



THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

INTRODUCTION

“Come back to me, with all your heart.” (Joel 2:12)

It is quite common for Catholics today to struggle with our understanding of, and participation in, the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

For many of us our only learning about this sacrament took place many years ago as young children when we made our ‘First Confession’. There has been considerable change in both the understanding and the celebration of the sacrament in the last few decades. This has not always been explained adequately to Catholics and so many of us feel a little alienated and unsure whether this sacrament even has any relevance in our lives.

What hasn’t changed though is our faith in the powerful love and mercy of God which we receive and celebrate in this Sacrament of wholeness and healing, of peace and of hope.

You are invited to join us in reflecting on the wonderful gift that is this Sacrament. It is our conviction that you as parents are the best and most appropriate teachers of faith for you children. By reflecting on your own understanding and experience of this sacrament, you will be able to share its purpose and gift with your child.



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A. WHY RECONCILIATION?

The Sacrament of Reconciliation has been, and sometimes still is, referred to as the Sacrament of Penance or Confession, although technically both confession and penance are only parts of the Sacrament.

The term confession defines a narrower act of reporting one's sins or failings whereas, in general, reconciliation is a broader term that is about relationship and healing.

In this sense, reconciliation is a better description of what this sacrament is about. It is one of the Sacraments of healing. It is about people being reconciled to God, themselves, and each other when they have gone astray from making good choices. The focus is on God's mercy, forgiveness, and desire to welcome us back and offer us a fresh start.

The Sacrament serves as a reminder that our God is like the father in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), as unbelievable as that might seem. In the story the younger son leaves home with his inheritance before his father dies, quickly squanders it and soon hits rock bottom. He decides to return home and, on the way back, rehearses his confession hoping his father will take him back as a hired hand.

Jesus listeners were probably as surprised as we are that the father not only runs to greet his son, but also shushes him before he can finish confessing! He has his son richly clothed and throws an extravagant party to celebrate his return. The father doesn't require an exhaustive recounting of what his son did wrong. He doesn't leave his son wallowing in guilt or try to extract a promise of future obedience. He welcomes him back, no questions asked, and invites others to celebrate with him because 'this son of mine was dead, and he is alive again; he was lost and has been found.' (Lk 15:24)

Over the coming week you may like to spend some time reflecting on your own experiences of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

- If your experiences have been positive and meaningful – what has most contributed to that?
- If your experiences have left you feeling like there’s something missing – what do you think would help you to participate more fully?

Over the next few weeks we will be looking at three questions which are key to our understanding of this Sacrament.

We invite you to spend some time this week considering how you would answer these questions:

Who is God?

How do I see God / my relationship with God/ how would I explain that to someone?

What is Sin?

What did this word mean to me as a child? What does it mean to me now?

What is forgiveness?

How do I understand forgiveness? How do I experience forgiveness?

“The sacrament of reconciliation must regain its central place in the Christian life,” so that “everyone is afforded the opportunity of experiencing the liberating power of forgiveness.”

Pope Francis in his 2016 apostolic letter Misericordia et Misera



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B. WHO IS OUR GOD?

The relationship we have with God gives meaning to how we approach and celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

For many of us, Old Testament images of a vengeful, punishing God have been a dominant part of our Christian imagination. Images of an old white man, far away on a cloud somewhere, with rule book and judgement scales in hand, may well linger on in the corners of our subconscious. Sadly, by allowing this, we miss the 'Good News' of Jesus.... Changing our image of God from one who judges and punishes, to one who pours out unconditional love was at the core of Jesus' mission – and it needs to be at the centre of our lives too!

In the story of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:5) the Scribes and Pharisees want to stone her to death. When Jesus invites them to put down their stones, he is inviting them to re-imagine God and God's law. Jesus recognises and points out the woman's damaging behaviour, but he stands unreservedly on her side as a person (a loved child of God.)

Do we believe in a God who stands passionately on our side? A God who - like the woman who lost a coin (Lk 15: 8-10), or the shepherd who lost a sheep (Lk 15: 8-10), or the father of the prodigal son – will take the initiative to come looking for us, and not stop looking until we are safely where we belong? Who will declare, 'Everything I have is yours!'

This is the relationship we are called to celebrate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

This week spend some time reflecting on your relationship with God.

No one image of God can fully capture for us who God is. We try, and many people have tried for us, to put our experience of God into words – but ultimately all words and images will be inadequate because we are dealing with God, our Creator, who is far beyond what we can imagine.

While an image of God as a welcoming forgiving parent or as one who searches for what is lost may be useful at times, at other times, other images maybe more useful.

- **God as a majestic bird, perhaps an eagle, protecting me from harm...**
 - ▷ *Hide me in the shadow of your wings.* Psalm 17:8
 - ▷ *I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.* Psalm 57:1
- **God as a gentle, nurturing mother...**
 - ▷ *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!* Isaiah 42:49
 - ▷ *As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.* Isaiah 66:13
- **God as personal adviser or coach...**
 - ▷ *I will guide you and teach you the way you should go. I will give you good advice and watch over you with love.* Psalm 32:8
- **God as healer...**
 - ▷ *who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases.* Psalm 103:2-3
 - ▷ *He sent out his word and healed them.* Psalm 107:20

“The best analogy for the relationship that God wants with us is friendship. God desires humans into existence for the sake of friendship.”

Fr William Barry SJ (A Friendship Like No Other, 2008).



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C. THINKING ABOUT SIN

If we believe in a God who—like the woman who lost a coin, or the shepherd who lost a sheep, or the father of the prodigal son—takes the initiative to come looking for us, and does not stop looking until we are safely where we belong; who will come running while we are still a long way off; who will throw an extravagant party for us; who will declare ‘Everything I have is yours!... then how should we think about sin?’

If we think of our faith from a position of relationship with God (rather than a legal perspective i.e. right or wrong actions, broken rules, etc.), we can see more clearly how God works within us and how our actions might either build up or damage that relationship. Sin is less something that can be seen only in what we ‘do’, but more something reflected in our way of ‘being’ or relating.

An ‘examination of conscience’ is a useful tool we use in coming to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and it’s also useful in our everyday lives. It’s a means of reflecting on how I might have failed to hear my God say, ‘everything I have is yours!’ – and instead gone looking for life elsewhere; how I may have turned away from the deepest part of myself—the part that calls me to choose life and peace with myself, with God and with others—when I acted contrary to my better judgement or to God’s voice within me.

Reflecting on our sinfulness may sound like an unhealthy product of the stereotypical Catholic emphasis on guilt. But the voice of our conscience, which lets us know when we have strayed from who we know we are called to be and moves us to make amends, is a voice that can lead us to become more loving and, ultimately, much happier people.

JOY COWLEY

(Marist Messenger, 31 May 2018)

Our spiritual paths are shaped by our biological roles. Most men achieve spiritual growth through information and structure. Women have lateral outreach and find God in relationship, intuition and love. Each path is gift for the other.

What about sin? For a man, sin usually attacks personal integrity. For a woman, the effects of sin are almost always relational.

That list of seven deadly sins – pride, anger, lust, gluttony, greed, envy, sloth – is masculine, and women recognize it as such. If we formed our own list, it would be all about unkind thoughts, words and deeds. It could probably look something like this: spite, jealousy, manipulation, betrayal, irrational emotion, gossip, lies. When I read that list to a group of women, there is much laughter. We all identify with it.

We recognise that the masculine understanding of sin has its roots in scripture, and yes, there is a lot about sin in the Bible. In Judaism, it was believed that all misfortune came from sin, be it illness, disability, poverty, famine, flood, war, sterility.

Times and understanding have changed. Sin is still a reality, although now we view it in the context of our understanding of the human psyche. It is a negative manifestation of our ego, that me-first instinct that can lock us in a little prison of self.

Where does that selfish instinct come from? The obvious answer is that it's a part of our primal instinct for self-preservation. But on our spiritual journey sin has a much bigger role. Our sinfulness is what God has given us to work with. It is the raw material of growth.

Pilgrimage is all about movement and change, leaving burdens with Jesus at the foot of cross and moving with him to resurrection. In this we become aware that our errors are valuable teachers. We know that if we were perfect, we would have no room for growth.



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D. THINKING ABOUT FORGIVENESS

As we have seen, forgiveness is possibly best expressed in the story of the Prodigal Son. The father takes the initiative of welcoming home his son and throws an extravagant party. Forgiveness is complete. It is the attitude and action of a compassionate heart.

In the same way the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a celebration of an event that has already taken place. The process of 'confessing' does not forgive the sin, God has already forgiven and is always waiting to 'welcome us home'. The Sacrament celebrates forgiveness and reconciliation and gives expression to it. God is the forgiver; the priest is the minister communicating this reality to us.

There is no place in this celebration for embarrassment or humiliation. Jesus recognised that people don't grow by being crushed. Overriding all else in the minds of everyone participating must be reconciliation with and the confirmation of God's unconditional forgiveness. The Sacrament should highlight confidence in God's forgiveness and desire to help us all just as we are. The celebration should be joyful. It is a celebration of what has already taken place. God has forgiven us!

The kernel of the Gospel is forgiveness. No one is alone in being weak. Think of Jesus' words, 'I have not come to call the virtuous, but sinners.' Isn't that all of us?

*Lord teach me to forgive
to look deep into the hearts of those who wound me,
so that I may glimpse, in that dark, still water,
not just the reflection of my own face
but yours as well.*

JOY COWLEY

(CathNews, 25 Feb 2019)

One of the most difficult burdens to carry is lack of forgiveness.

We all have that problem. We don't forgive others and we don't forgive ourselves.

This darkness is very heavy, and it weighs us down. We know it is partly caused by our judgemental attitudes, but even that knowledge is a judgement and it doesn't help.

Lack of forgiveness can become a major blockage.

For me, the only thing that works is to lay that dark weight at the foot of the cross and hear Jesus, the great healer, say "Father forgive them. They know not what they do".

That is so true. Much of the grievance I've carried has come out of someone's ignorance, haste, a mistaken sense of duty, and the same can be said of the hurt I've inflicted on other people.

In fact, if we look at the evil in the world, we see it caused by people who believe they are absolutely right.

Experience teaches us that the fruits of suffering are wisdom and compassion. For some of us, the hurt we've received from others has caused major disruption in our lives and we don't know how to move on.

Forgiveness is not simple. We peel back the burden layer by layer. It takes time.

When at last we can go to the cross in prayer to completely forgive, we discover the freedom of forgiveness. The dark burden dissolves in the light.

What a relief that is!

Not only do we find freedom in that light. We also find wisdom and love and they, in turn, make very good lenses through which to see the world as God made it.



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PART 5: CELEBRATING

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the culmination of our journey to forgiveness. The sacrament celebrates that forgiveness and reconciliation and gives expression to it. It ritualizes a journey that includes –

Conversion – my acknowledgement of how my words or actions (or lack of) have damaged my relationships with God, with myself and with others, my decision to put things right, and to strive to live differently now.

Contrition / Repentance – my experience of sadness and sorrow for the damage that I have caused.

Confession – my verbal acknowledgement of the damage I have caused.

Penance – my intention to repair the harm I have done and to make amends as necessary

Celebration – the reminder that God rejoices in our return and the celebration of God's gift of unconditional forgiveness.

We have the option of participating in The Sacrament of Reconciliation through two different ceremonies. While both incorporate the same elements each ceremony (rite) has a slightly different emphasis. Rite I is an individual ceremony whereas Rite II is a community celebration demonstrating more clearly the communal nature of sin and our need for reconciliation with one another.

In these rites we have a ritual in which we publicly acknowledge our sins, seek assurance of forgiveness and are welcomed back into communion with others by another member of the Body of Christ (the priest). It is a way of expressing in a concrete, palpable way that God loves and forgives us unconditionally. Priests are God's servants – reminding us of this wonderful, invisible grace.

Prior to celebrating either Rite we are called to spend some time with an 'examination of conscience' – reflecting on damage I have caused in relationships – with God, with myself, with others – that 'me-first instinct that can lock us in a little prison of self.' (Joy Cowley)

Rite I

Welcome - The priest will welcome me, we will make the sign of the cross together. He may offer some words of encouragement – or if he doesn't know me, we may chat briefly about myself to give him some background – especially if this is the first time, or its been a long time since I last celebrated this sacrament ...

Scripture Reading – either the priest or I may read a short passage of scripture, which reminds us to trust in God's loving forgiveness.

Confession – I now acknowledge to the priest the damaged areas of my life that I am most aware of...those instincts that have locked me into a 'little prison of self'

Penance – We will talk about what I need to do which will help repair and make amends for the damage I've done – and help me to live in peace with myself and others.

Contrition – I then express my sorrow for my sin and my desire to 'come home', through a short prayer.

Absolution – the priest then speaks the words of absolution - my assurance that God has welcomed me back!

Rite II

Welcome – We gather as a community and join in a hymn, before being greeted by the priest who will lead us in opening prayer.

Readings – we will listen together to readings from scripture

Homily – based on the reading we have just heard

Examination of conscience - encourages us to examine our lives, turn away from sin and redirect ourselves toward living loving and peaceful lives.

Communal prayer or hymn – acknowledging that we have sinned, expressing our sorrow, seeking forgiveness, and proclaiming our trust in God's mercy.

The Lord's Prayer

Individual confession, penance and absolution – as above.

Thanksgiving – we regather as a community to gives thanks for God's love and mercy through prayer or song.