

# Thinking about Reconciliation

## *a reader for priests and people*

*This booklet 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.*

### Contents

<b>Part One:</b> <i>The Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of Salvation</i>	2
<b>Part Two:</b> <i>The Mystery of Reconciliation in the Sacraments</i>	4
<b>Part Three:</b> <i>The Church, the sinner and society</i>	10
<b>Part Four:</b> <i>The Rite of Penance</i>	14
<b>Part Five:</b> <i>Preparing for and celebrating the Rite of Penance</i>	17
<b>Appendix A:</b>	22

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.

## Part One

### *The Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of Salvation*

God, the Father of mercies,  
through the death and resurrection of his Son  
has reconciled the world to himself  
and sent the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins;  
through the ministry of the Church  
may God give you pardon and peace,  
and I absolve you from your sins  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

The Prayer of Absolution. (*Rite of Penance*, 48)

The Sacrament of Penance is about much more than simply the forgiveness of a person's sins. It is about God the Father of mercies seeking to draw that person more deeply into the community of love that is the Church, united with Jesus. It is about our personal story of salvation from sin, an episode in the whole history of salvation.

The Father has shown forth his mercy by reconciling the world to himself in Christ and by making peace for all things on earth and in heaven by the blood of Christ on the cross. The Son of God made man lived among men in order to free them from the slavery of sin and to call them out of darkness into his wonderful light. He therefore began his work on earth by preaching repentance and saying: 'Turn away from sin and believe the good news' (Mark 1 :15).

This invitation to repentance, which had often been sounded by the prophets, prepared the hearts of men for the coming of the Kingdom of God through the voice of John the Baptist who came 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1 :4).

Jesus, however, not only exhorted men to repentance so that they should abandon their sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord, but he also welcomed sinners and reconciled them with the Father. Moreover, by healing the sick he signified his power to forgive sin. Finally, he himself died for our sins and rose again for our justification. Therefore, on the night he was betrayed and began his saving passion, he instituted the sacrifice of the new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. After his resurrection he sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, empowering them to forgive or retain sins and sending them forth to all peoples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name.

The Lord said to Peter, 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed also in heaven' (Matthew 16:19). In obedience to this command, on the day of Pentecost Peter preached the forgiveness of sins by baptism: 'Repent and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins'

(Acts 2: 38). Since then the Church has never failed to call men from sin to conversion and by the celebration of penance to show the victory of Christ over sin.

RP1

Our salvation in Christ was won by the saving mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. We first participate in that salvation through the sacrament of Baptism. The work of our redemption is made a present reality again and again each time we participate in the liturgy, and especially when we take part in the celebration of the Mass. (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 2). The Eucharist is a sacrament for the forgiveness of sin, for venial sin, and our participation in the Eucharist helps protect us from sin.

In the sacrifice of the Mass the passion of Christ is made present; his body given for us and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins are offered to God again by the Church for the salvation of the world. In the Eucharist Christ is present and is offered as 'the sacrifice which has made our peace' with God and in order that 'we may be brought together in unity' by his Holy Spirit.

RP 2

When we have committed serious sin, or when we feel the need for additional assistance in overcoming even venial sin, there is need for something more. It is then that we have recourse to the sacrament of Penance.

Furthermore our Saviour Jesus Christ, when he gave to his apostles and their successors power to forgive sins, instituted in his Church the sacrament of penance. Thus the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God and renewed in grace. The Church 'possesses both water and tears: the water of baptism, the tears of penance'.

RP2

Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God.

RP7

## Questions

1. What stories of God's saving love have made the strongest impact on you? Stories from the scriptures? Stories from the history of the Church?
2. How has your understanding of God's love and forgiveness developed over the years? Are you able to pin-point any particular times when your understanding changed?

## Part Two:

### *The Mystery of Reconciliation in the Sacraments of the Church*

As has already been noted the liturgical expression of the mystery of reconciliation is far from being confined to the *Rite of Penance*. Considering how this mystery is expressed in a variety of the Church's other Rites can help deepen an appreciation of the different dimensions of our reconciliation in Christ, and clarify what is particular to the *Rite of Penance*.

#### **Baptism**

This section might be better headed 'sacraments of Christian Initiation'. In the ancient tradition of the Church, the work of reconciliation is accomplished not only by Baptism but by the celebration together of the three sacraments of initiation, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. This practice is restored now for adults and older children in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. The majority of people baptised in the Church in England and Wales are still baptised as infants. They celebrate in later years the remaining sacraments of initiation, Confirmation and Eucharist, each of which effects and signifies the mystery of reconciliation in its own way.

Yet of the three sacraments it is Baptism that has been seen as *the* sacrament that reconciles humankind with God.

Baptism incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God's people. This first sacrament pardons all our sins, rescues us from the power of darkness, and brings us to the dignity of adopted children, a new creation through water and the Holy Spirit. Hence we are called and are indeed the children of God...

Baptism, the cleansing with water by the power of the living word, washes away every stain of sin, original and personal, makes us sharers in God's own life and his adopted children. As proclaimed in the prayers for the blessing of the water, baptism is a cleansing water of rebirth...

*Christian Initiation: General Introduction 2, 5*

Any celebration of the sacrament of baptism is very much about this person or these people being baptised, and about the particular change being effected in their being and in their lives. At the same time it is not just about them and their relationship with God, nor even their relationship with the Church, local or universal. The work of salvation now celebrated with them takes place within, is the latest expression of the great history of salvation. Through their redemption through water and the Spirit they become a part of that whole history.

For this reason the Church is cautious about any practices which might suggest that baptism is a private affair (cf. *Christian Initiation: General Introduction 7-10; Rite of Baptism for Children 4-6; Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults 9-16*)

One of the already mentioned prayers for the blessing of water evokes a number of saving events from salvation history which involved water. It invites those present to recognise the significance of what it is about to take place in this baptism, and its broader context.

## *2:The Mystery of Reconciliation in the Sacraments of the Church*

Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs,  
which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power.

In baptism we use your gift of water,  
which you have made a rich symbol  
of the grace you give us in this sacrament.

At the very dawn of creation  
your Spirit breathed on the waters,  
making them the wellspring of all holiness.

The waters of the great flood  
you made a sign of the waters of baptism,  
that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness.

Through the waters of the Red Sea  
you led Israel out of slavery,  
to be an image of God's holy people,  
set free from sin by baptism.

In the waters of the Jordan  
your Son was baptized by John  
and anointed with the Spirit.

Your Son willed that water and blood  
should flow from his side  
as he hung upon the cross.

After his resurrection he told his disciples:  
'Go out and teach all nations,  
baptizing them in the name of the Father  
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Father, look now with love upon your Church,  
and unseal for her the fountain of baptism.

By the power of the Spirit  
give to the water of this font  
the grace of your Son.

You created man in your own likeness:  
cleanse him from sin in a new birth of innocence  
by water and the Spirit.

*The priest may lower the Easter candle into the water either once or three times, as he continues:*

We ask you, Father, with your Son  
to send the Holy Spirit upon the waters of this font.

*He holds the candle in the water:*

May all who are buried with Christ  
in the death of baptism  
rise also with him to newness of life.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

*Roman Missal: The Proper of Seasons – The Easter Vigil, 42*

## *Thinking about Reconciliation*

By baptism we become ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Pt 2:9) And again and again through our lives we advert to our baptismal identity, the promises it contains for us, and the responsibilities it gives us.

Each time we enter a church, we dip our hands into holy water and make the sign of the cross. Whether the water comes from the font or not, the gesture connects us with our baptism.

At Sunday Mass there is the optional rite of sprinkling with holy water. It is especially commended during the season of Easter (because of the baptismal resonances of that season). It reminds us of our baptism that we might be kept faithful to the Spirit God has given us. (cf. Roman Missal, Order of Mass 3 A)

Baptism is signified in the alb which worn by the clergy and other liturgical. The whiteness of the alb echoes the white baptismal garment that all are dressed in after they have received the washing of baptism.

And the reconciliation already won in baptism is recalled in the funeral liturgy as the body of the deceased is brought into the church. Holy water is sprinkled on the coffin:

In the waters of baptism  
N. died with Christ and rose with him to new life.  
May he/she now share with him eternal glory.

(*Order of Christian Funerals*, 118)

The coffin may then be covered with a white pall, again a reminder of the baptismal garment and a sign of the dignity of this person whom Christ has reconciled with himself.

In some parishes when a coffin is brought into the church the night before the funeral it stands in the baptistery so that this baptismal imagery may be all the more strongly engaged with.

## **The Anointing of the Sick**

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick signifies and brings about reconciliation in a number of ways.

Often the sick and elderly can be marginalised within the community. The celebration of this sacrament with them, (together with the other liturgies which are offered in the *Pastoral Care of the Sick*) can help overcome that, and witness to the irreducible value of human persons at every stage of their lives.

In her Tradition the Church has recognised that as well as being a response to physical sickness this sacrament also is a response to spiritual and even moral disorder.

This sacrament gives the grace of the Holy Spirit to those who are sick: by this grace the whole person is helped and saved, sustained by trust in God, and strengthened against the temptations of the Evil One and against anxiety over death. ...If necessary, the sacrament also provides the sick person with the forgiveness of sins and the completion of Christian penance.

*Pastoral Care of the Sick: Introduction 6*

## **Marriage**

The sacrament of Marriage expresses in the union of man and woman the mystery of Christ’s union with the Church. In this mystery God teaches that what he has united may never be divided. (cf. *Rite of Marriage* 33)

## Orders

In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ—the head and shepherd—authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation—particularly in baptism, penance and the Eucharist, showing his loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock, which they gather into unity and lead to the Father through Christ and in the Spirit. In a word, priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the head and shepherd.

John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* 15.

The responsibilities of a Bishop and priest for the work of reconciliation in the Church are several times singled out for attention in the liturgies of ordination (e.g. *Rite of Ordination* 40, 152, 171.)

Not only their particular responsibilities for the ministry of the sacrament of Penance are considered, but also their broader responsibilities for maintaining and strengthening the unity and holiness of the Church enabling the Church herself to be minister of reconciliation, a sign in the world of conversion to God. (cf. *Ceremonial of Bishops* 621)

## Eucharist

The body of Christ we receive in Holy Communion is ‘given up for us’, and the blood we drink ‘shed for many for the forgiveness of sins’. For this reason the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1393

It will be clear that the Penitential Rite of the Mass engages us with the Mystery of Reconciliation. However so does the whole of Mass as well as its various parts.

In our gathering we who are many, and sometimes belie the unity of the Church in the way we live our individual lives are once more together and united with Christ. Indeed in our gathering Christ is once more personally present to and with his people. (cf. SC 7)

In the Liturgy of the Word, Christ speaks with his people. As we listen to his word and respond to it our continuing conversion from sin and to God is promoted. (cf. SC 7, Lectionary for Mass: Introduction 4, 5, 6) After the proclamation of the Gospel reading the deacon or priest kisses the Gospel Book and says quietly: ‘May the words of the gospel wipe away our sins.’ (*Roman Missal*, Order of Mass 13)

In the Eucharistic Prayer the faithful of the Church give thanks for the reconciliation won in Christ and pray that it may come to still fuller expression in their lives and for the peoples of the world.

Look with favour on your Church’s offering,  
and see the Victim whose death has reconciled us to yourself.  
Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood,  
may be filled with his Holy Spirit,  
and become one body, one spirit in Christ...

## *Thinking about Reconciliation*

Lord, may this sacrifice,  
which has made our peace with you,  
advance the peace and salvation of all the world.

From Eucharistic Prayer III (*Roman Missal*, Order Of Mass, 114)

The Church provides two particular Eucharistic Prayers for Masses of Reconciliation which focus on aspects of reconciliation which may be the object of thanksgiving.

During the Communion Rite the assembly prays for Christ's mercy as it prepares for Holy Communion:

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world:  
have mercy on us...

(*Roman Missal*, Order Of Mass, 131)

Together with the priest the people once more acknowledge their unworthiness and that reconciliation is Christ's gift:

Lord, I am not worthy to receive you,  
but only say the word and I shall be healed.

(*Roman Missal*, Order Of Mass, 133)

As they receive Holy Communion, Christ's faithful say 'Amen' to the gift of union with him.

In the Concluding Rite the faithful are sent forth in peace to love and to serve the Lord, in deeper communion, with each other and the whole Church. (cf. *One Bread, One Body* 66, 67)

The Penitential Rite at Mass can take a number of alternative forms. (As noted above it can also be replaced on Sundays by the Rite for Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water)

The first form of the Penitential Rite, the *Confiteor*, the 'I Confess', focuses especially on our sinfulness and on our call to pray for each other.

I confess to almighty God,  
and to you, my brothers and sisters,  
that I have sinned through my own fault  
in my thoughts and in my words,  
in what I have done  
and in what I have failed to do;  
and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin,  
all the angels and saints,  
and you, my brothers and sisters,  
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

The second form concisely contains a confession of sin and an implicit confession of the Lord's mercy and love.

Lord we have sinned against you:  
Lord, have mercy.  
*Lord, have mercy.*

Lord, show us your mercy and love.  
*And grant us your salvation.*

The 3<sup>rd</sup> form, sometimes called a Litany of Praise, always focuses on the saving acts of Jesus to which the assembly responds with the Kyrie Eleison, the Lord have mercy, by which we acclaim the Lord and implore his mercy.

Lord Jesus, you came to gather the nations  
into the peace of God's kingdom:  
Lord, have mercy.  
*Lord, have mercy.*

You come in word and sacrament to strengthen us in holiness:  
Christ, have mercy.  
*Christ, have mercy.*

You will come again in glory with salvation for your people:  
Lord, have mercy.  
*Lord, have mercy.*

A wide range of texts for this form of the Penitential Rite is provided in the Missal. (*Roman Missal*: Order of Mass 3B,c) There is also freedom to provide other verses or tropes, so long as they name the saving works of Christ and are invocations of praise. This flexibility can be of great assistance as a way of engaging the faithful with different aspects of the saving work of Christ in the Mass, or in various other liturgical celebrations which may be celebrated within or outside of the Mass.

There is sometimes confusion concerning the Absolution which concludes the Penitential Rite. A prayer for God's forgiveness rather than a formal act of absolution, it lacks the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance. (cf. GIRM 51)

## Questions

1. What expressions of penance and reconciliation are most familiar to you? Which of the dimensions of penance described above are least familiar?
2. What images of reconciliation are there in your parish church?
3. The prayer for blessing water at the Easter Vigil identifies saving events in salvation history. What other significant saving events (associated with water or not) might stand alongside these as significant for
  - a. The people of your parish
  - b. For you yourself
4. What saving works of Christ might be remembered in the 3<sup>rd</sup> form of the Penitential Rite at Mass, when there was to be a celebration of
  - a. The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick
  - b. The sacrament of Marriage
  - c. The sacrament of Orders (Bishop/priest/deacon)
  - d. A funeral Mass

Look to see which texts in the Missal would be most suitable. Try your hand at drafting alternatives (*Lord Jesus, you...*).

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

Christ ‘loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy’ (Ephesians 5: 25-26), and he united the Church to himself as his bride. He filled her with his divine gifts, because she is his body and fullness, and through her he spreads truth and grace to all.

The members of the Church, however, are exposed to temptation and unfortunately often fall into sin. As a result, ‘while Christ, “holy, innocent, and unstained” (Hebrews 7 :26), did not know sin (2 Corinthians 5 :21) but came only to atone for the sins of the people (see Hebrews 2: 17), the Church, which includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy and always in need of purification, constantly pursues repentance and renewal’.

RP 3

This work of purification, of repentance and renewal is a work for the whole Church.

The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.

RP 8

The readiness of the Church to repent of its faults and failings, and of her members to accept the call of God to turn from sin and seek to grow in love, provides the world with a sign of hope. Sin and failure is not the end. The last word always is God’s word of love and mercy.

### **Offending against God, the Church and our neighbour**

Sin is always an offence against God. The sin of a Christian is also a sin against the community of the Church – it is an act by which we distance ourselves from the way of life the members of the Church commit themselves to. And sin is always a sin against our neighbour. Sometimes because we do something which directly injures him or her, at other times because our example compromises the witness of the Church. Not uncommonly these ecclesial and social dimensions of sin are overlooked.

By the hidden and loving mystery of God’s design men are joined together in the bonds of supernatural solidarity, so much so that the sin of one harms the others just as the holiness of one benefits the others’. Penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sins.

In fact, men frequently join together to commit injustice. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with all men of good will for justice and peace in the world.

RP 5

When we think of the sins that we are responsible for, there is a tendency to think only of our personal sins. We are familiar, perhaps all too familiar, with those. But there is also what

the Church calls social sin. And it is often not so easy to identify what such sin is – for it will includes those sins that are perhaps no-one's direct and immediate fault, but where many people, even unwittingly, have contributed to the evil.

Pope John Paul explored this category of sin in his encyclical *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*.

To speak of social sin means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others. This is the other aspect of that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the communion of saints, thanks to which it has been possible to say that "every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world." To this law of ascent there unfortunately corresponds the law of descent. Consequently one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, 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 entire ecclesial body and the whole human family. According to this first meaning of the term, every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin.

Some sins, however, by their very matter constitute a direct attack on one's neighbour and more exactly, in the language of the Gospel, against one's brother or sister. They are an offence against God because they are offences against one's neighbour. These sins are usually called social sins, and this is the second meaning of the term. In this sense social sin is sin against love of neighbour, and in the law of Christ it is all the more serious in that it involves the Second Commandment, which is "like unto the first." Likewise, the term social applies to every sin against justice in interpersonal relationships, committed either by the individual against the community or by the community against the individual. Also social is every sin against the rights of the human person, beginning with the right to life and including the life of the unborn or against a person's physical integrity. Likewise social is every sin against others' freedom, especially against the supreme freedom to believe in God and adore him; social is every sin against the dignity and honour of one's neighbour. Also social is every sin against the common good and its exigencies in relation to the whole broad spectrum of the rights and duties of citizens. The term social can be applied to sins of commission or omission – on the part of political, economic or trade union leaders, who though in a position to do so, do not work diligently and wisely for the improvement and transformation of society according to the requirements and potential of the given historic moment; as also on the part of workers who through absenteeism or non-cooperation fail to ensure that their industries can continue to advance the well-being of the workers themselves, of their families and of the whole of society.

The third meaning of social sin refers to the relationships between the various human communities. These relationships are not always in accordance with the plan of God, who intends that there be justice in the world and freedom and peace between individuals, groups and peoples. Thus the class struggle, whoever the person who leads it or on occasion seeks to give it a theoretical justification, is a social evil. Likewise obstinate confrontation between blocs of nations, between one nation and another, between different groups within the same nation all this too is a social evil. In both cases one may ask whether moral responsibility for these evils, and therefore sin, can be attributed to any person in particular. Now it has to be admitted that realities and

## *Thinking about Reconciliation*

situations such as those described, when they become generalized and reach vast proportions as social phenomena, almost always become anonymous, just as their causes are complex and not always identifiable. Hence if one speaks of social sin here, the expression obviously has an analogical meaning. However, to speak even analogically of social sins must not cause us to underestimate the responsibility of the individuals involved. It is meant to be an appeal to the consciences of all, so that each may shoulder his or her responsibility seriously and courageously in order to change those disastrous conditions and intolerable situations...

Whenever the church speaks of situations of sin or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behaviour of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals.

A situation—or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself—is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad.

At the heart of every situation of sin are always to be found sinful people. So true is this that even when such a situation can be changed in its structural and institutional aspects by the force of law or—as unfortunately more often happens by the law of force, the change in fact proves to be incomplete, of short duration and ultimately vain and ineffective—not to say counterproductive if the people directly or indirectly responsible for that situation are not converted.

### *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia 16.*

Examples of this third form of social sin would include the continued economic exploitation of the developing world by the first world; institutional racism; the marginalisation of the elderly and seriously ill in our society.

These sorts of sins are not the sorts of things we are likely to bring to our individual confessions. However they are the sorts of things human communities including the Christian community are implicated in, and for which we need to express our sorrow, and determination that things will become otherwise. We can do this most effectively when our celebrations of the liturgies of reconciliation are seen to be having a direct impact on the way we live as individuals and as a community, in our ‘private’ and Church lives, and also in our taking up our responsibilities in society and the world at large.

Religion is always personal, but never just a private affair. Discipleship involves seeking God in this world as well as preparing to meet Him in the next. The Gospel imperative to love our neighbour entails not only that we should help those in need, but also address the causes of destitution and poverty. The deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour and thus with social action.

Many Catholics and indeed others too may well be surprised to discover how over the centuries the Catholic Church has reflected on the social dimension of the Gospel;

that is, the way society helps or hinders people to live out the command to love God and our neighbour. In recent times the Church's social teaching has been further emphasised and further developed by Pope Paul VI and John Paul II...

The Church has the right and the duty to advocate a social order in which the human dignity of all is fostered, and to protest when it is in any way threatened. Thus the Church opposes totalitarianism because it oppresses people and deprives them of their freedom. While recognising the importance of wealth creation, the Church denounces any abuses of economic power such as those which deprive employees of what is needed for a decent standard of living.

The Church also rejects the view that human happiness consists only in material well-being, and that achieving this alone is the goal of any government. If a government pays too much attention to material welfare at the expense of other values, it may advocate policies which reduce people to a passive state of dependency on welfare. Equally, if a government gives too little priority to tackling poverty, ill-health, poor housing and other social ills, the human dignity of those who suffer these afflictions is denied. In every society respect for human dignity requires that, so far as possible, basic human needs are met. The systematic denial of compassion by individuals or public authorities can never be a morally justified political option.

The Church does not present a political programme, still less a party political one. The social teaching of the Church, as expounded in this document, provides a set of consistent and complementary principles, values and goals. We recognise, of course, that many people of other faiths or even none would be able to accept much that this teaching has to offer, whether it is described as Catholic or not. Every public policy should be judged by the effect it has on human dignity and the common good. We accept that in many cases there will often be much scope for debate about the best way to achieve these.

The Church's social teaching places the political within the larger context of humanity's relationship with God. Social and political action is important, but realising our full human dignity as children of God, made in his image and likeness, also requires each of us to undertake an inner spiritual journey. The future of humanity does not depend on political reform, social revolution or scientific advance. Something else is needed. It starts with a true conversion of mind and heart.

Preface by Cardinal Basil Hume to *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching: a statement by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.*

## Questions

1. What experiences have you had which confirm or challenge the assertion that there is a social dimension to even apparently 'private' sin?
2. What examples of 'social sin' can you identify in addition to those given in the chapter above?
3. In what ways do the Church and individual Christians most effectively address the private and public dimensions of sin?
4. In what ways does the social dimension of sin, conversion and reconciliation find expression in your parish and local community?

## Part Four: *The Rite of Penance*

Open our eyes to see the evil we have done.  
Touch our hearts and convert us to yourself.  
Where sin has divided and scattered,  
may your love make one again;  
Where sin has brought weakness,  
may your power heal and strengthen;  
where sin has brought death,  
may your Spirit raise to new life.  
Give us a new heart to love you,  
so that our lives may reflect the image of your Son.  
May the world see the glory of Christ  
revealed in your Church,  
and come to know  
that he is the one whom you have sent,  
Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

**Amen.**

*Rite of Penance 54*

As we have seen all sin, as well as being a sin against God, has social and ecclesial dimensions also.

It was particularly to better assist engagement with these latter dimensions that Vatican Council II required a revision of the Rite of Penance.

The most notable element of that revision was a focus on communal celebration of the Rite. The revised Rite offered two liturgical forms – one sacramental, the other not – in which the liturgical assembly could focus on the Lord's call to conversion and his offer of mercy. This sacramental form is officially titled 'Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution', and here is more commonly referred to as 'the second form of the Rite'. The non-sacramental form is officially titled 'Penitential Celebrations'. In the Rite these celebrations are dealt with in paragraphs 36 and 37 of the Introduction and in Appendix II. The Liturgy Office will shortly be preparing a separate paper considering the opportunities offered by such Penitential Celebrations.

The revised *Rite* also includes a revision of the previous form for individual penitents, officially titled 'Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents' and here more commonly referred to as 'the first form of the Rite'.

### **The second form of the Rite of Penance**

Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The faithful listen together to the word of God, which proclaims his mercy and invites them to conversion; at the same time they examine the conformity of their lives with that word of God and help each other through common prayer. After each person has confessed his sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son.

RP 22c

The form of the sacramental rite is given in the following table:

*Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents  
with Individual Confession and Absolution*

### **Introductory Rites**

- Song
- Sign of the Cross
- Greeting
- Introductory Words
- Opening Prayer

### **Liturgy of the Word**

- Readings
- Homily
- Examination of Conscience

### **Liturgy of Reconciliation**

- General Confession of Sins
- Individual Confession of Sins and Absolution
- Exhortation to do good works to proclaim the grace of repentance
- Proclamation of Praise for God's Mercy
- Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving

### **Concluding Rite**

- Blessing
- Dismissal

The structure of the rite has much in common with many other liturgical rites. It begins with the gathering of the liturgical assembly, including the bishop or priest presider. It continues with the Liturgy of the Word – both the proclamation of the Scriptures and our response to them in mind and heart. We then enact our response liturgically, here through the celebration of the Liturgy of Reconciliation. Finally those who have gathered as the Body of Christ are dismissed to live in their daily lives what has been celebrated, and to bear witness to the saving love of Christ.

The Liturgy Office has produced resources to assist parishes and individuals prepare and celebrate this form of the Rite of Penance. They are available for downloading from [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/)

### **The first form of the Rite of Penance**

In the revision of the previous Rite new emphasis was placed on the quality of encounter between priest and penitent – the priest is not only required to judge wisely the matters placed before him, but also to reveal the heart of the Father and show the image of Christ the Good Shepherd.

The revision made it yet more clear that even in this form the Rite of Penance is a liturgical rite. It is not a forensic confession and absolution of sin alone, but as with other liturgies it too is an act of worship, an opportunity to encounter and experience the merciful presence of God in assembly and minister, in word and in sacrament.

## *Thinking about Reconciliation*

The revision placed new emphasis on the ministry of the word (e.g. RP 45, and RP Chapter IV, 55), and the range of alternative texts for priest and penitent provided better to articulate the experience of each particular celebration (e.g. RP 43, 45, 47, 49).

## *Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents*

### **Reception of the Penitent**

- Greeting
- Sign of the Cross
- Invitation to Trust
- Revelation of state of life

### **Liturgy of the Word**

- Call to conversion

### **Liturgy of Reconciliation**

- Confession of Sins and Acceptance of Satisfaction
- Penitent's Prayer of Sorrow
- Absolution

### **Conclusion**

- Proclamation of Praise of God and Dismissal

The revision of the Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents was less dramatic than the introduction of an entirely new form of the rite for collective celebration. Consequently it seems to have been more often over-looked. However where the revision has been well understood and implemented by priests and penitents alike it has brought significant pastoral and spiritual benefit.

These two forms of the Rite of Penance are the normal and ordinary ways of celebrating the sacrament. The Rite offers a third form (including general absolution) but its use is permitted in truly exceptional circumstances, and only then with the prior and express permission of the Bishop of the Diocese.

The two ordinary forms of the Rite each have their own particular advantages and strengths. The criteria for deciding which of the two forms of celebration to use in any circumstance should depend not on subjective reasons but by a desire to advance the true spiritual good of the faithful. (cf. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* 32).

## **Questions**

1. How has your experience of the Rite of Penance changed down the years? What have been positive developments? What have not been?
2. Where do you see difference between these two forms of the Rite of Penance? What significance reason for the differences can you suggest?
3. What would you see as the strengths of each of the two forms? Are there any disadvantages? If so, how might they be overcome?
4. How has each form been received in your parish? In what ways might the parish be helped to appreciate the opportunities each form makes available?

## 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

## *Thinking about Reconciliation*

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 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 whatever 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 prefect the grace of baptism, and to conform ourselves to Christ. (RP 7)
- **Contribution.** 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.

## *Thinking about Reconciliation*

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 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](http://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 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?

## Appendix A

### I. Questions to help review parish/deanery practice in the light of the Rite

#### Questions to help review current practice in a single parish

1. Section 1 of the ‘Introduction’ to the *Rite of Penance* places celebrations of the Rite firmly in the context of the mystery of salvation. This same mystery is evoked in the opening words of the Absolution:

*God, the Father of mercies,  
through the death and resurrection of his Son  
has reconciled the world to himself  
and sent the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins...*

What indications are there in the celebration of the sacrament in your community of this broader context to an individual penitent’s turning from his or her sins?

2. Section 2 of the ‘Introduction’ to the *Rite of Penance* makes the connections between the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Penance.

In what ways might these connections be made more clear for the people of your community?

3. The social and ecclesial dimensions of sin and penance features strong in the ‘Introduction’ to the *Rite of Penance*, (e.g. RP 3, 4, 5, 6. 8, 13, 19, 22, 36 and 37).

In what ways are these presently explored in your parish’s celebrations and catechesis? Are there ways in which they might be still more effectively brought out?

4. In considering the ministry of Penance the ‘Introduction’ to the *Rite of Penance* first gives consideration to the ministry of the whole Church, c.f. RP 8.

In what ways does your Community express its part in this ministry? Are there ways in which its responsibilities and opportunities to fulfil this role might be made clearer?

5. The revision of the *Rite of Penance* placed new emphasis on the place of God’s word in people’s preparation for the sacrament and in its celebration (c.f. RP 4, 17, 24, 25, 26, 36).

In what ways does this assist the penitent make their ‘inner examination of heart and ... exterior accusation... in the light of God’s mercy?’ (‘Introduction’, 6b)

How might more assistance be provided to penitents in making use of the scriptures as part of their preparation for the sacrament? And in the celebration of particularly the first form of the Rite, the *Rite of Reconciliation for Individual Penitents*?

6. What resources are available in the parish to assist penitents to familiarise themselves with the various forms of the *Rite of Penance* and the various options it provides them with – e.g. prayers of sorrow?

Who is responsible for renewing the provision or varying what is provided according to the season?

7. In *Misericordia Dei*, Pope John Paul reminds that all priests are ordained to reflect the image of the Good Shepherd. In the scriptures the Good Shepherd shows special care for his sheep, tending the wounded, going out in search of the lost, to welcome them back to the fold. He urges that confessors do all they can to be available for penitents at times that are suited to the real circumstances of their lives.

What are the times presently advertised for celebrations of the *Rite of Penance* in your community during the year – both for individual and for communal celebrations? How were they arrived at? What are their advantages/disadvantages? Might alternative arrangements be more attractive? (NB It is likely that a certain amount of consultation with people – those in work; those retired or unemployed; school-children; students; those with young families etc – would be necessary to answer this question adequately.)

How might additional provision to be made to assist those children who have celebrated their ‘first reconciliation’ get into the habit of regular celebrations of the sacrament – both individually and communally?

8. How fitting to its sacred purpose is your community’s place of reconciliation – i.e. reconciliation chapel or room, or confessional box? Is it reserved for one purpose, or is it pressed into other alternative use? Is it kept clean and tidy? Are there art-works (e.g. a crucifix; a statue, perhaps of the Good Shepherd; an icon) to give visual expression to the saving love of God).
9. What advantages does the non-sacramental Penitential Celebration (*RP*, 36f) offer to a community? What are the opportunities for such celebrations in your community?

### Questions to help consider current practice in a deanery

1. What recent positive experiences of the *Rite of Penance* are you aware of?  
What circumstances promoted these positive experiences?
2. What promotes or inhibits worthy celebration of the *Rite of Penance* in the parishes of the Deanery?
3. In what ways might Deanery collaboration further assist the faithful in their celebration of the various forms of the *Rite of Penance*? (i.e. *Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents*; *Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution*; *non-sacramental Penitential Celebrations*).
  - a) In parishes
  - b) In chaplaincies
  - c) In other ways – e.g. Youth Days
4. What resources are made available to the following people to assist them with their present needs?
  - a) Parents whose children are preparing to celebrate the sacrament for the first time, but have themselves very little direct experience of the sacrament.
  - b) Adults preparing for their own Christian initiation?
  - c) Adults who wish to deepen their participation in the sacrament, or related processes of spiritual development?

