

## **Reconciliation**

**H**appily, in churches throughout this country, it seems to be the case that more and more people are going to communion – virtually entire congregations in many cases – whereas, somewhat strangely, fewer and fewer people are going to the sacrament of reconciliation (or confession). Even in the case of children newly prepared for those two sacraments, their first confession is very often their last for upwards of a year or more. All of us, whatever our age, need to develop a regular sacramental practice – including confession. We are only required by Church law to go to confession when we are in a state of grave (mortal) sin, but as important as it should be to our spiritual health, confession should be a regular part of our sacramental lives whether we have committed serious sin or not.

### **So what might the reasons be for the current demise of the sacrament?**

**I**t has to be said that confession isn't exactly everyone's favourite sacrament and yet things used to be far worse than they are now. In the early church, sins were confessed publicly and penance had to be carried out publicly also. It was the Christian community who then decided whether someone had satisfactorily demonstrated their contrition before they were readmitted to its celebrations. That may seem a little harsh to us but it did at least emphasise one aspect of sin that we often don't acknowledge, and that is that it not only offends God but it also has a damaging effect on the spiritual health of the community, the body of Christ, of which we are all members. The system as it was back then enabled a person to show their contrition not just to God but also to the community and so bring about a complete spiritual healing.

**U**nder the influence of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monks sent to this country, the practice was introduced of private confession to God through the person of the priest, and the development also of an almost standard list of penances related to the particular sins committed. The rite included a prayed Act of Contrition, with satisfaction being made by carrying out the assigned penance. At first absolution was only given after the penance was completed, but gradually there was a change to its being given at the time of confession.

**E**ventually more practical ways of making satisfaction for sin took the place of penances in the sense that the word was understood. A spiritual "penance" of prayer was often given – a rather unfortunate use of the word, as if it were a penance to pray. There continued to be a remnant of the 'standard list' in the practice of penitents coming prepared with their own "laundry list" of sins which unfortunately tended to place more importance on the actual enumeration of sins

than on an appreciation of the underlying causes and effects of them. In other words, the danger was of coming away from the sacrament content with having done things ‘by the book’ rather than experiencing the healing and reconciliation that the sacrament was, and is, all about. Little wonder therefore that many of us grew up with the idea of confession as a legalistic and sometimes unpleasant process of “doing” rather than an occasion of being and feeling reconciled and why we refer to *celebrating* the sacrament.

Little wonder also that it became for many a very negative and painfully difficult experience. In a day and age when people were taught that they had to go to confession before they could receive communion, for some that was sufficient incentive to be at the sacrament fairly frequently (perhaps too frequently) “just in case”. Others simply stayed away from both sacraments until having to fulfil their “Easter duty” (as it was called) left them with no choice. Nowadays, sadly, people no longer seem to accept the need for regular confession even though, as a sacrament, it remains just as important and their need of it just as great. Perhaps this and an underlying apprehension are the basic causes of people getting out of the habit of regular confession.

*Come now, let us talk this over, says Yahweh.  
Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool.*  
(Is 1 v18)

**There may, however, be another and in many ways more troubling cause.**

In his 1997 address to the bishops of England & Wales, Pope John Paul expressed his concern that people may be in danger of losing what he called a “sense of sin” and he referred to what St John said in his first letter: *If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth* (1Jn 1 v8). The Holy Father called for a renewed appreciation of the beauty and joy of the sacrament of confession.

One theory in support of the Pope’s concern is that catechesis in recent years has played down the traditional understanding of sin and the definition of the terms *venial* and *mortal* in relation to personal sin. Indeed there are some schools of thought that, in a misguided effort at ‘political correctness’(!), would deny the reality of sin altogether rather than risk offending people’s sensibilities! Once people are persuaded, or persuade themselves, that there is no such thing as sin then, not surprisingly, they see no need for a sacrament by which sins are forgiven

and with that particular “bathwater” we also throw out the “baby” of personal responsibility and the sense of sin referred to by the Pope.

Those who haven’t yet totally rejected the notion of sin may claim, however, that sins can be forgiven by saying a good Act of Contrition or in the Penitential Rite of the Mass, and so why the need for the sacrament? Such a suggestion can be faulted for minimising a sacrament in the first place, but it also fails to acknowledge Church teaching that grave (mortal) sin can only be forgiven through the sacrament. Most importantly, perhaps, is the fact that it was Jesus himself who instituted the sacrament when he gave his disciples (and their successors) authority to absolve sin in his name. Are those who claim there is no need for the sacrament saying they know better than Our Lord? Is there a danger that they are simply looking for an “easy way out”, a less painful way of confessing their sins? How sorry are we if we are looking for an easy way out?

*If we acknowledge our sins,  
then God who is faithful and just  
will forgive our sins and purify us  
from everything that is wrong.*

(1Jn 1 v9)

**How might we overcome any reluctance or fear on our part in order to more positively experience the process of forgiveness, reconciliation and healing that the sacrament offers?**

As they say about banging your head against a wall, it feels really good when you stop! In the gospel parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15 v11-32) Jesus tells a story designed to explain God’s approach to forgiveness. The central element of the story is that even while the wandering son is living his riotous and sinful life, his father is keeping a daily watch for his return. He knows his son and he also knows that one day he will come to his senses – as he eventually does. And it’s in that moment of realisation, plus his deliberate decision to return home and ask his father’s forgiveness, that the process of reconciliation begins. The son is truly sorry for his mistakes, and his father- who already knows that - is waiting with open arms to embrace him. The son’s confession and apology aren’t really necessary from the father’s point of view, but they are important for the son and to the process (and experience) of being reconciled.

In this context, there is a wonderful episode in the film *The Mission* with Jeremy Irons and Robert De Niro. The film tells the story of the conflict that arises between the European colonial powers who are capturing and enslaving native Indians to work as slaves on plantations, and the efforts of religious orders, in this

case the Jesuits, to protect the Indians and save them from becoming slaves. Robert de Niro's character starts out as a slave trader and has killed Indians in the process, but he undergoes a conversion experience and even asks to be accepted as a Jesuit novice. However, in his guilt for his past life he imposes his own penance on himself by insisting on bundling up his armour and weapons in a net and dragging the bundle behind him as he joins the Jesuits on their return journey to their mission – the very mission where in the past he has killed and kidnapped Indians. The effort involved in dragging this bundle begins to impose itself on his companions, slowing down their journey and trying everyone's patience, but he insists on carrying out the penance. After hacking their way through the jungle and traversing rivers and waterfalls, they eventually approach the mission where de Niro is immediately recognised. One of the Indians rushes toward him with a knife but instead of killing him as it appears he is going to, after a tense few moments in which he recognises in the pathetic state of De Niro the change that has taken place, he cuts through the rope and the bundle falls into the river and is swept away.

Sometimes this is what we do to ourselves in terms of the great bundles of guilt and unresolved past sins that we drag around with us, having never quite got round to allowing ourselves the experience of letting the sacrament of confession cut us free. As more and more time passes, it gets increasingly difficult to do what should have been done long before it became such a burden. It's almost as if we think God doesn't know what we've done and we keep putting off the process of telling him. But, of course, God already knows because he knows everything, and, of course, it was against him that we committed the sins in the first place. Like the father in the parable, every day God has been watching and hoping, waiting for us to come to our senses, waiting to cut us free from our burden, waiting to welcome us back again. It just needs a willingness on our part to say that we are sorry – in this case in the context of the sacrament – and so come to experience, and to accept, his forgiveness and his healing embrace. So what are we waiting for? As I said before, just like banging your head against a wall, it feels really good when you stop!

*I will forget their iniquities  
and never call their sins to mind.*

(Jer 31 v34)

**How do we understand and experience the sacrament and the process involved in its celebration?**

For many people, one of the most difficult aspects is having to admit and mention faults and sins to another person (in this case the priest). It is perhaps worth remembering that you are not confessing to the priest but, through him, to God. In that sense (and if I can put it this way) the priest isn't interested in what you have done or what you have to say. He *is* interested, of course, in that he needs to hear it in order help you celebrate the sacrament properly and to offer whatever spiritual help and direction he feels may be necessary, but he *isn't* interested in the sense of whatever you say being any of his business or being retained by him. In that respect you must always remember the *seal of confession* – the fact that complete and absolute confidentiality (under pain of excommunication) governs whatever is mentioned in confession. Nothing, under any circumstances whatsoever, goes any further and nothing of it can be referred to again by the priest – it is over and done with as far as he is concerned, just as it is over and done with as far as God is concerned. In any case, just think how many confessions a priest hears. He couldn't possibly remember all those details and, indeed, isn't allowed to, doesn't want to, and therefore never tries to. It's none of his business. And how does he manage it, you may ask? Trust the graces of the sacrament!

People may be all the more concerned about celebrating the sacrament face-to-face and the fact that the priest will know who they are in relation to the sins they confess. Well yes he will but, again, everything is absolutely confidential and, again, he doesn't retain the knowledge anyway. It may also help to think of it from the priest's point of view. He isn't sitting there in judgment of anyone and in any case he is only too well aware of his own sins and failings. (Yes, priests commit sins also! and they too need the sacrament just like everyone else.) Rather he is in the very privileged and humbling position of being an intermediary between the penitent and God, facilitating the reconciliation process and helping the person to experience the loving forgiveness of God. Trust the graces of the sacrament.

And just a final thought on celebrating confession face-to-face. When you go to your doctor for a medical or for a diagnosis, you don't expect to stand behind a screen and have the doctor first of all guess who you are and then what might be wrong with you! The same is true of confession. The better a priest knows you, the better he is able to help make your experience of the sacrament as positive and as healing as it is meant to be, and this is so much easier if you and the priest can sit together and talk together.

**How the sacrament is celebrated is another important factor in how positively we approach it.**

Traditionally complete anonymity was offered in that the priest and penitent were separated by a grille and the confessional box was usually a dark little “cupboard” so you couldn’t be seen anyway. Many still exist. As a child (and even as an adult), how does going to confession in a dark confessional box encourage a positive approach to the sacrament? However that was the traditional practice and the option of an anonymous confession must still be available even in churches where the more recent alternative of ‘face-to-face’ (or ‘open’) confession has been introduced.

In such churches there is usually a larger space than the old confessional box (possibly even a purpose-built reconciliation room) where the penitent has the choice of remaining anonymously behind a screen or curtain separating them from the priest, or of coming round to sit in a chair facing him for ‘open’ confession. Such larger spaces make it possible to introduce appropriate lighting, decoration and soft furnishings, in order to create a more welcoming and comfortable environment and, hopefully, an entirely more positive and enjoyable experience of the sacrament. However, numbers coming to confession each week are still alarmingly low. Might it be that the actual method of celebrating is the problem?

An alternative – and one that does seem to be proving increasingly popular – is to celebrate the sacrament within the context of a parish Reconciliation Service. There can still be no short cuts to the essentials of the sacrament and such services must allow for individual confession and absolution (general absolution is not allowed in this country), but it seems to be the context of prayer, music and the gathered community that proves to be popular.

*As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our sins.*  
(Ps 103 v12)

**And so to the subject of how the sacrament is celebrated.**

It is always helpful – and is recommended – before actually going to confession, to spend a little time in a prayerful examination of conscience by way of preparation. This should ensure that you know why you are there and what it is that you are bringing to God for his forgiveness.

The priest, for his part, should prayerfully welcome you and then do whatever he can to assist you in making your confession. Take your time. You may use either the traditional formula you were probably taught at school: *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is (however long) since my last confession,* or you may use your own words – it’s up to you.

Many people were taught what I earlier referred to as the “laundry list” method of confessing - listing your sins and how many times you have committed each of them. Perhaps it’s a helpful method for you and, if so, that’s OK. However, can we *really* remember exactly how many times we have committed each of our sins in whatever time it has been since we were last at confession? More helpful perhaps is, at the time we are examining our conscience in preparation, that we try to be aware of the ways in which we have sinned, perhaps the relative seriousness of those sins, and the way in which they may not only have offended God but also other people. It should also help us in recognising how we might go about avoiding those sins, and those actions against God and other people, in the future. The “laundry list” method doesn’t always do that. It’s that deeper and more encompassing awareness that we need to bring to the sacrament and place before God, rather than simply what we’ve done and how often.

The priest will then hopefully offer a few words of advice and guidance before giving you whatever penance he feels is appropriate and then asking you to say an Act of Contrition. Again this can be one of the traditional prayers you may know by heart, or it can be something you say in your own words.

[Just as an aside, it’s amazing how many people - and especially those of “a certain age” who really should know better! - rush into church and straight into the confessional apparently without even having acknowledged the presence of the Blessed Sacrament much less having made a prayerful preparation for the sacrament. They are often still so out-of-breath that they can hardly get the words out properly and their Act of Contrition is just as rushed as everything else. Then there are the whisperers who seem reluctant to let even God hear their sins, let alone the priest. And there are the hard-of-hearing who will put a wall and grille between them and the priest and then wonder why they can’t hear, rather than come and sit opposite the priest where they *can* hear and so the priest doesn’t have to raise his voice so everyone else can hear as well.]

The priest will then say the words of absolution – listen to them, they are very important, they are what you are there to hear. *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 the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* Hearing those words (another point in favour of the sacrament and the presence of the priest) should be a reassurance for you of the forgiveness and reconciliation that has taken place.

And about the words: *I absolve*. The priest absolves, he doesn't forgive; it is God who forgives. To *absolve* means to grant a remission or a release from something. The absolution given by the priest in the name of the Trinity is your reassurance through the spoken word of the priest that your sins have been taken away – but by God, not by the priest. And that process of being absolved – reassured that your sins are forgiven – must be backed up first of all by being truly sorry for your sins (as expressed in your Act of Contrition), doing whatever penance you were given and any act of satisfaction (to make up for the sins you committed), and having a firm purpose of amendment – sincerely intending, with the help of God's grace, to avoid sin in the future.

Then celebrate! Celebrate the forgiveness and the healing that has taken place. Celebrate how good it feels to be forgiven. Celebrate the relief that the sacrament has brought in finally having had the burden of our sins cut away. And how to celebrate? Well that's up to you: a family meal, a new hairdo, an ice-cream, whatever. But to not do something by way of celebration is to perhaps miss completely an important dimension of the sacrament and what has taken place in your relationship with God.

*Happy the man whose fault is forgiven,  
whose sin is blotted out. (Ps 32 v1)*

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