The Rite of Penance: Trying It Again for the Very First Time
This bulletin is primarily pastoral in scope. It is prepared for members of parish liturgy committees, readers, musicians, singers, catechists, teachers, religious, seminarians, clergy, diocesan liturgical commissions, and for all who are involved in preparing, celebrating, and improving the community's life of worship and prayer.

Editorial commentary in the bulletin is the responsibility of the editor.

Editor: Margaret Bick
Editorial Office: NATIONAL LITURGY OFFICE 90 Parent Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B1
Telephone: (613) 241-9461 extension 276
Web Site: http://www.cccb.ca
E-mail: liturgy@cccb.ca

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The Rite of Penance: Trying It Again for the Very First Time
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JULY 1, 2001
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

This year Canada Day falls on a Sunday. Though optional texts for masses celebrated on Canada Day are provided in the sacramentary, their use is not permitted on Sunday. The appropriate texts for July 1, 2001 are listed on page 190 of the Liturgical Calendar 2000-2001 ("Ordo").

It is appropriate to include prayers for our nation in the general intercessions at masses on this day. Parish bulletins may include prayers for family use and might suggest serious thoughts on Christian citizenship for prayer and meditation.
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This issue and its sequel, both of which deal with the Rite of Penance, have been a long time coming. It's difficult to find someone who does not have strong feelings about some aspect of the topic; surely this is an indication that we need to take a careful look at the way we celebrate reconciliation. But only the brave do so in print; for this reason we are truly grateful to our authors who agreed so readily to do so.

In Bulletin #164 we have included the ICEL texts of the Introduction and Chapters I to III of the Rite of Penance. They have been re-sequenced so that paragraphs 15–37 (those portions dealing with a single form of the celebration) appear together with the ritual texts to which they apply. The texts are immediately followed by a commentary and discussion questions for parish liturgy committees, clergy study groups, seminarians, and anyone interested in deepening their understanding of the “new” (December, 1973) rite. (We have allowed the writers the license to call the rite new because, though twenty-seven years old, it is still to a great extent untried.) Bulletin #165 will serve as a pastoral resource drawing on the wisdom and experience of several people who have struggled long and hard to celebrate reconciliation in their local situation according to the vision of the Vatican II Council Fathers. (Readers will immediately notice that no commentary is provided for the “Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution.” We have chosen to deal with this topic in a different manner and in the next issue, Bulletin #165.)

Because this is the first issue of Volume 34, readers will find here the index of Volume 33.
The **Rite of Penance:**
Trying It Again for the Very First Time

**Rite of Penance**

**Introduction**

I. The Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of Salvation

1. The Father has shown forth his mercy by reconciling the world to himself in Christ and by making peace for all things on earth and in heaven by the blood of Christ on the cross.1 The Son of God made man lived among men in order to free them from the slavery of sin2 and to call them out of darkness into his wonderful light.3 He therefore began his work on earth by preaching repentance and saying: "Turn away from sin and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). This invitation to repentance, which had often been sounded by the prophets, prepared the hearts of men for the coming of the Kingdom of God through the voice of John the Baptist who came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

Jesus, however, not only exhorted men to repentance so that they should abandon their sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord,4 but he also welcomed sinners and reconciled them with the Father.5 Moreover, by healing the sick he signified his power to forgive sin.6 Finally, he himself died for our sins and rose again for our justification.7 Therefore, on the night he was betrayed and began his saving passion,8 he instituted the sacrifice of the new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins.9 After his resurrection he sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, empowering them to forgive or retain sins10 and sending them forth to all peoples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name.11

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1 See 2 Corinthians 5:18ff; Colossians 1:20.
2 See John 8:34-36.
3 See 1 Peter 2:9.
6 See Matthew 9:2-8.
7 See Romans 4:25.
8 See Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer III.
9 See Matthew 26:28.
10 See John 20:19-23.
The Lord said to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed also in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). In obedience to this command, on the day of Pentecost Peter preached the forgiveness of sins by baptism: “Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Since then the Church has never failed to call men from sin to conversion and by the celebration of penance to show the victory of Christ over sin.

2. This victory is first brought to light in baptism where our fallen nature is crucified with Christ so that the body of sin may be destroyed and we may no longer be slaves to sin, but rise with Christ and live for God. For this reason the Church proclaims its faith in “the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

In the sacrifice of the Mass the passion of Christ is made present; his body given for us and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins are offered to God again by the Church for the salvation of the world. In the eucharist Christ is present and is offered as “the sacrifice which has made our peace” with God and in order that “we may be brought together in unity” by his Holy Spirit.

Furthermore our Saviour Jesus Christ, when he gave to his apostles and their successors power to forgive sins, instituted in his Church the sacrament of penance. Thus the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God and renewed in grace. The Church “possesses both water and tears: the water of baptism, the tears of penance.”

II. The Reconciliation of Penitents in the Church’s Life

The Church is Holy But Always in Need of Purification

3. Christ “loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy” (Ephesians 5:25–26), and he united the Church to himself as his bride. He filled her with his divine gifts, because she is his body and fullness, and through her he spreads truth and grace to all.

The members of the Church, however, are exposed to temptation and unfortunately often fall into sin. As a result, “while Christ, ‘holy, innocent, and unstained’ (Hebrews 7:26), did not know sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) but came only to atone for the sins of the people (see Hebrews 2:17), the Church, which includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy and always in need of purification, constantly pursues repentance and renewal.”

Penance in the Church’s Life and Liturgy

4. The people of God accomplishes and perfects this continual repentance in
many different ways. It shares in the suffering of Christ by enduring its own difficulties, carries out works of mercy and charity, and adopts ever more fully the outlook of the Gospel message. Thus the people of God becomes in the world a sign of conversion to God. All this the Church expresses in its life and celebrates in the liturgy when the faithful confess that they are sinners and ask pardon of God and of their brothers and sisters. This happens in penitential services, in the proclamation of the word of God, in prayer, and in the penitential aspects of the eucharistic celebration.

In the sacraent of penance the faithful "obtain from the mercy of God pardon for their sins against him; at the same time they are reconciled with the Church which they wounded by their sins and which works for their conversion by charity, example, and prayer." 24

Reconciliation with God and the Church

5. Since every sin is an offence against God which disrupts our friendship with him, "the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him." 25 Therefore, the sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who "first loved us" (1 John 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us, 26 and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly. 27

"By the hidden and loving mystery of God's design men are joined together in the bonds of supernatural solidarity, so much so that the sin of one harms the others just as the holiness of one benefits the others." 28 Penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sins.

In fact, men frequently join together to commit injustice. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that they who are freed from sin by the grace of Christ may work with all men of good will for justice and peace in the world.

The Sacrament of Penance and its Parts

6. The follower of Christ who has sinned but who has been moved by the Holy Spirit to come to the sacrament of penance should above all be converted to God with his whole heart. This inner conversion of heart embraces sorrow for sin and the intent to lead a new life. It is expressed through confession made to the Church, due satisfaction, and amendment of life. God grants pardon for sin through the Church, which works by the ministry of priests. 29

a) Contrition

The most important act of the penitent is contrition, which is "heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more." 30 "We can only approach the Kingdom of Christ

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23 See Council of Trent, Session XIV, De sacramentis Paenitentiae: Denz.-Schön. 1638. 1740. 1743; Congregation of Rites, instruction Eucharisticum mysterium, May 25, 1967, no. 35: AAS 59 (1967) 560-561; Roman Missal, General Instruction, nos. 29, 30, 56 a. b. g.
24 Second Vatican Council, constitution Lumen gentium, no. 11: AAS 57 (1965) 15-16.
26 See Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:25.
28 Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution Indulgentiarum doctrina, January 1, 1967, no. 4: AAS 59 (1967) 9; see Pius XII, encyclical Mystici Corporis, June 29, 1943: AAS 35 (1943) 213.
29 See Council of Trent, Session XIV, De sacramentis Paenitentiae, Chapter I: Denz.-Schön. 1673-1675.
30 Ibid., Chapter 4: Denz.-Schön. 1676.
by metanoia. This is a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge, and arrange his life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in his Son in the last days and given to us in abundance" (see Hebrews 1:2; Colossians 1:19 and passim). The genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition. For conversion should affect a person from within so that it may progressively enlighten him and render him continually more like Christ.

b) Confession

The sacrament of penance includes the confession of sins, which comes from true knowledge of self before God and from contrition for those sins. However, this inner examination of heart and the exterior accusation should be made in the light of God's mercy. Confession requires in the penitent the will to open his heart to the minister of God, and in the minister a spiritual judgment by which, acting in the person of Christ, he pronounces his decision of forgiveness or retention of sins in accord with the power of the keys.

c) Act of Penance (Satisfaction)

True conversion is completed by acts of penance or satisfaction for the sins committed, by amendment of conduct, and also by the reparation of injury. The kind and extent of the satisfaction should be suited to the personal condition of each penitent so that each one may restore the order which he disturbed and through the corresponding remedy be cured of the sickness from which he suffered. Therefore, it is necessary that the act of penance really be a remedy for sin and a help to renewal of life. Thus the penitent, “forgetting the things which are behind him” (Philippians 3:13), again becomes part of the mystery of salvation and turns himself toward the future.

d) Absolution

Through the sign of absolution God grants pardon to the sinner who in sacramental confession manifests his change of heart to the Church's minister, and thus the sacrament of penance is completed. In God's design the humanity and loving kindness of our Saviour have visibly appeared to us, and God uses visible signs to give salvation and to renew the broken covenant.

In the sacrament of penance the Father receives the repentant son who comes back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings it back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies this temple of God again or lives more fully within it. This is finally expressed in a renewed and more fervent sharing of the Lord's table, and there is great joy at the banquet of God's Church over the son who has returned from afar.

The Necessity and Benefit of the Sacrament

7. Just as the wound of sin is varied and multiple in the life of individuals and of the community, so too the healing which penance provides is varied. Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God.

a) To obtain the saving remedy of the sacrament of penance, according to the plan of our merciful God, the faithful must confess to a priest each and every grave sin.

32 See Council of Trent, Session XIV, De sacramentis Paenitentiae, Chapter 5: Denz.-Schön. 1679.
34 See Titus 3:4–5.
which they remember upon examination of their conscience.36

b) Moreover, frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly.37 In confession of this kind, penitents who accuse themselves of venial faults should try to conform more closely to Christ and to follow the voice of the Spirit more attentively.

In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among Christ’s faithful, it must take root in their whole lives and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbour.

The celebration of this sacrament is thus always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith, gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ has made us free,8 and offers its life as a spiritual sacrifice in praise of God’s glory, as it hastens to meet the Lord Jesus.

III. Offices and Ministries in the Reconciliation of Penitents

The Community in the Celebration of Penance

8. The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.39

The Minister of the Sacrament of Penance

9. a) The Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and priests. By preaching God’s word they call the faithful to conversion; in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit they declare and grant the forgiveness of sins.

In the exercise of this ministry priests act in communion with the bishop and share in his power and office of regulating the penitential discipline.40

b) The competent minister of the sacrament of penance is a priest who has the faculty to absolve in accordance with canon law. All priests, however, even though not approved to hear confessions, absolve validly and licitly all penitents who are in danger of death.

The Pastoral Exercise of This Ministry

10. a) In order to fulfill his ministry properly and faithfully the confessor should understand the disorders of souls and apply the appropriate remedies to them. He should fulfill his office of judge wisely and should acquire the knowledge and prudence necessary for this task by serious study, guided by the teaching authority of the Church and especially by fervent prayer to God. Discernment of spirits is a deep knowledge of God’s action in the hearts of men; it is a gift of the Spirit as well as the fruit of charity.41

36 See Council of Trent, Session XIV, De sacramentis Paenitentiae, can. 7–8: Denz.-Schon. 1707–1708.
37 See 2 Corinthians 4:10.
38 See Galatians 4:31.
39 See Matthew 18:18; John 20:23.
40 See Second Vatican Council, constitution Lumen gentium, no. 26: AAS 57 (1965) 31–32.
41 See Philippians 1:9–10.
b) The confessor should always be ready and willing to hear the confessions of the faithful when they make a reasonable request of him.\textsuperscript{42}

c) By receiving the repentant sinner and leading him to the light of the truth the confessor fulfills a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. He should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who mercifully accomplished the saving work of man’s redemption and who is present by his power in the sacraments.\textsuperscript{43}

d) As the minister of God the confessor comes to know the secrets of another’s conscience, and he is bound to keep the sacramental seal of confession absolutely inviolate.

The Penitent

11. The acts of the penitent in the celebration of the sacrament are of the greatest importance.

When with proper dispositions he approaches this saving remedy instituted by Christ and confesses his sins, he shares by his actions in the sacrament itself; the sacrament is completed when the words of absolution are spoken by the minister in the name of Christ.

Thus the faithful Christian, as he experiences and proclaims the mercy of God in his life, celebrates with the priest the liturgy by which the Church continually renews itself.

IV. The Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance

The Place of Celebration

12. The sacrament of penance is celebrated in the place and location prescribed by law.

The Time of Celebration

13. The reconciliation of penitents may be celebrated at any time on any day, but it is desirable that the faithful know the day and time at which the priest is available for this ministry. They should be encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance at times when Mass is not being celebrated and especially during the scheduled periods.\textsuperscript{44}

The season of Lent is most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of penance. Already on Ash Wednesday the people of God has heard the solemn invitation “Turn away from sin and believe the good news.” It is therefore fitting to have several penitential celebrations during Lent, so that all the faithful may have an opportunity to be reconciled with God and their neighbour and so be able to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Easter triduum with renewed hearts.

Liturgical Vestments

14. The regulations laid down by the localOrdinaries for the use of liturgical vestments in the celebration of penance are to be observed.

\textsuperscript{42} See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Normae pastorales circa absolutionem sacramentalem generali modo impertiendam, June 16, 1972, No. XII: AAS 64 (1972) 514.

\textsuperscript{43} See Second Vatican Council, constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium, no. 7: AAS 56 (1964) 100–101.

Adaptations by the Episcopal Conferences

38. In preparing particular rituals episcopal conferences may adapt the rite of penance to the needs of individual regions so that after confirmation by the Apostolic See the rituals may be used in the respective regions. It is the responsibility of episcopal conferences in this matter:

a) to establish regulations for the discipline of the sacrament of penance, particularly those affecting the ministry of priests and the reservation of sins;

b) to determine more precise regulations about the place proper for the ordinary celebration of the sacrament of penance and about the signs of penance to be shown by the faithful before general absolution (see no. 35, above);

c) to prepare translations of texts adapted to the character and language of each people and also to compose new texts for the prayers of the faithful and the minister, keeping intact the sacramental form.

The Competence of the Bishop

39. It is for the diocesan bishop:

a) to regulate the discipline of penance in his diocese, including adaptations of the rite according to the rules proposed by the episcopal conference;

b) to determine, after consultation with the other members of the episcopal conference, when general sacramental absolution may be permitted under the conditions laid down by the Holy See.

Adaptations by the Minister

40. It is for priests, and especially parish priests:

a) in reconciling individuals or the community, to adapt the rite to the concrete circumstances of the penitents. The essential structure and the entire form of absolution must be kept, but if necessary they may omit some parts for pastoral reasons or enlarge upon them, may select the texts of readings or prayers, and may choose a place more suitable for the celebration according to the regulations of the episcopal conference, so that the entire celebration may be rich and fruitful;

b) to propose and prepare occasional penitential celebrations during the year, especially in Lent. In order that the texts chosen and the order of the celebration may be adapted to the conditions and circumstances of the community or group (for example, children, sick persons, etc.), they may be assisted by others, including the laity;

c) to decide to give general sacramental absolution preceded by only a generic confession, when a grave necessity not foreseen by the diocesan bishop arises and when recourse to him is not possible. They are obliged to notify the Ordinary as soon as possible of the need and of the fact that absolution was given.

Editor’s note: No. 35 appears on pg. 47.
In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the Second Vatican Council mandated a reform of the sacrament of penance: “The rite and formularies for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament” (72). It took fully seven years to complete the task (from 1966 to 1973), but one of the results is an extensive introduction that is rich in theological and pastoral content.

**Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of Salvation (1–2)**

The first major contribution of the Introduction is that it situates the rite of penance within the context of salvation history. This had not been done for a long time, and theology, catechesis, the people’s understanding of the sacrament, and the celebration itself all suffered as a result.

Reconciliation is a master-theme in the history of salvation. Two events—creation and the fall from grace—lie in the background. The Fall left us (the human race) estranged from God, and it is this terrible estrangement that the scriptures call darkness and theologians call sin. In such a state the world is helplessly lost, doomed to destruction and death.

**The Paschal Mystery**

But from the time of Abraham, the scriptures point to a God of reconciliation—a God who searches us out, who calls us home. God’s plan of reconciliation reaches its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ: “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” (Colossians 1.19–20).

In God’s work of reconciliation in Christ we see the activity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (Galatians 4.4–7).

By his passage through obedient death to resurrected and glorious life in God, Jesus broke the bonds of estrangement and carried humanity home. In his own person, he established a new covenant of life and love between God and the world. From that time on, it remains for the people of this world to hear the good news of the kingdom of God and to become one with Jesus in his passage to new and glorious life.

**Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist**

Baptism, confirmation, and eucharist are precisely sacraments of initiation into the mystery of Christ’s passage through death and resurrection to ascension into glory and communion of life in the triune God. It is by way of conversion to the good news and participation in the sacraments of passage that the world becomes one with Christ and makes its way home. These are the primary sacraments of reconciliation, the primary sacraments of salvation. And of these the eucharist is the goal and the end, for the highest expression of reconciliation is to sit at the table of shared life with our God.

**Penance or Reconciliation**

What we have seen above allows us to situate the sacrament of penance or
reconciliation in its proper context. If baptism/confirmation is the fundamental sacramental route to the eucharistic table, penance is the sacramental route back to that table when, because of grave sin, our participation in the eucharist would be a lie. The process of return requires a renewed conversion of the heart, a sacramental encounter with the reconciling God, and a reintegration into the assembly that gathers for eucharist.

This radical reintegration into the eucharistic assembly is the primary intention and force of the sacramental event. But, in the course of time, the sacrament has come to be valued as a privileged place for the forgiveness of venial sins as well. In this latter, secondary role, the sacrament has as its goal a fuller, more honest and open participation in the eucharistic celebration.

Reconciliation of Penitents in the Church’s Life (3–5)

In this section the Introduction points to reconciliation as an ongoing characteristic of Christian life, for “the Church, having sinners in its midst, is at the same time holy and in need of cleansing, and so is unceasingly intent on repentance and reform” (3).

The Holy People of God

In order to understand the continuing need for reconciliation in the Church, it is important to turn our attention first to the essential holiness of the People of God. They have walked through the waters of regeneration, they have been sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and, in the Sunday assembly, they gather at the feast of the kingdom, sharing communion of life in God.

Peter writes as follows: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2.9). And Paul teaches the same truth: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Ephesians 2.19–22). Such is the unshakeable dignity of the holy People of God.

Thus we are described, not as a community of sinners, but as a community of saints. Yet, in the course of the sometimes-arduous journey of life, sin remains a prospect that is never very far away. We are prone to act in ways that offend our dignity as a holy people, that damage or even break our relationship with God. Hence the need for vigilance, for hearing the good news again and again, for having a change of heart, for asking forgiveness, for being reconciled with one another in God.

Renewing the Covenant

The eucharist is the covenant rite of New Testament times, and it is within the Sunday eucharistic assembly that the People of God seal and reseal their relationship with God. In holy communion the community is engaged in the covenantal words: “The body of Christ. Amen. The blood of Christ. Amen.” In this marvellous exchange the Lord commits his life to us and we in turn give our lives to him. It is a sacred oath in which we pledge our lives for the sake of the kingdom and the glory of God.

Thus it is the Sunday eucharist that constantly challenges the community to refine its life, to set aside all those things that hold it back from the fullest commitment of its life to God. This means that the participants in the Sunday eucharist need to prepare for the celebration by examining their lives and renewing their conversion to the Lord.

Living as the Body of Christ

The most appropriate examination of life is one that is rooted in our experience of
the Sunday eucharist, one that recognizes our identity as the body of Christ. Saint Augustine, referring to the rite of communion, made the point as follows: “You reply ‘Amen’ to what you are, and thereby agree that such you are. You hear the words ‘The body of Christ’ and you reply ‘Amen.’ Be, then, a member of Christ’s body, so that your ‘Amen’ may accord with the truth” (Sermo 272).

Living as the body of Christ means living in unity and peace in the Holy Spirit. It means loving and caring for one another on the journey to the fullness of the kingdom. It means supporting one another along the way. It means following the mandate of the Lord: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 14.12). And it means paying attention to Jesus’ message about recognizing him in the sisters and brothers: “I was hungry and you gave me food … Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of your family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25.35-40).

Sacrament of Penance and Its Parts (6)

Under this title the Introduction identifies contrition, confession, the act of penance, and absolution as the central elements of the rite of penance. But it begins, most judiciously, with the comment that the penitent “should above all be wholeheartedly converted to God.”

Conversion to God

This conversion precedes the celebration of the sacrament, and the Introduction emphasizes this point because it is such an important part of genuine reconciliation (and perhaps because it has not always been given the attention it deserves). When conversion is not given its proper place in the reconciliation process, the sacramental celebration may be too mechanical and automatic and open to the charge of easy forgiveness or cheap grace.

In its root meaning, conversion is a turning round. Building on an examination of life and the recognition of faults, it involves a turning to face the living God, an acknowledgement with sorrow that we have not been faithful to our relationship of love, and an expression of our heartfelt intent to change.

Facing God in this way can be the hardest thing to do. It calls for a humility and a lack of pretense that is uncommon in society today. And it sometimes requires overcoming a fear of God instilled from childhood days. Penitents need to hear, through the preaching of the word, that God loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31.3), and they need to hear the striking words of Jesus, that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15.7).

The Central Elements of the Rite

The sacrament of penance has the power to carry the penitent deep into the mystery of God’s reconciling love, yet sometimes the way we celebrate it gets in the way. Many of us remember reciting a catalogue of sins with our mind fixed on not forgetting anything on the list. Many of us remember saying a memorized act of contrition with our mind set on finishing before the priest completed his part. And many of us remember praying five Hail Mary’s as a less than productive act of penance.

It is this sort of thing that the Introduction wants to change when it sets before us the profoundly spiritual meaning of contrition, confession, the act of penance, and absolution. The new rite of penance focuses our attention on a live, personal encounter with the God of salvation, and nothing less will do.

Need and Benefit of This Sacrament (7)

In this section the Introduction commends the sacrament of penance to all the
members of the Church: "Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from communion with God in love are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who, experiencing their weakness daily, fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to reach the full freedom of the children of God."

The role of the sacrament of penance in the remission of grave sin can be documented from the early times of the Church's life. In fact, its use was restricted to this end. Moreover, since the conversion brought about by the baptism/confirmation/eucharist experience was intended to have a binding and enduring effect, post-initiation penance was taken to be the exception rather than the rule. Even to this day it is understood that the celebration of penance is required only if and when a penitent is conscious of grave sin. (The so-called "Easter duty" always referred to Easter communion; the requirement of confession before this communion was only on the presumption of grave sin.)

Gradually, during the course of the Middle Ages, the role of the sacrament was expanded to include the remission of venial sins as well. And in our own day the use of the sacrament for this purpose has been highly recommended by the Church.

The call for regular and even frequent confession has increased over the past number of years, in part because of a noticeable decline in penitential practice—a decline that has been variously ascribed to a loss of the sense of sin, a dissatisfaction with the previous way of celebrating the rite, or the presence of other avenues of forgiveness such as the penitential rite and the sign of peace in the Sunday liturgy. The jury is still out on these matters, but there are three points we might keep in mind.

The first is that the sacrament of penance is not the only legitimate vehicle for the remission of sins. From the beginning the Church recognized that prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other good works could bring about the forgiveness of everyday faults. It is a question of selecting the best approach in each situation. (For further insights in this direction see the article by Abbot Peter Novecosky in National Bulletin on Liturgy, winter 1999, pages 255-256. This topic, opened up by Abbot Peter, will be pursued in Bulletin #165.)

The second is that the sacrament of penance is a privileged place of reconciliation. The power of the sacrament to change our lives and make us more fully dedicated to the praise and glory of God is real indeed.

The third is that the frequent use of the sacrament brings with it the danger of a superficial, mechanical, and routine celebration that does not effect genuine change in the pattern of our lives. This caution does not suggest that confession should be less frequent. Rather, it takes us to the admonition offered in the Introduction: "In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among the faithful, it must take root in their entire life and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbour."

Offices and Ministries in the Reconciliation of Penitents (8–11)

The Introduction addresses the respective roles of the community, the minister of the sacrament, and the penitent in the process of reconciliation. Perhaps surprisingly the community is mentioned first. This is because sacraments are always celebrations and self-expressions of the Church, and both initiation and reconciliation are the business and concern of the whole community of faith.

The Role of the Community

If the sacrament of penance has been on shaky ground over the past period of time, it is possibly due as much to the absence of community participation as it is to the manner of its celebration. Penance began as a thoroughly communal event, but as
time went on a “private” form of penance gradually took hold, supplanted the older rite, and has remained with us up to the Second Vatican Council.

Nonetheless, the true picture of reconciliation begins with the eucharistic community, which is both the body of Christ and the sacramental presence of Christ in the world. It is this community that carries as its mission the reconciliation of the world with God. Thus it is the responsibility of all its members to stand solidly with those in spiritual pain, to listen to their stories, to pray with them, to encourage their return, to welcome them back, to celebrate their return. The faltering of this mission left reconciliation in a small corner of the Church’s life and turned the celebration into a mere shadow of its former self.

**The Role of the Minister**

In previous times much has been made of the role of the priest as judge and physician. While these characteristics retain their value, it is interesting to note that the Introduction speaks eloquently about the discernment of spirits, which is “a deep knowledge of God’s working in the human heart, a gift of the Spirit, and an effect of charity” (10a).

More fundamental yet is the role of the priest as the sacramental icon of Christ, the Head of his body, the Church. The power of all the sacraments to effect the salvation of the world rests on the presence and activity of Christ, Head and members, in the liturgical action.

**The Penitents**

Sometimes penitents may feel that they are simply “acted on” in the celebration of penance. Yet, as the Introduction is careful to point out, nothing could be further from the truth. The sacramental action is precisely a living dialogue and a saving encounter between God and the penitent within the setting of the community that is the Church. Of necessity, then, penitents are major participants in the sacramental action.

The Introduction describes the penitents’ involvement as follows: “In this way the faithful, even as they experience and proclaim the mercy of God in their own life, are with the priest celebrating the liturgy of the Church’s continual self-renewal” (11). This reflection should serve to energize penitents and lead them to engage in the rite in the fullest way.

**Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (12–14)**

Under this title the Introduction deals with some basic issues related to the rite of penance: the place and time of celebration and the liturgical vesture of the priest.

**The Reconciliation Room**

Readers will note that the text continues to speak of the “confessional,” a term that is, of course, perfectly legitimate and that has been in use for quite a long time. The only problem—and it is a significant one—is that it conjures up images of the small, dark box of earlier times.

The new rite of penance, however, requires a more hospitable space. For this reason parishes have begun to provide a “reconciliation room.” The room is bright and inviting, and its proportions are appropriate for social discourse. It provides a screen that allows anonymity from the time the penitent opens the door, but the arrangement of space encourages the penitent to choose a face-to-face celebration. Because of the connection between baptism and penance, contemporary plans for church buildings often situate the reconciliation room in proximity to the font. It pertains to the conference of bishops to establish norms for the construction of reconciliation rooms and for their location.

**The Season of Lent**

Lent is the time when the People of God undertake the joyful journey to the annual paschal feast: “Each year you give us this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed” (Preface, Lent 1). It is thus a
privileged time for the sacrament of penance as well. Penitential services, celebrated several times during the season, would serve to renew the "mind and heart" of the community. Penitents could also celebrate the sacrament of penance at an appropriate time and according to their need.

The Sunday Eucharist

We have already seen that the sacrament of penance, like baptism/confirmation, is intrinsically ordered to the celebration of the eucharist. In its primary role it reintegrates the penitent within the eucharistic assembly, and in its secondary role it disposes the penitent to a fuller and more fervent participation in the eucharistic celebration.

In this regard a couple of nagging problems need to be addressed. The first is the fairly common practice of holding a communal penance celebration on a Sunday evening in Lent. The problem here is that Sunday is the day for the eucharist, not for penance, and in this case penance is celebrated after the eucharist has taken place. The second problem, hopefully less common, is the practice of celebrating penance while the eucharist is actually in progress. Clearly, penance precedes the celebration of the eucharist. And people cannot do two things at once.

Adaptations of the Rite to Various Regions and Circumstances (38–40)

All of the Church's post-Vatican II rituals have provided not only a rich diversity of options, but also the opportunity to adjust the rites to meet local conditions and needs. The Introduction sets guidelines for adaptations of the rite of penance, listing those that pertain to the conference of bishops, the local bishop, and the minister of the sacrament.

The Conference of Bishops

If there is one major shortcoming in the revision of the rite of penance, it is that none of the three forms of reconciliation takes into account the markedly different circumstances of the penitents who approach the sacramental celebration. One penitent may have been estranged from God and the sacraments for years and years, while another may have come to confess venial sins, yet they are both dealt with in the same brief way. The rite as it presently stands does not serve the first penitent well.

At the 1983 Synod of Bishops in Rome, Cardinal Bernardin proposed a fourth form of reconciliation that would be more attuned to such a person's needs. Instead of compressing all the elements of the rite of penance into one liturgical moment, this fourth form would divide the rite into four stages, following the pattern of the restored catechumenate and the early Church's order of penitents.

After the confession of sins, the penitent would take part in a process of renewed conversion paralleling the pattern of the catechumenate but respecting baptismal integrity. This might take place during Lent, to be followed by sacramental reconciliation, a reintegration into the eucharistic assembly for the paschal feast, and a period of mystagogical reflection.

Such a process serves the penitent well. It also engages the whole community in its proper, more active role in the work of reconciliation. It calls for a variety of ministers working from within the community: counselors, catechists, sponsors. And it calls for an assembly that knows it is a pilgrim people dedicated to supporting one another along the way to the fullness of the kingdom of God.

Conferences of bishops may find it within their mandate to prepare an adaptation of this kind and, after confirmation by the Apostolic See, to make it available in ritual form.

The Diocesan Bishop

No one should underestimate the importance of the setting in which the celebration of penance takes place. The confessional, which came into general use
in the sixteenth century, inhibits the proper celebration of the new rite. Among other things, it is dark and foreboding, makes it impossible to celebrate the word of God, and prevents the imposition of hands, which is the traditional sacramental gesture of reconciliation.

Bishops may find it useful to encourage, or even mandate, the construction of modern reconciliation rooms that conform to the needs of the new Rite of Penance.

The Minister
It pertains to priests to “adapt the rite to the concrete circumstances of the penitents.” Thus, if necessary, “they may omit some parts of the rite for pastoral reasons or enlarge upon them” (40).

In interpreting this text, pastors should keep in mind that the freedom to adapt the rite is given for the pastoral benefit of the penitent. For example, the priest might enrich the rite by a more extensive reading and discussion of the word of God, thus providing a more nourishing and effective celebration of the sacrament. It is not intended to allow the brief, truncated and often routine kind of celebration that has sometimes occurred in the past.

In particular, the Instruction clearly points out that “the entire form of absolution” must always be used. The essential form (“I absolve you from your sins …”) may be used only when the penitent is in imminent danger of death.

The reason for this requirement is quite clear: The prayer of absolution, in its proclamation of the wonderful works of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world, draws the penitent’s present celebration of penance within the cosmic picture of God’s reconciliation of all things in Christ. It situates the penitent within God’s grand plan of renewing the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. All of this is lost if the entire prayer is not prayed.

Discussion Questions
1. How does sin make participation in the eucharist “a lie.”
2. How can participation in the sacrament of penance contribute to a “fuller, more honest and open participation in the eucharistic community”?
3. Remembering that a sacrament is a sign of a deeper reality, how can we call the Sunday eucharist a “sacrament of reconciliation”?
4. How frequently should the average person approach the sacrament of penance?
5. How can we begin to restore a deeper sense of the role of community in this sacrament?
6. How well is/are your parish place(s) of individual confession suited to the new rite? How can it be improved?
7. Do you think the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (and other conferences) should work at developing a fourth form of reconciliation as described in this article? Do you have any suggestions for a fifth form of celebration?
Preparation of Priest and Penitents

15. Priest and penitent should first prepare themselves by prayer to celebrate the sacrament. The priest should call upon the Holy Spirit so that he may receive enlightenment and charity. The penitent should compare his life with the example and commandments of Christ and then pray to God for the forgiveness of his sins.

Welcoming the Penitent

16. The priest should welcome the penitent with fraternal charity and, if the occasion permits, address him with friendly words. The penitent then makes the sign of the cross, saying: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The priest may also make the sign of the cross with the penitent. Next the priest briefly urges the penitent to have confidence in God. If the penitent is unknown to the priest, it is proper for him to indicate his state in life, the time of his last confession, his difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else which may help the confessor in exercising his ministry.

Reading the Word of God

17. Then the priest, or the penitent himself, may read a text of holy Scripture, or this may be done as part of the preparation for the sacrament. Through the word of God the Christian receives light to recognize his sins and is called to conversion and to confidence in God's mercy.

Confession of Sins and the Act of Penance

18. The penitent then confesses his sins, beginning, where customary, with a form of general confession: I confess to almighty God. If necessary, the priest should help the penitent to make a complete confession; he should also encourage him to have sincere sorrow for his sins against God. Finally, the priest should offer suitable counsel to help the penitent begin a new life and, where necessary, instruct him in the duties of the Christian way of life.

If the penitent has been the cause of harm or scandal to others, the priest should lead him to resolve that he will make appropriate restitution.

Then the priest imposes an act of penance or satisfaction on the penitent; this should serve not only to make up for the past but also to help him to begin a new life and provide him with an antidote to weakness. As far as possible, the penance should correspond to the seriousness and nature of the sins. This act of penance may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service of one's neighbour and works of mercy. These will underline the fact that sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect.

The Prayer of the Penitent and the Absolution by the Priest

19. After this the penitent manifests his contrition and resolution to begin a new life by means of a prayer for God's pardon. It is desirable that this prayer should be based on the words of Scripture.

Following this prayer, the priest extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formula of absolution, in which the essential words are: I absolve you from
your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. As he says the final words the priest makes the sign of the cross over the penitent. The form of absolution (see no. 46) indicates that the reconciliation of the penitent comes from the mercy of the Father; it shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally, it underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church.

Proclamation of Praise and Dismissal of the Penitent

20. After receiving pardon for his sins the penitent praises the mercy of God and gives him thanks in a short invocation taken from scripture. Then the priest tells him to go in peace.

The penitent continues his conversion and expresses it by a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God, for "love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

Short Rite

21. When pastoral need dictates it, the priest may omit or shorten some parts of the rite but must always retain in their entirety the confession of sins and the acceptance of the act of penance, the invitation to contrition (no. 44), and the form of absolution and the dismissal. In imminent danger of death, it is sufficient for the priest to say the essential words of the form of absolution, namely, I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents (from Chapter I)

Reception of the Penitent

41. When the penitent comes to confess his sins, the priest welcomes him warmly and greets him with kindness.

42. Then the penitent makes the sign of the cross which the priest may make also.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The priest invites the penitent to have trust in God, in these or similar words:

May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy.

The penitent answers: Amen.

Other forms of reception of the penitent may be chosen from nos. 67–71.

Reading of the Word of God (Optional)

43. Then the priest may read or say from memory a text of Scripture which proclaims God's mercy and calls man to conversion.
A reading may also be chosen from those given in nos. 72–83 and 101–201 for the reconciliation of several penitents. The priest and penitent may choose other readings from scripture.

**Confession of Sins and Acceptance of Satisfaction**

44. Where it is the custom, the penitent says a general formula for confession (for example, I confess to almighty God) before he confesses his sins.

If necessary, the priest helps the penitent to make an integral confession and gives him suitable counsel. He urges him to be sorry for his faults, reminding him that through the sacrament of penance the Christian dies and rises with Christ and is thus renewed in the paschal mystery. The priest proposes an act of penance which the penitent accepts to make satisfaction for sin and to amend his life.

The priest should make sure that he adapts his counsel to the penitent's circumstances.

**Prayer of the Penitent and Absolution**

45. The priest then asks the penitent to express his sorrow, which the penitent may do in these or similar words:

My God,
I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.
In choosing to do wrong
and failing to do good,
I have sinned against you
whom I should love above all things.
I firmly intend, with your help,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Saviour Jesus Christ
suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy.

Other prayers of the penitent may be chosen from nos. 85–92.

Or:
Lord Jesus, Son of God
have mercy on me, a sinner.

**Absolution**

46. Then the priest extends his hands over the penitent's head (or at least extends his right hand) and says:

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, 
and of the Holy Spirit.

The penitent answers: Amen.
Proclamation of Praise of God and Dismissal

47. After the absolution, the priest continues:
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

The penitent concludes: His mercy endures for ever.

Then the priest dismisses the penitent who has been reconciled, saying:
The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.

Or [93]:
May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of all the saints,
whatever good you do and suffering you endure,
heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness,
and reward you with eternal life.
Go in peace.

Or:
The Lord has freed you from sin.
May he bring you safely to his kingdom in heaven.
Glory to him for ever.
R. Amen.

FORM/REFORM:
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Theme: On This Mountain:
Raising a Banner of Hope

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The conference is for artists, architects, liturgical designers, building and renovations teams and commissions, parish liturgy and environment committees and all other interested persons. The conference in collaboration with the Georgetown Center for Liturgy, will be hosted by the Office of Divine Worship, Archdiocese of Chicago. This is an excellent opportunity for people involved in all aspects of church buildings, renovation, restoration or historic preservation to gather, learn and share information. Parish liturgy and environment committees will benefit from the continuing education sessions offered at the conference, which covers all levels of past experience.

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Although the new ritual is titled the Rite of Penance, all three of the rites provided by the ritual use the term “reconciliation.” In practice, three descriptive words have been used to designate the sacrament: confession, penance, and reconciliation. Of these three, “reconciliation” is surely the best. “Confession” refers to only one part of the celebration, and penance pertains only to the penitent. But “reconciliation” involves both God and the penitent and describes the goal and outcome of the celebration.

As the title indicates, this first rite is intended for use when an individual approaches the Church seeking sacramental reconciliation. In such circumstances there is every opportunity for the full elaboration of the rite. When several people gather for reconciliation (for example, on a Saturday afternoon), the second rite, with its enhanced communal dimension, is indicated and very much to be preferred. When the first rite is used in such circumstances, some of its elements are invariably compressed or omitted, and the penitent’s genuine encounter with God suffers as a result. Pastorally, all that is required for the second rite to be successful on these occasions is to ensure that the participants are present when the celebration begins.

In the following discussion we shall presume a face-to-face celebration, since this arrangement allows a full and proper elaboration of the rite.

Preparation of Priest and Penitent (15)

There can be no doubt that the new Rite of Penance wants to make sure that the celebration draws the penitent into a genuine meeting with the God of salvation, and thus, on the opposite side, to avoid a superficial or merely pro forma approach to the sacrament.

With this in mind, the ritual underscores how important it is for both priests and penitents to “prepare themselves above all by prayer to celebrate the sacrament.” For priests this means setting aside a time for quiet conversation with God in preparation for the celebration. For penitents it means moving beyond recalling individual sins to discussing with God the strengths and weaknesses of their personal relationship of love.
Rite of Penance follows the pattern of other revised rites, including the eucharist. This sign of the cross should not be interpreted simply as the customary, matter-of-fact way that Catholics begin their prayers. Traced carefully over the body, it is a profession of faith proclaiming that the penitent, initiated into the Church through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist, bears the imprint of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Thus it sets the entire celebration under the rubric of the saving passage of the Lord.

After the sign of the cross the priest "invites the penitent to have trust in God," and the penitent answers "Amen" (42). The priest will find a number of texts printed in the ritual, but they are exemplary in nature and he is not restricted to any of them. Yet he will need to have committed to memory one or more texts that he can use at this point in the celebration.

Next, the ritual advises penitents who are unknown to the priest "to inform him of their state in life, the time of their last confession, their difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else that may help the confessor in the exercise of his ministry" (16). All of this can be facilitated by the priest, who can point the conversation in the appropriate direction according to need.

Reading of the Word of God
(17, 43)
A renewed emphasis on the word of God is a characteristic of all of the revised sacramental rites. This is most evident in the Sunday eucharist, but the other sacraments, including penance, display a similar pattern.

Most reconciliation rooms have a Bible prominently set on a table near the priest and penitent. The most effective way to celebrate this part of the liturgy is for the priest or penitent to read a passage from this Bible. The priest can facilitate this by marking a number of appropriate passages for general use. The ritual provides an extensive list of texts that proclaim God's mercy and call us to conversion.

Ever since the Second Vatican Council, attention to the word of God has been put forward as the fundamental way to conversion. During the season of Lent, for example, the Sunday scriptural proclamations, taken more deeply into the heart, are viewed as the focus of the Church's ongoing renewal. Parish catechists should lead members of the community to follow this pattern of recourse to the scriptures as they examine their lives in preparation for reconciliation. As this practice becomes more common, one can foresee penitents bringing their own scriptural passage to the celebration.

What has been suggested above is surely the best way to celebrate this part of the liturgy of reconciliation. The ritual allows the priest to "say from memory a text of Scripture" (43), but the passage would have to be very short, and the impression would be left that the word of God has been given an inconsequential place in the rite in order to shorten the celebration. The ritual does point out that the reading of the word of God is an option, but if this first rite is used in its proper setting (see "General comments" above), there should be no reason to omit it.

Penitent's Confession and Acceptance of the Penance
(18, 44)
The confession of sins and acceptance of a penance follows the reading of the word of God. The ritual indicates that confession begins "with the general confession formulary, 'I confess to almighty God,' if this is the custom" (18). Large numbers of Canadian Catholics no longer use this formulary, so the penitent would normally begin the confession of sins directly. (Another formulary, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," retained some favour in the period between the Council and the publication of the revised Rite of Penance, but its use is obviated by the new rite, which does not provide for a blessing here or at any other place in the celebration.)
The face-to-face setting of the reconciliation room allows for the natural kind of dialogue that is presumed by the new ritual. The penitent needs to make an "integral" confession, but it should be understood that this does not entail the necessity of mentioning every venial sin after the manner of a checklist. The better approach is to couch the confession of sins within an overall recounting of the ups and downs of one's relationship with God.

For example, it was very common in the past for a penitent to confess that he or she had forgotten to say morning and evening prayers. But this may have been a symptom of a deeper relational problem: paying no attention to the presence of God in one's life except during Sunday mass.

In its description of the role of the priest in this dialogue, it is interesting that the ritual highlights the paschal character of the celebration, indicating that he should remind the penitent that "through the sacrament of penance the Christian dies and rises with Christ and is thus renewed in the paschal mystery" (44).

After the confession of sins the priest "proposes an act of penance which the penitent accepts to make satisfaction for sin and to amend his life" (44). The ritual clearly wants to ensure that this penance is given its proper place in the reconciliation process. It should serve "not only as atonement for past sins but also as an aid to a new life and an antidote for weakness" (18). It especially recommends service to neighbour and works of mercy.

Some of the penances assigned in the past (such as a number of Our Father's and Hail Mary's) served the penitent well in that they provided an easy assurance that the penance had been fulfilled, but they may have done little to aid the penitent in the pursuit of a new life. The ritual now emphasizes the latter and more fundamental aspect of the act of penance.

Although it is the priest who "imposes" the penance (18), there is every opportunity in the new rite for priest and penitent to discuss what act of penance would best suit the spiritual needs and capacity of the penitent. When the penance is arrived at in this manner, the penitent's own insights as a member of the body of Christ are more fully respected.

**Penitent's Prayer and the Priest's Absolution (19, 45-46)**

This part of the reconciliation liturgy, consisting of the act of sorrow and the prayer of absolution, is the central moment of the celebration. It is the point where dialogue finds fulfillment, where the penitent's expression of sorrow meets the pardon of God.

Readers familiar with the rite as it was celebrated before the Council will remember that these two parts were so compressed that they overlapped, the penitent saying the act of contrition while the priest gave absolution—a striking example of bad liturgical practice. Happily, the new *Rite of Penance* puts them side by side, making them two distinctive parts of one act of reconciliation.

The ritual provides a number of examples of an act of sorrow (45). The first of these is a modern reworking of the older act of contrition, although it is scarcely recognizable in its updated, short-sentence form. In any event, the ritual indicates that the penitent may use one of these formularies or similar words.

There seems to be no advantage in requiring penitents to memorize a new act of contrition; we have seen in the past how concern over remembering a lengthy text can divert penitents from their focus on a genuine expression of sorrow. Most will agree that a far better pastoral practice is to invite the penitent to express sorrow for sin in his or her own words.

The priest then imposes hands and prays the prayer of absolution. The great importance of the laying on of hands should not be overlooked. The absolution formula, in fact, says what the gesture does. The laying on of hands is the Church's ancient sign of solidarity in sharing the life of the
Spirit in Christ's body, the Church. It is therefore the sign of full reintegration into the assembly for worship, given by the one who presides both at the celebration of penance and at the Church's assembly for eucharist.

The priest then prays the prayer of absolution. This prayer (composed for the new rite) is extremely rich in content and takes the form of a proclamation of the mighty works of God. It should be prayed in measured phrases so that it may have its fullest impact on the penitent. The prayer of absolution tells us "that the reconciliation of the penitent comes from the mercy of the Father; it shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally it underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament, because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church" (19). The penitent's "Amen" confirms and affirms this prayer.

In the reconciliation room the penitent may kneel (the traditional posture of sorrow) with head bowed for the act of sorrow, and the priest may impose hands and pray the prayer of absolution seated. Alternatively, the penitent may pray the prayer of sorrow seated with head bowed, and the priest may stand for the laying on of hands and the prayer of absolution. Although the actual imposition of hands is the strongest gesture, the ritual simply says that the priest "extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent" (19). As the priest prays the final phrase of the absolution ("I absolve you from your sins ..."), he makes the sign of the cross over the penitent, a gesture that once again reflects the paschal nature of the celebration.

**Proclamation of Praise and Dismissal of the Penitent**

(20, 47)

The celebration concludes with a proclamation of praise of God and a dismissal. For the proclamation of praise the priest says, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good," and the penitent concludes, "His mercy endures forever" (47). It is in every way appropriate for the rite to conclude in this way; reconciliation is a cause of great joy and leads naturally to the praise of God, and this brief act of praise anticipates the penitent's participation in the praise-filled eucharistic assembly, which is the goal of the penitential rite.

The priest then dismisses the penitent. Several formularies are provided in the ritual, but the first of these has found its way into common use: "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace" (47).

**Shorter Rite (21)**

The ritual allows the priest to shorten or even omit certain parts of the rite. In parish pastoral care, however, the priest should consider a shortened rite to be the exception rather than the rule. The option should be taken only for the benefit of the penitent (who may, for example, be in poor health), and not, as a general practice, because a number of penitents are waiting, since the second rite is available for use at the regular times set aside for reconciliation.

**A Closing Observation**

One problem that needs to be addressed at least in some parts of Canada is lack of familiarity with the new rite on the part of penitents and priests alike. Penitents may be hesitant to celebrate penance precisely on this account. It would seem that every parish should provide information on the way to celebrate the sacrament of penance. Parishioners should know that the new rite requires practically no memorization on their part and that, even without having committed anything to memory, the priest will lead them step by step through the celebration.
Discussion Questions

1. Which of the three names for this sacrament matches your own experience of it?

2. How do you prepare to celebrate the sacrament?

3. What would you specifically suggest as preparation for the sacrament?

4. Suggest a wording a priest could use to welcome a penitent who prefers anonymity.

5. To what extent do people appreciate the paschal significance of making the sign of the cross?

6. Describe the reading of the word of God at your last experience of the sacrament of reconciliation?

7. What scripture passages would you suggest to begin a celebration of reconciliation with a single penitent?

8. How can parishes begin to restore the word to its proper place in every celebration of reconciliation?

9. What words could the priest use to begin the conversation in which the penitent makes an “integral” confession?

10. To what extent is the collaborative approach to the imposition of penance being implemented?

11. Can you think of any circumstances (other than poor health) that would justify use of the shortened rite?

12. What could be done (on the national, diocesan, and parish levels) to seriously address the problem of people’s discomfort, or unfamiliarity, with the rite of reconciliation?

For priests:

13. Have you considered using only form II for regularly scheduled celebrations of this sacrament?

14. How do you prepare to celebrate the sacrament as penitent? As minister?

15. How would you specifically advise priests to prepare for the sacrament in the role of minister?
Rite of Penance

Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution (from Introduction)

22. When a number of penitents assemble at the same time to receive sacramental reconciliation, it is fitting that they be prepared for the sacrament by a celebration of the word of God.

Those who will receive the sacrament at another time may also take part in the service.

Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The faithful listen together to the word of God, which proclaims his mercy and invites them to conversion; at the same time they examine the conformity of their lives with that word of God and help each other through common prayer. After each person has confessed his sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son.

If necessary, several priests should be available in suitable places to hear individual confessions and to reconcile the penitents.

Introductory Rites

23. When the faithful are assembled, a suitable hymn may be sung. Then the priest greets them, and, if necessary, he or another minister gives a brief introduction to the celebration and explains the order of service. Next he invites all to pray and after a period of silence completes the (opening) prayer.

The Celebration of the Word of God

24. The sacrament of penance should begin with a hearing of God's word, because through his word God calls men to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart.

One or more readings may be chosen. If more than one are read, a psalm, another suitable song, or a period of silence should be inserted between them, so that the word of God may be more deeply understood and heartfelt assent may be given to it. If there is only one reading, it is preferable that it be from the gospel.

Readings should be chosen which illustrate the following:

a) the voice of God calling men back to conversion and ever closer conformity with Christ;

b) the mystery of our reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ and through the gift of the Holy Spirit;

c) the judgment of God about good and evil in men's lives as a help in the examination of conscience.

25. The homily, taking its theme from the scriptural text, should lead the penitents to examine their consciences and to turn away from sin and toward God. It should remind the faithful that sin works against God, against the community and one's neighbours, and against the sinner himself. Therefore, it would be good to recall:

a) the infinite mercy of God, greater than all our sins, by which again and again he calls us back to himself;

b) the need for interior repentance, by which we are genuinely prepared to make reparation for sin;
c) the social aspect of grace and sin, by which the actions of individuals in some degree affect the whole body of the Church;

d) the duty to make satisfaction for sin, which is effective because of Christ's work of reparation and requires especially, in addition to works of penance, the exercise of true charity toward God and neighbour.

26. After the homily a suitable period of silence should be allowed for examining one's conscience and awakening true contrition for sin. The priest or a deacon or other minister may help the faithful with brief considerations or a litany, adapted to their background, age, etc.

If it is judged suitable, this communal examination of conscience and awakening of contrition may take the place of the homily. But in this case it should be clearly based on the text of scripture that has just been read.

The Rite of Reconciliation
27. At the invitation of the deacon or other minister, all kneel or bow their heads and say a form of general confession (for example, I confess to almighty God). Then they stand and join in a litany or suitable song to express confession of sins, heartfelt contrition, prayer for forgiveness, and trust in God's mercy. Finally, they say the Lord's Prayer, which is never omitted.

28. After the Lord's Prayer the priests go to the places assigned for confession. The penitents who desire to confess their sins go to the priest of their choice. After receiving a suitable act of penance, they are absolved by him with the form for the reconciliation of an individual penitent.

29. When the confessions are over, the priests return to the sanctuary. The priest who presides invites all to make an act of thanksgiving and to praise God for his mercy. This may be done in a psalm or hymn or litany. Finally, the priest concludes the celebration with prayer, praising God for the great love he has shown us.

Dismissal of the People
30. After the prayer of thanksgiving the priest blesses the faithful. Then the deacon or the priest himself dismisses the congregation.
Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution (from Chapter II)

Introductory Rites

Song
48. When the faithful have assembled, they may sing a psalm, antiphon, or other appropriate song while the priest is entering the church, for example:
Hear us, Lord,
for you are merciful and kind.
In your great compassion,
look on us with love.

Or:
Let us come with confidence before the throne of grace
to receive God's mercy,
and we shall find pardon and strength
in our time of need.

Greeting
49. After the song the priest greets the congregation:
Grace, mercy, and peace be with you
from God the Father
and Christ Jesus our Saviour.
R. And also with you.

Or:
Grace and peace be with you
from God the Father
and from Jesus Christ
who loved us
and washed away our sins in his blood.

Or other forms of greeting may be chosen from nos. 94–96.

Then the priest or another minister speaks briefly about the importance and purpose of the celebration and the order of the service.

Opening Prayer
50. The priest invites all to pray, using these or similar words:
Brothers and sisters, God calls us to conversion; let us therefore ask him for the grace of sincere repentance.

All pray in silence for a brief period. Then the priest sings or says the prayer:
Lord,
hear the prayers of those who call on you,
forgive the sins of those who confess to you,
and in your merciful love
give us your pardon and your peace.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
R. Amen.

Or:
Lord,
send your Spirit among us
to cleanse us in the waters of repentance.
May he make of us a living sacrifice
so that in every place,
by his life-giving power,
we may praise your glory
and proclaim your loving compassion.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
R. Amen.

Other forms of the opening prayer may be chosen from nos. 97–100.

Celebration of the Word of God

51. The celebration of the word follows. If there are several readings a psalm or other appropriate song or even a period of silence should intervene between them, so that everyone may understand the word of God more deeply and give it his heartfelt assent. If there is only one reading, it is preferable that it be from the gospel.

First Example

Love is the fullness of the law

First Reading:
Deuteronomy 5:1–3, 6–7, 11–12, 16–21a, 6:4–6 Love the Lord your God with all your heart.

Responsorial Psalm:
Baruch 1:15–22

R. (3:2) Listen and have pity, Lord, because you are merciful.

Second Reading:
Ephesians 5:1–14 Walk in love, as Christ loved us.

Gospel Acclamation:
John 8:12

I am the light of the world.
The man who follows me will have the light of life.

Gospel:
Matthew 22:34–40 On these two commandments the whole law and the prophets depend.

Or:
Second Example

Your mind must be renewed.

First Reading:
Isaiah 1:10–18 Stop doing what is wrong, and learn to do good.

Responsorial Psalm:
Psalm 51:1-4, 8-17

R. (19a) A humbled heart is pleasing to God.

Second Reading
Ephesians 4:23–32 Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution.

Gospel Acclamation:
Matthew 11:28

Come to me, all you that labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest.

Gospel:
Matthew 5:1–12 Happy the poor in spirit.

Homily
52. The homily which follows is based on the texts of the readings and should lead the penitents to examine their consciences and renew their lives.

Examination of Conscience
53. A period of time may be spent in making an examination of conscience and in arousing true sorrow for sins. The priest, deacon, or another minister may help the faithful by brief statements or a kind of litany, taking into consideration their circumstances, age, etc.

Rite of Reconciliation

General Confession of Sins
54. The deacon or another minister invites all to kneel or bow, and to join in saying a general formula for confession (for example, I confess to almighty God). Then they stand and say a litany or sing an appropriate song. The Lord’s Prayer is always added at the end.

First Example
Deacon or Minister:
My brothers and sisters, confess your sins and pray for each other, that you may be healed.

All say:
I confess to almighty God,
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have sinned through my own fault
They strike their breast:
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done,
and in what I have failed to do;
and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin,
all the angels and saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters, 
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

Deacon or minister: 
The Lord is merciful. He makes us clean of heart and leads us out into his freedom 
when we acknowledge our guilt. Let us ask him to forgive us and bind up the 
wounds inflicted by our sins.

Give us the grace of true repentance. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Pardon your servants and release them from the debt of sin. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Forgive your children who confess their sins, and restore them to full communion 
with your Church. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Renew the glory of baptism in those who have lost it by sin. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Welcome them to your altar, and renew their spirit with the hope of eternal glory. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Keep them faithful to your sacraments and loyal in your service. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Renew your love in their hearts, and make them bear witness to it in their daily 
lives. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Keep them always obedient to your commandments and protect within them your 
gift of eternal life. 
R. We pray you, hear us.

Deacon or minister: 
Let us now pray to God our Father in the words Christ gave us, and ask him for his 
forgiveness and protection from all evil.

All say together: 
Our Father ... 

The priest concludes: 
Lord, 
draw near to your servants 
who in the presence of your Church 
confess that they are sinners. 
Through the ministry of the Church 
free them from all sin 
so that renewed in spirit 
they may give you thankful praise. 
We ask this through Christ our Lord. 
R. Amen.

**Second Example**

Deacon or minister: 
Brothers and sisters, let us call to mind the goodness of God our Father, and 
acknowledge our sins, so that we may receive his merciful forgiveness.
All say:
I confess to almighty God,
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have sinned through my own fault
They strike their breast:
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done,
and in what I have failed to do,
and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin,
all the angels and saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters,
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

Deacon or minister:
Christ our Saviour is our advocate with the Father:
with humble hearts let us ask him to forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from every stain.

You were sent with good news for the poor and healing for the contrite.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You came to call sinners, not the just.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You forgave the many sins of the woman who showed you great love.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You did not shun the company of outcasts and sinners,
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You carried back to the fold the sheep that had strayed.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You did not condemn the woman taken in adultery, but sent her away in peace.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You called Zacchaeus to repentance and new life.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You promised Paradise to the repentant thief.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You are always interceding for us at the right hand of the Father.
R. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

Deacon or minister:
Now, in obedience to Christ himself, let us join in prayer to the Father, asking him
to forgive us as we forgive others.

All say together:
Our Father ...

The priest concludes:
Father, our source of life,
you know our weakness.
May we reach out with joy to grasp your hand
and walk more readily in your ways.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
R. Amen.

For other texts see numbers 202–205.

**Individual Confession and Absolution**

55. Then the penitents go to the priests designated for individual confession, and confess their sins. Each one receives and accepts a fitting act of satisfaction and is absolved. After hearing the confession and offering suitable counsel, the priest extends his hands over the penitent's head (or at least extends his right hand) and gives him absolution. Everything else which is customary in individual confession is omitted.

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, \( \star \) and of the Holy Spirit.
The penitent answers: Amen.

**Proclamation of Praise for God's Mercy**

56. When the individual confessions have been completed, the other priests stand near the one who is presiding over the celebration. The latter invites all present to offer thanks and encourages them to do good works which will proclaim the grace of penitence in the life of the entire community and each of its members. It is fitting for all to sing a psalm or hymn or to say a litany in acknowledgement of God's power and mercy, for example, the canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46–55), or Psalm 136:1–9, 13–14, 16, 25–26, or one of the psalms as given in no. 206.

**Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving**

57. After the song of praise or the litany, the priest concludes the common prayer:

Almighty and merciful God, how wonderfully you created man and still more wonderfully remade him. You do not abandon the sinner but seek him out with a father's love. You sent your Son into the world to destroy sin and death by his passion, and to restore life and joy by his resurrection. You sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts to make us your children and heirs of your kingdom. You constantly renew our spirit in the sacraments of your redeeming love, freeing us from slavery to sin and transforming us ever more closely
into the likeness of your beloved Son.
We thank you for the wonders of your mercy,
and with heart and hand and voice
we join with the whole Church
in a new song of praise:
Glory to you
through Christ
in the Holy Spirit,
now and for ever.
R. Amen.

Or:
All-holy Father,
you have shown us your mercy
and made us a new creation
in the likeness of your Son.
Make us living signs of your love
for the whole world to see.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
R. Amen.

Other concluding prayers may be chosen from nos. 207–211.

Concluding Rite

58. Then the priest blesses all present:

May the Lord guide your hearts in the way of his love
and fill you with Christ-like patience.
R. Amen.

May he give you strength
to walk in newness of life
and to please him in all things.
R. Amen.

May almighty God bless you,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
R. Amen.

Other blessings may be selected from nos. 212–214.

59. The deacon or other minister or the priest himself dismisses the assembly:
The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.
All answer: Thanks be to God.

Any other appropriate form may be used.
Call a Solemn Assembly, Gather the People—Even the Aged and the Children, Sanctify the Congregation

( Joel 2.15–16 )

Albert LeGatt

A Chilly Night at St. Abstemius Parish

"Here we go again," thought Fr. Smith as people struggled in at the last minute. It was Tuesday evening of the third week of Advent, the pre-ordained date for the Advent penitential service at St. Abstemius. It had been announced in the bulletin for the last couple of Sundays; however as Fr. Smith greeted the people coming in, he reflected upon something that was a concern both for himself and for the parish liturgy committee: with each season there seemed to be fewer people coming to these twice-a-year penitential services, which had in their turn taken on a certain lifelessness. Not that they were exceedingly long ("Keep the beginning part under twenty minutes" he had been told by a couple of parishioners), nor was there a shortage of priests to hear individual confessions. It’s true, he admitted to himself, that the planning for those celebrations was always a bit last-minute: calling upon a couple of readers this afternoon and making sure the music ministry had the standard three hymns ready. And he noted there weren’t many young adults or teenagers or children—mostly gray-haired heads—even though for the last thirty years the penitential celebrations at school had always stressed a loving merciful God. He further reflected that it would probably end as it always did, with people quickly lining up for individual confession before the closing hymn was even half begun, judging which line was shortest and which priest was quickest. "These young priests," he mused, "they sometimes take fifteen or twenty minutes with each person; it’s enough to add a couple of sins to the list just standing in line waiting!!" The parish had tried a couple of years ago telling people to simply go to a priest at the front and say one sin—the most important one. It had shortened the service, but people complained it was too rushed and they felt like cattle in a chute; so they had dropped that idea. "Oh well," thought Fr. Smith as he looked at his watch, "it’s time, here we go again!"

Taking Stock

Is this what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had in mind when they decreed that "the rite and formularies of the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of this sacrament" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 72)? One of the key elements of this revision was the establishment, in the Rite of Penance promulgated in 1973, of rites of reconciliation for several penitents either with individual confession and absolution or with general confession and absolution. Looking back after almost thirty years,
what can we say? What have been the experiences, good and bad? Where is this whole sacrament of “reconciliation” going?

For the most part the response to the call for clarity of the Council Fathers’ has not been what was envisaged or hoped for. One might well be tempted to say that the sacrament is “limping along” with one foot still very much planted in past practices, theology, and spirituality and the other foot stepping forward but not quite sure where to set itself down. The reasons for this state of affairs are many: it was the last rite to be introduced and, after many other new elements in liturgical reform, the energy level was at low ebb for education and implementation. In addition, the rite itself was, of course, a blend of old and new. For many the sense was that not much had changed. Then with a new sense of God, of Church, of Christian life, of grace and sin, many people abandoned a sacrament they saw as restrictive, inefficient or guilt-ridden. Other avenues of reconciliation were searched for, both within and without the Church.¹

It remains that the introduction of these “communal celebrations” was welcomed by many people and such celebrations are still widely appreciated. They give a

stronger sense of community, of shared journey, of shared acknowledgement of sin and shared rejoicing in God's mercy. They speak of prayer and conversion and mission lived together. But still this rite has not borne all the fruits that were hoped of it.

It is clear that many of the issues mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are not attributable to what type of rite is celebrated (be it individual or communal); and to that extent these issues are outside the focus of this article, which is specifically concerned with Rite II. However, since the new communal way of celebrating the sacrament was proposed (and preferred) as a way of emphasizing the relationship of the sacrament to the community (22), it is proper to ask if communal celebration has "delivered the goods."

Asking the "Rite" Question

In dealing with this question, one might reflect on the structure of the rite, on its language, on the possibilities of adaptation (38–40), on the need for more use of enacted symbolism, on the need to restructure it for today's issues and understanding. However, although the actual elements of the rite and their proper celebration continue to be a very real concern, and although much work still needs to be done in terms of the full implementation of the richness of the rite as it now stands, it is increasingly apparent that, as with most of the revised rites coming from Vatican II, the focus of a second generation of reflection upon them is not centered there.²

Today's reflection centres on the liturgical (and theological) spirituality implicit in the celebration of the revised rites. It is a question of depth and meaning: how can the faithful, through catechesis, celebration, and Christian life in common, come to discover and grow in the full richness of the sacrament as it is now offered to us? This will of course set, or reset, the direction and criteria for the full celebration of this sacrament. In this part of the article we shall endeavour to approach the question specifically in regard to Rite II. We will look at three key ways in which the sacrament of penance, or as it is now more properly called the sacrament of reconciliation,³ speaks to the lives and hearts of the faithful. These will have very concrete implications for how we celebrate Rite II.

A New Vision

The three key implications of a renewed vision of the sacrament of reconciliation are:

- the sacrament is social and ecclesial in nature as well as in its effects;
- the deepest meaning of the sacrament is conversion and this conversion goes beyond ritual to the whole of Christian life as mission;
- the sacrament is an act of ecclesial worship⁴.

Social and Ecclesial

In terms of the social and ecclesial aspects of the sacrament, which are shown more clearly by communal celebrations (22), sin and conversion are now seen as the concern of the whole Church (5). The sacrament is about the holiness and mission of the Church in all its aspects. Sin is seen not only in its individual dimension but also very much in its social dimension and effects. Reconciliation is about Christ's victory over all sin. Reconciliation is effected in baptism/confirmation, nourished in eucharist (the primary sacrament

² The elements of the rite are dealt with in the second part of this article.

³ It is significant to note that even to use the word "reconciliation"—a word repeatedly used in the Rite's praemnotanda—is to move the focus from simply forgiveness of sins and individual grace to the much wider reality of reconciliation as a work of God within the whole history of salvation, fulfilled in Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection—a work now shared in by the Church as a whole, a work which in fact is her very nature and mission.

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of reconciliation) and restored or enhanced in the sacrament of penance.

Reconciliation is brought about in a multitude of ways through a multitude of ministries and Christian works—sharing in the sufferings of Christ by enduring one’s own difficulties, carrying out works of mercy and charity, adopting even more fully the outlook of the Gospel message (4)—culminating specifically in the celebration of the sacrament. The sacrament ultimately is about reconciliation lived and fostered between people in all aspects of a common life directed towards unity, forgiveness, healing, justice, and peace, and this in response to God’s all-merciful love in Jesus Christ.

When understood in this light, celebrations of the sacrament of penance are validated as sharing in the character of all liturgical celebrations as source of the Church’s power and summit of its activity.

Conversion and Mission

In terms of the aspect of ongoing conversion, as presented in the revised Rite and its praenotanda, focus is placed now on healing rather than on judgements, both for the individual and for the Church as a whole. Sin is not so much an isolated action as a pattern both individual and communal that is to be brought to God’s healing love so that the Christian can grow in love and the Church correspondingly can grow in holiness. Of prime importance are the discernment of the Spirit’s movement in the penitent’s heart and the identification of the proper response to this in both ritual celebration and daily life. The prime goal is always a deepening friendship with God (5).

Ecclesial Worship

In terms of the sacrament being an act of ecclesial worship—the direct consequence of the two prior considerations—the properly communal aspects of Rite II are described in paragraph 22 as “listening together to the word of God, helping each other through common prayer … praising God together.” The ecclesial character of this worship is effected by the variety of ministries (assembly, priest, deacon, reader, music ministry, greeter, etc.) and the full participation of all present in celebrating the sacrament. However, and this is crucial, it is also ecclesial worship because of what people “bring” to the celebration, i.e., the whole of their life and the whole of the life of the Church, which are once more celebrated as sacramentalized, here as an expression of God’s reconciling love.

Full Preparation

Communal

The pastoral note 22 indicates that the penitents assembled together for sacramental reconciliation should be “prepared” for the sacrament by a celebration of the word of God. This preparation is an act undertaken together. Given the whole reality of reconciliation described above, I believe we ought to look at this “preparation in common” in the broadest sense, which leads to the actual celebration itself. We need to be attentive not only to liturgical planning (seeing to concrete choices of readings and music selections, co-ordination of ministries, etc.) but even more to liturgical preparation of the assembly, and this also in a communal way. Only in this approach will we move from a ritual moment isolated in itself (and thus weakened) to a sense of the rite being but a part (though a very essential part) of a whole process of conversion and reconciliation for both the individual and the Church as a whole. In the words of Edward Foley: “the sacramental form found in the rite of penance cannot bear the weight of the entire reconciliation process.”

This communal preparation, to be respectful of the variety of person’s experiences and the uniqueness of each one’s process,

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of each one's journey, will of course have to make distinctions. One such distinction to be made is between persons who are truly or seriously alienated from the Church (approached through experiences like “Coming Home” and “Re-Membering Church”) on the one hand and people who are striving to further deepen their conversion (7) on the other hand. For the sake of this article I will deal only with the latter, pointing out that in many ways we have not paid sufficient attention to this wide-ranging communal “preparation” and so have suffered the consequences.

**Long Term**

Long-term preparation for a truly communal celebration of the sacrament entails a strong parish commitment to undertake periodic and extensive catechesis on “the nature and effect” of the sacrament of reconciliation. We need to regularly engage in a common reflection on:

- the mystery of reconciliation as the initiative of God founded in Christ’s death and resurrection and enacted in the whole of the Church’s life today,
- our image of God,
- our sense of sin,
- the nature of true and full reconciliation, and
- the need for constant conversion to a fuller commitment to this mission of the Church.

We then need to reflect together on the place of the sacrament of penance in all of this. We will not move to a renewed sense of the sacrament, we will not be prepared for the sacrament unless together we undertake this task in a wide variety of ways. It's not true that “not much has changed” in terms of the reality of how we are called to both celebrate and live out the sacrament and we need to deepen that realization together.

**The Call of Lent**

Of particular importance would be a parish’s effort to truly live out each Lenten season as a communal experience of conversion and reconciliation on the way to the Easter feast. This can be done by efforts to link each parishioner’s experience of Lent with that of the elect so that the Sunday gospels and the scrutinies become fodder for a parish-wide examination of conscience (even if the parish has no elect in their immediate midst). It will most certainly entail efforts to free the parish agenda so as to make room for:

- parish retreats,
- weekly gatherings to prepare the scrutinies through reflection and prayer (with the last such gathering in the week before Passion (Palm Sunday) being the communal celebration of the sacrament), and
- weekly faith sharing groups reflecting on the upcoming Sunday readings, etc.

It may require pastoral staff or capable lay volunteers to be available for prayer, spiritual direction, and/or pastoral counselling. The effort will be supported by weekly articles in the bulletin, prayer and discussion aids for families to use in their homes, etc. It demands particular attention be paid to homilies, intercessions at mass, teaching sessions, etc. that open up the social dimension of sin and correspondingly the social aspect of the conversion of the community as a whole in terms of individual lifestyle changes. This would naturally lead to concrete common efforts towards:

- justice,
- joining forces with others in the larger community for the common good, and
- ecumenical prayer and endeavours.

With such a broad-ranging view of Lent the parish community truly understands the sacrament of reconciliation (4) as offering a vehicle for arriving at the wholeness required for it to authentically enter into the Triduum feast.

If the community as a whole and throughout the whole of Lent prepares in this way for the celebration of reconciliation on its way to Easter, then the sacrament has a very real chance of realizing its potential as envisaged in the reform of the rite.
Without these or similar efforts the actual communal celebration has little chance to both attract and transform the faithful in their need for reconciliation seen in its broader sense.

Although “preparation” seen in this manner automatically calls for “follow-up” or the appropriate continuation of these efforts beyond the celebration of the sacrament, it remains that both Lent and Advent—each in its own way and with its own particular accents—can be extremely valuable times not only for celebrating reconciliation, but also and especially for renewed efforts to live out reconciliation in the community. (Of course, this does not preclude other times in the parishes also being used with this aim.)

**Full Celebration**

Having thus “set the stage” let us now walk through the actual celebration of Rite II with a view of how best to celebrate it. It goes without saying that we should devote as much attention to the planning and prior co-ordination of this sacrament as (hopefully) we do for the other sacraments. Prior preparation prevents poor performance. In terms of this planning there should be a concern for the full celebration of the rite giving it the time and space it needs. Re-arranging or abridging the rite only weakens it. There should be no minimalism in terms of music, ministries, vesture, etc. In the long term the effort to “get people out quickly” will only result in having them not come at all because of the poverty of ritual experience.

**Introductory Rites**

The gathering time should be strong (greeters’ hospitality, procession and hymn, presider’s greeting) with the focus being on the sense of solidarity before God, solidarity in sin and solidarity in grace. Efforts should be made to integrate this celebration with what has been lived out in the extensive “prior” preparation of the community.

**The Liturgy of the Word**

**Proclamation of the Word**

The liturgy of the word as “immediate” preparation for the sacrament is one of the most significant points of the revision of the rite (24). Care should be given both to the selection of texts (101–201) and to spiritual preparation by the readers for this ministry. Use of a familiar seasonal psalm refrain will enable fullest participation and engagement.

**Homily**

The homily reflects on the word of God proclaimed (25). It certainly will call to mind the need for inner repentance, the social dimension of grace and sin, and the duty of expiation (satisfaction) leading to a renewed love of God and neighbour; but its goal is to reveal and proclaim the mercy of God at work in the moment.

**Examination of Conscience**

The liturgy of the word ends with a time of silence (26) for a (personal) examination of conscience and the awakening of true contrition for sin. This moment is very important and should not be short-changed. This is a special moment to link up the individual and communal aspects of sin and grace in one’s heart, to truly make it personal. Therefore we should not be afraid of silence, of a silence wherein God can speak to the depths of our heart and to the concrete reality of our lives.

As indicated in paragraph 26 the priest or deacon or another minister may help the faithful with brief (note brief) considerations. The text includes a telling remark that this examination of conscience should be reflective of the scripture texts and, one might suggest, also reflective of

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7 For some examples see the next issue of the National Bulletin on Liturgy (#165 Summer 2001).
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the season. Care should be taken that this examination of conscience is not simply the reading off of a list of possible sins but is rather done as a prayer. A powerful simple repeated refrain as part of this would be very helpful. The examination of conscience and/or litany should be concrete so as to open up for people other realizations of sin, particularly of omission. Again, continuity with themes from the Lenten journey of the whole parish or from a parish retreat will be very helpful. This having been said, let there be a long period of true silence for people to enter into the next moment, the actual encounter of reconciliation. Together in silence, the assembly is keenly aware of being sinners together and saved together.

Rite of Reconciliation

General Prayer of Confession
The specific moment of the rite of reconciliation then begins with a general prayer of confession (27). The common posture of kneeling at this moment is most appropriate. This is followed by a litany or song expressing confession of sinfulness, heartfelt contrition, entreaty for forgiveness, and ultimate trust in God's mercy. All this is gathered up in the communal recitation of the Lord's prayer.

Individual Confession, Absolution, Laying on of Hands
Next, in Rite II, comes the opportunity for individual confession, absolution, and laying on of hands. Efforts should be made to have people approach in a true procession (reminiscent of other processions e.g., communion) and not simply in a line-up. An arrangement of hymns, refrains, musical accompaniment, and reflective silence can enhance this powerful symbol of the people of God coming forth together to drink in and celebrate God's mercy, praying for each other, united in their common sinfulness and holiness.

As the individual penitent meets the priest, the challenge is to make this a truly personal moment. This is where good prior preparation, both long-term and immediate, can transform the traditional confession of a "list of sins" into a true acknowledgement of one's sinful actions and patterns before a loving, healing God in all confidence. There should be enough time given to individualize the experience (the one-sin-only formula denies this). There should be enough time for the person to share the major areas of his/her life needing conversion and reconciliation, and enough time for the priest to offer both corresponding counsel and the invitation to a penance (satisfaction) that flows from all this. The satisfaction proposed must be of a sort to truly express conversion and thanksgiving rather than the performance of a rote formula of prayer.

Of course the length of time for each penitent must be balanced so that, within the time frame of the whole celebration, this part of the rite is not so long as to destroy the attitude of prayer. Prior explanation needs to be given to the parishioners regarding the difference between confession and longer spiritual direction/discernment or pastoral counselling. Even more importantly, the parish must offer the concrete possibility of obtaining this direction or counselling either before or after the celebration of the sacrament.

In terms of the moment of absolution the gesture of the laying on of hands (even of touching, if the person is comfortable with that) can be a powerful way of signifying the compassionate touch of God's mercy that heals, frees, and gives new life. Among the many other elements of the celebration, this gesture particularly moves the experience from "magic" to a loving encounter with God through the ministry of the priest.

Proclamation of Praise
After the individual confession and absolution there is the proclamation of praise for God's mercy (56). As much as possible this should be maintained so that this celebration of reconciliation leads to a common prayer of thanksgiving, praising God for his merciful initiative of reconciliation. Of note is the remark that the presider "invites all the people to offer thanks
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and encourages them to do good works which will proclaim the grace of repen-
tance in this life of the entire community and each of its members.” This invitation underlines the need to continue in con-
version as a life-long response to God’s reconciliation. The effort should be made to cast this invitation not only in indi-
vidual terms but also, and especially, in terms of community actions. The community as one is to be a sign of a reconciled and re-
conciling reality in the world.

Concluding Prayer
There follows a concluding prayer (in the nature of a collect), the blessing, and the dis-
missal. The going-forth is itself of signif-
icance here as it too is a “procession”: the healed community goes forth to the world with Christ’s peace. Though not specified in the rite this is an appropriate moment for the exchange of peace (if it has not been done at the time of the proclamation of praise or even before that).

Adaptations
Adaptation and developments of this rite are possible—use of incense during the prayer asking for forgiveness, inclusion of ritual actions during the examination of conscience/moment of silence, placement of ritual symbols in the environment to which speak of the common Lenten jour-
ney of the community, etc.—can enhance the actual celebration as long as they pro-
mote the community’s prayer and do not become a focus in themselves.

Closing Remarks
In closing I would like to quote Kathleen Hughes in regard to Rite II (and III): “Whether alone or with others, we are
drawn to the sacrament because of the mercy of God who first loved us, Christ who gave himself up for us and the Spirit who has been poured out on us abund-
antly and who stirs us to love God com-
pletely and commit ourselves completely to God (5). … What is new in our day is the opportunity for communal celebra-
tions and the remarkable new insights that communal reconciliation stir up in us. In general, communal celebration is responsible for a new sense of Church, of the power of ritual, of the responsibility of a sacramental way of life, and of the need to prepare so that the rites genuinely cele-
brate an experience of God’s healing, for-
giving presence.”

Full preparation for the sacrament, full celebration of the sacrament, full living out of the sacrament! Approached in this manner, the rite for reconciliation of sev-
eral penitents, this communal celebration of conversion and reconciliation, can be both a powerful moment in itself and a powerful wellspring of vigour for the life of the Church in the days ahead.

Bibliography

8 Emphasis added.
Discussion Questions

1. To what extent does your parish experience match that of St. Abstemius?

2. What has been good in your experience of Rite II?
   What has been not so good?

3. What signs, if any, do you see that your community has "welcomed" communal celebrations of reconciliation?
   What signs, if any, do you see to the contrary?

4. In what ways are the individual sinful acts (or omissions) of individual persons the concern of the whole Church?

5. What is conversion for the baptized Christian?

6. How does the Church show its concern for "my" growth and for the healing of the community?

7. How can parishes offer assistance to individuals who are seeking to discern the movement of the Spirit within them and a proper response?

8. Identify the specific moments in your parish celebrations of Rite II that are genuinely experienced as ecclesial worship.

9. How much energy goes into preparing the details of the celebrations of Rite II in your community?

10. How are parishioners helped to prepare for each celebration?

11. What vehicles of discernment and/or reconciliation does your parish offer to those seriously alienated from the Church?

12. How has your community been catechised regarding a post-Vatican II understanding of this sacrament?

13. How does your parish prepare together for communal celebrations of the sacrament in Lent? In Advent? At other times?

14. What is done in your community to highlight the communal aspect of each celebration of Rite II?

15. Do homilies at these celebrations proclaim good news?

16. Does the examination of conscience speak to the reality of life and lifestyle of the various people in this community?

17. Does the time for individual confession and absolution allow for the personal encounter called for by the rite?

18. Is the celebration designed so that everyone can be present for the communal proclamation of praise?

19. How can the going-forth be conducted so that it is more clearly seen as a procession of the whole gathered assembly?

20. What is meant by "full living out of this sacrament"?
The Discipline of General Absolution

31. Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.

Particular, occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to give general absolution to a number of penitents without their previous individual confession.

In addition to cases involving danger of death, it is lawful to give sacramental absolution to several of the faithful at the same time, after they have made only a generic confession but have been suitably called to repentance, if there is grave need, namely when, in view of the number of penitents, sufficient confessors are not available to hear individual confessions properly within a suitable period of time, so that the penitents would, through no fault of their own, have to go without sacramental grace or holy communion for a long time. This may happen especially in mission territories but in other places as well and also in groups of persons when the need is established.

General absolution is not lawful, when confessors are available, for the sole reason of the large number of penitents, as may be on the occasion of some major feast or pilgrimage.

32. The judgement about the presence of the above conditions and the decision concerning the lawfulness of giving general sacramental absolution are reserved to the bishop of the diocese, who is to consult with the other members of the episcopal conference.

Over and above the cases determined by the diocesan bishop, if any other serious need arises for giving sacramental absolution to several persons together, the priest must have recourse to the local Ordinary beforehand, when this is possible, if he is to give absolution lawfully. Otherwise, he should inform the Ordinary as soon as possible of the need and of the absolution which he gave. (Editor's note: The 1983 Code of Canon Law is more restrictive than this; see c. 961.)

33. In order that the faithful may profit from sacramental absolution given to several persons at the same time, it is absolutely necessary that they be properly disposed. Each one should be sorry for his sins and resolve to avoid committing them again. He should intend to repair any scandal and harm he may have caused and likewise resolve to confess in due time each one of the grave sins which he cannot confess at present. These dispositions and conditions, which are required for the validity of the sacrament, should be carefully recalled to the faithful by priests.

34. Those who receive pardon for grave sins by a common absolution should go to

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45 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Norma pastorales circa absolutionem sacramentalem generali modo imperiendam, June 16, 1972, no. III: AAS 64 (1972) 511.
46 Ibid., no. V: loc. cit., 512.
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individual confession before they receive this kind of absolution again, unless they are impeded by a just reason. They are strictly bound, unless this is morally impossible, to go to confession within a year. The precept which obliges each of the faithful to confess at least once a year to a priest all the grave sins which he has not individually confessed before also remains in force in this case too. 48

The Rite of General Absolution

35. For the reconciliation of penitents by general confession and absolution in the cases provided by law, everything takes place as described above for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution, with the following exceptions:

a) After the homily or during it, the faithful who seek general absolution should be instructed to dispose themselves properly, that is, each one should be sorry for his sins and resolve to avoid committing them again. He should intend to repair any scandal and harm he may have caused and likewise resolve to confess in due time each one of the grave sins which cannot be confessed at present. 49 Some act of penance should be proposed for all; individuals may add to this penance if they wish.

b) The deacon, another minister, or the priest then calls upon the penitents who wish to receive absolution to show their intention by some sign (for example, by bowing their heads, kneeling, or giving some other sign determined by the episcopal conferences). They should also say together a form of general confession (for example, I confess to almighty God), which may be followed by a litany or a penitential song. Then the Lord's Prayer is sung or said by all, as indicated in no. 27, above.

c) Then the priest calls upon the grace of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, proclaims the victory over sin of Christ's death and resurrection, and gives sacramental absolution to the penitents.

d) Finally, the priest invites the people to give thanks, as described in no. 29, above, and, omitting the concluding prayer, he immediately blesses and dismisses them.

Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution (from Chapter III)

60. For the reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution, in the cases provided for in the law, everything is done as described above for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual absolution, but with the following changes only.

Instruction

After the homily or as part of the homily, the priest explains to the faithful who wish to receive general absolution that they should be properly disposed. Each one should repent.
of his sins and resolve to turn away from these sins, to make up for any scandal and harm he may have caused, and to confess individually at the proper time each of the serious sins which cannot now be confessed. Some form of satisfaction should be proposed to all, and each individual may add something if he desires.

**General Confession**

61. Then the deacon or other minister or the priest himself invites the penitents who wish to receive absolution to indicate this by some kind of sign. He may say:

Will those of you who wish to receive sacramental absolution please kneel and acknowledge that you are sinners.

Or:

Will those of you who wish to receive sacramental absolution please bow your heads and acknowledge that you are sinners.

Or he may suggest a sign laid down by the episcopal conference.

The penitents say a general formula for confession (for example, I confess to almighty God). A litany or appropriate song may follow, as described above for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution (no. 54). The Lord's Prayer is always added at the end.

**General Absolution**

62. The priest then gives absolution, holding his hands extended over the penitents and saying:

God the Father does not wish the sinner to die
but to turn back to him and live.
He loved us first and sent his Son into the world to be its Saviour.
May he show you his merciful love and give you peace.

R. Amen.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was given up to death for our sins,
and rose again for our justification.
He sent the Holy Spirit on his apostles
and gave them power to forgive sins.
Through the ministry entrusted to me
may he deliver you from evil
and fill you with his Holy Spirit.

R. Amen.

The Spirit, the Comforter, was given to us for the forgiveness of sins.
In him we approach the Father.
May he cleanse your hearts and clothe you in his glory,
so that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God
who has called you out of darkness into the splendour of his light.

R. Amen.

And I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, #
and of the Holy Spirit.

R. Amen.

Or:

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and resurrection of his Son

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has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, *
and of the Holy Spirit.
R. Amen.

Proclamation of Praise and Conclusion
63. The priest invites all to thank God and to acknowledge his mercy. After a suitable
song or hymn, he blesses the people and dismisses them, as described above, nos. 58–59,
but without the concluding prayer (no. 57).

Rite for Reconciliation of
Several Penitents
with General Confession
and Absolution
(from Chapter III)
Short Rite

64. In case of necessity, the rite for reconciling several penitents with general confession
and absolution may be shortened. If possible, there is a brief reading from scripture. After
giving the usual instruction (no. 60) and indicating the act of penance, the priest invites
the penitents to make a general confession (for example, I confess to almighty God),
and gives the absolution with the form which is indicated in no. 62.

65. In imminent danger of death, it is enough for the priest to use the form of absolution
itself. In this case it may be shortened to the following:
I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, *
and of the Holy Spirit.
R. Amen.

66. A person who receives general absolution from grave sins is bound to confess each
grave sin at his next individual confession.
Rite of Penance

Penitential Celebrations
(from Introduction)

Nature and Structure
36. Penitential celebrations are gatherings of the people of God to hear the proclamation of God’s word. This invites them to conversion and renewal of life and announces our freedom from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. The structure of these services is the same as that usually followed in celebrations of the word of God and given in the Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents.

It is appropriate, therefore, that after the introductory rites (song, greeting, and prayer) one or more biblical readings be chosen with songs, psalms, or periods of silence inserted between them. In the homily these readings should be explained and applied to the congregation. Before or after the readings from scripture, readings from the Fathers or other writers may be selected which will help the community and each person to a true awareness of sin and heartfelt sorrow, in other words, to bring about conversion of life.

After the homily and reflection on God’s word, it is desirable that the congregation, united in voice and spirit, pray together in a litany or in some other way suited to general participation. At the end the Lord’s Prayer is said, asking God our Father to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us... and deliver us from evil. The priest or the minister who presides concludes with a prayer and the dismissal of the people.

Benefit and Importance
37. Care should be taken that the faithful do not confuse these celebrations with the celebration of the sacrament of penance. Penitential celebrations are very helpful in promoting conversion of life and purification of heart.

It is desirable to arrange such services especially for these purposes:
- to foster the spirit of penance within the Christian community;
- to help the faithful to prepare for confession which can be made individually later at a convenient time;
- to help children gradually to form their conscience about sin in human life and about freedom from sin through Christ;
- to help catechumens during their conversion.

Penitential celebrations, moreover, are very useful in places where no priest is available to give sacramental absolution. They offer help in reaching that perfect contrition which comes from charity and enables the faithful to attain to God’s grace through a desire for the sacrament of penance.

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52 Ibid.
53 See Council of Trent, Session XIV, De sacramento Paenitentiae, chapter 5: Denz.-Schön. 1677.
In the years following the Second Vatican Council we have become ever more conscious of two fundamental truths about our Church: our mission is to advance the reign of God in our world; and this mission is entrusted to a priestly people incorporated into Christ through baptism. These two realities need to be held in mind as we reflect on paragraphs 36 and 37 of the Rite of Penance (1975), which invite us to experience penitential celebrations without sacramental absolution. This article proposes to suggest some of the reasons why we should accept the invitation.

Although the Rite of Penance suggests four intended purposes for these celebrations I will focus on three. (Editor's note: The fourth, formation of conscience in children, will be addressed in the next issue of the Bulletin.)

Fostering the Spirit of Penance within the Christian Community

As I begin to write, I can almost hear the echo of those who would exclaim, “But we’ve just been freed of the burden of guilt, surely we should not work to restore it!” My sentiment exactly. We should not attempt nor desire to return to a time when guilt was the hallmark of our self-consciousness and sin and its eternal consequences were frequent topics of Sunday sermons. Our discovery of a loving and merciful God, imaged in the story of the prodigal son, helped us overcome our negative self-image and freed us to live in the Spirit of Jesus, sent forth by him to minister in the world. We must not abandon this precious gift of freedom so essential for unbinding God’s world.

But since the mission of the Church is that of transformation: of announcing the good news, of setting the downtrodden free, of proclaiming liberty to captives, of opening eyes that do not, or choose not to see, we need to name and challenge that which is contrary to the coming of God’s reign in our world. We need to expose the operative sins that impede the mission of justice and peace; we need to name how we ourselves are participants in actions, or failures to act, that inhibit God’s plan from taking shape.

Repentance called for in penitential celebrations needs to be understood in the context of mission. In this we recognize that by developing within ourselves the spirit of contrition and repentance, we become more capable of re-committing to the ministry entrusted to us. We need to discover and acknowledge that our greed and individualism contribute to the existence of poverty and hunger in others; that our obsession with possessions and wealth demands that others remain in the bondage of underdevelopment, lack of education, and inadequate health care; that our indifference supports violence and prejudice against the most vulnerable in the world. Penitential celebrations that foster a spirit of penance in us are concrete ways for sin to be named and its
consequences taken seriously. It is the truth about the reality of sin and its social consequences that can lead us to conversion and true freedom.

Penitential celebrations are not intended to return us to the days when as adults we still confessed the sins of our youth. Rather they are moments when we can be reminded that since God has chosen us for the Church's mission, we need to be graced mediators of God's activity in our world. In and through us God wishes to fulfill the promise of a world made new. How our indifference, prejudice, and lack of caring inhibit God's activity is indeed worthy of reflection. These sins against humanity are indeed sins against the unconditionally loving God who, St. Peter reminds us, has no favourites but who does have, as our Church proclaims, a fundamental option for the poor.

Helping the Faithful to Prepare for Individual Confession (Made Later at a Convenient Time)

Few of us today live the illusion that great numbers of people flock to the sacrament of reconciliation. Indeed we are quite aware that many Catholics no longer see this sacrament as an essential component of their spiritual lives. It seems that no amount of inviting or encouraging moves them towards sacramental absolution. Why is this so? I would suggest that at the heart of the problem is our failure to deal adequately with the reality of sin. While we have done well in freeing ourselves from the guilt of our childhood and adolescence, we have not succeeded in developing an adult understanding of sin and its grave consequences.

In addition to reflecting on the impact of sin on the social structures of our time, we do well also to acknowledge that sin has deep consequences on us personally. Although often not easily named, guilt rooted in personal acts or omissions continues to paralyze. As a presbyter I know too well the many who still name themselves as unworthy to accept the invitation to ministry in the name of the Church.

While serving on team for the North American Forum on the Catechumenate's institute "Concerning the Baptized" during which we experienced a penitential celebration, I was moved by the comment of one during the mystagogical reflection on the rite who exclaimed, "It made me want to run to the sacrament of reconciliation." At a time when so many run away from this sacrament, we do well to consider what these celebrations can accomplish.

A final word on this second purpose. Penitential celebrations are not primarily directed at moving people to experience the sacrament of reconciliation. People may indeed choose to avail themselves of this sacrament following a penitential celebration as they become aware of the serious nature of their sin; however, others may leave the celebrations conscious of the call to conversion but without the sensed need for sacramental absolution. In either case the purpose is the same: to name sin and to grow in the awareness of the grace of conversion offered us by our God.

Helping Catechumens in Their Conversion

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults offers the Church a tremendous insight into the meaning of conversion. It applies equally to catechumens, candidates for full communion, and the already initiated, and it is this: Conversion is to Jesus Christ, not to the Church. While the Church is the context in which Jesus is to be discovered and experienced, one's conversion is to the values, vision, and mission of Jesus. Catechumens and candidates need to name for themselves the areas of their lives that stand in need of transformation as they move more intimately into communion with Christ.
Personal conversion is at the heart of the process of initiation and this conversion happens as one divests oneself of that which is contrary to Jesus’ way of life. Penitential celebrations that focus on the relationship of the disciples to the Master enhance this process.

In Summary

- That God’s reign may come, place for it must be made in our world. Through personal conversion to the mission of Jesus and movement away from participation in fostering sinful structures, we can make a difference. Allowing ourselves to stand before the call of the gospel and be challenged to examine our values and lifestyle is an essential starting point.

- That we might live as disciples, we need to possess a personal sense of freedom and an awareness of our basic human goodness. The burden of guilt that paralyzes some can be lifted through sacramental absolution offered in response to authentic conversion.

- That those whom we prepare to initiate or welcome into our Church may enhance our capacity to influence our world for the better, they require opportunities for growth and conversion. By dying to sin they indeed may discover the new life and empowerment that God offers them, and with us go forth to proclaim good news to others.

Discussion Questions

1. To what extent are most Catholics aware of the mission orientation of the whole life of the Church?

2. To what extent do most Catholics see themselves as being central to the Church’s mission?

3. How can parishioners be brought to an understanding of their role in the mission of the Church?

4. How can parishioners be brought to an understanding of the place of “non-sacramental” penitential celebrations in the life of the local community?

5. How many penitential celebrations should be celebrated in preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation near the end of Lent?

6. What connection can you see between regular parish penitential celebrations and the process of formation of catechumens and candidates for full communion/completion of initiation?
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### July 2 - 27, 2001

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Newman Theological College and the Liturgy Commission, Archdiocese of Edmonton

### Session I: July 2 - 13, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Courses:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CLS 301</td>
<td>Introduction to Liturgy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kim Warner (7:00 - 9:05 p.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. CLS 303</td>
<td>Eucharist</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev. James Ravenscroft</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9:30 - 11:20 a.m.)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elective Courses:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. CLS 406</td>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Glenn Byer (7:00 - 9:05 p.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. CLS 503</td>
<td>The Word of God in the Lectionary: Matthew &amp; the Hebrew Scriptures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Les McKeown (9:30 - 11:20 a.m.)</td>
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<td>5. CLS 507</td>
<td>Liturgical Ministry with the Sick and Dying</td>
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<td>Dr. Glenn Byer (9:30 - 11:20 a.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. CLS 511</td>
<td>Liturgical Ministry: Discernment and Pastoral Practice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Richard Wanner (7:00 - 9:00 p.m.)</td>
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### Session II: July 16 - 27, 2001

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<tr>
<th>Core Courses:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CLS 302</td>
<td>The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most Rev. Gerald Wiesner, omi</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(7:00 - 9:05 p.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. CLS 304</td>
<td>The Liturgical Year: Entering Sacred Time and Space</td>
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<td>Kim Wanner (9:30 - 11:20 a.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Elective Courses:</th>
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<tr>
<td>3. CLS 412</td>
<td>Liturgical Law and Pastoral Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev. Brian Burns, ofm</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(7:00 - 9:05 p.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. CLS 502</td>
<td>Christian Initiation of Children</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sr. Connie Piska, uj</td>
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<td>(9:30 - 11:20 a.m.)</td>
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<td>5. CLS 504</td>
<td>When Lay People Preside</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sr. Zita Maier, osu</td>
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<td>(9:30 - 11:20 a.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. CLS 505</td>
<td>Liturgical Music for Sacramental Celebrations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sr. Zita Maier, osu</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. CLS 608</td>
<td>The Liturgical Year and the Divine Office in the Byzantine Liturgy</td>
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<td>Most Rev. Lawrence Huculak, osbm</td>
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<td>(7:00 - 9:05 p.m.)</td>
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For further information contact:
The Registrar, Summer School in Liturgical Studies
Newman Theological College, 15611 St. Albert Trail, Edmonton, AB T5L 4H8
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