

Thinking about Reconciliation

a reader for priests and people

This series offers an oversight of reconciliation in the liturgical life of the Church. It offers individuals a broader perspective on reconciliation than is provided in other Liturgy Office resources which are specific to the Rite of Penance itself. The text includes extensive quotations from the Rite of Penance and other Church documents, and series of questions to encourage personal engagement with the material.

The parts of Thinking about Reconciliation are listed below. They can be downloaded from the Liturgy Office website: www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources.

Part One: *The Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of Salvation*

Part Two: *The Mystery of Reconciliation in the Sacraments*

Part Three: *The Church, the sinner and society*

Part Four: *The Rite of Penance*

Part Five: *Preparing for and celebrating the Rite of Penance*

Appendix A:

Two sets of additional questions. The first is intended for those who wish to review current parish and/or deanery practice in the light of the Rite, and the second for those who wish to reflect on *Thinking about Reconciliation* as a group.

Acknowledgements

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Part Five:

Preparing for and celebrating the Rite of Penance

In his letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* written following the Jubilee year 2000 Pope John Paul wrote encouraging a new catechesis concerning the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He observes that it is important that the Church faces the question of sin, but is even insistent,

...in calling for a rediscovery of Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself. It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance, which for the faithful is “the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism”.

Novo Millennio Ineunte 37.

What the Holy Father calls for on the part of the Church as a whole is very similar to what it is that every member of the Church must seek to do as they prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance, be that as priest or penitent – namely to rediscover the mystery of our faith, in the person of Christ. Part of our preparation and part of our focus in celebrating will always also be a consideration of our own lives, and particularly the sins that mark them. But this is a means to the greater end, of rediscovering Christ.

For convenience what will be principally described in this section is how we prepare and participate in the celebration of the first form of the *Rite of Penance*. The second form of the Rite includes some other dimensions which will not be discussed here. However all that is discussed here will be relevant to celebration of the second form of the Rite.

Let us start by considering how regularly a Catholic should celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. The code of Canon Law requires that ‘All the faithful who have reached the age of discretion are bound faithfully to confess their

grave sins at least once a year.' (*Code of Canon Law*, Canon 989.) Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not receive Holy Communion without previously having been to sacramental confession, unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, which includes the resolve to go to confession as soon as possible. (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 916)

Also confession of venial sins is recommended to the faithful. (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 988)

Grave sin is not a regular feature of every Catholic's life, but when it is present the discipline of the Church is clear.

When it is not then the pattern of celebrating the sacrament will vary from person to person. Some will find a monthly celebration about right, others will find that excessive. The practice of Parish celebrations of the second form of the Rite of Penance in Lent and Advent means that perhaps most active Catholics will celebrate the sacrament at least twice in the year. It is for them to discern what further need they might have.

Preparing for the Sacrament

Preparation for the sacrament is something we need to take time over. It is something we might do even over several days. It is certainly, in most circumstances, to make our preparation for celebrating the sacrament before we go to the church to celebrate either the first or the second forms of the sacrament.

There are a number of stages in preparation.

Examination of Consciousness

The penitent should compare his life with the example and commandments of Christ and then pray to God for the forgiveness of his sins.

RP 15

Examination of conscience is an important part of preparation for the Sacrament. However before examining our *conscience* it is advisable first to examine our *consciousness*. Spending time considering all that has been happening in our lives and the lives of those around us during the period since our last celebration of the sacrament, rather than immediately trying to call to mind only our sins is not time wasted.

The formal act of penance is not an end in itself, but is given to assist the penitent begin to live a life more fully imbued with the Spirit of Christ. In a sense the act of penance, itself a good thing, rehearses us for the other good things that Christ invites us to in the rest of our lives.

Sometimes, having prepared well for the sacrament, and having celebrated it well, we find we fall into sin again even quite quickly. Many people find it especially discouraging if they find themselves once more, or even many more times, committing some particular sin of which they have truly repented. These things happen: they will of course be regretted and one would never wish to be complacent about sin. At the same time the wisdom of St Paul can offer comfort to those of us who find ourselves in this situation.

The Lord has said, 'My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness.' So I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me, and that is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12.9-10

Questions

1. How does your parish promote the celebration of sacrament?
2. How does your parish help people to prepare for the celebration of the sacrament? What special resources and aids are available? What encouragement to make use of the ordinary features of parish life – e.g. Sunday Readings; Seasons of the Liturgical Year.
3. How might particular assistance be provided to particular groups of people in the parish – for example the housebound, the teenagers and young adults, those who cannot read or whose first language is not English, those who have been 'away from the sacrament' for a number of years?
4. In what ways can your parish community support the processes of conversion which begin afresh with reconciliation? How might such action be encouraged?

be a number of other people arriving at the last minute too. It assists to a good quality of celebration.

Celebration

The structure of the Rite was laid out in the previous chapter. The Liturgy Office has also prepared cards to guide penitents in the celebration. These are downloadable from: www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources

The Rite is envisaged as a series of exchanges between priest and penitent – a ritual dialogue or conversation during which our sins are confessed and God’s mercy disclosed. Some parts of the Rite have a greater formality than other parts. The part which is most conversational in the ordinary sense of that word will almost certainly be the Confession and acceptance of the act of penance. Sometimes the priest will ask questions or prompt the penitent if something is less clear, or where other assistance might be helpful.

The exchanges between priest and penitent may be made face-to-face, or with a screen between both, giving a degree of anonymity to the penitent. The choice of which of these to choose belongs to the penitent. (*Misericordia Dei* 9b)

Some penitents can get very nervous or worry about getting nervous when speaking with the priest. If that happens it is important to recall that the priest is there at the service of the penitent, and part of their responsibility is to do what is necessary to help the penitent make ‘a good confession’.

It is not uncommon that during the celebration of the Sacrament what the penitent finds he or she wants and needs to focus on is not exactly that which seemed most important before hand. This is frequently a result of the work of the Spirit in the liturgy, bringing the penitent to a deeper recognition of what is taking part in their lives.

Sometimes both priest and penitent will be aware of others waiting to come to the sacrament. Each celebration will take as long as it needs to, but no longer. The celebration of the liturgy is not the time for more extensive Spiritual Direction or consideration of the more complex aspects of our situations in life. Where these are wanted and needed other times should be found for them.

Afterwards

As has already been noted the act of penance is one of the consequences of the celebration. It will normally be completed within a day or so of the Confession and Absolution, but sometimes other arrangements may be proposed.

The more time we allow ourselves for the examination of consciousness, the better balanced and the more in context is likely to be our identification of sins of commission and omission, and our understanding of what has led to them. All this will be of benefit to us as we seek to turn from such sin, and also of assistance to our confessor in offering us his guidance.

Some of us have good memories, others do not. Some have instant recall of everything that has happened over the past six months or so, others have difficulty remembering what happened yesterday. Those with weaker memories might find it helpful to review what is written in their diaries – even appointment diaries, not only diaries that record our impressions of each day.

Using passages of scripture can also help us get a healthy overview of our lives. Passages such as Psalm 22 – ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ Psalm 24 – ‘Lord make me know your ways’; Psalm 138 – ‘Lord you search me and you know me’; 1 Corinthians 13.4-13 – ‘Love is always patient and kind’ can be helpful. Again one should be careful not to rush to judgment of oneself, but allow the fresh hearing and meditation on the scripture to help one to an overview of one’s recent life. Just what has been going on.

Examination of Conscience

As seen in quotation above the Introduction to the Rite of Penance suggests we bring the example and commandments of Christ to our consciousness of life.

One essential consequence that should flow from this is that what ever sin we do identify in our lives, we will also be aware, perhaps even more aware, of the graciousness of the Shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep, who even lay down his life for his sheep.

In practice how do we bring the example of commandments of Christ to our consciousness of life? For some a process of imaginative contemplation will be the way: taking a narrative passage from the Gospels – perhaps involving Jesus himself (e.g. John 20.19-29 – Jesus’ appearance to the disciples in the Upper Room, John 8.1-11 – Jesus engagement with the scribes and Pharisees and the woman taken in adultery), Luke 19.1-10 – Jesus and Zacchaeus; perhaps some of the stories Jesus told to help his original hearers reflect on their lives and on God’s mercy (e.g. Luke 15 – the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the Prodigal Son; Mark 2.1-12 – the healing of the paralytic because of the faith of his friends; Matthew 18.12-14 – the lost sheep).

Others will find more help in directly reflecting on certain of Christ's commandments. Three commandments of Christ are singled out in the *Rite of Penance* (c.f. RP Appendix III):

You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart;

Love one another as I have loved you;

Be perfect as your Father is perfect.

Again the first stage is to contemplate the commandment and what it shows us about Christ, not immediately to reflect on ourselves.

For others it may be remembering Christ through the singing of a psalm or hymn, for others by contemplating the symbol of a lit candle, a religious picture or icon. There is no right way, but it is wise to seek a way that helps us.

And then, mindful of Christ, his example and his commandments we examine our consciences. What has been sinful in our lives – by omission or commission? What has been the good we have failed to do – either deliberately or through thoughtlessness? Both these things are appropriate matters to bring to this sacrament which exists to restore us to a healthy life as disciples of the Lord, witnesses to his Gospel.

To know one's sin or failings is the first step towards the sacrament. Next must come sorrow for what has been, and the intent to lead a better life.

The following schema might be of assistance in taking some hold of how one feels with regard to one's sins.

- **Knowledge of sin.** This comes from true knowledge of ourselves before God, and is the fruit of an inner examination of heart and a judgement of what we find there in the light of God's mercy.

'The faithful are to confess to a priest each and every grave sin which they remember upon examination of their conscience.' Confession of venial sins is also encouraged as a way of striving to perfect the grace of baptism, and to conform ourselves to Christ. (RP 7)

- **Contrition.** This is heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sins we have committed and the intention of sinning no more. It is a fruit of God's grace, of the call to conversion. It is a profound change of the whole person who begins to consider, judge and arrange his or her life according to the holiness and love of God made manifest in Christ. Conversion affects a person from within enlightening them and making them continually more like Christ.

- **Penance.** Conversion is completed by acts of penance for the sins we have committed, by changing the way we live, and sometimes by making good a particular hurt or loss we have caused to others. In some sense our acts of penance seek to cure a previous sinful action, rehearsing us in better ways of living. Thus the penitent, 'forgetting the things which are behind' (Philippians 3:13), again becomes part of the mystery of salvation and turns himself toward the future. (cf. Rite of Penance 6.)

These same attitudes are engaged with in the celebration of the sacrament. We come with contrition for our sin, confess the sins we have knowledge of to the priest, and accept the penance which will allow us to continue our conversion from sin and to the Lord. In the celebration of the sacrament this process is crowned with the sign of absolution in which God grants pardon and the sacrament is completed.

Particularly if an examination of consciousness and conscience is made sometime before the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, some people will find it helpful to make a few notes to refer to shortly before the celebration. Others will not.

Direct preparation

As with any celebration of the Church's liturgy it is good to arrive in good time, to have the opportunity of composing and readying oneself before the celebration begins.

Priest and penitent should first prepare themselves by prayer to celebrate the sacrament. The priest should call upon the Holy Spirit so that he may receive enlightenment and charity. The penitent should compare his life with the example and commandments of Christ and then pray to God for the forgiveness of his sins.

RP 15

It is an act of charity for priests and penitents also to pray for each other, as well as for those others who might be in need of the Sacrament.

Most parishes will offer the opportunity of booking a time for celebrating the sacrament, as well as advertising regular times when a priest will be available in the church. If availing of the latter opportunity it is wise to arrive well before the end of the advertised period. This is not only because the priest may have other pressing commitments immediately afterwards, but also because there may