

St. Paul of the Cross Lenten Retreat 2014

Presented by Fr. Donald Ware & Fr. Michael Salvagna

Theme: Reconciliation: God's Healing for the Body of Christ

People have asked me, "**Why do I have to go to individual confession? Why can't I go directly to God?**" Well we can go directly to God. But there are good reasons why we should go to individual confession as we shall see. It is true many people find the sacrament of reconciliation difficult and even stressful. Scrupulous people especially. We are embarrassed to share our sins with a priest. What will he think of me? Why do these sins reoccur in my life? Try as we might there are some weaknesses and habits that are hard to break. But we go to confession out of humility and obedience in response to the New Testament and to the teaching of the Church. **We desire to experience God's mercy and to be forgiven through the absolution of the priest.** But was confession always in this manner? Let us briefly review the history of reconciliation.

History of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

How did Christians have their sins forgiven in the year 50 AD? Was it in the same we do today? **No.** There wasn't a developed theology of individual confession back then. Certainly repentance for personal sin was an important part of adult baptism. But what happened afterward? First let us look to what Jesus said when he appeared the Apostles after his resurrection. **"Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."** John 20:22, 23 The power to forgive sin was bestowed upon the apostles, the first bishops of the church, and to the priests who served with them. It seems they exercised forgiveness by what we call **general absolution** in large group settings like Eucharist. Bishops and priests gave forgiveness in the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass. Then in reciting the Lord's prayer they would say, **"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."** The congregation always acknowledged the need for reconciliation and mutual forgiveness whenever they gathered.

But there is another biblical tradition which connects more with individual confession. We read in James 5:16, **"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."** That is a challenging message that takes lots of courage to do. We can assume that there were occasions when believers admitted their sinfulness and asked for pardon. It does not say a priest or bishop need be present. So what we have here is a scripture passage that would take centuries to develop into the practice we have today – individual confession to a priest with private absolution. So how did this come about?

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The monks of Ireland in the 5th Century, perhaps at the encouragement of St. Patrick, used to confess their sins regularly to each other. As a community they labored to minimize their faults and sins, and to grow in virtue. This may have involved some kind of spiritual direction on the part of the monks. It seems many Irish monks migrated to Europe around the year 650, and slowly private confession grew in popularity. The people were taught the difference between mortal and venial sin and they confessed to the monks and priests. Penances were given to penitents as a sacrifice to live a better life. Severe penances were given to those who committed sins like adultery, murder and apostasy. For example a person may be required to stand outside for days regardless of weather conditions before he would be welcomed back to the congregation. The healing was for the individual but also for the community in which he lived. A formula for absolution by the priest first appeared around the year 1000.

In 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council, Pope Innocent III and the cardinals decided that private confession to a priest was to be the norm, and that individual absolution was to be given to the penitent. This standardized the sacrament of reconciliation. It made it easier for people to receive absolution in a private confidential manner. The priest was like a shepherd who reconciled the flock with God and the Church. The people would feel more personally the mercy and healing touch of God.

The Council of Trent (1545-63), in the midst of the Protestant Reformation, had much to say about the doctrines of the Church and the sacraments in particular. People were encouraged to go to confession frequently, but at least once a year. The practice of private confession with absolution was standardized in the Church. Eventually confessionals were constructed inside churches to provide more privacy. This practice has prevailed into our time.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) revised the celebration of all the sacraments and made some moderate adjustments to enhance reconciliation. A greeting and scripture passage was suggested at the beginning. The absolution prayer was now in English. Well lighted reconciliation rooms offered the penitent the option of face to face confession with the priest. Frequent confession is still encouraged and for most people this seems to be 2 or 3 times a year. A popular option has developed where the sacrament of reconciliation takes place in the context of a **communal penance service**. The service is a liturgy of the word with song, scripture reading, homily and a communal act of contrition. At the end

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of the penance service, priests are on hand to hear private confessions. Some churches offer this service in Advent and in Lent.

God's Healing for the Body of Christ

Scripture calls us **to be holy as God is holy**. That is a lifetime work. To become holy means to do battle against the world, the flesh (us) and the devil every day. Growing in virtue entails minimizing or removing our sins and character defects which hamper us from getting closer to God. We fight against all kinds of temptations which seek to separate us from God. **Sin is a failure to love God, neighbor and self** as designed by God. Each day we sin and fall short of the glory of God. **The Body of Christ, the Church, is always in need of reconciliation and healing**. Repentance of our sins and a desire to mend our ways brings the mercy of God upon us.

What is reconciliation? It is the process of bringing together that which is separated or broken. Our sins offend God and hurt our brothers and sisters around us. **We sin by thought, word, action and negligence.** These are usually not serious sins but we bring them to God for healing. There are various examinations of conscience which people use to prepare themselves for the sacrament. One can reflect upon the 10 Commandments or the 7 capital sins: pride, anger, envy, lust, greed, gluttony and sloth. Responding to God's mercy and forgiveness bring peace of mind and heart to believers.

It is good to keep in mind that forgiveness is a two way street. We seek forgiveness from God and one another. But we also need to offer forgiveness to those who hurt us. This is so crucial that Jesus said if we are at the altar and there recall that we have offended a brother or sister, leave the gift there and make peace. Though we may not follow this advice literally, we can desire to forgive those who have offended us. Jesus did just that from the cross at Calvary. Our Blessed Mother Mary did the same.

A true story comes to mind. John made a weekend retreat at St. Paul and signed up to speak to me about a problem with his boss. It seems John was demoted and his pay was cut in half because of poor performance. John was livid with anger, fear and resentment. I listened to his story and knew that forgiveness was the course of action that could bring him serenity. I encouraged John to desire to forgive his boss even if he did not feel it. Next I said you need to pray for him every day. This strategy comes from Jesus' own words **to love your enemies and praying for your persecutors**. Then I told John to pray that God would heal his painful memory of all that

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was bothering him at work. John left and I did not hear from him. A year later he returned for retreat and signed up to see me. John wanted to thank me for the advice I gave him the previous year. He said he did not want to follow my advice but decided to give it a try. Every day he prayed to forgive his boss. John probably had to repent of his poor performance as well. He said that after a couple of months, he was able to be comfortable around his boss. Things continued to improve. Anger, fear and resentment melted away. He could sleep at night. Then John proceeded to tell me that when he came on retreat last year **he had already bought the gun to shoot his boss!** That was a close call. Forgiveness unlocked the key to **reconciliation and healing.**

Christian Unity

The Body of Christ is larger than the Roman Catholic Church. It includes all Christians who claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior. On the night before he died, Jesus prayed **"that they may all be one."** John 17:21 Since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century, the Body of Christ has endured much suffering and brokenness, and that is the Church that we inherited. Each of us can be an instrument of healing and reconciliation toward Christians in other communities. In other words, are we part of the problem or part of the solution? Have we personally ever repented of our prejudice toward other Christians?

The divisions which exist in the Body of Christ are the main reasons why Christianity is not stronger and more influential in our world. St. Paul called the Church of Ephesus to work toward unity. He reminded them that there is **"one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is Father of us all."** His words apply today. We Christians have to find the way to rally around what unites us rather than focus on what divides us. There is so much we can do together if we try. We need to get beyond competition, ignorance and prejudice. We need a change of perspective. Maybe this image will help.

Imagine Jesus standing in the middle of an enormous wheat field extending as far as the eye can see. Jesus sees the stalks of wheat waving in the wind. The wheat represents faithful Christians all over the world praising God. Do you know where some of us are in that scene? We are up in a helicopter looking down on the wheat, and we see the fences that separate the various denominations and independent Churches. We see what divides us from each other instead of what unites us as disciples of Jesus. Let us ask our Lord to give us his mind and heart to love all his followers as he does.

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The theme of reconciliation reminds us of the mercy of God toward repentant sinners. With humility we go to confession to experience forgiveness and healing, and we invite God's grace to cleanse and sanctify us. Why does God do this over and over again? Because God loves us with an infinite love and we are precious in his sight. **God loves us as we are not as we hope to become. God sees the goodness, truth and beauty** that is inside all of us that is yearning to come out. Let us appreciate this sacrament of reconciliation and welcome the loving touch of God in our lives. Together may we bring God's healing touch to the Body of Christ.

Recommended Books:

Doors to the Sacred

Joseph Martos Doubleday, New York, NY 1981

Sacramental Guidelines

Kenan Osborne, OFM Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 1995

Litany of Repentance

Response: Forgive us, Lord.

For not allowing Jesus to be the Lord and center of our lives...

For soft-pedaling our religious convictions because of what others would think...

For not deepening our faith in Jesus Christ by prayerful reading of the Bible and spiritual reading...

For any involvement in fortune telling, horoscope, card reading, Ouija board and other superstitious practices...

For excluding anyone from our love because of fear, pride or jealousy...

For being resentful and unforgiving toward those who have hurt us or our loved ones...

For being arrogant, stubborn, angry or lazy...

For not being true to our family and friends by gossiping about them...

For not trying to understand those with whom we disagree...

For prejudice against people of different color, race, religion or family background...

For rash judgments and for cutting people down by our words and our looks...

For disobedience and lack of responsibility concerning our obligations...

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For being selfish, greedy and domineering in the way we relate to others...
For giving in to feelings of negativity, cynicism, and self-pity...
For impurity of thought and action, either alone or with others...

For lack of control in the use of food, alcohol and other legitimate pleasures...
For lying, cheating, stealing and any injustices we have committed...
For inappropriate use of the internet and social media...

For those times we did not respect the gift of God's creation by abusing our environment...
For not being more attentive to the needs of the poor in a spirit of generosity...
For not being more protective of the rights of minorities and immigrants...

For excessive criticism of the leaders of the Church through a spirit of pride...
For the many times we did not seek to discover or accept God's plan in our lives...
And for being content in mediocrity and not desiring true holiness.

Closing Prayer

Forgive us, most gracious God, if this day we have done or said anything to increase the pain of the world. Pardon the unkind word, the impatient gesture, the hard and selfish deed, the failure to show sympathy and kindly help where we had the opportunity but missed it; and enable us so to live that we may daily do something to lessen the tide of human sorrow, and add to the sum of human happiness. We ask this through Christ, our Lord.

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