

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

“If self-knowledge and the thought of sin are not seasoned with remembrance of the blood and hope of mercy, the result is bound to be confusion.” ----St. Catherine of Siena

St. Catherine is reminding us that when we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation it is not only our sins that we need to remember but the love of Christ as well. Our heart, our conscience must first pass through our love of the Paschal Mystery if the sacrament is to be subjectively meaningful, and more, constitutive of our Catholic spiritual life. To simply remember our sins and feel bad about our human failures is not enough. This self-knowledge must be placed in the context of “the blood” and “of mercy.” If we do this we will not be “confused” about our sins, rather we will experience the healing of our affection for sin and the drying up of the roots of specific temptations.

The sacrament of Reconciliation will be more eagerly remembered by Catholics and thus celebrated more frequently and deeply if this personal context of *encounter with the Love of God is promoted*. I would like to explore this more personal side of the sacrament in this essay. I will argue that unless true prayer, prayer authentically and subjectively appropriated by both penitent and priest, occurs in the sacrament many Catholics will continue to neglect to celebrate it regularly. There is a freedom to the Sacrament of Reconciliation that has been constrained in both the priest’s and penitent’s minds. It will not be the minimalism of a communal penance service that “saves” the sacrament from obscurity, but just the opposite. The sacrament will have a new birth if we can get *to the root of sin in the midst of forgiveness being accomplished*. Naming the roots of our personal sins releases us, unbinds us, and orders us toward the healing of particular sins. We name particular sins in the Sacrament so that we might have access to the root of our “love affair” with sin.

Beholding the Face of Christ

Like Catherine, John Paul II highlighted the sacrament as a personal encounter of conversion and healing.

“My invitation then (1984, *Reconciliation and Penance*) was to make every effort to face the crisis of "the sense of sin" apparent in today's culture. But I was even more insistent in calling for a rediscovery of Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself. It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance, which for the faithful is "the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism"--. *Nova Millenium leunte*, n .37

The face is the expression of the essence of a person. It magnifies and reveals the beauty of a person; it is the “place” of encounter. Christ’s face is met in the mystery of God’s kindness. This Divine kindness toward His creatures is received as compassion when we behold His face sacramentally. The Sacrament of Reconciliation risks becoming a perfunctory exercise and then discarded as a habit only when *this face is not beheld*, when this face is not encountered.

Bl. John Paul II implies that the face of Christ can be obscured *even in* the sacrament of Reconciliation and must be secured by the objective rite itself in combination with the subjective dispositions of both priest and penitent. Such dispositions can carry or prevent the deeper reception of moral and spiritual healing that is the sacrament’s end. Without doubt forgiveness is offered objectively when the rite is exercised, but is the face of Christ seen?

Since love itself is a form of seeing, the penitent, the one who is **aware** of severed communion with God and church, raises his or her face to the benediction freely given by the Son. The penitent wants to see and be seen by God. Penitents know the suffering of living

without Trinitarian intimacy. They long to see Christ's face. The subjective element within the sacrament cannot be ignored if this longing is to define their way of dealing with sin. If we are ever to taste *the limits* of our sinful consolations we literally must *come to miss God*. *For us to pine for God we must first know and love Him from within a life of prayer. One cannot miss what one does not know.*

In order to enflame a desire to mend any severed communion with God we may have to re-order the priorities of our parish and truly allow the community to be formed *as a school of prayer*. In this way, we will be acknowledging that we gather as a parish only to explicitly seek the face of Christ. To yearn for God after sin is not a sentimental pining but an affective loss touching the depths of will and knowledge. It is an experience of being "lost without you." In our current age, in the technological West, it can be difficult to come to a sense of communion with God since it is so easy to live *as if God does not exist*. Here, we enter the call for re-evangelization. This re-evangelization secures a deeper interior life for the parishioner marked by intimate prayer. If we are ever to be sorry for sin, we have to first know that such sinful choices negatively affect a true and living relationship with God and the Church. We will not repent if we only hold God to be an "idea" or Christ to be simply "an historical figure." We will repent if the parish is evangelized and then moved into a life of interior prayer. Then sin becomes the enemy of my own happiness, because sin is the enemy of intimacy with the Holy Trinity.

Prayer and Repentance

If we give God time God will give us Himself. Prayer is “His time” St. Therese taught. Today, we are obsessed with our time, my time. In our present culture I would argue that we equate ourselves with “time.” Today, prayer is such a suffering because we have so little time to give to it. We have so little of “me” to give since we have so little time. The culture of the west is a culture of distraction...this voice calls out to me, then another, then another. How do I choose what to give my time (self) to? It is a culture of anxiety, a time of fear, and paradoxically a time of sloth....a time of fearing the goodness of God.

In fearing God’s goodness we give up on our own goodness.... “Oh I can never be holy.” Since we are not in communion with the Mysteries through prayer we oftentimes fall into this loneliness and sloth. We think that God is selfish and unwilling to share His own holiness with us. With this frame of mind we turn *from* Him instead of *toward* His face. Truth be told God *is giving* us His holiness, so we need to give Him our time, the equivalent of our personal availability. In so doing, God will invade us with His Mind. This invasion is our salvation; it is not to be feared. What is to be feared is our penchant to hold onto our own mind, our *own way* of life. In receiving His mind through prayer we will commune with His beauty and His truth and His holiness. We will let Him inhabit us, tutor us, correct us and console us. In the early stages of learning prayer we will suffer His coming, since we love our sins more than we love God. Soon, however, we will want our communing with God to become *our own secured interiority*; we will want this communion *to be* our interiority...our fountain, our source of meaning.

Gabriel Marcel taught that “the deepest part of me is Another.” Within our hearts we can know this Other; our lives can *be a relationship*. *We can be* creatures of holy communion.

Living and thinking out of this life of communion will be our way to truly secure the renewal of the sacrament of reconciliation to its very depths. With such knowledge the mystery of communing with the kindness of God's face will be experienced as the mystery of opening one's own heart to the heart of God, Christ. In so doing, I offer to Him the places I hide from Him, those dark depressions within my heart that give me false consolation: sin. God seeks us, "Adam, where are you?" (Gen. 3:9) Like fallen Adam we know God only as selfish, as One not to be trusted. We believe God to be a "taker" and not a "giver." We see His face and fear, "What do you want of us Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us?" (Lk 4:34)

Learning to Behold the Beauty of Divine Love

It will be contemplative prayer learned in the parish that heals this fear, this erroneous image of God as "taker". In this prayer, which is a form of seeing His face, we will come to delight in the communion He offers us and recognize when our actions have betrayed this communion. God takes nothing from us but sin and gives all that we truly need and desire: holiness. Again, without prayer we may never know what we are missing...the depth of His affection and solicitude toward us. Moral living, holy living is about "life in the Spirit." Healthy remorse for sin only arises after true encounters with the beauty of God. Execution of our duty to confess sins may simply quiet a conscience schooled in external rewards. As a parent says to a reluctant child, "say you are sorry to your sister." In this school of external compulsion and reward an authority figure has *to force another* back into communion with an "enemy." This external compulsion happens only when the agent of sin never "sees" his or her victim. Prayerful conversion occasioned by deepening interiority in a sacramental context opens the

eyes of believers to “see” the other. When this seeing of the other is habitual, sin against the other becomes a waning desire.

One moves to life in the Spirit when one “beholds” a person as real, as other, as beautiful. Beyond this stance toward others human persons can we come to “Behold the Lamb of God”? Can the spiritual leadership of our parishes lead us into these depths? Do we really want to go to those depths? Would we accept our parishes as schools of prayer, as communities where mystic encounter is mediated sacramentally? To become holy is to let Him live His life over again in us. We come to know Him and let Him be known within the depths our prayer. Sin blocks such communion, and therefore contradicts our true identity as ones who desire communion with Him.

“My children, I am writing this to you so that you may not commit sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is expiation for our sins and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world. The way we may be sure that we know him is to keep his commandments. Whoever says, "I know him," but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, the love of God is truly perfected in him. This is the way we may know that we are in union with him: whoever claims to abide in him ought to live (just) as he lived.” (1Jn 2)

The only way we can live like Him is IF He is in us. Becoming Holy is a participation in God’s own life. Simply being ethical is to be one who discerns actions based upon secured virtues. For those who have faith in Christ, however, these virtues *prepare us* to receive the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. The moral virtues are not ends in themselves. If we come to believe that Christ is alive in our prayer, then the sacraments will no longer be *time spent*, but *union deepened*. We will grow to love our time beholding His face. How can we insure that the way we form community and celebrate the sacraments facilitates our reception of God’s presence?

Fear of Conversion

The desire for conversion must first pass through the acknowledgement that one is not interiorly free to immediately fulfill this desire. One has to break free of past habits and thought patterns which were established as a result of being attached to sin. To break free the person will undergo some level of suffering. To assist in moving people past the fear of suffering that comes from leaving sin behind *is the most urgent pastoral activity in service of the Sacrament of Reconciliation*. Instead of suffering this conversion many people choose to avoid it with choices of distraction (“I am too busy for the interior life”) and/ or a continuation of hiding in false consolation (i.e. choosing to escape into my sins).

Refusal to name one’s evil and move beyond a particular pattern of sinning is a sign of spiritual sickness, a state that needs healing not judgment. All of us have sinned, are sinning... will sin. To specify in the Sacrament of Reconciliation the deliberate acts of sin one has freely chosen is a sign of mental and spiritual health. It is a sign that one is living in reality, living according to truth and in communion with Christ, the mercy and truth of God. Our lack of consciousness about sin, as noted above, may be a sign of an anemic evangelization. More profoundly, however, this lack of consciousness about sin *is a crisis of mystic communion* with the One into whose death we were baptized. Our freedom to name sin is gifted to us when we become more and more vulnerable to the spiritual intimacy Christ wants to offer. A life of sustained interiority, one that is built upon communion with Christ naturally opens up to a deeper participation in the sacramental life.

Specifically, the sacrament of reconciliation will have a revival when Catholics accept the invitation from the Spirit to let Him awaken their hearts. The arena for this awakening is primarily the parish community; conversion is why we gather together in a sacramental community under the pastor’s spiritual leadership. The defensive heart, cynical heart, angry heart, frightened heart will all

move against one's heart becoming awakened. If the heart is not awakened we choose to keep saying NO to the light, we choose to hide from God in the pathological consolation of sin and guilt. Because of our brokenness we do not want freedom we want pathological consolation...we want to be alone (Gen 2). Into this loneliness enters the faint voice of conscience, the way out of pure subjectivity, and the way toward communion with the mystery of Christ's own love.

Conscience

Conscience is the reality that eradicates mere subjectivity. Conscience, in other words, is the human mind integrating the *interior spiritual life* with *the truth* that comes from God. It was Cardinal Newman in modern times, following the influence of St. Bonaventure, who *personalized conscience* and made the church realize that the voice heard there carried more than the judgment of a human mind ...it was a herald of the indwelling Spirit. This Spirit can be trusted when His message is discerned and purified within the context of the church and its doctrine and practices. One is alone before God in the conscience to be sure, but to trust the conscience and its judgment one must first bathe in the mystery of Christ's own self donation upon the cross of love. Conscience without spiritual purification and formation may only be an echo of the values of "this passing age" (Rom 12:1).

An American conscience formed by private opinions and ideas coming forth from secularized university professors, media, popular culture and personal experience will leave one just there...in popular American culture. For the sacrament of reconciliation to be deeply received unto one's conversion the penitent must desire a divine encounter. The pragmatic, the academic, the pastoral (accommodation to current values) approaches to Christian living are only more or less helpful in the end. What is essential is our participation in Christ's self-donation upon the cross and his resurrection and Ascension as these are sacramentally "poured" into us by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the mystical is essential.

The church has just lived through the ascendancy of the pastoral and the academic approach to Catholic living. And yet the latest research points to a withering of attendance in parish worship not an increase.¹ The pastoral approach to Catholic life is, of course, necessary but not sufficient. The church wants to embrace "the dialogue of salvation [that] adapts itself to the needs of a concrete situation [and] does not bind itself to ineffectual theories and does not cling to hard and fast forms when these have lost their power to speak to men and move them." (Pope Paul VI). In some incarnations over the past fifty years, however, being pastoral simply meant receiving a person where he or she "was" and then offering *information* about doctrine or moral living to assist this person to "follow their own conscience." Being pastoral may have degenerated, in some cases, to being indifferent. What was held in high esteem was a theory of freedom that valued a sharing of information between pastoral minister and parishioner rather than a passion for formation.

The "pastoral approach" has lost its own power to call Catholics to conversion because it has not ordered the faithful toward the Eucharist and worship.² What other barometer than participation in

¹ In a profile of America's Catholic population, released in 2008, the Pew Forum calls attention to a demographic shift, with younger Catholics less likely to remain active in the Church, while Hispanic immigrants replace many of the "cradle Catholics" who no longer practice the faith. **"No other major faith in the U.S. has experienced greater net losses over the last few decades as a result of changes in religious affiliation than the Catholic Church,"** the Pew report notes. Citing the extensive survey undertaken for the "Religious Landscape Survey", the Pew Forum explains that **"roughly one-third of those who were raised Catholic have left the church, and approximately one-in-ten American adults are former Catholics."** Only 41% of self-identified adult Catholics attend Mass each week, the Pew study found, lowest among young adults, with just 30% of Catholics aged 18-29 attending Mass weekly. (Pew Forum, Religious Landscapes Study, Feb. 2008)

Updated statistics on Mass attendance since 2008 or here :
<http://cara.georgetown.edu/caraservices/frstats/massattendweek.pdf>.

The weekly Mass attendance in 2013 is now about 30%.

² The goods within the pastoral approach to ministry need to be retained (e.g. respect for the individual dignity of each person's life circumstances, that moral conversion is normally developmental, attract people to Christ by emphasizing the positive and the good, not being fixated upon sin, and more) but contextualized within the mystical. If these goods are not so contextualized they can be more easily manipulated by the ideologies of our age and the relentless pull within our affective life to be "current" and acceptable to those in secular power.

worship can be used to measure the involvement of Catholics in the depths of their faith? Some might answer that charity to the poor is a clearer indication of Catholics living their faith with exuberance. The love of God as expressed in the virtue of worship, however, *founds the love of neighbor*. The revelation of Christ was *not needed* to invite persons to simply be ethical. Virtue, at some level, has been known in every human epoch established simply by the use of our wounded reason. What is received by Catholics in faith is not the virtue of almsgiving or generosity, but *a love of Christ as savior*. This love, given through baptism, blossoms into the desire and commitment to love the mystery of Christ, a mystery made available fully in the Eucharist. If the Catholic is not communing with Christ there at the fount and ever open conduit of His Paschal Mystery then what constitutes one's public presence among the poor or in works of social justice?

The Mystical Pastoral Life

More specifically what do I mean by the mystical in the context of the sacrament of reconciliation? The mystery here is the same, of course, as it is in all sacraments...it is Christ. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, however, the Mystery of Christ is experienced primarily as *an interior vulnerability to the Mercy of God contextualized in the Church's priestly ministry*. For both the priest and penitent the sacrament is a real *anamnesis*, a true reception of the presence of Jesus as savior and healer, albeit in different ways. Christ is the one I encounter as living Word bearing the truth of His love to my heart. The penitent and priest go together into the sacrament "[to] *remember* your name, [to] keep your law" (Ps 119:55). This law, of course, is *the law of rapt listening in love* that kept Christ heading toward the sacrifice of the cross. To keep the law is not a legalistic or authoritarian approach to mercy. Such an approach to Catholic spiritual life is as failed an approach as is the "pastoral" one. To keep the law is to enter with Christ into the mystery of the Father's steadfast mercy. This mercy is known in the fidelity of Christ's compassion to us even in the face of our sin. Into this mystery the priest

and penitent go. It is a journey that leads them from the night of sin into the light of the resurrection. *Cor ad cor loquitur*. What they encounter is the truth of who God is... close, interior, passionate, and desirous of union with His Bride. It may not be that one simply *undergoes* a sacrament and intimacy with God is granted. No, one must yield to the Spirit personally so that the inner nature of the sacrament is known. This yielding to the *inner nature of the sacrament* is the deepest form of *active participation* in worship that we can know.

We can fruitfully meditate with Gregory of Nyssa on the mercy of God, “We regard falling from God’s friendship as the ONLY thing dreadful and we consider becoming God’s friend the ONLY thing worthy of ...desire.” The goal, then, of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to restore a relationship that is *necessary*. From this restoration of communion flows a share in the love that Christ has for His church and for the Father. Over time this communion of love heals and integrates the mind, heart and will of any one person and orders the believer toward the Eternal.

The Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The sacrament is subjectively meaningful to penitents when they can prayerfully experience this passionate meaning of the Sacrament: the Father desires them, God wants to be in communion with them. Rushing the sacrament to accommodate those who are waiting outside the reconciliation room appears ill conceived.³ Of course, Christ is the one forgiving the penitent *by the work he accomplished*. To follow the form with the right intention brings about forgiveness objectively. It is just as true, however, that the prayerful presence of the priest facilitates the *subjective appropriation* of this work of divine forgiveness. How might the priest facilitate the subjective appropriation of the sacrament by the penitent?

³ Prudence dictates the amount of time a priest spends with a penitent. What is begun in the sacrament may, of course, have to be continued at a later time in spiritual direction or pastoral counseling.

A. *Silence*

Just as in the Eucharistic Liturgy *silence* can also be meaningfully introduced into the celebration of reconciliation. This humble limited silence can be the occasion for a penitent to receive an awareness of the *roots of his or her sin*. This silence is a silence that is full of prayer, a time of invitation by the penitent and priest to invoke the Spirit, begging the Spirit to raise to the heart of the penitent these roots of sin. Only when the roots are touched by divine love will the penitent return to the mercy of God again and again. In the healing of the roots the memory of the penitent is awakened to the beauty of the freedom afforded by this sacrament. One brings to Christ not only the sins but the roots of the sin, one desires not only forgiveness for particular acts, but the healing that will end one's desire to engage these acts in the future.

Silence plunges the penitent into the real living Christ, the One who keeps on giving Himself in and through the sacraments. He is a God of eager availability, ready to receive the truth about our fears, doubts, angers...and take them all into the mystery of His Mercy. The priest invites the penitent into the silence, a silence full of presence and truth. This truth of God's mercy must be intentionally held in our hearts or its power to effect communion with the divine will lay fallow.

B. *Spiritual Fathering*

For Clement of Alexandria (d.215) the sacrament of penance was a process, a dialogue between God and the sinner assisted by a spiritual director. In order to assist the penitent in receiving healing from the Spirit can we adopt this approach as well? The precise form of the sacrament of reconciliation remains stable but the priest's approach, his disposition and stance toward what a penitent becomes is more akin to spiritual direction albeit not within an overly lengthy time frame. Within the form of the sacrament, for example, the priest receives the confession of sins but then leads the penitent to try to

know, name, experience the root of the sin. He invites the penitent to receive the truth of the root of his or her individual sins ("I am afraid", "I hate myself", "I do not believe in love", "I am lonely", "I am confused", etc). He then invites the penitent to silently receive the presence of God, maybe through a healing prayer. In this the priest gives voice beyond the prayer of absolution, to a particular prayer for *this individual penitent*, a healing prayer that can be taken up into absolution.

There is no doubt here that the penitent is forgiven when the form of the sacrament is accomplished. Instead, *silence mediated by spiritual fathering* attempts to facilitate the reception of Divine love, an encounter sacramentally mediated and personally appropriated as living and real. To not enter forgiveness as a prayerful encounter on the subjective level, on a level of integrated affect and faith militates against the penitent's future celebration of the sacrament. "I don't simply want to be told I am forgiven. I want to be healed in and by communion with Christ." If we approach the sacrament as a venue for restored communion we must first appreciate that *God is interested in us not our sins*. Christ focuses on the relationship not the sin. Prolonged consciousness or excessive fixation on our personal sin keeps my heart focused upon how "bad I am." Instead, the priest can guide the penitent to let God reach him or her and not simply the sins that are confessed. In so doing, God heals the penitent so deeply that his or her interest in the sin wanes. This work of *letting Christ reach us in prayer is the work of spiritual direction* but *the desire to be so reached by Christ* can be awakened in a confession that welcomes personal healing. This healing occurs within a prayerful offering to Christ of the *acknowledged origins* of any sin. If the roots are eminently clear in the celebration of the sacrament then the penitent should vocally raise them to the priest. "Father, this sin has something to do with my own self –hate." The priest then has an opportunity to offer a healing prayer or a deliverance prayer over the penitent, inviting the penitent to explore these roots in deeper prayer and spiritual direction outside of the sacrament. With such inner healing developing in us we can move to a place where God's loving *interest in us* defines who we are rather than *our interest in sin*. *God wants to show us this place of life.*

The priest might say after the prayer of absolution, “Christ, come to your son and heal him of his self hate, help him to receive your love right now, pull up the roots of his sinning, and help him receive the medicine of your Mercy.” If it is a face to face confession this type of prayer and silent receptivity can be accomplished by the “laying on of hands.” The point of such a particular prayer is just that...to particularize a ritual in order for the penitent to be assisted in receiving that which the sacrament contains. In this way it is similar to the silences after the Liturgy of the Word and after the reception of Holy Communion, silences filled with personal, private communication even in the midst of a communal cry for union with Christ’s mysteries. Emerging from this silence is His presence, a presence to be received and remembered as living. If Catholics believed and knew that their God was alive, calling them deeper into His eternal presence, His eternal love, their hearts would awaken and move them again and again to worship and reconciliation. God’s love would never be forgotten because they would live and move and possess themselves in and through so Great a mercy. With this the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be a personal encounter with the face of Christ, a face that reveals the Sacred Heart of mercy.

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