

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

In the Catholic Church we have what some have called a Sacramental economy, which means that the practice of our Faith is grounded in Jesus Christ and the seven sacraments we celebrate. Many sacraments are just celebrated once in our lifetime: Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage and Holy Orders (Second Marriages can occur if a spouse dies). Of the two sacraments that are called the Sacraments of Healing, Anointing of the Sick and Reconciliation, Anointing is celebrated in rarer circumstance, before surgery, when suffering from serious illness and especially in danger of death. This leaves the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist as the most common way that we as Catholics invite God into our lives. They are seen as so crucial that the Church asks each Catholic to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year and worthily receive the sacrament of Eucharist at least once a year (often called the Easter Duties). We are of course called to attend the celebration of the Eucharist weekly but if we have some serious sin that we have not reconciled with God and are not resolved to do so when possible we are asked to abstain from the Eucharist until we are resolved to bring the issue to God for assistance.

Now for many Catholics the sacrament of Reconciliation is problematical, and difficult. Even for priests, who often celebrate the sacrament monthly, it can be difficult to go to a brother priest and ask for God's assistance in parts of our lives where they may be struggling, but they go, because they know that reconciling with God is the way to peace. Part of the problem might be the names we sometimes use for this sacrament, Confession or Penance, with Penance being the more formal name for the Rite. The names all have some important truths to them, but the current emphasis on Reconciliation is the most inclusive term as it includes the idea of confession and penance but emphasizes the desired result of the grace we seek in the sacrament, to realign our will with the will of God.

Now in the earliest days of the Church forgiveness was received in Baptism, and if you turned away from God you were excluded from receiving the Eucharist because you could not be baptized again. This is similar to "three strikes and you're out" laws. But like baseball the church saw that even if you struck out the God of Mercy could forgive and you should get another turn at the bat. One of the more common transgressions that had to be reconciled was when someone denied their faith to avoid being fed to the lions in the early days. To reconcile the penitents had to offer public contrition. The most common penance was that the sinners had to kneel during the Eucharistic prayer during Lent and not receive the Eucharist until Easter. Eventually everyone started kneeling to admit their sinful state during the Eucharistic prayer until the Church went back to the more common and traditional stance of having all rise and stand as our King enters the assembly. While penance is still an important part of the Rite, where the penitent is asked to perform some action to help them move back into a correct relationship with God we no longer impose public penances, although in some cases people do feel a need to acknowledge a public contrition for a sin that is publicly known.

One of the next developments in the sacrament occurred when Pope Leo the Great worked to re-establish Christianity after the Mongols had left. Since Ireland had not been as affected many missionaries were sent from Irish Monasteries to re-establish the Church. These were enthusiastic missionaries but because they were hastily formed and ordained they did not always have solid moral theology. To make up for the lack of knowledge books were compiled called penitentials where sins were listed and appropriate penances assigned. The good in the practice was that people did have sins forgiven. What was lost was the dialogue about ways to help change sinful habits almost disappeared, and sometimes the sacrament became very short, the penitents listing transgressions in number and kind and the priest assigning a fixed penance and absolving the penitent. While the sacrament was effective in gaining grace, and some folks did eventually “Turn away from sin and return to the Gospel” as we are asked to do each Ash Wednesday, many opportunities more tailored to the individual circumstances were not explored, which lessened the chances of the sacrament effecting deeper conversions.

During the counter-reformation one of the great graces that came to the Church was the Spiritual renewal promoted by St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits. Many Catholics are aware to some degree that Ignatius promoted personal meditation of the Scriptures to discover the will of God in their lives. People are less aware that Ignatius had at his foundation a belief that we need to put ourselves in a right relationship with God, trusting that God’s will should always be chosen over our own wills, and finally that we have to admit our times of turning from God and repent. Then we are ready to encounter God in prayer. Ignatius was one who saw the wisdom of the Church starting our communal prayer of the Eucharist with a penitential rite, where we do receive forgiveness but still should celebrate reconciliation for major or mortal sins.

Considering all of this it is easy to see why we refer to the sacrament as Reconciliation today. It includes of course confession of sins. Without sins there is no need for reconciliation of our wills to the will of God. There is also a penance given, but today it might be more tailored to the circumstances of our sins. There may be more real dialogue between the priest and penitent, which is often why many choose face to face confession as opposed to placing a screen between the priest and penitent. Real healing sometimes happens in the confessional. Most priests have seen moments of great joy when people truly experience God’s love in this sacrament, even if we cannot discuss them. Each encounter in this sacrament has the potential of bring the penitent closer to God, which is why sometimes it takes a little longer for some. Because of the way the sacrament is celebrated today is why it is not often scheduled before mass or other events as priests do not want to be placed in the position of having to cut off a sacred moment to go say mass or do some other function. Some who sense they might need a bit longer sometimes make an appointment. In light of this I am going to schedule confessions after mass on Saturday mornings so that I will not have to be watching the time when. If there are no funerals there should be plenty of time to celebrate well, taking the time needed.

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