “ali­
enation.” “Reconciliation” means to reunite, to bring back together in a harmony that
once was or should be. It presupposes that some division or rupture of harmony
has taken place, that alienation exists and is to be overcome. It is God’s dream
for creation. “Alienation,” from its Latin root, means “to make other.” What is sup­
posed to be the same, what is supposed to be one, is divided. We consider as
other than us what is supposed to be one with us. What we are part of is consid­
ered to be different from us. Alienation points to withdrawal, separation, alone­
ness, disunity.

Alienation and disunity are too much part of our experience to be denied. We see
separation between people and nature when lands and rivers are polluted and
when natural resources are squandered for the sake of selfish comfort. We see
separation within people showing itself in anxiety and inner conflicts. We see sep­
aration between peoples leading to prejudice, violence, and war. We see separa­
tion between people and God – forgetfulness, meaninglessness, infidelity, sin.

None of this is what God intends for people. The Genesis story shows that. The
biblical story of Adam and Eve and their descendants is not history but the point
and counterpoint of history. God puts the pair into the garden to live in harmony
as part of nature, whole and happy, and to live as companions in the caring pres­
ence of God. Yet they take the forbidden step of defy­ing and distorting nature, are
torn by remorse, accuse one another, and must hide from God’s presence. Sin
grows as the generations pass.

God still seeks to achieve the original intention of creation. The incarnation of
God’s Word as Jesus shows the lengths to which God goes: taking the
destructiveness of human sin into self in order to destroy it. Now God and we work together in a mission of reconciliation, a synergy to bring together people and nature, to restore shattered selves, to bring people together, to unite all creation with God.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5.17-20, NRSV)

That is our mission: to be a reconciling community.

Several years ago a social worker in the parish to which I belong asked if I would serve as a buddy to a man with AIDS. I agreed, and soon began to visit Jerry regularly. Jerry was about my age. He had married, on the advice of a confessor who assured him that his homosexual interests would cease after marriage. Two children and a divorce later, Jerry finally accepted his sexual orientation as gay. He became active in Dignity/Seattle, sang in the Gay Men’s Chorus, and in anger left the Catholic Church following Cardinal Ratzinger’s letter on homosexuality.

When I met him, Jerry had gone beyond anger. He had come home to die. His parents, farm folk, couldn’t understand the sexual issues but took him in because they loved him — he was their son. Both he and they agreed to be interviewed on television, the first people in Spokane to be publicly identified with AIDS. But his parents’ parish priest was afraid to visit him. He came, months later, after I called and insisted, but was too fearful to go beyond the hospital-room door.

Jerry and I became good friends in the six or seven months I knew him. I saw him weekly. We talked about many topics — illness and death, sexuality, gays and the Church, God and Jesus. We prayed together. I promised to be present when he died, to help his parents.

During Holy Week Jerry and I talked for what would prove to be the last time. I gently offered to bring him eucharist for Easter. He replied with words that lodged within me and continue to ache: “Thank you . . . but it no longer holds symbolic significance for me. The Church has made it abundantly clear — I’m not wanted.”

Just after Easter I received an early morning phone call from Doris, Jerry’s mother. The doctor gave him just a few hours. Would I come? After cancelling classes, I went to their home. The family was eating breakfast, and I stayed with Jerry, now unresponsive but struggling to breathe. I took his hand, spoke to him, told him he had fought long enough — that it was time to entrust himself to God, who was ready to welcome him. I prayed the Lord’s Prayer and absolution. Jerry began to breathe more easily but ever more shallowly. I called for his family to gather around his bed and Jerry slipped away.

The parish priest came to the funeral . . .
We are accustomed to looking at sacraments from the perspective of individuals. In the case of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, we have, over the last thirty years, begun to move from seeing that sacrament as the source of forgiveness for our sins to seeing it as the church being with us in our ongoing struggle to be transformed into the likeness of Christ and, if necessary, as the church reaching out to reconcile those who have, by serious sin, been alienated from the church. We have come to recognize that the sacrament is more concerned with reconciliation than forgiveness. But what does a church do that has failed in its ministry of reconciliation? How does it admit its guilt? To whom does it confess? From whom does it seek absolution?

The Church of Sinners is a Sinful Church

Sinfulness and the need for conversion are true not only of us individually but as a church as well. Our church is not only a church of sinners but a sinful church, constantly called to conversion and reconciliation.

Vatican Council II was the first council in the history of the church to admit the church's sinfulness and to commit the church to conversion. In the words of the bishops at Vatican Council II, the pilgrim church moving through history "carries the figure of this world which is passing."1 "The church, containing sinners in its own bosom, is at one and the same time holy and always in need of purification and it pursues unceasingly penance and renewal."2 "It does not cease from renewing itself until, through the cross, it arrives at the light which knows no setting."3 "While in the most blessed Virgin the church has already attained the perfection by which it is without stain or wrinkle, the faithful continue to strive by overcoming sin to grow in holiness."4 "And since all of us commit many faults, we are in continuous need of the mercy of God and our daily prayer has to be: 'And forgive us our trespasses.'"5 The church itself is called to a "change of heart."6 At points the bishops approach an explicit confession of the church's sins, though only in general terms — sins against unity, for example.7

In an Apostolic Letter in November 1994, Pope John Paul II called the church to an examination of conscience "As the Third Millennium Draws Near" — the title of his letter.8 In speaking of "sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion,"9 he mentioned not only sins against unity, sins

---

2 Lumen gentium, 8. See also Unitatis redintegratio, 4, 6
3 Lumen gentium, 9
4 Lumen gentium, 65
5 Lumen gentium, 40
6 Unitatis redintegratio, 7
7 Unitatis redintegratio, 3, 7
8 See Origins 24, no. 24 (24 November 1994), 401-416
9 Tertio millennio adveniente, 34
which have wounded and divided the church, but also "intolerance and even
the use of violence in the service of truth,\textsuperscript{10} not only in the past but also in the
present.

Though Pope John Paul is clearer than the Council in admitting present as well
as past sin, he is more hesitant than the Council to admit that the church itself is
sinful. He is always careful to speak of the sins of the members of the church.
(How there can be a church without members or a church unaffected by its mem­
bers' sinfulness, I cannot imagine.) Nor is he specific in his examination of the
church's conscience. He does not mention the crusades, castrati, colonialism,
clericalism, Jews, Galileo, slavery, witch-burning, racism, sexism, the drive for
power and control. He makes a point of mentioning cultural conditioning and
other extenuating circumstances which diminish responsibility, much as you and I
make excuses for our wrongdoing. His confession is less than complete.

Nevertheless, he calls us corporately to an examination of conscience and he
himself gives us an example. Recognizing that the form sin takes will vary from
one local church to another, he realizes that it will be up to the church in each
culture and society to recognize and resist the evil that surrounds and infects it.

---

Penitent Church as Reconciling Community

Recognition of evil comes before resistance to it and before the possibility of
reconciliation. What is true of us individually is likewise true of the church: until
we can acknowledge that we have sinned and then turn to God, there is no
hope of reconciliation. But there is something more: unless the church walks
the path of conversion, it cannot be a sign of reconciliation to the world, nor
can it be a context within which people seek to walk the path of conversion
and reconciliation. Only a penitent church can be a reconciling community, and
only in a penitent and reconciling community will the conversion and move­
ment toward reconciliation of individuals reach their proper goal.

The most difficult part of our effort to renew the sacrament of penance and
reconciliation lies in achieving a genuine and credible experience of a penitent
church. This is the precondition for a reconciled and reconciling community
that mediates the experience of a merciful, compassionate, and loving God.
Such a church, like Jesus, can reach out to sinners with love rather than judg­
ment, with welcome rather than condition.

Surveys suggest that the majority of Catholics do not perceive their church as
a reconciling community. Bishops voiced similar convictions at the 1983 Synod
on penance and reconciliation: the church cannot be a reconciling force in
society if it cannot reach out to its own marginal and alienated members. Nor
can the church convincingly call people to conversion and reconciliation unless
it is clearly set on the same path.

Conversion and reconciliation are inseparable. Without conversion, a turning, a
change of heart, there is no real reconciliation nor any possibility of being a
force for reconciliation. So long as the church projects the illusion of perfection,
it is in denial of its own sinfulness and incapable of being a fully open channel of God's mercy and grace.

The church usually admits sin only when it is historically distant or esoterically abstract — the medieval persecution of Jews and 'witches,' the prosecution of Galileo, the sixteenth-century abuses that precipitated the Reformation, the early twentieth-century decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission — but when it confesses its present sinfulness, it shows that it lives only by God's purifying grace. Only a converting community, one that recognizes and struggles to overcome the collective sin that has taken root in it, knows how to welcome and work with penitent sinners [and to reconcile those who are alienated]. A disincarnate, transcendent, and perfect institution, standing apart from its members, may channel an abstract forgiveness and grace, but it is unlikely to be a community that supports conversion and promotes reconciliation.  

The sinful church is holy, not of itself but because of the grace of Christ's Holy Spirit that is its source of life. To the extent that it relies on grace, the church is able to stand in solidarity with the sinful and the oppressed and to proclaim the message of reconciliation as it seeks conversion. To the extent that it relies on grace, the church is even able to seek the forgiveness of those whom it has offended and alienated and to bring about reconciliation. To the extent that it relies on grace, it can be a reconciling community for humanity's and God's sakes. And as reconciling community, it can be a call to reconciliation for its members and for the world.

The Reconciling Church

A penitent and reconciling church does not cease to proclaim the gospel or to call sinners to repentance. But because it admits it has erred, it is less sure of itself, less self-righteous, more ready to admit that it can fail both in its understanding of the gospel and in its practice of the gospel. At the same time it remains convinced that the Spirit of God will not abandon it, that God will not cease to challenge and to support the church in its own ongoing conversion.

A church committed to conversion can credibly challenge people to see the sin in their lives that they may be so accustomed to that they do not notice it: pre-occupation with self and self-fulfillment at the expense of others; or neglect of self to the point of self-effacement; a sense of value based on work and achievement; the lack of self-esteem; the drive for comfort. Such a church challenges itself to see its own failure to listen and learn from those who disagree, to value and benefit from the gifts of all its members, to avoid language and policy that exclude any of its members.

A reconciling church seeks the restoration of relationships, not the admission that it was right and others wrong. It does not sit in judgment, even when it feels deeply that the behavior of individuals or of a group is a gross violation of

---

what it stands for. It does not judge, because it knows that it will be judged. It leaves judgment to God, realizing that God has a much greater investment in the cosmos and its outcome than does the church. It seeks to be sensitive to differences and inclusive of all.

This may sound like the old adage “Hate the sin but love the sinner.” It is not. The flaw in that adage is the attitude of self-righteous judgment. Such an attitude assumes the ability to do what only God can do – judging the hearts and minds of people. Instead, a reconciling community accepts and welcomes even while it protests the hurt that it feels or recognizes. In other words, it does not say, “You are sinning; stop!” but rather “You are hurting me” or “You are hurting your sisters and brothers.” It accepts and welcomes the person and leaves the judgment of sin to God. In the terms of traditional theology, it can identify “grave matter” – harm that is done – but it can make no judgment on “sufficient reflection” and “full consent,” without which there is no sin.

A reconciling community is a place of hospitality that attempts to provide even now an experience of what God will accomplish. In the second eucharistic prayer for Masses for Reconciliation we pray: “In that new world where the fullness of your peace will be revealed, gather people of every race, language, and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet.” A reconciling community strives to realize that here and now to the extent possible. Those on the way out of the church and those on the way back in, as well as those who remain, whether comfortable or ill-at-ease, are equally welcomed and accepted. The weak, defenseless, and voiceless of society find a haven, a defender, and a partner in seeking justice and peace.

In particular, a reconciling church values those who are ill-at-ease in its midst. These are the ones whose consciences are perhaps more sensitive than others. Because they are uncomfortable with the current state of affairs, they may well be the ones to whom God speaks of the new directions that the church is called to take. Like us, the church may well learn more from those with whom it disagrees and who criticize it than it can from those who agree.

The question was posed earlier regarding what a church does that has failed in its ministry of reconciliation – how it admits its guilt, to whom it confesses, how it does penance, from whom it seeks absolution. The answer should now be clear: it seeks reconciliation. It halts the spiral of sin, tries to rebuild relationships, seeks healing of its disease, struggles to recover from its addiction. It admits its guilt and confesses its sin to those it has offended and alienated. It asks their forgiveness, their absolution. In reconciling, it is reconciled.

Perhaps some of us, to this point, when we have heard the word “church” have thought of pope or bishops or priests or pastoral ministers. But all of us are church. All of us have sinned as individuals and all of us share responsibility for the church’s sin. All of us are likewise responsible for making the church a reconciling community.

The responsibility for a reconciling community does belong to all of us. All of us share in the power to forgive, the power of the keys given to Peter. As Saint Augustine put it:

... if this was said to Peter as an individual, then only Peter did it. He died and left the scene, so who binds, who looses? I dare to say that we ourselves have those same keys. Should I go on to say that we
bind and we loose? Yes, and you yourselves bind and you yourselves loose. For whoever is bound is kept isolated from your company, and the person who is separated from your company is bound by you. And when reconciled that person is loosed by you, for it is by you that God is beseeched on the individual's behalf. If we reach out in grace-filled love to those who are estranged from the church, the church is in fact a reconciling community. If our gesture is accepted, then reconciliation has begun, even if disagreements remain. Jerry was undoubtedly reconciled to the church, because he was willing to forgive the church. He and Cardinal Ratzinger continued to disagree, but God will resolve that argument in time if we commit ourselves to loving one another.

What is crucial is to realize that the responsibility for reconciliation is one that belongs to all of us: "We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5.18-20)

But the church that people know best is that in the faith communities of which we are members. For that reason, the context for renewing the sacrament of penance is the parish committed to conversion and reconciliation. We cannot call individuals to conversion and reconciliation unless our parishes provide a favored place for those who live on the edges of society and church. A penitent church committed to the work of reconciliation is the context for experiencing, understanding and celebrating the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation.


History and the Reform of Penance

James Dallen

What is true of us as individuals is true of the church as well. Our experience and understanding of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation has changed in the course of our lifetimes. The church's experience and understanding of its mission of sacramental reconciliation has also changed over the centuries. Neither we nor the church have yet reached perfection, but we have changed and are still in the process of changing, with God's reign in our lives and in human history our goal.

It has been said that those who are ignorant of history have to repeat its mistakes. It has also been said that all we learn from history is that we don't learn. Both could be said of the history of this sacrament. Nevertheless, the first task of the committee responsible for drafting the revised penance ritual after the council was to survey the history of the sacrament. Ten years later, the International Theological Commission likewise reflected on that history in preparing a report for the bishops who gathered for the 1983 Synod on penance and reconciliation. Even Pope John Paul II, in his 1984 postsynodal document, acknowledged that the sacrament had changed over time.

This recognition of history and of historical change is a new phenomenon, and not only in discussions of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. Early in this century theologians who studied and discussed such historical development were suspected of a vaguely defined heresy called "modernism" because they dared speak of change in the church's sacraments. Now a Council calls for such investigation and a pope acknowledges that change has taken place.

The long, convoluted history of the sacrament makes a Russian novel read like a fable by Aesop. The sacrament has changed so much over time that at times it is hard to recognize the sacrament as we have known it when we look back into some periods of history. But just as it is helpful to look back into our personal histories in order to understand ourselves better, so it is helpful to look back at the sacrament's origins and history.

1 Unfortunately, the preliminary documents and the drafts of the ritual have not yet been made available for analysis.
3 See Reconciliation and Penance (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference n.d.), e.g., no. 30
4 In the Constitution on the Liturgy, the bishops at Vatican Council II stated: "In order that healthy tradition can be preserved while yet allowing room for legitimate development, thorough investigation - theological, historical, and pastoral - of the individual parts of the liturgy up for revision is always to be the first step" (no. 23).
The Origins of the Sacrament

The starting-point or institution of the sacraments is looked at very differently now than it was even fifty years ago. Then we were likely to think that Jesus had given the apostles detailed instructions on how to celebrate each of the sacraments. Some people may even have thought that St. Joseph built the first confessional! Now, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes it, we are more likely to realize that the mysteries of Christ's life were the foundations of the sacraments and that the Spirit at work in the church has built on those foundations to give us the sacraments as we know them today.5

For the origins of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, then, we do not so much look to a specific incident in the life of Jesus as to the pattern of his dealings with sinners. He reached out to them, proclaiming the good news of God's love and readiness to forgive. He told stories of a God who risked everything to search for a missing member of the flock, who was overjoyed to find a worthless sinner, who threw a banquet to welcome back someone who would likely wander off again. He invited sinners to share his vision of a God like that and he lived the vision by associating with them and inviting them to share his table. In Jesus we see the compassion of God – and nowhere more clearly than in his dying and rising and gifting us with God's Holy Spirit.

The gospels recall several instances when the Twelve failed to get the point. Peter was particularly obtuse: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"6 The disciples did little better after Easter. They knew that corrupt disciples were dangerous, that they had to be confronted and, sometimes, even expelled from the community. What to do then was the problem. How often to forgive and even whom to forgive, if at all, were matters of controversy.

This controversy left its mark on the New Testament documents. Many, if not most, early communities had little tolerance for sin and had politics to deal with serious sinners.7 Most communities represented in the New Testament literature were apparently ready to welcome back those who repented. However, we do not know how the churches regulated this practice or how the invitation and welcome took place. As near as we can determine, the only condition was repentance.

Still, even these communities were often reluctant to reconcile serious sinners. Times of persecution made it hard to trust someone who had betrayed the baptismal commitment to the Lord by serious sin. Would such a person likewise betray the members of Christ's church if arrested? Compassion was one thing, the instinct for self-preservation another.

5 See nos. 1115-1116.
6 Matthew 18.21. The NRSV translates the Greek adelphos as "member of the church."
7 Matthew 18.15-18 is the most detailed. The Letter to the Hebrews regards repentance as impossible in at least some cases (Hebrews 6.4-8; 10.26-31; 12.16-17) and the Johannine community was reluctant even to pray for serious sinners (1 John 5.14-17). The mysterious saying about the sin against the Spirit is still puzzling (Mark 3.29; Matthew 12.32; Luke 12.10).
The Development of Ancient Penance

Near the beginning of the third century, at about the time the catechumenate developed and for similar reasons, an “order of penitents” came into being to protect the church’s wholeness and holiness. The catechumenate supported the conversion of those who were seeking baptism as members of the faithful. This institution recognized the risks both to the church and to the individuals concerned if they were too easily let into the church. It was important to be sure they were ready. The order of penitents operated on similar premises, though it dealt with those who had already been baptized and who now needed special help to resume Christian living. Those undergoing conversion – whether first or second – needed to be segregated and ministered to intensely. This ministry was required for a lengthy period, as conversion took time. Only when their conversion was clearly maturing could catechumens and penitents be welcomed among the faithful.

Individuals entered the order of penitents in a public ceremony where they were assured of the community’s prayer and support. Though we do not know how they spent their time in the order of penitents, we do know that the community continued to pray for them publicly at Sunday worship. When their conversion had progressed sufficiently, they were welcomed back by the bishop and community.

Yet Peter, in the person of the bishops, continued to want limits on mercy and compassion. Practice varied from place to place, but in many churches bishops refused to reconcile those guilty of such sins as apostasy. Some people even denied that the church could do so. As controversies were resolved, an elaborate liturgy of reconciliation culminating in the bishop’s laying on of hands gave public witness that the individuals were reconciled with the faithful because they had once more learned how to undergo conversion.

But even when compassion won out over condemnation, Peter, in the person of the bishops, insisted on forgiveness only once in a lifetime. Former penitents, like convicted felons today, often had lifelong restrictions placed on them, including being henceforth ineligible to enter penance and be reconciled.

Lest this sound worse than it was, we should note that entrance into the order of penitents was originally only for those guilty of major sins of infidelity to God, the church, to neighbor, to spouse. Most Christians were forbidden to enter penance, because it was only for those in need of intensive care. Though the order of penitents is impressive, it played hardly any role in the religious life of the majority of Christians. Most continued or resumed the ongoing conversion of the baptismal life without it.

Cultural factors focused attention on bodily behavior rather than on introspective feelings, so self-denial, while reaching out to God in prayer and to neighbor in service, was the solution to everyday sin. People felt the community’s support through other Christians’ example, loving concern, and prayer, with the eucharist having a privileged place in maintaining them in the ways of conversion.

After the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century, most converts entered the church without the careful formation that had characterized the catechumenate. As a consequence, the sense of community and the recognition of informal
community support diminished, as did the sense of a call to lifelong conversion. Increasingly regulated by law, the order of penitents became something that people were compelled to enter for an ever-growing number of sins.

The Eastern churches kept more of the New Testament spirit of compassion for sinners. There penance carried less of a public stigma, and those unwilling to enter the order of penitents were often permitted to do penance quietly, with the help of a spiritual director.

Still, the only form of private penance in the ancient period was for those who were dying. In an emergency adaptation of official penance, they were received as penitents and immediately reconciled. This adaptation shows that pastoral compassion motivated the official institution and that it was flexible enough to adapt. In time deathbed penance became popular and common. The fact that most people hoped to receive penance before dying is a sign that penance, conversion, was coming to be seen as something that could be received ritually when it was impossible to live it.

By the sixth and seventh centuries the order of penitents was almost nonexistent, with most people avoiding it like the plague. But outgrowths of it continued into the Middle Ages: some pious layfolk became conversi, dedicated to a more religious way of life as quasi-monks; many people adopted a penitential way of life temporarily, going on pilgrimage; more people became penitents for the period of Lent.

In the church of the first centuries, emphasis on the virtue of penance or conversion was common, but the full liturgy of the sacrament of penance or conversion was rarely celebrated. People who learned how to convert in the catechumenate were expected to do so for a lifetime. If they lost their way, the order of penitents was a second chance to take on the spirit of conversion. The ministry it offered had as its goal helping them to take their place again in a converting community. In other words, ancient penance was social and ecclesial in its nature and effects.

In an era when the church's mission was primarily understood as presenting an experience of holiness in the midst of a society of sinners, penance was geared toward maintaining the church's holiness and wholeness. Responsibility for supporting both everyday conversion and formal conversion in the order of penitents belonged to the community as a whole. It was integrated within community worship as part of the church's mission of service to God and neighbor.

The Shape of Penance in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages focus shifted from the conversion and reconciliation of the faithful to the forgiveness of sins. To compensate for this narrowed vision, ministries and rituals that had formerly been extraordinary became more common and were extended to cover more sins. As old forms died, new ones were born.

As the most striking form of penance in the ancient church was the order of penitents, the most striking in the medieval church was a new element that would eventually lead to our modern private confession. Anglo-Saxon and
Celtic monks had borrowed an informal penance from Eastern monasticism. Ministry here took the form of spiritual direction and counseling. As these monks worked to re-Christianize the continent after the barbarian invasions and the Dark Ages, they extended this practice to the laity. Sinners were no longer segregated into an identifiable group. They received no ministry in public liturgy. There was no ritual of official reconciliation. But this new aid to conversion was always available for all converting sinners—it could be repeated and it applied to all sins.

When extended to laity who had barely been evangelized, the monastic practice changed. It had begun as a manifestation of conscience to enable spiritual guidance on continuing conversion and spiritual growth. It soon came to have a ritual value of its own: a confession of sins so that the confessor could advise on how to make satisfaction for those sins. In a one-on-one therapy session, the confessor listened to the recital of sins and helped the penitent make an examination of conscience. He pointed out how the sinner was in God's debt and in danger of punishment. He advised on how to make compensation so that the sinner would once more be in God's good grace.

Bishops often condemned the practice. They tried to restore canonical penance and tried to ban the penitentials, books which monk-confessors used to determine how much penance a given sin was worth. Unable to return people to the practice of the order of penitents, the bishops eventually approved this private penance, provided the confession was made to a priest and provided the priest gave absolution declaring forgiveness. The penitent then fulfilled the required penalties after the confession and the blessing which we have come to call "absolution."

Confession and absolution continued to develop through the Middle Ages and by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the modern system of penance is recognizable. The growing importance of confession and absolution is evidence of the different perspective. Sin and its forgiveness were a preoccupation. Individuals purged themselves of guilt through confession. They received forgiveness through absolution. The penalties prescribed for their sins gradually lessened, since forgiveness had already been received. The role of the priest was paramount, although confession to laypeople continued, especially when no priest was available. Confession was not only repeated but gradually became more frequent. Only a few sinners had been allowed into the order of penitents and only relatively serious offenses required canonical penance, but creative imagination discovered new possibilities for sin when there were repeated opportunities for forgiveness.

Another new form also developed, a ritual as communal as confession was individual. Beginning in about the ninth century, public declarations of forgiveness—general absolutions—were given in the liturgy of the hours and at Mass. These were especially common during Lent and on the few Sundays in the year when people were likely to receive communion. Either private confession or general absolution enabled them to be purified and ready for holy communion.

Although these general absolutions remained common through the fourteenth century, by the fifteenth century only private confession survived of the many forms of reconciliation and forgiveness. Theologians developed the concept of sacramentality in such a way that only confession and absolution fit the definition of sacrament. General absolution, pilgrimage, the remnant of the order of
penitents, and all the others survived. However, they were seen as means of forgiveness for venial sins and as aids to a devout life — as sacramentals, not the sacrament.

When the Protestant reforms challenged the practice of private confession and absolution in the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent reaffirmed it. Before long the prayers that provided a full liturgy in the bare-minimum community of priest and penitent dropped out, highlighting confession and absolution. Private confession to the priest and the priest's absolution were the sacramental means of forgiving serious sins committed after baptism.

How Penance is Changing in Our Times

The bare-bones ritual of private confession, hardly a shadow of the medieval form, grew in frequency through the centuries of the Counter-Reformation as communion gradually became more frequent. Frequency peaked in the 1940s and 1950s and then began to decline. Already in the early 1940s Pope Pius XII was speaking of a crisis of sin and penance because fewer people were going to confession, and he was complaining that theologians were criticizing the practice of devotional confession.8

The reasons for the decline are complex. The context was in part a growing realization of being members of the Body of Christ and a recognition that more frequent communion itself supported people's growth into that Body. Frequent repetition of the ritual of penance seemed increasingly irrelevant to people's efforts to live the Christian life. This was particularly the case as they rediscovered an older understanding of the sacrament which stressed conversion rather than forgiveness.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, theologians reached consensus that the sacrament in the early church had a broader purpose than forgiveness of individuals' sins. They realized that it had been geared more to reconciliation of serious sinners with the church. The rediscovery of the communal character of the sacrament led in Europe to the reinvention of communal celebrations of the sacrament, services of community worship within which individuals could make their confessions and receive absolution or within which absolution was given to the whole gathered community. Efforts were also made to make private confession once more an experience of shared prayer.

Vatican Council II called for a reform of the sacrament to make its social and communal nature and effects clear.9 Scholarly studies combined with grassroots renewal provided the foundation. We will look at this twentieth-century reform in our next section to get a clearer sense of how the sacrament is changing in our times.

8 "Devotional confession" is the celebration of the sacrament when the individual is unaware of grave sins that make reconciliation necessary. In such instances, the celebration is an expression of personal devotion or of a desire for support in continued spiritual growth.

9 See Sacrosanctum concilium, 72.
Conclusion

A few comments on the names given to the sacrament in the different historical periods can serve as a summary of this history. In the ancient church, *penance* was the means of restoring sinners to the community of the faithful. *Poenitentia*, the Latin word used for the scriptural *metanoia*, meant conversion. The order of penitents formed and supported those seeking to return to the faithful after they had ceased to follow the Christian way of life. Emphasis was more on behavior than feelings and the experience of community provided the context for reform. The wholeness and holiness of the community was the primary concern.

The medieval church became more individualistic and introspective. Feelings of sorrow for sin were given more attention in a context where society was at least outwardly Christian. Sinners were dealt with individually. Since emphasis was on the admission of specific sins and the expression of sorrow for them, the name *confession* became common and continued to be used into our own times. The private ritual of confession and absolution was a means for individuals to receive forgiveness of their sins and move toward holiness — to be put right with God and assured of salvation.

Today we are more inclined to put the emphasis less on what the sinner has done — sin — and is not doing — penance and confession — and more on what God does — reconciliation. God's compassion reaches out to reconcile sinners, calling them to take their place again among the faithful. We therefore speak of the sacrament as the sacrament of *reconciliation*. The forgiveness of individuals' sins, part of the process of conversion, is set into the context of God's action creating a reconciling community. The sacrament is a sacrament of conversion and reconciliation.
Twentieth-Century Reform of Penance

James Dallen

The past history of the sacrament has contributed to its present shape and is the foundation for its future. That will be our focus as we look at the direction the sacrament seems to be taking on the eve of the third millennium. Twentieth-century theological developments have set that direction and hold the promise of making a major contribution toward meeting the church's needs in the twenty-first century. However, timidity in implementing those developments in pastoral practice leaves the situation uncertain: will the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation be a vital force in the life of the church in coming years, or will the sacrament become as marginal in people's lives as the sacrament of anointing has been for centuries?

Theological Developments in the Twentieth Century

The practice of penance in the Middle Ages shifted from a focus on the community's wholeness and holiness to a focus on the individual's forgiveness and sanctification. This focus on individual forgiveness and sanctification remained constant until the twentieth century. Only with the retrieval of forgotten truth through historical study did a transformation begin that led to theological renewal and ritual reform.

Research into the sacrament's history began in the sixteenth century. In many ways, confession had been the basic sacrament of the medieval church, a means of being set right with God and of relieving people's anxiety over individual salvation. Not surprisingly, confession became a focal point of Catholic-Protestant debate and theologians began to investigate its history for polemical purposes. Protestant historians tried to prove that private confession was a sinister invention of the medieval church. Catholic historians tried to prove that it had existed from the apostolic age. When Catholic theologians eventually became aware that the practice of the ancient church had been different from contemporary practice, they felt compelled to explain away differences for fear that private confession would otherwise be regarded as an indefensible medieval innovation.

The chilling effect of the modernist scare halted the development of Catholic theology in the early twentieth century. In the case of penance studies, historical findings were forced to fit dogmatic interpretations. But the 1922 publication
of an extensive study of penance in the ancient church required theologians to reassess their positions. Over the next thirty years they came to consensus that ancient penance had been social and communal in character, oriented to reconciling sinners with the church and thereby with God. In other words, the sacrament’s primary purpose was not the forgiveness of individuals’ sins but the return of penitent sinners to the faithful, thus making the church whole once again. Restoration to God’s grace came through returning to the church’s communion, since the church is the sacrament of humanity’s community with God and the sacrament of salvation.

In the 1950s, in response to perceived pastoral needs, communal celebrations of the sacrament began to develop in France and Belgium and then in The Netherlands. The initial motivation seems to have been to prepare for sacramental celebration people whose involvement in the church was largely limited to performing their “Easter duty” and to help children prepare for the celebration. These efforts were subsequently approved by bishops in several countries.

This grassroots reform saw the emergence of the first new forms of penance in a millennium. They were of three types:

• confession services – private confessions within a communal liturgy;
• fully communal liturgies – a general confession of sinfulness by the community and absolution by the priest without specific individual confession of sins;
• penitential celebrations – a general confession of sinfulness but no absolution.

Since by then most theologians had come to regard the social and communal nature and effect of the sacrament as primary, theologians tended to evaluate the new practice positively. However, official reaction, sometimes by bishops but more often by Rome, was generally negative. This was especially the case when absolution was not preceded by individual confession or when, in the case of children, the practice led to delaying first confession until after first communion. The authorization of absolution without confession had expanded during the World Wars, but it was not officially approved except in life-threatening emergency situations. This was because the Council of Trent’s defense of confession and absolution seemed to have insisted that individual confession and absolution were essential to the sacrament as intended by Christ.

---

Vatican II and the Reform of Penance

These theological developments led to a recognition of the need to reform the sacramental liturgy. In 1963, in the Constitution on the Liturgy, the bishops of Vatican Council II called for a reform that would clearly show the social and ecclesial nature and effects of the sacrament. Related reforms came first: the reform of the discipline of fasting, abstinence, and personal penance; and the reform of

---

Bartholome F. Xiberta, *Clavis ecclesiae: De ordine absolutionis sacramentalis ad reconciliationem cum ecclesia* (Roma: Collegium Sancti Alberti 1922)

Sacrosanctum concilium, 72, and declaration accompanying the final draft; see also Lumen gentium, 11, and Presbyterorum ordinis, 5

Paul VI, *Paenitemini*, 1966
indulgences. At least in retrospect, both of these reforms appear to be efforts to revitalize the sense of conversion as an essential part of the Christian life and to keep it in clear relation to participation in the church’s mission.

Despite the mandate and clear principles for liturgical reform, behind-the-scenes controversy impeded the preparation of the new ritual. Part of this was turf protection by Vatican offices, but, more fundamentally, it was a clash of different understandings of the church and its mission. Such disagreement prevented publication of the draft ritual, completed in 1969, which had allowed extensive use of general absolution. Then the June 1972 Pastoral Norms of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith grudgingly permitted communal celebrations, though restricting absolution without previous confession. The new rite was redrafted to correspond with the 1972 Norms and to take advantage of the experience of other liturgical reforms.

After extensive study and revision by Roman congregations, the Ordo Paenitentiae (Rite of Penance) was promulgated on December 2, 1973, and published in February 1974. The English translation was completed and approved in 1975 and went into effect in the United States in 1977.

The Rite of Penance and Its Implementation

The introduction to this portion of the reformed Roman Ritual describes the church’s understanding of penance and its ministry and gives norms for celebration. This introduction is especially important as it outlines the doctrinal and theological understanding on which the ritual is based. It is key to understanding and using the ritual forms. While elements of ancient and medieval understandings rest uneasily side by side, the overall orientation clearly responds to the Council’s request that the sacramental liturgy more clearly express the social and ecclesial nature and effects of the sacrament.

Chapter I gives the rite for reconciling individual penitents, a much-enhanced liturgy for the familiar private confession. This liturgy celebrated by priest and penitent provides an experience of prayer within which the penitent expresses repentance and confesses sinfulness and the priest declares reconciliation. Most significant is that it is indeed a liturgy, the church’s communal prayer worshipping God, something that was not easily recognized in private confession as it had been practiced. An obvious addition is a Liturgy of the Word, even though it is only a brief scripture reading and is labeled optional. However, the overall climate of the service is clearly one of shared prayer.

---

4 Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, 1967
5 This sometimes came into the open; for example, in 1966 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith criticized theological and pastoral emphasis on the social function of reconciliation with the church.
6 *Rite of Penance (RP)* 1-11
7 RP 12-40
8 RP 41-47
Chapter II provides a rite for reconciling several penitents with individual confession and absolution. This is a communal celebration much like the French confession service. It is a fully developed community celebration, with a gathering rite, liturgy of the word, and community engagement in prayer, action, and praise. In the context of this community liturgy, individuals have the opportunity to approach a priest privately to confess their sins and receive absolution.

Chapter III gives the rite for reconciling several penitents with general confession and absolution. Like the Dutch communal celebration, this form is fully communal. In other words, it lacks the individual's specific confession of sins and does not provide for the individual absolution of the penitents. Instead, the community as a whole confesses its sinfulness and absolution is declared publicly.

Chapter IV provides additional texts and options for use in celebration. Appendix I gives formulas for absolving from censures and irregularities. Appendix II provides regulations and nine models for penitential celebrations. These communal celebrations without absolution are intended to provide support for conversion still in process and are labeled "nonsacramental" because they have no ritual of reconciliation. Appendix III is a model examination of conscience.

Overall, the *Rite of Penance* reflects current theological consensus, although compromises with the Counter-Reformation outlook are also evident. Pastoral implementation has been hesitant, in large part because church officials have not backed it wholeheartedly. In other words, the controversies which surrounded its preparation have continued, much as controversy marked the development of the sacrament from the beginning. Beyond that, the hopes of Pope Paul VI that the new rite would draw people back to frequent celebration have not been realized. In fact, the numbers of confessions have continued to decline in most places.

During the pontificate of John Paul II, efforts made to revitalize the sacrament have primarily taken the form of re-emphasizing individual confession. Pope John Paul stresses that both Christ and the penitent have the right to the personal encounter that individual confession makes possible. He has been critical of communal celebrations where there is no individual confession and has consistently downplayed the significance of community celebrations. He has also tightened the restrictions on general absolution and has prohibited postponing first confession until after first communion.

The negative evaluation of communal celebrations influenced the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which reverts to speaking of confession rather than reconciliation. Many participants in the 1983 Synod of Bishops (on "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church") took issue with what appeared to be regression from Vatican II reforms. However, John Paul's 1984 post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, reiterates his emphasis on the

---

9 RP 48-59  
10 RP 60-66  
11 RP 67-216  
12 See, for example, *Redemptor hominis*, 20  
13 C.I.C., can. 914  
14 For an analysis, see my "Church Authority and the Sacrament of Penance: The Synod of Bishops" *Worship* 58 (1984) 194-214
"profoundly personal character" of the sacrament and Trent’s requirement of individual confession. The social and ecclesial dimension, expressed especially in communal celebrations, receives little attention in the papal document, although penance’s relationship to the church’s mission receives some attention.\textsuperscript{15}

---

### Basic Elements of Reform

Three trends characteristic of the twentieth-century theology and ministry of the sacrament have been incorporated into the documents of Vatican II and the 1973 Rite of Penance:

- the nature and effects of the sacrament as social and ecclesial;
- the sacrament as an act of ecclesial worship;
- sacramental celebration in relation to a life of personal conversion, which includes responsibility for the church’s mission of reconciliation.

Their contrast with the late-medieval and Counter-Reformation forms of the sacrament makes these trends a source of tension in a time of transition and also indicates areas for work in the future. Continuing in the direction they set is crucial to meeting the needs of the church as we enter the twenty-first century.

### Social and Ecclesial Character

Once it was rediscovered that reconciliation with the church is an effect of the sacrament, a theological consensus developed within a few decades, was expressed pastorally in celebration and ministry, and was officially accepted at Vatican II. Theologians concluded that penitents experience God’s reconciling love through experiencing acceptance by the faithful rather than through experiencing interior sorrow for sin\textsuperscript{16} and both the Council and the Rite of Penance appear to take the same position.\textsuperscript{17}

The Rite of Penance’s preference for reconciliation as the name for the sacrament highlights both divine initiative and human response in the context of church community and incorporates the new theological orientations. In the Rite of Penance the mystery of reconciliation is the key to understanding God’s work of redemption in Christ, sacramental conversion, the church’s life and worship, and the church’s ministry to repentant sinners.\textsuperscript{18}

---

\textsuperscript{15} For an analysis, see my “Reconciliatio et Paenitentia: The Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation,” Worship 59 (1985) 98-116

\textsuperscript{16} In the terms of scholastic theology, reconciliation with the church is the \textit{res et sacramentum} of penance and reconciliation – the first effect of the sacrament whereby the ultimate effect, reconciliation with God, is experienced by the penitent. In other words, people experience God’s reconciling action by experiencing acceptance by the faithful.

\textsuperscript{17} Though the Council correlated reconciliation with the church and reconciliation with God (\textit{Lumen gentium}, 11; \textit{Presbyterorum ordinis}, 3), it took no position on priority, since there was no theological consensus on that point. It did, however, stress the social and ecclesial character of both sin and conversion. The Rite of Penance is clearer on this and subsequent documents, such as that of the International Theological Commission approved by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is explicit.

\textsuperscript{18} RP 1-7
The *Rite of Penance* emphasizes the communal and ecclesial character of the sacrament, its celebrants (ministers and penitents), and its liturgy. The same outlook is evident in remarks on sacramental celebration, the nonsacramental penitential celebrations, and adaptations which local churches may make.

In the *Rite of Penance* the church is understood as a reconciling community. The church is where God and humanity are reconciled and the sacraments celebrate this. The history of God's dealings with humanity shows that the purpose of penance is reconciliation with God and church. The absolution formulas express this clearly. The penitent's role is ecclesial and the church itself is penitent. This is clearest in communal celebrations, although the church itself is renewed even when an individual is reconciled. Laity participate in planning and preparing celebrations and are agents of reconciliation.

A specific reform spoken of in the Council was the restoration of the ancient gesture of the laying on of hands. In the celebration of the sacrament, the imposition of hands symbolizes reconciliation with the church and the restoration of the penitent sinner to the community where the Spirit of Jesus is active. It is by this renewal of grace through incorporation into the Church that sinners are reconciled with God. Penitents are again part of the Easter mystery by being restored to the Church and thus the broken covenant is reaffirmed.

The *Rite of Penance* also stresses that the Christian goal is likeness to Christ, not conformity to law. It indicates that social sin is a reality and that all sin has social dimensions. It encourages communal celebrations because they more clearly manifest penance's ecclesial nature and show the church's involvement in conversion. It is through this ministry, in which the whole church acts, that
God grants remission of sins. Ecclesial ministry in this sacrament is not only judgment—the Council of Trent's emphasis—but also leadership in prayer, discernment of spirits, pastoral dedication, and human warmth. The church exercises the ministry through bishops and priests, who are ministers of God and of the church acting in the person of Christ. However, the rite states that all the faithful share the work of reconciliation. How this is the case remains to be developed. Unlike the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the Rite of Penance gives no indication of how lay ministries are part of this sacrament.

The social and ecclesial nature and effects of the sacrament need to be expressed in both celebration and ministry. This guiding principle of twentieth-century reform is also key to meeting the needs of the church as it enters the twenty-first century. By complementing and contextualizing the need for personal conversion, this communal character of the sacrament corrects the individualistic theology, ritual, and ministry of recent centuries. This corrective is currently the source of tension and controversy, especially surrounding the fully communal celebration where penitents are reconciled with general or communal confession and absolution.

A sustained effort to implement the Rite of Penance fully is still necessary. The variety of forms for the sacrament provided in the Rite of Penance also needs to be strengthened and expanded. Particularly important theologically is a clarification of how the church and the local community are involved and affected in every celebration. A key theme here is that of the penitent church, which we have already discussed. A promising area for investigation is that of the penitential celebration, which is likely to be increasingly useful because of the shortage of priests. How, for example, does the nonsacramental penitential celebration differ from the sacramental celebration, so far as the nature and effects are concerned? Efforts to develop a modern order of penitents for reconciling the alienated should also prove fruitful in expanding the understanding and expression of ministry in this sacrament, as the RCIA has done in the case of initiation.

Ecclesial Worship

Twentieth-century sacramental theology views sacraments more liturgically than canonically or ascetically by seeing them in relation to the mystery of Christ and church. Pastorally, communal celebrations and individual celebrations based on
a shared prayer model have helped restore the sense of community worship in the sacrament. Vatican II gave preference to communal celebrations of the sacraments, affirmed the place of scripture, and called for adaptation to pastoral needs in different cultures. Despite the Council's clear statements, this area of development likewise still needs pastoral attention.

In the *Rite of Penance*, the sacramental celebration is an act of community worship and its atmosphere is one of shared prayer. This is clearest in the communal celebrations, especially that with general confession and absolution. However, the individual rite is also ecclesial worship. The emphasis on dialogue, on prayer, and on the Word, and the fact that the priest's ministry is presiding at liturgy brings this out. In every case, the focus is on God's action and on praise in response to God's action.

Scripture is the foundation for this and has a place in every celebration. The Word of God reveals sin, calls to conversion, encourages trust in God's mercy, and shows the nature of conversion and penance. A compromise is evident in that scripture is regarded as optional in the rite for reconciling individuals, but the justification for omission should be proportionate to the paramount importance of the Word in community worship.

Divine initiative and human response meet in liturgical celebration, but the sacramental expression of both extends beyond the role of the presider. Although the *Rite of Penance* puts somewhat more emphasis on priestly power than does contemporary sacramental theology, it does not restrict the work of reconciliation to priests nor restrict the priest's ministry to absolution. Yet it is rather vague on both points. While theological work has been done on the role of the assembly and the variety of ministries in celebrating initiation and eucharist, almost nothing has been done on these points in the sacrament of reconciliation. These are important areas for future investigation and will become more crucial as the number of priests continues to decline. Again, the so-called nonsacramental penitential celebration and the modern order of penitents are likely to be key elements in future development.

Although the *Rite of Penance* takes no explicit position on the disputed question of the sacramental priority of reconciliation with the church to reconciliation with God, it does seem to favor the former. This has liturgical implications, particularly the significance of a warm climate of human acceptance and full participation in every celebration, since this is the way that God's compassion enters into our experience. How to further this in a sacrament which, in recent

---

51 *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 26-27
52 *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 24, 35
53 *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 27-40, 62
54 RP 4, 7, 11, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 27, 29, 36, 37
55 RP 11
56 RP 6d, 16, 18
57 RP 6
58 RP 20, 29
59 RP 6d
60 RP 17, 22, 24, 36-37
61 RP 17, 43
centuries, has centered on integral confession and priestly absolution is a major area for future work.

In any case, the life of conversion and reconciliation must precede and follow the sacramental ritual if the ritual is to be authentic worship. Thus, the traditional acts of the penitent (contrition, confession, and satisfaction) are the ritual expression of the phases of conversion leading to reconciliation.

Personal Conversion and Mission

Contemporary theology and Vatican II regard sacraments as acts of worship whose effects extend into people's lives and are part of the church's overall mission and community life. Conversion is therefore broader than ritual, and reconciliation is more than forgiveness. Sacraments are priestly acts of Christ expressing the Easter mystery. Sacraments nurture spirituality and growth in faith. Such growth is in likeness to Christ: it begins in baptism and is the goal of the Christian life. Continual conversion is thus the constant dynamic of Christian holiness. It is achieved by living in the church community and sharing its mission. It is reaffirmed and renewed in the sacrament of reconciliation.

In the *Rite of Penance*, baptism is the paradigmatic experience of reconciliation. Thus, the purpose of penance and conversion is deeper love and friendship or, if necessary, reconciliation with God and church. Lent is a special time of community conversion and sacramental celebration, but conversion characterizes the whole of the Christian life, not just a period or a ritual within it.

Though the *Rite of Penance* encourages frequent sacramental celebration, it also calls for caution and care in such celebration and affirms that there are other means of expressing repentance and achieving reconciliation. Overall, living gospel repentance is a dimension of the mission of bringing salvation to the world by proclaiming the gospel and working for justice and peace. Life and liturgy are viewed in a communal rather than individualist context. The sacrament helps in attaining baptism's goal of full freedom and likeness to Christ, but penitent sinners "should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with all [people] of good will for justice and peace in the world." This is the first correlation of sacrament,
everyday penance, and social justice in an official document. The clearest sign of being reconciled with God is commitment to the work of reconciliation.

The revitalization of the sacrament of reconciliation depends not only – not even primarily – on further theological development but also, and especially, on the development of liturgy and ministry. Most importantly, the church must be, and be experienced as, a reconciling community. This requires sustained commitment to the effort to reconcile its alienated members while, at the same time, reaching out as a reconciling force in society and the world. To be the "voice of the voiceless," the church must acknowledge its own sin and alienation and speak out for the poor and oppressed. While liberation theologians have not focused their attention on this sacrament, their work offers significant hints for future work.

Similarly, theological reflection on the relationship between the sacrament and spiritual direction or pastoral counseling will be important, as will the emerging ministry of the laity in these and other areas. What, for example, does the sacramental celebration add to counseling or direction if the individual has not been excluded from the eucharistic assembly by grave sin? In what circumstances may a lay presider reconcile, as in past instances of lay confession? What about the ministry of lay pastoral ministers and hospital chaplains?

As in other sacraments, so here: the rituals of penance and reconciliation cannot substitute for the reality of conversion and reconciliation. Insofar as sacramental liturgy is the human response to God, the life of conversion and reconciliation must precede and follow the celebration. The human sciences have much to offer the theologian in this regard, but the socio-eschatological character of the church's life and mission also requires investigation: what is at issue is far more than individual growth and development. The sacrament is an intimate expression of community as part of the church's mission in service to God, humanity, and the reign of God.

Conclusion

The rediscovery of the historical development of the sacrament has provided the foundation for revitalizing theology, ministry, and celebration. The major orientations of the contemporary theology of the sacrament were accepted at Vatican Council II and incorporated in the Rite of Penance. These three elements of twentieth-century theology and reform are not only the source of present controversy but also the key to resolving controversy and to preserving penance's place in the church's life.

In many ways, not only with respect to penance, Vatican Council II needs to be seen as complementing and completing the Council of Trent. The emphasis in twentieth-century theology and reform on the social and ecclesial character of the sacrament appears to conflict with Trent's teaching on the necessity of integral confession to the priest and Trent's teaching on the priest's absolution as a judicial act, a judgment analogous to that in a courtroom. But the other two orientations complement and complete Trent's statements on confession and absolution.

See also RP 7
Trent's teaching was framed in a situation of bitter polemics between Catholics and Protestants. A changed context now enables that teaching to be seen differently.

"Integral confession" is the term used at Trent to speak of the necessity of the penitent confessing to the priest all serious sins that the penitent is aware of through an examination of conscience. What is called for is not simply an enumeration but personal disclosure. This is required because of the social and ecclesial character of Christian life and this sacrament: the penitent's conversion cannot remain interior to the individual but must become visible in the church.

Contemporary emphasis on conversion relativizes the requirement of integral confession by showing that conversion can become visible and can be ritualized in other ways. For example, participation in a communal celebration with general confession and absolution can be as deeply personal a manifestation of repentance and conversion as private confession. The church's responsibility to offer support and guidance to repenting sinners can also be met in ways other than private confession; for example, in faith-sharing groups and in small Christian communities and in spiritual direction and pastoral counseling.

Absolution as an act of judgment is the way the Council of Trent affirms the priest's role in the sacrament. It is an official, authoritative, and effective role, not simply a reminder to the penitent of God's mercy and compassion. What Trent did not adequately realize is that the sacraments are acts of church worship and that the priest's role is primarily one of presiding in the church's liturgy. This role is actually more clearly expressed in communal celebrations than it is in private confession. Thus, the contemporary emphasis on the sacrament of penance and reconciliation as ecclesial worship is the key to resolving controversies over the priest's role in the sacrament.

Sacramental theology has the task of deepening the understanding of the historical development and clarifying how to adapt the sacrament to respond to pastoral needs. The key areas of twentieth-century renewal are crucial to the sacrament's future. Our current efforts to implement the *Rite of Penance* will provide a faith-experience upon which to reflect in further developing the sacrament as we enter the twenty-first century. What is especially significant is that our experience of conversion and reconciliation must lead us to deeper involvement in the church's mission of reconciliation.
Rituals and Ministries of Reconciliation

James Dallen

We began our reflection on the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation by considering the church's role as a penitent and reconciling community. Then we surveyed the history of the church's celebration of the sacrament. In our last section we examined the twentieth-century developments in the theology and celebration of the sacrament and related them to the church's mission and ministry of reconciliation. Our next step is to see how the penitent church's rhythms of conversion and reconciliation become ritual in its celebrations. The starting point is the horizon and motivating force of conversion - God's constant love.

The Starting Point: God in Love with Us

John Grisham's novel The Chamber tells the story of Sam Cayhill, an old man facing the gas chamber many years after the Ku Klux Klan bombing that killed two young children. At the last, Sam is defended by a young attorney, his grandson, who has only recently learned of his family history and met his grandfather for the first time. Near the end, Sam has written letters to the families of his victims, letters to be delivered after his death, expressing his remorse and asking forgiveness. A few days before the scheduled execution Ralph Griffin, the prison chaplain, is visiting with Sam.

"God will forgive you, Sam."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive."

"How many murders will he forgive?"

"All of them. If you sincerely ask forgiveness, then he'll wipe the slate clean. It's in the scriptures."

"That's too good to be true. . . . Just doesn't seem right, you know. You kill someone, then in a matter of minutes God forgives you. Just like that. It's too easy."

"You must be truly sorry."

"Oh, I am. I swear."

"God forgets about it, Sam . . . ."

---

It does seem too easy, doesn’t it? It’s taken Sam years to reach this point, but in a moment God will forgive him. Too good to be true? Not only that – it violates our sense of justice. How could God be so unfair? What about the victims’ pain and suffering? Is all that erased in a moment too, along with the criminal’s sin and guilt? Does God forget about that, too? What kind of God could do that?

Jesus told us what kind of God could do that when he told the story of the prodigal son. We’re so familiar with the story of the prodigal son that it no longer shocks us as it did Jesus’ listeners. The story Jesus told portrays God as a doddering old fool. He has given his selfish son his share of the family fortune to squander. The son returns when it’s gone, more hungry than sorry, ready once again to take advantage of good old dad. His fool of a father doesn’t even give him time to deliver his well-rehearsed speech. No guilt trips, no dredging up the past, no conditions, no warnings. Instead, he welcomes him and prepares to throw a party.

We can understand the young man’s situation and his desire to get out of a rough spot, but he’s hardly admirable. We can sympathize with the older brother’s position! (His fantasy life is more active than he is – he’s the only one to bring up loose women!) What we can’t understand is the stupid old man. No wonder Jesus was charged with blasphemy!

The so-called prodigal son has been held up as a model of conversion: he recognizes his sin and is sorry for it, he resolves to confess his sin and work at making things right, and he’s welcomed back and forgiven! Preachers have probably highlighted the misery that sin puts us in, maybe even used the image of wallowing in mud like pigs. Their point: repent while there’s still a chance – if you’re truly sorry, God will forgive you.

I won’t quarrel with that, but the emphasis in the parable is not on the son’s attitudes and actions – they are hardly an example to be followed. The point Jesus is making is a very different one – that God is so crazily in love with you and me that nothing we do can come between us, so far as God is concerned. The challenge that Jesus puts to us is not the very reasonable one of admitting we were wrong and working to fix things up. That’s reasonable, that makes sense, we should do it. But Jesus’ challenge is: how are we going to respond to such unreasonable love? Can we ever be the same if we recognize it?

“Conversion.” The original word in Greek is metanoia, a change of mind and heart and vision. It does involve sorrow for sin, clearing the decks by confessing our sin, and the effort to begin a new life. But the starting point and motivating force is not from us but God’s grace. Jesus pointed to it in this parable: the wonder and the awe that the God who knows everything I’ve ever done truly and genuinely loves me.

That is the starting point. That is the motivating force. That is what brings us to conversion, a change of mind and heart and vision – not shame, not guilt, not remorse, but the realization of God’s love. God never stops loving us. If God ever did, we would stop existing! God is even in Hell! And what is God doing there? Loving the damned! God loves Satan just as much as God loves Mary! The only difference is that Mary is thrilled and the devil hates it.

If we realize God’s love for us, we see everything in a very different way – everything, even our sins. Conversion is then not the long, difficult road we
have to take to return home. Rather, it is the party God throws to welcome us. It is the loving worship we offer in response to the crazy old man whose deepest desire has been to have us back.

But we and the church are too often like the older brother. We assume that God thinks the way we do. We assume that it's necessary to purge ourselves of guilt and put everything in order so that God will forgive us. Jesus tells us in this story that we don't have to do that, because God has already forgiven us. We are home. We can celebrate and rejoice!

But the challenge is still there: how do we respond to the God who loves us this way? Can we simply go on with life in the same old way as though nothing had happened? The only appropriate response is conversion.

Conversion

Deep radical sin – the sin that we have termed “mortal sin” – is much more rare than we used to think. Our usual experience is that we are turned radically to Christ in mind and will but weak in living the logic. It is not that we are radically sinners, distorted to the core, but that we are sinful, with some of our actions not fitting the persons we are or want to be in response to God’s deep and unconditional love.

Unfortunately for us, sin is not simply a matter of actions and behavior. If it were, change would be much simpler. Rather, it is too often a situation in which we find ourselves, without any way of extricating ourselves. We need to change, but we cannot change ourselves. It is only Christ, Christ living in his church, who can give us the Spirit that changes and transforms.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him – provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. (Colossians 1.19-23 NRSV)

How do we respond to the experience of God’s love? With conversion. Conversion is the way we allow God’s love into our lives so that reconciliation can be a reality within our experience. Conversion has reconciliation as both its starting point and its goal. Such conversion is a process – not a program, not a ritual. It is a process intimately personal and deeply communal.

First we must live with our sinfulness until we intimately know its evil, realize that it is out of our control, and make the decision to surrender ourselves to God. That is contrition, a turning from sin and a turning to God whereby we begin or renew our conversion. At this stage we may not even be able to name our sinfulness or recognize its characteristic features, but we see in Christ the person we are called to be.
Then we must look at our lives closely to see where we have gone astray, admit to ourselves, to God, and to at least one other human being “the exact nature of our wrongs,” be ready to change and ask God to change us. That is confession. In the course of history confession’s manner and minister has varied, but experience has shown that sin must be named and our consciousness of sin must be shared in some way with at least one companion if we are to proceed on the path of conversion.

We must identify those whom we have harmed, be willing to make amends, and do so to the extent possible. That is satisfaction. Life must be restructured, relationships must be rebuilt, the evil that has been done must be undone, or conversion is no more than a wistful dream and a vague good intention.

But something more is still needed if absolution is to have full meaning as the absolutio or completion of conversion. (That is the original meaning of the absolution: it was the ritual declaration that conversion was complete and a final blessing of the penitents indicating that they were restored to the eucharistic assembly of the faithful.) If absolution is to have its full meaning as the completion of conversion, then we must continue to commit to the path of conversion. We must reach out to God in prayer and to others in service, sharing “the message of reconciliation” as “ambassadors of Christ.”

The process just described gives not only the traditional “acts of the penitent” — contrition, confession, satisfaction — but also the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA has rediscovered the communal process of penance and conversion developed in the early church. The challenge is for this communal process of conversion to be revitalized in the church.

The Worship of a Reconciling Community

We experience now that power of Christ’s victory when we gather for worship as a reconciling community. The life-rhythms of a community committed to conversion and reconciliation take ritual shape in the structures of its worship. And that life and worship in turn shape the lives of the members of that community, moving them to conversion through the experience of God’s reconciling love.

We do not form a reconciling community by dealing only with individuals, any more than we form any community except by gathering people together. That means beginning with what the Council insisted was primary, community celebrations of conversion and reconciliation. These are not a panacea or quick fix. Faith is personal commitment, even if it is essentially the gift of community. Conversion is personal surrender and effort, even if it is essentially the transformation of individuals into community. But community celebrations of conversion and reconciliation provide the experience of God’s reconciling love to initiate and support our response of conversion and to provide an experience of the goal we seek.

2 The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Fifth Step.
3 2 Corinthians 5.19
4 2 Corinthians 5.20
To do this, our community liturgies must show that personal conversion is part of reconciliation. They must link personal conversion, the reintegration of sinners into the church, and the church's mission of reconciliation. Most importantly, they must not focus simply on the forgiveness of individuals’ sins or leave the impression that sin is something only between individuals and God, as though sin were something invisible and interior, something which could be forgiven without changing the whole human situation.

Conversion means that we allow God's love to become operative within us so that we can love with the same love, proclaiming the good news of reconciliation and working with all our hearts so that others can experience it for themselves. It is co-operating with God's love so that we can be set free from whatever keeps us from being part of what God is doing.

Forgiveness is thus only one part of conversion, the experience of liberation. And conversion itself has an essentially social function in a community moving through history toward the kingdom of God. The absolution proclaimed in the sacramental celebration makes that explicit. It consecrates the whole conversion process – intrinsically, not extrinsically – by showing that its term and goal is not simply forgiveness of sins but reconciliation with the church so as to take part in its mission.

The community celebrating the liturgy of penance and reconciliation must itself be perceived and experienced as a converting and reconciling community. If it is not fulfilling its mission and recognized as doing so, penitent sinners will not be able to identify with it and will be unlikely to seek to be reconciled with it. They may go through rituals of forgiveness, but they will find it difficult to recognize the broader scope of conversion and reconciliation.

As a converting community, one which strives to surrender to the Spirit and to be transformed, the assembly both presents itself as model for penitents and identifies with their struggle. As a converted community, one possessed by the Spirit and reconciled by Jesus to the Father, the assembly shares its Spirit with the penitents and identifies them with itself by accepting them. The activity by which it completes the sacrament is the memorial or anamnesis of Jesus no less than is the eucharist. Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them because he recognized how loyal God is, present even in the midst of conflicts and transgressions. Our liturgies of conversion and reconciliation are eucharistic, thankful praise and faith that God's love is found in such surprising places as sinners' lives, and they lead to, culminate in, the eucharist.

Conversion takes several forms and finds support in nonsacramental as well as sacramental ways. Not every form of conversion reaches its term in the form of reconciliation to the church we call "absolution." Always, there is the continuing conversion that is Christian living. Always, there is the continued reaffirmation of surrender to God that is Christian growth. Repeatedly, there is the conversion from venial sin that is necessary to maintain growth. At important turning points, there is the radical neo-conversion that substantially deepens the intensity of conversion. On rare occasions, there may be the reordination to conversion that is required after grave sin.

Only in the last case, of course, is there "reconciliation" in the strict sense of the term and the full meaning of the sacrament. Likewise, only in that case does

---

5 See Romans 5.5
church law require that sinners be reconciled before sharing eucharistic communion. Yet the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation can provide ecclesial support to those undergoing other types of conversion, if it is celebrated in the proper way and if those sinners find in the life of their community the call to conversion and support for their conversion.

Our usual theological and canonical terminology, reiterated in Pope John Paul's postsynodal document on penance, describes two forms of the sacrament as "ordinary" forms: the private reconciliation of an individual penitent (Rite One) and the communal celebration within which individual penitents are privately reconciled (Rite Two). Either of those forms may be used in any situation of conversion. The third form of the sacrament is described as "extraordinary": the communal celebration where all the penitents are reconciled as a group. Currently, it may be used only when the other forms cannot be celebrated properly. And in emergencies penitents may be reconciled as a group even without a communal celebration. Curiously, the extraordinary situation of grave sin calls for an ordinary form of the sacrament!

The 1983 *Rite of Penance* provides an additional liturgy, the penitential celebration, which is not regarded as fully sacramental because it lacks absolution. It is the most appropriate form for supporting adults in continuing conversion, for forming children in the spirit of conversion, and for helping adults prepare for individual celebration.

The communal celebration is always to be preferred to celebrating the sacrament privately. That is a general liturgical principle stated in the Constitution on the Liturgy. In the case of this sacrament, it is because the communal celebration better expresses the social nature and effect of the sacrament, better expresses the sacrament as act of worship, and better expresses the nature of Christian conversion as social commitment — the three shifts in theology and doctrine mentioned in the previous session.

The exception, stated in the *Rite of Penance* and in canon law, is that those conscious of grave sin are required to be reconciled privately, either in an individual celebration or within a communal celebration (Rite Two). If they are reconciled as part of a group of penitents, whether in a communal celebration (Rite Three) or in an emergency use of general absolution, they are required to go privately to a priest later to confess their grave sins and receive counseling, though another absolution is unnecessary.

### Guiding Principles

In our next section we will look more closely at the structure of the sacramental celebrations of conversion and reconciliation. Before doing so, we must be clear on three principles that orient and shape our understanding, catechesis, and celebration.  

---

The first principle is that **the sacrament is celebrated communally**. Communal celebrations, not the individual rite, are the ideal and normative manner of celebrating the sacrament. The present Code of Canon Law unnecessarily restricts the fully communal celebration, Rite Three, the celebration with general confession and absolution. This is understandable for a variety of reasons: the Counter-Reformation defense of private confession against criticism and attack, residual clericalism, the likelihood that an inadequate understanding of conversion and reconciliation could lead people to see general absolution in a mechanical and magical way.

But where people have come to the realization that salvation is in community and that being the community Body of Christ is the base of their Christian identity they are ready to celebrate the sacrament in all its present forms and to discover new forms. Regular community celebrations of the sacrament are the major means of maintaining the sacrament's place in the life of our parishes and parishioners.

The second principle is that **the sacrament is celebrated by a community that is committed to building community**. Studies have shown that one factor in the declining frequency of celebrating the sacrament is that people do not perceive the church or their parish communities as in fact committed to reaching out and reconciling those who are in some way marginalized or alienated. The sacrament is not for individuals who seek perfection in isolation or who seek a private relationship with God. It is for those who realize that the love of God and neighbor are inseparable, that we cannot love the God we do not see if we do not love the neighbor we do see. Love of neighbor, community, is sacrament of the love of God, and there is no communion with God without community. Part of the revitalization of the sacrament, then, is necessarily reaching out to those who are, in any way, marginalized or alienated and letting it be evident that our parishes are committed to being welcoming and reconciling communities — inviting communities and communities that invite.

The third principle is that **the sacrament is celebrated because of that commitment to build community**. Our parishes will celebrate the sacrament frequently and regularly to the extent that they are hospitable and reconciling communities and seek to be such. The sacrament is not celebrated by individuals who look at their sin as an imperfection keeping them from an individualistic goal or as a barrier to a private relationship with God. People who realize that we love God and neighbor with the same love not only know that there is no communion with God without community but also know that sin is an obstacle to communion with God **because** it is a barrier to community among people. They do not come to celebrate the sacrament seeking individual forgiveness but reconciliation — conversion **into** community **in** community.
Theologians speak of the sacraments as the celebration of the “paschal mystery” or “Easter mystery.” This “mystery” is God’s life shared with us — begun in creation, revealed in Christ, now realized in us. From the first nano-second of the Big Bang, God’s purpose has been to bring all creation into communion within the Trinity. The Christ-character of the mystery happened as the Crucified One is raised from death to new life. But we, the church, are part of what happened to Jesus in the resurrection, because God, who breathes new life into the dead Jesus, breathes the Holy Spirit into us, too. The Spirit sent from God raises Jesus from death and raises us with him as the Spirit is shared with us.

The Easter mystery, then, takes shape in our world in the form of a community of faith that is the Body of Christ, the church. That is always happening, and the Spirit associates people with Christ’s Body of whom we are unaware, but we as committed members of Christ’s Body experience it most intensely and most consciously when we gather as that Body and feel the life of the Spirit coursing within it and within us. That is the marvel of sacramentality: that God comes to us through us and that we are the way to God for one another. The presence of God is recognized in and through human reality, human action, human experience.

An individualistic or pietistic way or approach to sacrament overlooks the fact that God has put self into creation so that creation can enter into the Trinity. Since the incarnation we are able to see that, as the human was God’s way to us, so the human is our way to God: God has become human so that we can become divine. God’s purpose, to make the cosmos one in Christ, is visible to us as the reconciling community of the church. And when we gather to worship as that reconciling community, we know our place and purpose in God’s plan.

Think first of the story of Easter. Disillusioned disciples of a crucified Jesus gathered to recall him. As they shared their memories, suddenly he was in their midst. They listened and heard him speak of what God had done for him and them: “Peace be with you.” As he breathed the Spirit into them, they knew the depths of God’s love and shared a communion that bound them to him and one another. When they went forth, it was with a sense of identity and purpose that aligned them with the Spirit’s work throughout the cosmos and enabled them to bring to others the new life that they had received.

In the ritual of sacramental celebration we experience anew that saving action of God. We not only remember that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again,” as though it were something that we had been told about or that we had learned from someone else. Rather, we experience it anew for ourselves so that we become witnesses of the Risen Lord — we become symbol and sacrament.

In a symbol we recognize the presence of one reality in and through another. A symbol is different from a sign: it does not simply announce or inform; it does not
have a single meaning that can be stated in intellectual terms; it doesn't take the place of an absent reality. Instead, a symbol discloses or reveals a transcendent reality. It is not identical with that reality, but it does communicate that reality and puts us in touch with it. It gives the reality, not just something about it, and through a superabundance of meaning it inspires by evoking both conscious and unconscious response. In this case, reconciliation among people is both the sign and the reality of reconciliation with God: it is the way we experience God's presence and action. That means that establishing the clear sense of mutual acceptance among the celebrants must have priority in preparing and celebrating this sacrament.

In understanding sacramental worship, in preparing ourselves for sacramental worship, and in helping others take part in sacramental worship we must be sensitive to how God's action shows itself in our experience. We must take care in how we celebrate, because sacramental celebration focuses and directs our attention toward certain elements of our experience, which we then recognize in faith as God's action. To celebrate poorly misdirects our attention and leads to an incomplete or mistaken sense of what God is doing.

To apply this specifically to the sacrament of reconciliation, it is not enough to say that God forgives and loves us. We have to be able to experience concretely that sin, the barrier to community, is being removed. We do so by experiencing that community is coming into being. It is in this that we experience communion with God and the forgiveness of our sin.

### Structural Dynamics

The structure of the liturgical celebration of reconciliation, because it passes on the Easter experience, is the community's gathering, listening, sharing, and departing. Christian worship always consists of gathering a community, listening to the Word, sharing the experience of God's action, and departing to serve.

Where the sacramental celebrations differ is in the "sharing the experience of God's action." Even though that action is a single one from the eternal vantage point that God has, we experience it in different ways according to the situation we find ourselves in. Thus, in the sacraments of initiation we experience ourselves being brought into community: the barriers of sin are removed and we are united in the community of the faithful. In the eucharist we experience our communion, the absence of barriers, at table: we are companions at table, hosting one another as Christ hosts us. In the sacrament of penance and reconciliation we focus on the God who continues to remove the barriers to community, sins after baptism.

The three forms for celebrating the sacrament provided in the Rite of Penance differ in the rhythms of celebration. Since the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation celebrates the Easter mystery from the perspective of God removing barriers to community, the forms differ primarily in the experience and expression of community. Thus:

- The rhythm of celebration is most complete and clearest in the third rite, where penitents express their conversion to the church as a group and are reconciled as a group.
- The rhythm of celebration is also strong in the second rite, though there can be a break or hiatus while penitents make their individual confession.
The rhythms are weakest and least apparent in the first rite, the private rite.

The rhythms are strong but incomplete in penitential celebrations, which lack the statement of reconciliation.

Though this rhythmic experience and expression of God's action is clearest in the communal celebrations where a group of penitents is reconciled, it is also the structure of the rite for reconciling individuals. In this situation, where the priest and one penitent celebrate the liturgy together, the community is, of course, at a minimum — two people — but it is still a community that celebrates the "liturgy by which the church continually renews itself." The structure is not as clear nor the experience of community as intense, because the community is so small and restricted, but the basics are the same. And because the situation permits a more extended personal interaction and a greater depth of intimacy, this form of the sacrament is either advisable or necessary in some situations. The importance of community celebrations by no means rules out the importance and value of the smaller celebration of priest and one penitent. Yet the more restricted celebration, what we've called private confession, makes sense and achieves its purpose only in the context of regular community celebrations.

Let's look at the processes and dynamics: gathering, God drawing us together; listening, God speaking to us; sharing, God acting to give us the divine life; departing, God sending us to serve.²

Gathering

Worship begins with gathering. The community collects, re-collects, recollects itself. This is much more than getting bodies together in the same place. It requires that the individual members become aware of one another, pay attention to one another, and interact with one another. In any liturgy this is important throughout the service but especially at the beginning. Thus, those who plan and lead worship must recognize that a primary responsibility is to support the group's awareness, attention, and interaction so that it will become a gathered community. In the liturgy of penance and reconciliation, as in initiation, this element of gathering is the focal point of the celebration, not just at the beginning as at Mass. In other words, the gathering rite at the beginning of the celebration is rather brief because the heart of the service will be a more extended experience of gathering.

Gathering or assembly is the sacrament of church and the prerequisite for worship. Since the transformation or reformation of individuals in the sacramental process is dependent upon the Spirit which enlivens the community, the extent and intensity of the community's presence impedes or enhances the work of the Spirit. The introductory rite in these celebrations is primarily concerned with ensuring that penitents form an assembly. In all celebrations the experience of community is the way God's converting and reconciling presence enters into penitents' experience.

A call to worship should direct the assembly's attention to the God who is present to make sinners welcome and holy. This is not simply an introduction to

---

¹ Rite of Penance 11


102
the celebration or an explanation of the service but encourages the assembly to join together in worship.

A carefully chosen hymn expresses and deepens the assembly's unity and reason for confidence. Time spent in prayer then shapes the assembly as a worshiping community. This must be a period of silence long enough for real prayer to take place. As in the Mass, it is a time of silence spent in prayer by the whole assembly. However, it should be longer than that in the Mass, since silence for reflection and prayer is especially important in the liturgy of penance. The time for prayer is then brought to a close by the presider's brief summary prayer.

**Listening**

The Liturgy of the Word is celebrated in every sacrament. (This element, unfortunately, is often omitted when a priest and one penitent celebrate the liturgy together.) Listening to its memories of God's action recorded in the scriptures and recognizing that same action in its life, the community remembers and makes present its call to live as God's people and the Body of Christ.

Celebrating the Word shows that the gathering community of faith has as its inner dynamic God's creative presence. That is why the Constitution on the Liturgy restored the primary place of scripture in liturgical celebration and why the *Rite of Penance* gave it primacy in every celebration. God calls us to conversion by assuring us how deeply we are loved. Our realization of our need is the way we begin hearing God's call. Celebrating the Word shows that his sacrament is a matter of ecclesial prayer, joyful praise, and confident worship because it centers on the action of a merciful God rather than on penitents' sins.

One or more readings may be used. Where there is only one, it should be from a gospel. When there are several readings, a psalm, hymn, or time for silence may offer opportunity for reflection and commitment. The *Rite of Penance* offers many suggestions. In fact, it has the largest lectionary of all the reformed rituals.

The homily should reveal and strengthen the links between the Word and the community's life, leading people to a deeper consciousness of sin's power in their lives and to a commitment to conversion in response to the God who loves us nevertheless. However, the homily should not moralize or examine consciences. Its primary purpose is to proclaim God's reconciling love and to assure us that we can respond to that love and allow it to enter our lives and transform us.

The homily should be followed by ample time for silent reflection. Considerations for reflection may be offered, a litany of examination may be used, or the time may simply be spent in silence.

**Sharing**

Sharing the action of God is always the most complex part of worship. This ritual element differs from one sacrament to another, but in each the community experiences the reality of God's action of Christ. In initiation we are formed into the Body of Christ in order to have as our own Jesus' baptismal experience, his realization of intimacy with God and commitment to mission, the work of building community. In eucharist we take bread and cup, bless God, break the bread, and share the bread and cup and so experience the action of God in Christ who has formed us into a common union. In the sacrament of
penance and reconciliation we concentrate on the God who continues to remove the barriers of sin by making us community.

This is an act of community worship, something hardly experienced in the old rite of private confession and often missed in the present rite for reconciling individuals. The focus is not on sin but on the reconciling God. The experience of community enables us to experience and recognize the action of God. Liturgically, conversion is ritualized, then reconciliation: we experience ourselves becoming community with God and thus our sins are forgiven.

Conversion is ritualized by recognizing the barriers to community that God removes. We acknowledge our sinfulness as a community and as individuals. How specific and detailed this confession of sins gets varies according to the needs of the assembly and its members.

- The rite for reconciling an individual offers the best opportunity for being precise on the barriers that God removes. It also provides the best opportunity for ministry to the individual.

- The communal celebration which includes individual confession is necessarily more restricted in the opportunity for personal sharing, even if it provides a broader experience of community. Both it and the communal celebration with so-called “general” confession and absolution presume that individuals in need of more specific expression and help will seek it outside the liturgical setting.

But in every form of the sacrament this “confession” is not so much an admission of guilt as praise of a merciful and compassionate God who is found in such surprising places as a sinner’s life.

Reconciliation is ritualized by recognizing the community that God establishes, community among people and thus a common unity with God. Again, the different forms of celebrating the sacrament provide distinctive expressions of community.

- It is expressed individually and personally when the absolution is prayed and proclaimed in the second person singular, addressed individually to each person. In Rites One and Two each individual hears personally the good news that he or she exists now in community and that sin, the barrier to community, is thus removed.

- In Rite Three, the communal celebration with “general” confession and absolution, the community and all the persons in it hear this good news.

One of the values of individual confession and absolution, whether in Rite One or in Rite Two, is the greater opportunity for dialogue and interaction. However, the way Rite Two is usually celebrated actually allows for very little dialogue and interaction. Penitents are often told to confess only one or two sins or sinful tendencies, leading some to speak of this as “rite two and a half.” Though this may barely satisfy the requirements of a legalistic minimalism, it does not permit much in the way of a personal interaction. What is unfortunate is that, in most of our celebrations, such interaction and dialogue is limited to priest and penitent and that even in the more private rite the dialogue and interaction are frequently no more than the listing of sins and a perfunctory response.

Community is necessarily broader than the relationship between priest and penitent. In preparing celebrations of the sacrament we need to give greater scope to interaction among the members of the assembly. Perhaps, for example, members of the assembly might be invited to turn to one another and to pray for one another, clasping hands or imposing hands. We’re still conditioned, both by our
religious heritage and by our cultural perspective, to see individual confession as the model for the sacrament! We have to realize that both in life and in liturgy the process of gathering and regrouping requires awareness, attention, and interaction on a broader scale than merely priest and penitent.

Similarly, the act of penance, what we have traditionally called “the penance” – is a concrete way of connecting the ritual with everyday life by indicating specific ways in which penitents commit themselves to ongoing conversion and continued growth or to repairing the harm they have done. This should be an action geared toward correcting sinful actions or attitudes, not a token prayer. If penitents identify a particular sinful tendency in their lives, they should be encouraged to choose and to commit to a concrete way of countering it. The act of penance, in other words, is a concrete expression of the conversion that is underway.

Conversion is ritualized in every liturgy of penance. Sometimes this is to deepen penitents’ consciousness of what they are involved in, especially in the penitential celebration. Sometimes it is to relive and cap off a completed process before the ritual of reconciliation, as in the sacramental celebrations. Scholastic theology called the ritualizing of conversion “the acts of the penitent.”

In the penitential celebration, conversion is still in process and penitents seek the church’s acceptance, support, example, and prayer. They pray together. They either engage in a ritual action symbolizing their desire to change their lives or they commit themselves to an action indicative of such conversion. The presider voices the church’s prayer, seeking God’s assistance for the penitents to continue their conversion. The penitential celebration has a feeling of incompleteness about it. That is because the goal of conversion, reconciliation with the church, is not celebrated. The liturgy ends with the prayer for the penitents, their blessing, and the dismissal.

In celebrations of the sacrament, penitents express their conversion in much the same way. The difference is in how the church responds to their expression of conversion. In the celebrations of the sacrament the church not only prays for their forgiveness but grants them reconciliation through absolution. In response to this action, the community of reconciled penitents joins in praising and thanking God.

The manner in which penitents show their repentance to the church and the manner in which the church responds to their repentance differs in the various celebrations.

• In the penitential celebration, penitents express their concern to undergo conversion. The church, itself sinful, identifies with them and responds with prayer for them.

• In the fully communal celebration of the sacrament (Rite Three) the stress is on personal sincerity and responsibility: sincerity of repentance and responsibility to continue conversion and to seek whatever help might be needed. The church responds to the community of penitents by identifying them with itself and giving the assurance of reconciliation by absolving them.

• In the private individual celebration (Rite One) the penitent shows conversion by a specific confession of sins, seeking the confessor’s advice and prayer. The priest absolves the individual as assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation.

• In the rite where penitents are reconciled individually within a communal celebration (Rite Two), penitents show the church as a whole their repentance and express it more specifically to the priest in private confession. Though there is little opportunity for counsel and prayer, there is the opportunity for a more personal expression both of sinfulness and of reconciliation through individual confession and individual absolution.
Then, in every liturgy of the sacrament, the true meaning of confession is shown by the penitents' praise and thanksgiving to God for the mercy received.

- This is clearest in the third rite, where the assembly responds to the public proclamation of reconciliation with a song of praise.
- In the second rite, where the sense of being a gathered community dissipates somewhat during the time for individual confession and absolution, the song of praise extends into a prayer of thanksgiving by the priest, further expressing the spirit of gratitude and concluding the community's proclamation of praise for God's mercy.
- In the first rite, priest and penitent use a short passage from the psalms to verbalize their response to God's word and deed.

Departing

Liturgical celebration is always incomplete until God's kingdom comes. The "unfinished business" in the case of the sacramental celebration of penance and reconciliation is that a reconciled community must be a reconciling community, extending and sharing what it has experienced of God. The celebration concludes with a blessing and dismissal as those reconciled to God and church are sent to live as agents of reconciliation.

The Eucharistic Character of Conversion and Reconciliation

The sacrament of penance got its name in the church as paenitentia secunda, second penance, second conversion. First penance or first conversion takes ritual shape in the process of Christian initiation - the catechumenate and the sacraments of initiation, climaxing in the celebration of eucharist. Second penance or second conversion likewise climaxes in the celebration of eucharist. For this reason, the eucharist is the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation, just as it is the sacrament of initiation.

Because of the community character of Christian being and living, conversion and reconciliation are never simply individual. As ecclesial or church realities, conversion and reconciliation are oriented toward the eucharist. This is because conversion and reconciliation have their starting point in God's redemptive action in Christ, celebrated in the eucharist, and because conversion and reconciliation achieve their goal and purpose as all creation is brought together in Christ, an ultimate goal and purpose already present in our eucharistic celebration.

But our personal sharing in the ecclesial reality of conversion and reconciliation is also eucharistic because it is our grateful response to God's action. We do not seek to change, to undergo conversion, because that is what salvation costs us. Rather, we undergo conversion and become agents of reconciliation because we are grateful for God's love. Conversion and reconciliation are our praise and thanksgiving to the God who loves us. That, ultimately, is why we celebrate the sacrament.
God’s initiative to reconcile is most evident in Jesus. Its sustaining force is his Spirit. Thus the Easter Mystery of Christ’s dying, rising, and gifting us with Spirit is the clearest expression of the worldly presence of the reconciling God. This initiative of the triune divinity, reconciling us to God, is not only the foundation of the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation but also the clearest expression in human history of God’s intent in creation itself.

“Church,” God’s gathering people together in community, is the first instance of God’s reconciling work in Christ and the primary sacrament of the Easter Mystery. It is the place in the world where God’s reconciling becomes evident and where people align themselves with God’s purpose and commit themselves to God’s work. This means that, since sign and reality are closely related in sacrament, to be sacrament of the Easter Mystery the church must be a community that works to reconcile. Church is more verb than noun, not just a static sign but a dynamism that shares the reality of what it stands for. This requires moving away from a view of the church as institution, as external, juridical organization, to seeing the church as *communio*, dynamic communion, so that it can be sacrament.

We must also move away from a view of church mission and ministry which sees the church’s role as limited to the “spiritual” or “churchy” realm or confined to working only with individuals alone. The sacrament of reconciliation (like the eucharist and, for that matter, all the sacraments) has an intrinsic orientation outside itself — service to humanity in the form of social action as well as evangelization. It shows us that our Christian mission, as individuals and as community, is to serve the needs of individuals and of society.

Since the church as a visible community is the sacrament of humanity’s reconciliation with God in and through Christ, reconciliation with it is reconciliation with God. This is the starting point not only for the sacrament’s theology but also for parish catechesis and practice.

---

**The Church Penitent**

“Sacrament” is always a dynamic reality: action and not thing. And as conversion and reconciliation imply and make one another possible, so the church, in order to be a reconciling community, must be a converting community, a penitent church.

The church must recognize and realize itself as penitent in order to continue its own movement toward the kingdom and to minister to its members, as well as to fulfill its mission. The church presents itself to catechumens as a converting
community in order to show them how to convert and in order to sustain their conversion. It must present itself in the same way to penitents in order to call them to a renewed conversion and to maintain them in this basic dynamic of Christian living, growth in likeness to Christ. Individuals or communities unaware of their own weakness are more likely to be rigid, demanding, and intolerant of others’ weaknesses. Individuals and communities aware that they live from God’s compassionate and healing grace are able to call others to live in that same grace.

This theme is crucial if communal celebrations are to be more than sacramental efficiency. In a communal celebration of the sacrament the church gathers as a community of sinners, a sinful community, that seeks reconciliation and renewal. This theme is also crucial for understanding how even the reconciliation of an individual penitent is an ecclesial celebration – thus how all Christian conversion is ecclesial. In the reconciliation of an individual penitent, the church identifies itself with the sinner so that the sinner can once more enter into the mystery of Christ reconciling all to the Father.

The paramount importance of the social and ecclesial character of the sacrament shows why it is inadequate to consider the sacrament as therapeutic, individual healing. Individuals are not reconciled to themselves. Rather, they are reconciled to the church which, as community, is healed and made whole by their return and thus better able to pursue its mission.

Mission and Worship

The proper orientation of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation is to reintegrate the sinner as a participant in the church’s mission. Its thrust is therefore toward reconciliation, reintegration, re-incorporation rather than forgiveness of the individual’s sins. Ancient penance was concerned with the wholeness and holiness of the church. Medieval and modern penance were concerned with the forgiveness of individuals’ sins. Today, and for the immediate future, the sacrament must focus on involving the penitent members of a reconciling church in the church’s mission, the service of God and neighbor both individually and corporately. Since the days of the early penitential controversies there has been a tendency to focus on the conclusion of the process, the rite of reconciliation – a tendency still evident in the controversies over general absolution. We need to give more attention to the process itself, the process of conversion.

Pastoral Strategies

First of all, we must be clear on our goal. It is not to increase the number of confessions or communal celebrations. It is rather to aid the growth of the church and its members toward full stature as Christ in the world. We foster such conversion in many ways, and the celebration of the sacrament is only one such way. We need a unifying vision that, for example, enables us to see all our efforts at warm hospitality in our parish communities as part of our continuing commitment to conversion and reconciliation.
Systematic catechesis, penitential preaching, and honest dialogue are crucial if members of the church are to realize the necessity of change in their lives, in the church, and in the understanding and practice of this sacrament. The nature of conversion and its paramount importance as the constant dynamic of Christian life and growth must receive special attention. The church’s mission of reconciliation, and therefore the need to be a penitent and welcoming community, must be evident as our parishes find ways to reach out to the marginalized in their midst and in society. A deepened understanding and appreciation of the sacrament needs to be developed through teaching and celebration. It is especially important that those who preach and teach, particularly the clergy, are deeply aware of these developments, convinced of them, and able to communicate them.

But it is also crucial that when our communities assemble to seek support for conversion or to celebrate reconciliation, their members become more deeply aware of their identity and of one another, that they attend more carefully to one another’s needs, and that they dialogue and interact with one another. Only as they reflect on their everyday experience of conversion and reconciliation and surrender to the Spirit that comes out of our tradition will they grow in likeness to Christ. New ministries, pioneered by laity, will then emerge to offer assistance to those undergoing conversion and seeking reconciliation.

A parish’s experience of the catechumenate as a structure of its life deepens its realization of conversion as its constant call and inspires its efforts to support its members in responding to that call. As we have rediscovered the value of the catechumenate and its communal rites for initiating adults into a missioned church, so we are realizing anew that parallel movements and structures are the best way to restore people to participation in this mission. “Re-Membering Church” and similar processes and ministries for alienated and marginalized Catholics returning to the church provide a model for doing so.

It is especially important that a way be provided for people to share the stories of their own conversion experiences in order to encourage and assist those who are engaged in that process. A “buddy” or sponsor to accompany those who are recommitting themselves to participation in a reconciling community can be a particularly valuable form of peer ministry.

In addition, communities need a periodic reminder and renewal of this essential dimension of Christian life for all their members. Without detriment to its properly baptismal character, Lent can be the opportunity for such renewal through a parish “order of penitents.” While all who take part in the Ash Wednesday celebration commit themselves to renewal, provision can be made within the service to bless those for whom this will be a special time of growth. In addition to daily prayer and reflection and a specific form of service, they can gather weekly in small groups for a penitential celebration or “Lenten devotion.” Those celebrations, designed as opportunities to focus on progressive aspects of conversion, should include not only catechesis but also faith-sharing.

A special blessing in the community’s Sunday liturgy offers community support and encourages other members of the community to continue in the Lenten process of renewal in less formal ways. Special attention can be given to these penitents in the parish’s communal celebration of the sacrament in Holy Week or in the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, perhaps in connection with a ritual expressive of the call to service modeled by Jesus in his washing of the disciples’ feet.

We are currently at risk of losing the sense of Lent as a special time for personal and communal renewal. Pope Paul VI’s reform of the traditional Lenten
and Friday practices and abstinence had the twofold goal of revitalizing a sense of personal responsibility and deepening a sense of social responsibility. Revision of legal norms was a step in diminishing obligation in favor of responsibility. He was also trying to restore the ancient sense that individual practices of self-denial have their true meaning in their social character of service to God and neighbor. Unfortunately, our legalistic heritage led us to the superficial conclusion that we were no longer obliged to such traditional forms of penance. Linguistic changes, whereby "penance" had come to have the meaning of punishment rather than conversion, supported this legal mentality.

Our parish catechesis and practice must help us to realize that conversion always involves turning away from a focus on our individual selves and comfort to the service of neighbor and God. Conversion, symbolized and actualized in practices of self-denial, is, from one perspective, a matter of consuming less so that the needy will have more. For example, to borrow a slogan, we eat simply so that others can simply live. What we deny to ourselves we share with others, whether it be food or drink or other comforts or our most precious commodity, our time. But self-denial's place in conversion and reconciliation will not be evident if our reaching out to neighbors is not also linked with reaching out to God.

Self-denial, service, and prayer – traditionally spoken of as fasting, almsgiving, and prayer – are, individually and corporately, a mirror of the Trinity's inner life and an expression of church mission. The sacrament and the dynamics of conversion and reconciliation do not confine their attention to those pieces of behavior that we label as "sin." They reach deeper into our humanness and penetrate to that tendency to preoccupation with self that we label "original sin" and the "consequences" of original sin. A parish's communal celebration of the sacrament, especially during Lent, should make this clear. Confronted only by law and obligation, we may be able to congratulate ourselves that we have kept the rules. Challenged by the example of God in Christ, we can only ask for compassion and help.

Lent as a special time of personal and communal renewal in the spirit of those committing to Christ in baptism needs to be revitalized. However, communal celebrations in the spirit of repentance and reconciliation cannot be limited to Lent. A parish should have such a celebration periodically, perhaps quarterly (on the model of the old Ember Days) or even monthly. If Rite Two is impractical (as it usually is) and if Rite Three is not permitted, then the penitential celebration offers scope for imagination and creativity.

Such traditional devotional practices as the stations of the cross and the Advent wreath can be incorporated into these celebrations. Anointing with oil (not the sacrament of the sick), the use of holy water, and the imposition of hands – traditional actions which symbolize healing, purification, and the sharing of the Spirit – can be focal actions in these celebrations. Since the penitential celebration is not a celebration of the full sacrament but rather concentrates on conversion as such, the doing of these ritual actions need not be hierarchical in character but should instead be an expression of mutual ministry.

Regularly scheduled opportunities for individuals to celebrate Rite One with a priest should also be provided throughout the year. Leaving it to individuals to call for an appointment in practice discourages people from celebrating the sacrament individually. All the forms for celebrating conversion and reconciliation need to be part of a parish's program of worship.
Since it is especially important in our times that the links between conversion, worship, and mission be explicit, parish service projects should correlate with the community's recognition in liturgy of its call to conversion. Thus, for example, a parish's initiation of a Habitat for Humanity house might begin with a penitential celebration acknowledging society's failure to provide a hospitable home for the disadvantaged and ritualizing the parish's commitment to provide a countersign. A parish program on family violence could conclude with a liturgy confessing failures in family relationships and committing to new ways of relating to one another as disciples of Jesus. Similar celebrations should be helpful in communities disrupted by allegations of child abuse or pedophilia, reminding us of our responsibility to look out for our weaker members. What is crucial in a sacramental church is that efforts to become a welcoming and hospitable community and to reach out in service must be integrated within the community's rhythms of prayer and worship.

Toward the Third Millennium

Such integration seems to be a central intuition underlying Pope John Paul II's plans in preparation for the beginning of the third millennium. Few people—certainly not scholars—contend that the turn of the millennium marks the three-thousandth anniversary of Jesus' birth. People even differ on whether the millennium begins in 2000 or 2001! But our manner of calendar reckoning is sufficiently embedded in Western culture and, for that matter, world culture that the change of digits has significance as symbol of transition. To mark it religiously through sacramental symbols, particularly since its arbitrary starting point was deliberately linked with Jesus, makes sense.

Pope John Paul II's plan, outlined in his apostolic letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*,1 is for the church to undergo intensive repentance and renewal in preparation for the third millennium. He offers a trinitarian shape for the final years of the second millennium: from Christ and through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father. 1997 is a Christological year: "Jesus Christ, the one savior of the world, yesterday, today, and forever" (40). The sacramental focus is baptism and faith (41), with the hope of a renewed sense of conversion in the context of prayer and service and a renewed appreciation of catechesis (42). 1998 is a year devoted to the Spirit and attention to the presence and activity of the Spirit, especially in the sacraments of confirmation and orders (45). Hope in the coming of God's reign (46) and the church's unity (47) are focal points during this year.

The year 1999 is dedicated to the Father, and it is this year that will especially require attention to the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation. The sense of being on a "journey to the Father" calls for a journey of true conversion, liberation from sin and orientation to the good that the Gospel affirms and deepens (50).

This is the proper context for a renewed appreciation and more intense celebration of the sacrament of penance in its most profound meaning. The call to conversion [is] the indispensable condition of Christian love . . . (50).

---

1 See *Origins* 24, no. 24 (24 November 1994)
Pope John Paul goes on to link the year's emphasis on conversion and love with the "preferential option for the poor and the outcast" and "commitment to justice and peace," speaking specifically of international debt, intercultural dialogue, women's rights, the family, and marriage (51).

Before the eucharistic year of 2000, the Great Jubilee, the church is challenged to a renewed commitment to the Gospel. The years of preparation focus on conversion and renewal as involving prayer and service to God and neighbor. The final year of preparation, 1999, gives the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation a privileged place in meeting the challenge of the year 2000 and the third millennium. This will be another "teachable moment" in the continuing reform and renewal of the sacrament as a force for Christian holiness, witness, and service.

The orientation proposed in these pages is in line with Pope John Paul II's letter and essential to keeping that year's focus from becoming a matter of introspective guilt or individualistic piety. The personal and social evils to which the pope calls attention are real. Resisting and overcoming them requires community action and community worship, not just personal concern and personal prayer.

---

**Conclusion**

Humanity's original and constant sin has been the effort to maintain isolation, to live behind the false security of walls that can keep us safe and separate — where we can hide our weaknesses, have shelter from the weaknesses of others, and avoid being open and honest with one another. The problem is compounded by religious habits which see the relationship with God as almost exclusively individual and interior. Even in liturgy we see the really important things happening inside individuals, not among us.

Yet Christian faith is commitment to community, a reconciled and reconciling community. Christian conversion, at its heart, is conversion into community and takes place in community. It was hard for those with whom Jesus spoke to accept community with Samaritans and lax Jews. It was hard for his disciples after Easter to accept community with gentiles. In North American society it is simply hard to accept community despite our yearning for it.

But it is here that we see the most basic principle of sacrament or sacramentality — the presence of God is recognized in and through a human reality, a human action, a human experience. In worship and outside it, what God does enters into our experience and makes a difference. As in the case of the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, love is the evidence of forgiveness (see Luke 7.47). Her affection for Jesus showed that her sins were forgiven. Our sense of outreaching community in the body of Christ and our efforts to build community are evidence of our reconciliation. Conversion into community is the way we experience reconciliation with God.

Of course, words like "alienation" and "reconciliation" are used metaphorically when we apply them to the relationship between God and us. We take something from our everyday experience with other people and use it to recognize our experience of God. Ultimately, there is really no alienation between God and us, no matter how serious our sinfulness. Were God not with us, supporting
us, continually loving us into being, we would fall into oblivion, cease to exist. But the divisions among us, the ways we are alienated and isolated from one another, are painfully real. They help us recognize the extent to which we fail to be like the God who draws and holds all things together.

Even more importantly, as those divisions are overcome we are able to experience our likeness to God. As we cease to be separate, isolated individuals, as we are transformed into community, we become the human image of the triune God. Transcending our differences and ever more clearly expressing our commonality and oneness, we come as close as we can to direct contact with the God who is the source and goal and center of all that exists. In and through our community with one another we have communion with God and share the divine life.
Mary Collins is a Benedictine sister and professor of liturgical studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. The following is an excerpt from her October 28, 1995, address to the annual liturgical conference of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Her title was “Liturgy: Holiness and Justice in Hard Times.” What she says about preaching in the church of Los Angeles surely applies to our own local churches as well.

Structurally, the homily is an integral part of the liturgy, not an interlude. Our official documents tell us it is a word as essential as — yes — the proper baptismal formula or the words of the eucharistic prayer. As with other aspects of our liturgy, we have been trying for 30 years to get it “just right.” But we are beginning to recognize that we have a serious language deficit and a deficit of understanding that goes beyond the inadequacy of any particular homilist. And that frees us to stop blaming them. The homilist who tries the late night monologue or talk-show host style, the one who reverts to classroom biblical exegesis, the one who cites doctrinal texts from the catechism or papal encyclicals, are all simply witnesses to our deficit.

The liturgical homily needs to be inculturated, but not by emulating the speech of popular culture, or of the most recent statement of the magisterium, or of the classroom. We need to discover a new form of mediating speech in the liturgical assembly. If the liturgical homily is speaking done during the liturgy, when the church is celebrating its own mystery, the homilist must be able to name where and how the mystery is at work among us. For the Spirit of Holiness is trying to find a public voice among us.

The inculturation theory that is discussed in seminaries and universities teaches us that inculturation of the homily, like all authentic inculturation of the apostolic faith, is not simply a task for the clergy to grapple with alone. Getting the homily right as part of the liturgy is a process in which the whole church must yet participate. Because we have a language deficit, the creation of prophetic homiletic speaking must begin with the Catholic people speaking of its faith and with Catholic pastors listening the church into authentic speech, listening to people’s faith and hope and to their incredulity and alienation.

A generation ago this impulse to new homiletic praxis gave rise to the phenomenon of the “dialogue homily.” The dialogue homily was typically undisciplined and unfocused; its disappearance implies a consensus that it failed as a life-giving word. But the impulse itself was an expression of people’s desire,
however awkward, to voice their concerns in the presence of the mystery being manifest in the liturgy. Honoring that undisciplined impulse to connect the liturgy to life suggests a way forward at this critical moment in liturgical and ecclesial renewal in hard times.

Wise pastors are probably already gathering up the fragments of speech about grace and ambiguity, hope and anxiety, that appear within people’s ordinary speaking. Wise pastors were undoubtedly “all ears” at the civic discussion recently called by Los Angeles civic leaders for Angelenos to talk about racism in this community. Pastors have to go where such real speaking happens, since de facto the confessional no longer serves as the place for narratives of sin and grace. People no longer want to tell their stories of betraying and being betrayed in secret; they want the world to hear about their pain and, less frequently, about their culpability.

Pastors must try to stay with these public narratives of sin and grace long enough for everyone to get beyond the conventional speaking of blaming others. In the best of the public discourse on social sin, people will talk about what is going on at “the quick” of their lives. From that quick, living images of sin and grace are being voiced, rising from the ground of people’s ordinary experience.

My point: The Spirit of Holiness is breaking through to the church of Los Angeles in the voices that speak of fear, mistrust, betrayal, pain, hope and aspiration, confidence and love. Admittedly, real people’s real speech from the quick of their lives is often frightening and confusing to a pastoral minister who thinks he or she must be in control. Can the pastors of the churches learn to listen to these discordant voices – to hear in them the call of the Spirit of Holiness? Can they learn to listen to the silences within the speaking? A suggestion: Reading the psalms aloud daily is a way of learning to trust that words of human rage and anguish, words blaming others and lament over betrayal are as much the stuff of prayer as words of praise and gratitude. God has heard it all before. Why should the ears of God’s ministers be spared?

The pastor who would be a liturgical homilist with words of power must receive the church’s own speech as a person of prayer, not as someone who has the answers. Theophan the Recluse, a 19th-century Russian Orthodox teacher of prayer, offered spiritual counsel about the life of prayer to adult Christians who wanted to mature in faith. How much more is his counsel useful for pastors who would bring whole congregations to spiritual maturity:

> At present your thoughts of God are in your head. All your inner disorder is due to the dislocation of your powers, the mind and the heart each going their own way . . . . You must descend from your head into your heart . . . . Where is the heart? Where sadness, joy, anger and other emotions are felt, here is the heart. Stand there with attention . . . . Stand in the heart, with the faith that God is also there . . . .

Pastoral ministers who listen to the speech of the Catholic people and the civic community with attention must also tell one another what they are hearing – as well as what is not being spoken about, what is concealed, repressed, hidden. How can this be done? Can pastoral ministers along every freeway leading into Los Angeles come together on some regular basis to test the discordant voices against the story of Jesus? Can they find a way to listen to the telling silences searching for the hidden holiness of God? If so, perhaps when the pastors preach on Sunday the people throughout the archdiocese might locate their common story of sin and grace in the story of salvation.
Can the homilies in the church of Los Angeles become powerful speech in which all the people can recognize themselves, openly lament, learn what to hope for and what to repent, and find a sense of common mission?

What I propose here to pastoral leaders as a way forward in the liturgical life of the church of Los Angeles is a burden, of course. But it may also be an invitation to you who are ordained presbyters to rediscover your mission in the church in your own ecclesiastical hard times. Have you tired of waiting for a new assignment? For retirement? For elevation to the episcopacy? Are you weary of the tepidity of routine pastoring? What if the Spirit of Holiness is waiting to find a public voice, to break through to all the people of Los Angeles, through you, the homilists of the Catholic archdiocese. This just might happen if you have been listening to what the Spirit is saying in the churches, and if you can muster newfound confidence and courage to proclaim the good news boldly because you have prayed alone and with your fellow presbyters.

To the lay ministers of Los Angeles I say, if your pastors cannot or will not yet initiate a plan for listening, begin to do the listening and speaking among yourselves. The Spirit of Holiness is pressing to break through the vulnerability of this church into works of justice. You are called to maturity in Christ as a community of believers. At any moment in the church's history, some among the baptized are, by God's gift, more spiritually mature than those who hold pastoral office.

If this is your gift, you may be agents of their formation by walking ahead of them or walking with them. Take what you are discovering together about the call of the Holy Spirit to your daily routine and to your Sunday liturgies as well. Liturgy will become more lively and more life-giving in the hard times still ahead to the measure that your ordinary lives reflect the holiness of God. If the liturgy can renew the church, it is also true that it is the church that renews its liturgy.
Amen

We say "Amen" so frequently in our liturgies that we may be tempted to do so somewhat unconsciously and without reflection; we may not pay full attention to what we are saying. If pressed, we may say that it means "so be it," and "it is true," but these translations just scratch the surface. This little Hebrew word packs so much in its two syllables! And that is why we almost never try to translate it; the Hebrew "Amen" is a rich treasure.

The Jewish Tradition

Because we Christians have borrowed Amen from the Jewish liturgy, that heritage will be our starting point. The following points are drawn from Jewish Liturgy: Prayer and Synagogue Service Through the Ages.¹

- In the liturgies of the Second Temple, Amen was the response to all prayers and blessings.

- In the vast synagogue of classical Alexandria, one of the synagogue officials signaled with a flag from the central reading platform in order to let the congregation know when to respond Amen after blessings. [In days before microphones, it was difficult for everyone in a large space to hear what the worship leader was saying.]

- It may be assumed that in Temple and talmudic times, responding Amen was the main form of participation in the service, not only because congregations were unfamiliar with the prayer texts but also because public worship mainly took the form of responsive reading.

The significance of responding Amen was carefully thought out by the rabbis. The same source tells us that the saying of Amen is held by the rabbis to be equivalent to reciting the blessing itself, and such religious value has been attached to it that it has been said to be superior to the benediction that occasions the response.

In pious reflection, the rabbis stressed the great religious value of responding Amen:

- it prolongs life
- the gates of Paradise will be opened to those who respond with all their might
- their sins will be forgiven

any evil decree passed on them will be annulled

they will be spared from punishment after death.

The rabbis also taught that when God hears a blessing, God nods Amen to the blessing given to God by humans.

Rules for Saying Amen

Commentators on the Jewish liturgy have formulated a number of rules that guide the saying of Amen. These are quoted from To Pray as a Jew.2

• One does not respond Amen to a blessing that one recites oneself.

• One exception is the Grace after Meals, where Amen is said to separate two biblical blessings from a later, rabbinical text.

• A second exception is when the prayer-leader uses Amen in an invitation to the congregation, as in “let us say Amen” or “and say Amen.”

• If one is in the midst of saying prayers that may not be interrupted, one may not stop even to say Amen.

• Amen may be said even when hearing a blessing recited by a non-Jew.

• It is forbidden to respond Amen to a blessing that is said needlessly and so takes the name of the Lord in vain.

• For educational purposes, one should respond Amen to a blessing recited by a child, and thereby set an example for the child.

• One should not say Amen in a louder tone than the blessing itself.

• Amen should be pronounced unhurriedly and distinctly. The first vowel must not be said so quickly as to lose the vowel sound altogether. The last letter must not be slurred so that the n sound is dropped.

• Amen is said only after the blessing is entirely completed. The last syllables of the blessing must not be cut off by the response.

• One should not say Amen for a blessing that one does not actually hear and one has no idea to what blessing he is responding. Such a response is called an “orphaned Amen,” because it has no “parent.” But if a person hears the congregation reciting Amen and does know to which blessing they are responding, they may join in the response.

• Contemporary authorities have ruled that Amen is not said when a blessing is heard over television, radio, or on a recording.

---

Christian Usage

The use of Amen in the Roman Catholic liturgy is similar in many ways to the Jewish usage.

The people do not say Amen at the end of prayers they say in unison, such as the I confess. In this case, however, they do respond Amen to the priest's "May almighty God have mercy on us . . ." that follows the I confess.

Similarly, the people do not say Amen at the end of the Our Father or its doxology. They also do not say Amen at the end of their part of the invitation to the prayer over the gifts, "May the Lord accept . . .".

Priest presiders likewise do not say Amen to the prayers they say privately at the preparation of the gifts and in the communion rite. The not uncommon practice of the priest saying, "May the body (and blood) of Christ bring me (us) to everlasting life," followed by a congregational Amen, is thus poor in two respects: it is supposed to be silent, and it has no Amen, whether from the priest or the people.

Exceptions to the general rule that we do not say Amen to our own prayers include the Glory to God and the Profession of Faith (Creed), both of which, according to the Sacramentary, end with Amen. This may be a case of older practices carried over into the renewed liturgy. It may also reflect an alternative tradition of concluding hymns (such as the Gloria) with Amen. In practice, these Amens - especially that following the Creed - are often spontaneously omitted.

The Sacramentary distinguishes two types of Amen, one a response and the other an acclamation.

Response: At the beginning of Mass, after the sign of the cross, the Missale Romanum says Populus respondet Amen; the English translation is "The people answer Amen." This also occurs following the "May almighty God have mercy on us . . ." and the final blessing. Unexpectedly, this is the case also at the sharing of communion: "The body of Christ. The communicant answers (respondet) Amen."

Acclamation: The Missale Romanum, by its use of the phrase populus acclamat Amen, indicates that the people's Amen following the opening prayer, prayer over the gifts, eucharistic prayer and prayer after communion, has a different character. Our English translation says "the people respond Amen" in these cases. Commentators talk much of the people's proclaiming their acclamations at these points in the liturgy.

This analysis elicits two immediate responses. First, our present English translation uses words that are weaker than those used in the Latin original: respondet becomes answer; acclamat becomes respond. In addition, respond does not adequately convey the sense of what this acclamation is supposed to be.

A third response is that contemporary liturgists would differ with the Missale Romanum with respect to the Amen at communion. Most would certainly consider this to be an acclamation, rather than a mere response.

All of these points have surely been considered by those who are carrying out the present revision of the Sacramentary, and we will soon see what the new edition brings.
Amen in the New Testament

Amen is a commonly used response in the New Testament, especially following doxologies. For example, at the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul says:

- ... to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 16.37)

Here are a few other usages in the Christian scriptures.

- Jesus is called Amen. In referring to the risen Christ, Revelation 3.14 says “The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation.”
- Jesus used Amen frequently to call attention to weighty statements, for example in John 10.7. Literally “Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep,” modern translations render it “Very truly, I say to you . . .”
- Paul uses Amen in speaking about trustworthiness.

Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our words to you have not been “Yes and No.” For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you . . . was not “Yes and No”; but in him it is always “Yes.” For in him every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 1.17-20)
- Paul also refers to the liturgical use of Amen and, in a quite rabbinic way, worries how one can authentically say Amen if the preceding blessing has been said in tongues:

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also. Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up. (1 Corinthians 14.14-17)

The Meaning of Amen

The church has never translated Amen for its liturgy, whether into Latin or Greek or vernacular languages, because any single translation simply limps; it cannot render the full richness of this little Hebrew word. Here are just some of the meanings, inferences, implications and consequences of Amen.

Key words that express something of the meaning of Amen include:

- Acceptance
- Acclamation
- Affirmation
- Agreement
- Assent
- Assurance
- Commitment
- Exclamation
- Proclamation
- Profession
- Testimony
- Witness

Here we will consider only two of these terms in greater depth.
Acclamation

To use Amen as an acclamation presupposes that the people saying it have listened to the prayer that has just been said, have entered into it personally, agree with what has been said, feel that it expresses their sentiments – and are led by the Spirit to say all of this in a public and corporate manner. So they say, Amen.

The acclamatory use of Amen therefore includes elements of acceptance, affirmation, agreement and assent. It is also an exclamation and a proclamation.

Commitment

Lawrence E. Mick speaks eloquently of Amen as commitment.³

• Amen is [best] understood as a word of commitment, an acceptance of the meaning of what has been proclaimed for my life.

• Our Amen [to the eucharistic prayer] not only signals our gratitude and praise to God but also our acceptance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the pattern for our own life.

• We say that the eucharist is a sharing in the sacrifice of Christ. By our Amen to the eucharistic prayer, we commit ourselves to follow in Christ’s steps, to submit to God’s will as he did, to allow our bodies to be broken and our blood to be poured out as Christ’s was, for the sake of others. So Amen is a powerful and momentous word of commitment.

• In similar fashion, our Amen when we receive communion is also a word of commitment. The word here might carry multiple meanings:
  - Amen. Yes, I believe it is the body of Christ I receive;
  - Amen. I recognize myself as the body of Christ in the world today;
  - Amen. I accept all those around me who also make up the body of Christ;
  - Amen. I accept my responsibility to make Christ visible in my life, to allow him to rule my life;
  - Amen. I recognize the body of Christ in the cup we share;
  - Amen. I am willing to pour out my life in service to others as Jesus did.

Finally, we may note that Protestant usage traditionally has differed from that of the Roman Catholic and Jewish liturgies. There it has been a signal by the presider that a prayer said by him or her is now concluded. It is therefore a presider’s word, not a congregational acclamation. Today, this is changing, at least in some quarters.

³ Lawrence E. Mick, “A simple word adds punch to our prayers,” Prairie Messenger (January 10, 1994) 12
The Pall

If it is the custom in the local community, a pall may be placed over the coffin when it is received at the church. A reminder of the baptismal garment of the deceased, the pall is a sign of the Christian dignity of the person. The use of the pall also signifies that all are equal in the eyes of God (see James 2.1-9). In Canada, the use of the pall is encouraged.

Order of Christian Funerals (Canada) n. 38

Covering the coffin with a pall is a way to make a statement about the identity of the deceased. This “clothing” of the coffin in a white garment parallels the clothing of newly baptized persons with a white garment in the liturgy of baptism. The pall proclaims the message that the deceased is baptized. This garment declares and reminds us that he or she is a member of the church, a sister or brother of Jesus Christ, a participant in the very life of the triune God. There is nothing greater that the Christian community can say about the person who is being buried.

Of course the church community knows that there are other aspects to the person’s identity in addition to baptism. But baptism is seen by the church as fundamental and primary and of the greatest importance. Hence at the funeral, baptismal identity is held up in a special way.

The pall is also a sign of hope and trust, a sign of resurrection, a sign of new life beyond this life, a banner that announces our continued relationship to the deceased person in days and years to come.

The pall — and paschal candle as well — are extremely important symbols in the liturgy of Christian burial, and communicate messages of great significance. Ideally, the importance of the baptism and the pall has been appreciated by the deceased person, and is understood by the surviving family, by the local church community, and by all the worshipping assembly at the several parts of the funeral rite.

Pastoral Difficulties

Problems arise, not surprisingly, when the meaning and message of the pall is not, in fact, appreciated by everyone concerned. This lack of understanding can take several forms.

As with weddings, persons may be buried from church who are baptized but who have never lived out the consequences of their baptism, or who may at some point have rejected baptism, the church, and the Christian life. The use of the pall in such cases can be a way for the church to say that we still
see the person’s dignity in God’s eyes because of baptism. Might it also, in some cases, smack of hypocrisy? As a church we still do not quite know how to relate to persons who, though once baptized, choose not to live out their baptism.

The deceased person (or his or her family), though a faithful Catholic, may not have a great regard or appreciation for baptism. The great significance of our baptismal identity began to be reemphasized just thirty years ago at Vatican Council II, and we as a church are still growing in this regard. Some individuals have not yet come to appreciate baptism as the core of their own personal identity. In such cases, the pall may not be very important to them.

Other complications arise because in daily life everyone has many identities in addition to baptism: family, work, social, civic, political, economic, ethnic and others. One may belong to various church groups as well as to various civic institutions. When one dies, are these to be forgotten? How might they be respected and signified as important parts of the person’s life?

Some deceased persons, some families, and many organizations and institutions may wish, at the funeral, to show one or another of these “non-baptismal” identities, rather than that of baptism. Some people, in their lives and in their consciousness, may feel that their identity as family members, hockey players, members of the military or this or that organization or fraternity, is more important than their identity as baptized. This can lead to requests or demands to use all kinds of symbols other than the pall.

Funerals, as with weddings, are (or may be) social and civil events as well as liturgies of the church. Many of the persons who are present are from other churches, other faiths, or no faith at all; many will not understand or value the baptismal identity of the deceased person and the message about baptism identity and dignity that the church is trying to communicate. Some may feel that they have, not only the desire but the right, to impose their views of the deceased person’s identity on the funeral liturgy of the church. These conflicting views can lead to difficult pastoral situations.

The use of the pall is not a simple matter. It raises many questions and challenges that we need to continue to wrestle with. Hopefully, we will continue to grow in our appreciation of our baptismal identity and its centrality in our lives.

---

The Funeral Liturgy

The following excerpts from the *Order of Christian Funerals* remind us of additional references to baptism in the funeral liturgy.

If it is the custom in the local community, the pall is then placed on the coffin by family members, friends, or the minister.

In baptism N. received the sign of the cross. May he/she now share in Christ's victory over sin and death.
On the day of his/her baptism, 
N. was welcomed into the Church, 
given new life in Christ, 
and clothed with the garment of salvation.

Today we greet the body of our brother/sister 
and surround him/her with the Church's prayer. 
We commend our brother/sister N. to the mercy of God 
and pray that the promise made to him/her in baptism 
will be fulfilled.

In baptism, N. was given a share 
in the death and resurrection of Christ. 
As we gather today to celebrate the mystery of our faith, 
we greet the body of our brother/sister 
and pray that he/she will feast for ever 
at the eternal banquet table of heaven.

In baptism N. received the light of Christ. 
Scatter the darkness now 
and lead him/her over the waters of death. 
Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

For N. who in baptism was given the pledge of eternal life, 
that he/she may now be admitted to the company of the saints. 
Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

In baptism, N. shared in the death and resurrection of Christ. 
May he/she be welcomed into the glory of eternal life.

Our brother/sister was washed in baptism 
and anointed with the Holy Spirit; 
give him/her fellowship with all your saints. 
We pray to the Lord: Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God, through the death of your Son on the cross 
you destroyed our death; 
through his rest in the tomb 
you hallowed the graves of all who believe in you; 
and through his rising again 
you restored us to eternal life.

God of the living and the dead, 
accept our prayers 
for those who have died in Christ 
and are buried with him in the hope of rising again. 
Since they were true to your name on earth, 
let them praise you for ever in the joy of heaven.
Listen, O God, to the prayers of your Church
on behalf of the faithful departed,
and grant to your servant N.,
whose funeral we have celebrated today,
the inheritance promised to all your saints.

Loving God, from whom all life proceeds
and by whose hand the dead are raised again,
though we are sinners, you wish always to hear us.
Accept the prayers we offer in sadness for your servant N.:
deliver his/her soul from death,
number him/her among your saints
and clothe him/her with the robe of salvation
to enjoy for ever the delights of your kingdom
Sunday Worship Without a Resident Priest in Days Past

*Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours,*¹ just recently published, provides a national liturgical book for English-speaking Canada for the needs of communities that cannot celebrate the eucharist on Sunday because no priest is available.

**Worship in the Caribbean:** Our present concerns about Sunday worship in communities without resident priests raises the question, How did our ancestors worship in similar circumstances? In the dispersed churches of the Caribbean islands at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, this need was met in several quite different ways. Here are four stories extracted from the accounts of Père J.R. Labat, 'the chaplain to pirates,' based on his ministry in that part of the world during the years 1693-1705.

**In Labat's words:** Titles have been added. The text is quoted from the abridged, English translation of Pere Labat's accounts.²

---

**Itinerant Priest**

When I visited, I was obliged to hold many masses, christenings, etc., etc., and confessed the whole colony. I also published the bans of marriage for many couples, some of whom were about to marry, while others had not considered it necessary to wait for a priest to bless their union but had been contented with a private arrangement. These latter couples I was surprised to find, were still so pleased with each other in spite of a trial marriage or novitiate of long duration, that they did not hesitate to be lawfully married.

The devotions of the islanders and the fêtes which followed the weddings made it impossible for [pirate captain] Daniel to obtain his farina and peas till Saturday, and then I had to say Mass on Sunday...³

---

¹ (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995)
³ Ibid., 248-249

126
Itinerant Worshippers

St. Pierre, 6th March 1694. We were busy all this morning confessing a crew of filibusters [pirates] who had arrived at Les Mouillages with two prizes that they had captured from the English. The Mass of the Virgin was celebrated with all solemnity, and I blessed three large loaves which were presented by the captain and his officers, who arrived at the church accompanied by the drums and trumpets of their corvette. At the beginning of Mass the corvette fired a salute with all her cannons. At the Elevation of the Holy Sacrament she fired another salvo, at the [Benedictus] a third, and finally a fourth when we sang the Te Deum after Mass. All the filibusters contributed 30 sols to the sacristy, and did so with much piety and modesty. This may surprise people in Europe where filibusters are not credited with possessing much piety, but as a matter of fact they generally give a portion of their good fortunes to the churches. If church ornaments or church linen happen to be in the prizes they capture, the filibusters always present them to their parish church.

Lay Leadership

When we arrived at St. Martin there was no King's officer at the head of the French colony. Their Commandant was a settler who was a surgeon. Apart from the duty of Governor, this gentleman, whose name I am sorry I have forgotten for it is more worthy to be remembered than many others, also acted as curé. The Capuchin curé was murdered by a Carib in 1699, and since then none of the religious orders have sent priests to reside in this colony. Priests from St. Kitts visited the settlers from time to time, but the visits ceased when the English captured St. Kitts.

It was then that M. le Commandant summoned his people to church on fête days and Sundays, and preached, said prayers, gave notices of fêtes and feasts, and I do believe bestowed corrections fraternelles on any of his flock who failed to attend his services.

Kidnapping a Priest

This pirate [Captain Daniel, a Frenchman], finding himself short of food between the Saints [islands] and Dominica, wanted some chickens, and knowing that there were plenty to be had in the Saints, dropped anchor at these islands during the night. Since it was peace-time no watch was kept on shore, so it was easy for the pirates to land and seize the curé’s house and other houses as well.

---

4 The translation gives "Benediction." However the text more likely refers to the "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" that was sung after the consecration, not the separate eucharistic devotion of Benediction.

5 Memoirs, 36

6 Ibid., 248-249
The pirates then conducted the curé and the settlers they had captured on board their ship, and posted men to guard the church and landing place. They were kindness itself to their prisoners and explained that they only desired wine, brandy, chickens, and other stores. After they had collected these items the pirates asked the curé to say Mass on their barque, and he was unable to refuse this request. They sent for the church ornaments, and put up an altar on the poop under an awning, and then chanted Mass lustily. A salvo of eight cannons marked the commencement of the service, they fired a second salvo at the Sanctus, a third at the Elevation, a fourth at the [Benedictus], and lastly a fifth after the Exaudiat, while the prayer for the King was followed by the most hearty Vive le Roi.

Only one incident slightly marred this ceremony. One of the pirates adopted an offensive attitude during the Elevation, and on being rebuked by the captain, he replied insolently with a horrible oath. Daniel promptly drew his pistol and shot him through the head and swore by God that he would do the same to anyone else who showed disrespect to the Saint Sacrifice.

The priest was quite startled, for this affair occurred close beside him, but Daniel said, “Do not trouble yourself, my father. It is only a ___ who has been punished for disrespect and will not forget his duty.” Quite an effective method, as one perceives, to prevent the poor fellow repeating his offense.

When Mass was over, the body was thrown into the sea, and the pirates rewarded the priest for preaching on board their ship. They gave him several valuable presents, and as they learned that he had no slave to wait on him, they presented him with [a] negro.

---

7 See note 4
8 The reference to “Exaudiat” is unclear. From the context it appears to be some prayer said after Mass.
9 Memoirs, 221-222
The ritual for Sunday celebration of the Word and Hours is intended for liturgical assemblies on Sunday, the Lord's Day, where the Eucharist cannot be celebrated. It is primarily intended for lay persons or deacons who lead the community in prayer at Sunday worship when there is no priest to preside at the celebration of the Eucharist. The ritual can also be used on other occasions: parish or community celebrations of Morning or Evening Prayer; liturgies of the Word in chapels and institutions where it is not pastorally possible to celebrate the Eucharist; or ecumenical celebrations of the Word or Hours.

Pastoral notes for the celebration of the Word and Hours are contained in two separate publications. The Liturgical Notes, which are printed in the ritual book itself, concern the actual celebration and its preparation. Additional notes for the formation and training of ministers, especially the leader of prayer, are printed (with the Liturgical Notes) in number 6 of the series Canadian Studies in Liturgy (May 1995).

**RITUAL BOOK**

The ritual book SUNDAY CELEBRATION OF THE WORD AND HOURS presents the liturgical prayers and rubrical directions for the following celebrations:

- Sunday Celebration of the Word
- Rite of Distribution of Communion
- Morning Prayer
- Evening Prayer

For greater convenience, the ritual book is offered in two different editions, with identical contents.

**Large Edition**: 384 pages, 21.5 x 28 cm, two colours, four ribbons, red hard cover with gold imprint: $51.95

**Study Edition**: 384 pages, 15 x 20 cm, two colours, sewn, four-colour flexible cover: $23.95

**PASTORAL NOTES**

The ritual book is completed by notes found in Canadian Studies in Liturgy No. 6: Pastoral Notes – SUNDAY CELEBRATION OF THE WORD AND HOURS (May 1995). Liturgical principles, ministries, the formation of lay leaders, special occasions, liturgy of the hours, options for the celebration and liturgical music are some of the subjects discussed in this companion book.

84 pages, 17 x 25.5 cm, saddle-stitched, two-colour cover: $6.95

The Winter 1994 issue of NATIONAL BULLETIN ON LITURGY (Vol. 27, no. 139) presents detailed commentaries on the ritual. Copies of this Bulletin are available for $5.00.

Place your order with: Publications Service
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
90 Parent Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B1
Tel.: 1-800-769-1147 – (613) 241-7538
FAX: (613) 241-5090