

RECONCILIATION: *Healing the Heart & Celebrating Mercy*

*This is the definition of sin:
the misuse of powers given us by God for doing good.*

-St. Basil the Great-

INTRODUCTION

Of all the sacraments of the Church, few evoke as many fears or offer as much intimacy, as does the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For many of us, the dread of the dark box where we tell our secrets (and have, at times, felt judged) keeps us away from the grace of this fundamental Christian experience. Even knowing that the sacrament is different now—usually celebrated face to face, often times more compassionate and caring in its theology—we avoid it, trusting instead to the penitential rite of the Mass or to our general faith in God’s abiding mercy. And, indeed, given the loving God in whom we believe, why do we need this sacrament at all? Why can’t we just pray and be forgiven or trust in a general absolution at Mass? Isn’t the Sacrament of Reconciliation just an anachronism of a fear-based Church that we should leave behind?

To answer these questions requires, first of all, exploring—perhaps in a new way—three other dimensions of our faith that explain (and, I think, help broaden) our understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: the nature of sin, the nature of human beings as loved-sinners, and the reason and nature of all the sacraments. In looking into our own humanity, and our own call to reconciliation,

we come to better understand not just this sacrament, but the whole experience to which we are called as children of God and sisters and brothers of Jesus.



THE NATURE OF SIN

*Love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home
love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.*

-Alice Walker

If you look up *sin* in the dictionary, it will tell you that it is *an offense against moral or religious law*—i.e., that it is a particular act. But the truth is, that in our Catholic tradition,



sin is not so much an **act** as a description of a **rupture in the relationship between a person and God**. A particular act may be *indicative* of the ruptured relationship, but it is not the behavior itself—distinct from the person—that is sinful. So it is that gambling may be a sin if it means that you are losing your family's rent, but it may be fine if it means a reasonable expense used to draw you closer to your friends on a Saturday night. The sin is not in the act, so much as in the person—or, rather, in the person's relationship to those he/she is called to love.

Despite the messy way some people use the notion of sin (e.g., when religious leaders talk about certain acts or tendencies as "*intrinsically sinful*"), the Catholic tradition teaches that a sin may find expression



in a particular act, but is dependent upon the identity and circumstances of the person. Sin is our separation from God, from the community, and from our own deepest self—though, of course, some acts, such as taking a life, almost always indicate such a separation. Yet, if we get away from acts themselves and look at the effect upon a person, then even ordinarily benign behaviors, such as watching television or reading, can be sinful *if they are ways we separate ourselves from the love of God and from sharing that love with others* (e.g., do I hide from those things and persons to whom I should attend through watching television or excessive work or whatever?).

Understanding sin as our separation from God's love (in ourselves, in others, in the world) also helps us better understand the

nature of **Original Sin**—which we often misunderstand as some kind of inherited personal sin (*Why am I guilty for what Adam did?*). A better way to understand Original Sin, however, may be to see it as *the condition of brokenness and separation into which each of us is born*. The world, even before we enter it, is filled with alienation and strife, and each of us becomes part of that broken world, before we ever make a choice; i.e. our origins condition us in separation. As Americans, we are born into the history of slavery; as

Catholics, we are born into the strife that separates the churches; as a members of our particular family, we are born into all our family's histories, all their losses, and pains—all of which account for an original brokenness that may not determine our

whole self, but is a part of the place in which we live: i.e., it predisposes us to a type of alienating behavior and separates us from God and others, prior to our choices. Thus, when we talk about Baptism as a healing for Original Sin, we mean, in part, that the promise of communion in Christ unites us—no matter what happens—to each other. Baptism is a stand *against* this Original Sin (i.e., original brokenness), just as Reconciliation is a renewal of our unity in moments of personal sin.



HUMAN NATURE & RECONCILIATION

The formidable power that forgiveness exercises in our lives enables us to acknowledge that the decisions of human life, even when they turn out badly, are not above repair.

-Doris Donnelly -

There is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the . . . whole human family.

-Blessed John Paul II-

If sin is the separation from God's love through choices we make—choices not to love or not to receive love—that still does not explain fully why we need the Rite of Reconciliation to overcome this separation. To answer that, one has to look at our own nature; and perhaps an analogy would help:

Have you ever had a fight with someone, in which you were determined to win, even though you may have known you might not be in the right? Maybe it had to do with asking for directions or being late for an appointment. It could be something foolish or serious, but it ended in a breach with someone you loved. Now, after you cool down and realize your part in the matter, what do you do? One way to approach healing is simply to let it all pass. You both move on and try to ignore that the argument happened. For those who love each other, and who can see that the anger came from frustration or embarrassment, forgiveness can

come easily; but there is always a sense of something unfinished about the resolution—even in the best of relationships. Like oil on one's hands, a residue remains, even after one washes.

Human beings are not angels, who live as pure spirit, and we need to speak out what bothers us and hear words of forgiveness. We need to name our failures and hear that we are forgiven; not so that we might wallow in our failure or because God (or even other people) will not forgive us until we do, but because we have bodies and ears and mouths, and the fullness of our humanity calls for the *Incarnation* of forgiveness. Our human nature—as enfleshed beings, in whom the body and the spirit are united—calls us to forgiveness that is both bodily and spiritual, both expressed in our actions as well as held in our souls.

The Rite of Reconciliation, then, is not a "*magic moment*" in which God forgives (for God forgives before we can even ask), and even less should it be seen as a court where our case is heard; rather, *it is an opportunity to get what separates us from God out into the open and get rid of it: to speak—with our own voices—the sin that hides in our hearts; to hear—with our own ears—that we really are forgiven, and, finally, to celebrate in the*



presence of another person, acting in the role of Christ and the community, that we are one again. Thus, like all sacraments, reconciliation is for the penitent and not for God; and it is not about laundry lists of sins carefully kept, but about whatever is keeping us from living fully that love God wants to give us. What keeps us, like Adam and Eve after they had eaten the fruit, hiding in the bushes, afraid to come forward? What keeps us—in great ways or small—from living as though we are beloved of God and capable of great love? That's what we need to confess and purge from our heart.



THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Christ urges you, when you ask forgiveness for yourself, to be especially generous to others, so that your actions may commend your prayer.

-Ambrose of Milan-

Even knowing that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is intended to free us from a burden we have trouble releasing; that it is intended to give us support and friendship in living as we most fully desire, we may still find it hard to go and tell a priest—especially one we see each week—what darkness lives in our hearts. I know I find it a challenge myself (and I have to go to men with whom I live my whole life). We live in a culture which calls us to deny or disguise every imperfection, every failure, every struggle—and the idea that we are all broken, yet still loved, seems a dangerous thing to admit

(though isn't it amazing that this is where every 12-step program begins?).

I could assure you, first of all, that every priest I know sees in this sacrament one of the great graces of his priesthood. Far from judging a penitent, the men I know—myself included—are humbled by this sacrament and by those who come to celebrate it. While the bond that seals the confessional is absolute (breaking the seal is one of the few offenses that earns one an automatic excommunication), more profound is the almost instant forgetfulness that comes in the sacrament. I have never seen anyone outside confession and thought of their sin, only their grace and goodness—a vision shaped by having seen them in confession.

In the end, however, the Sacrament of Reconciliation asks of us, in the most intimate way of all the sacraments, the same thing every sacrament asks: *that we be courageous*

enough to open ourselves to God, that we be humble enough to receive the Holy Spirit, and that we be generous enough then to give the Christ we receive to the world. The first of these occurs when we go to confess—either in private confession or in a penance service; the second comes when we accept absolution; and the third—symbolized by the penance we do—comes when we go from the sacrament and forgive as we have been forgiven, i.e., with joy and love for others. As with all the sacraments, Reconciliation gives us a mission, and it is in living this mission that we become healers of the world, women and men living in the image of Christ Jesus.



EPILOGUE:

CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENT

*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
Savior, Jesus Christ,
suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy..*

-Traditional formula of Contrition-

I. PREPARING

To prepare to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, begin with the simple question: ***What keeps me from receiving the love of God and sharing that love with others?***

The purpose of this question is not to discover a laundry-list of faults, but to find what it is by which your heart is entrapped and kept from living your deepest desire.

Is it pride that shows itself in self-centeredness and cruelty? Is it fear that draws you away from the risks of love and commitment, that keeps you silent in the face of injustice and blind to the suffering of others? Is it a sense of despair that keeps you from believing you can be loved by God or by others, which leads you to push others away from you or draws you to self-abusive behaviors and addictions?

The more you can get to your own heart, looking over your own history of where you have lost track of God, of others, and of yourself, the more ready you will be to ask for this sacrament of healing and hope.

II. GREETING & WELCOME

Going into the confessional or reconciliation chapel, you will be greeted by the priest, who will invite you to pray. He will then ask what it is you wish to bring to the Lord (or words to that effect). You may use the traditional formula of “*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,*” but you don’t need to do so. Nor do you need to list the times you have offended. Tell the priest if it has been awhile and know that you are welcomed!

III. CONFESSION

Speak naturally, as though to a close friend, about that with which you struggle. Be as specific as is helpful, but especially try to get to what is most at issue: e.g., “*I find myself angry at my spouse all of the time*” or “*I find myself constantly drawn to internet pornography*” or “*I don’t feel that God loves me; I feel lost all the time.*” Remember, the



life of Christ or the history of salvation, seeking to find connections with your own struggles. *Always, the priest will try to help you pray; to help you understand your forgiveness, and to give you a deeper sense of God's desire for you to have love and healing.*

V. PENANCE

Following the conversation, when he has heard something of your struggle and has a sense of what might help, the priest will offer you a penance, as a *symbol of your choice to follow Christ and a way for you to give back to the world*—perhaps through prayer or some good work.

This penance is not punitive, not a “sentence”—as though you were convicted in a trial and needed to pay a fine—rather, it is an invitation to give back, to bend your heart against the deforming power of sin, and a call to take up your mission as a Christian, i.e., to live as one who heals the world. As with all sacraments, Reconciliation invites us to become as Christ is: healer and helper of those who themselves suffer from division and sin.

VI. ABSOLUTION

Finally, the priest will ask you to say an act of contrition or in some other way to ask for God's forgiveness. This you may do in the traditional formula or in your own words, asking from your heart that you might live the life you desire and be free of those things that prevent it. When you have finished, the priest will give you absolution, invoking the ministry of the Church to give you pardon and peace and to absolve you of all your sins, even those left unnamed. This is not magic, but a means to invoke the Spirit of God, whose faithfulness to us is unwavering. It is, also, a celebration of what God has already done in you by bringing you to this sacrament.

As a sacrament of healing and strength, Reconciliation empowers each of us for the Church and the world.

sin you are confessing is what keeps you from God, from others, or from yourself—from the love to which we are called. Thus, it is not a time for excuses or for debate, so much as for healing of your heart.

You should feel free to ask for help in understanding the nature of your sin, or why you have been told that something is sinful, but remember that this is, in the end, a time for personal assessment before God.

Nothing you say, no matter what it is, can ever be repeated or even acted upon by the priest, outside of the confessional; so honesty and complete transparency—as though you were speaking to God—is key.

IV. CONVERSATION

Hearing all you have to say, the priest may ask some clarifying questions, to understand you better and help you more. He may then refer to Scripture and what we can learn from the

KEY SCRIPTURAL STORIES ON THE THEME OF RECONCILIATION



THE PARDON OF THE SINFUL WOMAN

(Lk. 7:36-50)



A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this he said to himself, *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner."* Jesus said to him in reply, *"Simon, I have something to say to you."* *"Tell me, teacher,"* he said. *"Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty. Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?"* Simon said in reply, *"The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven."* He said to him, *"You have judged rightly."* Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, *"Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."* He said to her, *"Your sins are forgiven."* The others at

table said to themselves, *"Who is this who even forgives sins?"* But he said to the woman, *"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."*

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON

(Lk. 15:11-32)



Then he said, *"A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.'* So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, *'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.'*" So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.'* But his father ordered his servants, *'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life*

again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, *'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'* He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, *'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.'* He said to him, *'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'*"

THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

(Jn. 8:2-11)

Early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, *"Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"* They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, *"Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one,

beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, *"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"* She replied, *"No one, sir."* Then Jesus said, *"Neither do I condemn you. Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more."*

ST. PAUL ON THE GRATUITY OF CHRIST'S SAVING LOVE

(Romans 8:28-39)

We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ (Jesus) who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: *"For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered."* No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

