

The Sacrament of Reconciliation: Celebrating God's Forgiveness

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The well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the most strikingly powerful illustration of the human process of reconciliation, and of the theology inherent in the new Rite of Reconciliation. But many of us find it difficult to believe the story (see Luke 15:11-32). The father welcomes the son back instantly—doesn't even wait for him to get to the house. And he isn't at all interested in the young man's confession, only in celebrating.

This is not the way we Catholics have viewed the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Even with the new Rite, most of us tend to view this sacrament with the attitude of the older son in the story: Forgiveness comes only after you recite your list of sins, agree to suffer a bit for them, do something to make up for your offences, give some guarantee you won't commit the same sins again, and prove yourself worthy to join the rest of us who haven't been so foolish!

But God really is like the merciful parent in this parable: not out to catch us in our sin but intent on reaching out and hanging on to us in spite of our sin. Reconciliation (and the new Rite is careful to point this out) is not just a matter of getting rid of sin. Nor is its dominant concern what *we*, the penitents, do. The important point is what *God* does in, with and through us.

A journey home to God

God's reconciling work in us doesn't happen in an instant. Reconciliation is often a long, sometimes painful process. It is a journey not confined to, but completed in, sacramental celebration. It is a round-trip journey away from our home with God and back again that can be summed up in terms of three C's: *conversion*, *confession* and *celebration*—and *in that order*.

In the past the order was different: Receiving the sacrament meant beginning with a recitation of sins (*confession*). Then we expressed our sorrow with an Act of Contrition, agreed to make some satisfaction for our sins by accepting our penance, and resolved to change our ways (*conversion*). *Celebration* was seldom, if ever, part of the process.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son can help us understand the stages in our journey to reconciliation—and the order in which they occur. This helps us see why the theology of the new Rite of Reconciliation suggests a reordering in the pattern that we were familiar with in the past.

The journey for the young man in the parable (and for us) begins with the selfishness of sin. His sin takes him from the home of his parents—as our sin takes us from the shelter of God and the Christian community. His major concern in his new self-centered lifestyle—as is ours in sin—is himself and his personal gratification. None of the relationships he establishes are lasting. When his money runs out, so do his "friends." Eventually he discovers himself alone, mired in the mud of a pigpen, just as he is mired in sin. Then comes this significant phrase in the story: "Coming to his senses at last..." This is the beginning of the journey back, the beginning of conversion.

Conversion: An ongoing process

The conversion process begins with a "coming to one's senses," with a realization that all is not right with our values and style of life. Prompted by a faith response to God's call, conversion initiates a desire for change. Change is the essence of conversion. *Shuv*, the Old Testament term for conversion,

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suggests a physical change of direction; *metanoia*, the term the New Testament uses, suggests an internal turnabout, a change of heart that is revealed in one's conduct.

The Gospel vision of *metanoia* calls for an interior transformation that comes about when God's Spirit breaks into our lives with the Good News that God loves us unconditionally. Conversion is always a response to being loved by God. In fact, the most important part of the conversion process is the experience of being loved and realizing that God's love saves us—we do not save ourselves. Our part in this saving action is to be open to the gift of God's love—to be open to grace.

Moral conversion means making a personal, explicitly responsible decision to turn away from the evil that blinds us to God's love, and to turn toward God who gifts us with love in spite of our sinfulness.

Persons who turn to God in conversion will never be the same again, because conversion implies transforming the way we relate to others, to ourselves, to the world, to the universe and to God. Unless we can see that our values, attitudes and actions are in conflict with Christian ones, we will never see a need to change or desire to be reconciled.

The need for conversion does not extend only to those who have made a radical choice for evil. Most often *metanoia* means the small efforts all of us must continually make to respond to the call of God.

Conversion is not a once-in-a-lifetime moment but a continuous, ongoing, lifelong process which brings us ever closer to "the holiness and love of God." Each experience of moral conversion prompts us to turn more and more toward God, because each conversion experience reveals God in a new, brighter light.

When we discover in the examination of our values, attitudes and style of life that we are "missing the mark," we experience the next step in the conversion process—contrition. This step moves us to the next leg of our conversion journey: breaking away from our misdirected actions, leaving them behind and making some resolutions for the future.

Let's look again at our story. The young man takes the first step in the conversion process when he "comes to his senses," overcomes his blindness and sees what he must do. "I will break away and return to my father." Before he ever gets out of the pigpen, he admits his sinfulness. And in this acknowledgment of sin he both expresses contrition and determines his own penance. "I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you.... Treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

Contrition means examining our present relationships in the light of the Gospel imperative of love, and taking the necessary steps to repent and repair those relationships with others, ourselves and God. The repentance step in the conversion process is what is commonly called "making satisfaction for our sins," or "doing penance."

For many people in the past penance connoted "making up to God" by punishing ourselves for our sins. But true reparation is not punishment. At its root, reparation is repairing or correcting a sinful lifestyle. In the past we were told to do penance as temporal punishment for our sins. Now, however, we understand that our real "punishment" is the continuing pattern of sin in our lives and the harmful attitudes and actions it creates in us. The purpose of doing penance is to help us change that pattern. Penance is for growth, not for punishment. "Doing penance" means taking steps in the direction of living a changed life; it means making room for something new.

Lillian Hellman provides a wonderful image of this process of reconciliation in her explanation of the word *pentimento* at the beginning of *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits*: "Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called *pentimento* because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by the later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again."

Confession: Externalizing what is within

Confession, one aspect of the sacrament which used to receive the greatest emphasis, is now seen as just one step in the total process. Confession of sin can only be sincere if it is preceded by the process of conversion. It is actually the external expression of the interior transformation that conversion has brought about in us. It is a much less significant aspect of the sacrament than we made it out to be in the past. This does not mean that confession is unimportant—only that it is not the essence of the sacrament.

Look again at the parable. The father, seeing his son in the distance, runs out to meet him with an embrace and a kiss. Through one loving gesture, the father forgives the son—and the son hasn't even made his confession yet! When he does, it seems the father hardly listens. The confession is not the most important thing here; the important thing is that his son has returned. The son need not beg for forgiveness, he *has been* forgiven. This is the glorious Good News: God's forgiveness, like God's love, doesn't stop. In this parable, Jesus reveals to us a loving God who simply cannot *not* forgive!

Zorba the Greek—that earthy, raucous lover of life created by Nikos Kazantzakis—captures this loving God when he says: "I think of God as being exactly like me. Only bigger, stronger, crazier. And immortal, into the bargain. He's sitting on a pile of soft sheepskins, and his hut's the sky....In his right hand he's holding not a knife or a pair of scales—those damned instruments are meant for butchers and grocers—no, he's holding a large sponge full of water, like a rain cloud. On his right is Paradise, on his left Hell. Here comes a soul; the poor little thing's quite naked, because it's lost its cloak—its body, I mean—and it's shivering.

"...The naked soul throws itself at God's feet. 'Mercy!' it cries. 'I have sinned.' And away it goes reciting its sins. It recites a whole rigmarole and there's no end to it. God thinks this is too much of a good thing. He yawns. 'For heaven's sake stop!' he shouts. 'I've heard enough of all that!' Flap! Slap! a wipe of the sponge, and he washes out all the sins. 'Away with you, clear out, run off to Paradise!' he says to the soul....Because God, you know, is a great lord, and that's what being a lord means: to forgive!"

Our attitude toward the Sacrament of Reconciliation is intimately related to our image of God. We need to really believe that our God, like Zorba's, is not some big bogeyman waiting to trip us up, but a great Lord who is ever ready to reach out in forgiveness.

The Rite of Reconciliation reflects this image of a God of mercy. Formerly, it was the penitent who began the encounter in confession—"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned"—not unlike the way the sinner of Zorba's imagination approached God, or the way the son in our parable planned to greet his father. But both Zorba's God and the parent in the parable intervened. In the same vein, now in Reconciliation it is the confessor who takes the initiative, reaching out, welcoming the penitent and creating a hospitable environment of acceptance and love before there is any mention of sin. Thus, the sacramental moment of confession—just one of the sacramental moments in the whole Rite—focuses on God's love rather than our sin.

Of course the new Rite does concern itself with the confession of sins. But one's *sinfulness* is not always the same as one's *sins*. And, as a sacrament of healing, Reconciliation addresses the disease (sinfulness) rather than the symptoms (sins). So, the sacrament calls us to more than prepared speeches or lists of sins. We are challenged to search deep into our heart of hearts to discover the struggles, value conflicts and ambiguities (the disease) which cause the sinful acts (the symptoms) to appear.

A question that often arises is: Why confess my sins? And why confess to a priest? Why not confess directly to God, since God has already forgiven me anyway? From God's point of view, the simple answer is: There is no reason. But from *our* point of view, the answer is that as human beings who do not live in our minds alone, we need to externalize bodily—with words, signs and gestures—what is in our minds and heart. We need to see, hear and feel forgiveness—not just think about it.

We need other human beings to help us externalize what is within and open our hearts before the Lord, which puts confessors in a new light. They are best seen, not as faceless and impersonal judges, but as guides in our discernment, compassionately helping us experience and proclaim the mercy of God in our lives. As the Introduction to the Rite puts it, the confessor "fulfills a parental function...reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of the Good Shepherd." Another of the confessor's roles is to say the prayer of absolution. Contrary to what we may have thought in the past, this prayer, which completes or seals the penitent's change of heart, is not a prayer asking for forgiveness. It is a prayer signifying God's forgiveness of us and our reconciliation with the Church—which is certainly something to celebrate.

Celebration: God always loves us

Celebration is a word we haven't often associated with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But in Jesus' parable, it is obviously important and imperative. "Quick!" says the father. "Let us celebrate." And why? Because a sinner has converted, repented, confessed and returned.

Celebration makes sense only when there is really something to celebrate. Each of us has had the experience of going to gatherings with all the trappings of a celebration—people, food, drink, balloons, bands—and yet the festivity was a flop for us. For example, attending an office party can be such an empty gathering for the spouse or friend of an employee. Celebration flows from lived experience or it is meaningless. The need for celebration to follow common lived experiences is especially true of sacramental celebrations. All of the sacraments are communal celebrations of the lived experience of believing Christians.

Perhaps what we need to help us feel more comfortable with the idea of celebration in relation to Reconciliation is a conversion from our own rugged individualism. Let's face it—there is something about believing in a bogeyman God from whom we have to earn forgiveness that makes us feel good psychologically. It's harder to feel good about a God who loves and forgives us unconditionally—whether we know it or not, want it or not, like it or not. In the face of such love and forgiveness we feel uncomfortable. It creates a pressure within us that makes us feel we should "do something" to deserve such largess—or at least feel a little bit guilty.

The older brother in our story expresses this same discomfort. Upon witnessing the festivities, he appeals to fairness and legalism. In a sense, he is hanging on to the courtroom image of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, suggesting that there is no way everyone can feel good about the return of the younger brother until amends have been made.

But this older son is far too narrow in his understanding of life, of God and of the sacrament. He is too calculating, too quantitative, not unlike the butchers and grocers that Zorba refers to in his description of God. This son finds it difficult to understand that we are never *not* forgiven. The Sacrament of Reconciliation does not bring about something that was absent. It proclaims and enables us to own God's love and forgiveness that are already present.

The older brother's problem is a universal human one. It's tough for most of us to say, "I'm sorry." It is even tougher to say, "You're forgiven." And it is most difficult of all to say gracefully, "I accept your forgiveness." To be able to do that we must be able to forgive ourselves. That, too, is what we celebrate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The community's liturgical celebration of Reconciliation places a frame around the picture of our continual journey from sin to reconciliation. Only someone who has never experienced or reflected on that journey will fail to understand the need and value of celebrating the sacrament.

The older son in our story may be such a person. When the father calls for a celebration, everyone else in the household responds. Not only do they celebrate the younger son's return, they

celebrate their own experience of forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation as well. They, like us, have been on that journey from which the young man has returned.

So there *is* something we can do about the unconditional forgiveness we receive from God: *forgive as we have been forgiven*. Having been forgiven, we are empowered to forgive ourselves and to forgive one another, heal one another and celebrate the fact that together we have come a step closer to the peace, justice and reconciliation that makes us the heralds of Christ's Kingdom on earth.

A communal celebration

Sacramental celebrations are communal because sacramental theology is horizontal. Sacraments happen in people who are in relationship with each other and with God. In the area of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation this is particularly evident. Our sinfulness disrupts our relationship in community as well as our relationship with God. And since the sacrament begins with our sinfulness, which affects others, it is only proper that it culminate with a communal expression of love and forgiveness that embodies the love and forgiveness of God.

Unconverted "older sons" will always be out of step with the Christian community. When we celebrate the sacrament, we celebrate with joy and thanksgiving because the forgiveness of the Christian community and of God has brought us to this moment—and that is worth celebrating. There is no room for the attitude that forgiveness comes "only when you have recited your list of sins, agreed to suffer a bit for them and proven yourself worthy to join the rest of us who haven't been so foolish."

Such "older sons" are looking for what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace"—grace without discipleship, without the cross, without faith, without Jesus Christ living and incarnate, and without the conversion necessary to live reconciliation within the Christian community. Such a person is hardly ready to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation as it is understood today.