

Rites of Reconciliation

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I

When I set out to prepare this paper I was mildly disconcerted to discover that what I had in mind had already been done, and done brilliantly, by an American nun, Sister Kathleen Hughes R.S.C.J. You will find it in *Reconciliation*, a collection of lectures given by American theologians at Notre Dame in 1986, and I must express my warm appreciation of its excellence and my debt to its contents for stimulating much that I now wish to say.

Sister Hughes's argument was that any theological discussion of reconciliation should start from human experience, which she illustrates very broadly from both fiction and real life. It may be worth adding that the point applies not just to this one sacrament but to all. Every sacrament meets something lodged deeply in human instincts and widely expressed in human behaviour. It was not the sacrament that invented marriage. It was not the Eucharist that invented ritual meals celebrating the intimate bond between creator and creature, the gifts of creation, and human ties of affection. And so with the other key human experiences—entrance into life, entrance into adulthood, serious illness and death. The sacraments are not stuck into ordinary life like candles on a cake. They are the God-given, church-moulded, Christian ways of speaking to deep-seated human needs and instincts as familiar as the lines on our hand.

This is notably true of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The Church does not invent the instinct to forgive and to be forgiven; to feel at ease with oneself and at peace with others, to be acceptable to one's community; to make good whatever damage one has consciously done to other people and to the scheme of things; and periodically to put the past behind and to start afresh. Nor does it invent the desire for all these things to be not merely a matter of interior disposition but a matter for public expression. As a simple example, when people fall out they are rarely content simply to let the matter drop. They sense loose ends left dangling until they have told each other that they forgive and will forget, and have sealed this reconciliation ritually—perhaps by a drink together, an exchange of gifts, a visit to each other's home, or whatever.

Secondly, these ways of marking moments of crisis and special experiences are normally the outcome of a positive outlook on life, a belief that sense can be made of it, that even its painful, bewildering and

threatening elements can be tamed and put to good use. Whether it is a family birthday party or an association's annual dinner, initiation into a group or a marriage rite, the solemnity of these occasions does not prevent pleasant expectations, feelings of satisfaction, and—even at funerals—an atmosphere of happiness. Generally speaking, people do not have to be bully-ragged into taking part, the point of what they are doing does not have to be laboriously explained, nor do appropriate feelings have to be whipped up.

My third introductory point is that the experiences lying at the heart of all these social rites are not the discovery of the Church. Feelings of alienation or disintegration, of guilt and remorse, the idea that being married is a relationship of unique personal and social importance, the hunger to be grown-up and to be respected as such, the instinct that death and burial must be treated as more than a long good-bye and an exercise in waste-disposal, all these antedate Christianity and exist independently of it. People do not need religious authorities to kindle such feelings.

To illustrate, perhaps I may borrow two examples from Sister Hughes. The first is the vivid description of a rite of reconciliation practised by a Nigerian tribe: on one day each year everyone wades into the local river; they all hurl insults and accusations as well as mud and water at each other; then they duck under the water and are totally submerged. When they come up they take a handful of mud from the riverbed and throw it on a cloth spread out on the bank. The cloth is hung between the horns of a goat and the animal driven into the bush carrying its burden. Once the accusations are over it is too late. Nothing from the previous year can ever be said again. Finally this chapter of fault and ritual purging is followed by a feast.

Clearly those Africans have a very clear idea of what reconciliation is about and have found a highly dramatic way of giving it ritual expression. So different from your average Saturday night confessions...

The other example is from Herb Gardner's play, *A Thousand Clowns*. One of the characters walks down the street saying indiscriminately to passers-by 'I'm sorry'. 'Forget it', they answer, or, 'That's O.K. really'. And he concludes, 'I could run up on the roof right now and holler "I am sorry"' and half a million people would holler right back, "That's O.K., just see you don't do it again".'

This extract illustrates another fact about human nature in, so to speak, the raw. It is in our nature to wish to forgive and to be forgiven. Though, of course, and this is missing from the passage quoted, it can be easier to forgive others in general than one particular offence against oneself. We need encouragement to forgive when forgiveness is difficult; it even, perhaps, requires heroism. Still, the underlying truth holds good, that we need to remember original virtue as well as original sin.

The fact is that the sacrament of reconciliation deals with raw material familiar to everybody, Christian and non-Christian, the religious and the non-religious alike. It is the stock in trade of agony columns, the

stuff of fiction, the currency of professional therapists and of everyday gossip. Yet the moment we begin to talk about how the sacrament 'handles', so to speak, this raw material, interprets it, plumbs its profoundest depths, and provides its various elements with ritual expression, we employ a lingo and a conceptual framework taxing to the understanding of ordinary people, and apparently quite separate from that homely reality. This I believe is the real barrier to the use of the sacraments in general and the sacrament of reconciliation in particular. And if we are to find rites that make sense and work, the proper starting-point is again and again to look at that raw material and to ask ourselves what we are trying to do with it in the name of Christ.

I shall return to that later. But first let us consider the difficulties we have all heard raised against private auricular confession. There are quite a few:

item: the penitent has been asked to adopt an uncomfortable and unusual posture in claustrophobic conditions and to whisper to someone, often a complete stranger, about intimate matters, without any of the visible signals, facial or postural, normally required for human communication.

item: the priest often has to judge and counsel someone without any known context or background. This makes it hard for him to say anything of genuinely personal relevance.

item: while some penitents of a breezy disposition find it easy to own up to their sins, others can find it agonisingly hard even to hint at the same matters.

item: many people find a thorough examination of conscience extremely difficult. They may have little power of introspection, or find it beyond their intellectual capacity, or be over-scrupulous. A frequent complaint is that official lists of sins often stress offences people don't feel too badly about or which have a certain ambivalence, but do not cover, or appear to allow for what they feel is seriously amiss.

item: these factors encourage the shopping-list approach and a stress on a rather mechanical confession and absolution, because to go further is too demanding on both sides.

item: sin is considered in terms of isolated acts rather than as a state issuing in particular symptoms; grace as a matter of stop-go, the spiritual life as repair and maintenance of a status quo rather than a lifelong process of development.

item: there is no recognition of communal influence on personal sin or indeed of collective or institutional sin. Sin is regarded exclusively in terms of isolated personal responsibility, and this can be resented by the penitent who knows his freedom has not been unconstrained.

item: the focus is on sin, without regard for the penitent's virtues or attempts at virtue, and the overall joyful, hopeful, reassuring, uplifting context of the work of redemption. At its

worst it makes sin or keeping out of sin the main meeting-ground with God, and fosters a depressive morbid guilt.

item: it focuses on the relationship between me-and-God, and neglects the relationship of the penitent to the Christian community and of that community to the wider world. The idea that the sacrament has to do with living life to the full not only from self-interest but for the sake of other people has become obscured.

item: the encouragement of frequent confession has never taken realistic account of the practicalities, especially the availability and quality of confessors and the demand it would make on priests' time if widely practised.

item: the danger of meeting with an unsympathetic, even harsh, confessor has been not inconsiderable and frequently disastrous.

That, I think, is a fairly exhaustive round-up of the complaints, and very telling they are. A stock answer is that they are just excuses made chiefly by people lacking in humility, and especially by those dread characters the 'super-sophisticated intellectuals'. But surely the rapid fall-off in the practice of confession has revealed that the difficulties really were widespread; and that the complaints of the Simone de Beauvoirs and Mary McCarthys only articulated what simpler people had also been feeling. They are, at least, serious reasons for taking a fresh look at what the sacrament is about and what new form it could take while preserving its essentials.

On this last point I propose to be extremely brief. There are many recent studies of the history of the sacrament and anyone interested can easily look them up. What stands out is that its practice has been very flexible indeed, with both the rite and the theological emphasis changing strikingly to meet new cultural circumstances; and that it has always been one among many means of forgiveness and reconciliation, others including the Eucharist, penitential prayers and charitable deeds. Its history leaves no grounds for assuming that private auricular confession of the kind familiar to us has to be the norm. What remains consistent is the need for reconciliation of the sinner with God and with others, and for conversion of life.

With that in mind let us again look at that raw material I mentioned earlier, and what the sacrament of reconciliation has to do with it.

The key word is relationships. Reconciliation implies that relationships have broken down and need mending. For the Christian the fundamental relationship is with God, which can be damaged by conscious resistance to whatever is understood to be His will. But the ways in which that can happen are common property. The desire and pursuit of wholeness is a universal instinct, and so too failure in achieving it. Everyone shares the experience of being at odds with oneself, fragmented, churned up, torn, as St Paul says, between the good we would do and the

un-good we actually do; of being at loggerheads with others—the whole range of quarrels, betrayals, antipathies and neglects that fracture personal relationships; of being out of sorts with the natural world and doing it harm; of contributing to group rivalries and enmities; of being caught up in those ‘vast impersonal forces’, political, economic, ideological, through which we harm and are harmed yet from which we seem powerless to escape. Everyone is aware of personal misguided choices triggering or worsening these inner and social conflicts. And everyone experiences the longing for inner and social harmony.

All these bring on feelings of guilt, shame, inadequacy, remorse, and often enough, a strong, even desperate, inclination to heal the damage, to make good again, to restore what is lost or broken. We want things put right and a way of registering and sealing the fact that matters are mended. What is often lacking is the conviction that this mending and healing is possible. The feeling of hopelessness can be overpowering, the trigger of hope missing, the path to reconciliation obscure.

Now what is it that the Church through the sacrament of reconciliation is trying to do with this raw material? First to explain it, then to affirm the possibility of setting matters right and making a fresh start, then to provide assurance that divine power is available to achieve that healing and to offer a visible channel for that communication and power. And to do so it needs to describe sin in terms that ring true to this common experience, and rites that persuasively reflect and interpret that experience and act out the whole cycle of human failure and repentance and God’s loving and redemptive response. At present, on neither count is there reason for complacency, as the almost universal abandonment of the sacrament in its present form clearly indicates.

Certainly sin is an offence against God but only in a rather roundabout way. Not by direct God-damage, but by misuse of his gifts, frustration of his benign designs for humanity and its environment, sabotage of that Kingdom of light and peace which he wishes to establish, violation of the image of God in which each of us is made, the ungrateful rejection of the divine life which is perpetually on offer. In those terms it is not too difficult to link what is theologically true with the damage and misery that is part of everyone’s human experience and to kindle fresh interest in what promises to help put it right. Sin as waste, sin as missing the mark, sin as unfulfilment, sin as self-inflicted pain and pain inflicted on others, all these are well within the range of common understanding; and from there to the understanding that such things have required a mighty effort on God’s part to repair that damage and lift that misery. There is the need to bring home God’s loving initiative to mend what is broken, to put the past behind and to make a fresh start possible. And finally there is the need to act out all of this in a suitably solemn and dramatic form.

It seems to me unlikely that the reason for the familiar rite falling out of favour is a general shortage of humility. Pastors and counsellors soon

learn that most people have a poor opinion of themselves and are often crippled by feelings of failure and inadequacy. Moreover, there are now many kinds of psychotherapy and counselling which demand more painful self-examination and self-exposure than confession as we know it. A more convincing explanation is that it has created feelings of unreality. It has been too mechanical and perfunctory. In some ways it has trivialised sin, repentance and reformation of life, in others it has been too exacting. There is something wrong when people happily confess petty peccadilloes while never thinking to question the success ethic, the racial prejudices and social bigotries they share with their unbelieving neighbours. And wrong, too, when they understand that one deliberate offence officially defined as serious has the same eternal consequences as the full score of crimes committed by a Stalin or a Hitler. Pressure of time has militated against both the kind of education and guidance needed, and the chance to describe actual states of mind in a more realistic and truthful way. Not surprising that the richer and more enterprising have turned to the psychotherapist, or so many given up the sacrament as a bad job—and often their faith with it. And perhaps one should add that the feelings of alienation and isolation experienced by penitents in general have been even more acute for members of minority groups regarded as socially or morally reprehensible.

I for one am highly doubtful whether the difficulties which have undermined use of the sacrament can be remedied by tinkering with private auricular confession in its familiar form. To put it brutally, this parrot is dead. We need to recognise a cultural shift when we see it, and to think again about how to express the essentials in new forms of practice. Certainly there is still room for private auricular confession to meet particular needs at particular moments of crisis in individual spiritual development. There is probably also a need for some additional public rite to cover the case of outrageous public sinners, such as ‘Catholic’ dictators who practise murder and torture. But the main concern must be the normative rite most likely to provide the form and context answering to new needs and sensibilities and to allow re-education of the faithful by more wholesale means than fish-and-line.

II

Among those chiefly concerned with these pastoral considerations, from bishops to pastoral liturgists, support has grown steadily for the view that Rite III (The Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution) has the strongest claim to be regarded as the norm. Its attractions and advantages are clear. Briefly, it makes it possible to ...

a) engage in large-scale and regular education of the faithful in a comprehensive understanding of sin, penitence, penance and reconciliation in the proper ecclesial framework and with a proper consciousness of the whole work of redemption.

Salvation comes in and through the community of faith, and the community context brings out the need for reconciliation with its members ('First be reconciled with thy brother') as a prerequisite for reconciliation with our Father in heaven.

b) see reconciliation as clearly linked to the mission of the Church to the world, especially to its mission of fostering peace and justice.

c) present sin, both personal and collective, in terms recognisably true to ordinary experience.

d) emphasise that the essence of the exercise is not nit-picking self-examination, but God's free gift of forgiveness, the chance to go forward with fresh heart, and the power to do better.

e) see both penitence and reconciliation as part of the lifelong process of pursuing sanctity and human maturity with all its ups and downs, advances and setbacks.

f) lift the burden of isolation through a keener experience of belonging to a community of fellow-sinners, and the experience of sharing its life of faith and hope.

g) make public acknowledgement of both the faith community's collective sinfulness and of the personal sinfulness which affects the well-being and mission of the community, together with a public affirmation of the desire to be personally and collectively worthier of the Christian calling.

h) grow in better understanding of what the Church is, of its purpose, and of the help and encouragement it can offer to its damaged members and to a broken world.

i) demonstrate that the sacrament is fundamentally an act of worship, not a punishment or psychological torture.

j) deal realistically and practically with large numbers of people and what might be called commonplace sin.

These results, I suggest, can all be achieved within a well designed pastoral liturgy and without abandoning any of the classic elements of the sacrament as practised over the centuries.

It has to be said that so far Rome has been reluctant to break away from the Counter-Reformation version of the sacrament. On the contrary, James Dallen, who has made an exhaustive study of the documents in the case, concludes that 'In the area of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation there is clear evidence that the trends apparent throughout the twentieth century and given official status in the Council and in conciliar reforms have, to some extent, been suspended, minimized or reversed in recent documents'. Since the 1920's he notes three dominant theological trends contrasting with the Counter-Reformation perspective: 1. the sacrament of penance is social and ecclesial in its nature as well as in its effects; 2. the sacrament of penance is an act of ecclesial worship; 3. the deepest meaning of penance is conversion, and this conversion goes beyond ritual to the whole of the Christian life. These trends, reflecting a broader and older church tradition, made an impact on the Council's

treatment of the sacrament, and also, despite much sniping from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1966 up to their publication, on the 1973 Rites. But thereafter, and most notably in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, the outcome of the 1983 Synod of Bishops, and the post-synodal exhortation of Pope John Paul II (*Reconciliatio et poenitentia* 1984), the Counter-Reformation view has been heavily favoured—in fact, so much so that the last must be considered a highly personal rebuttal of the propositions supported by most diocesan bishops in the Synod, which though never published were apparently in line with the Council's broader approach.

Almost crudely, the Pope reverts to the Tridentine formula with its emphasis on individual confession and absolution as the norm, stresses his own conviction about the 'profoundly personal character' of the sacrament, declares that 'For the Christian the Sacrament of penance is the ordinary way of obtaining divine forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism' and speaks of the reconciliation of individual penitents as 'the only normal and ordinary way of celebrating the Sacrament, which cannot and must not be allowed to fall into disuse or be neglected'. He minimises its ecclesial and social character, and pays little or no attention to the sacrament as an act of worship. What matters is the individual's private reconciliation with God, from which reconciliation in other relationships—considered in almost purely individualistic terms—is assumed automatically to follow. It is no exaggeration to say that the papal exhortation is essentially a call for the mixture as before.

As theologians and liturgists have robustly retorted, this is not theological conservatism but a blank rejection of the history of the sacrament. Neither historically nor theologically has it been true that the sacrament has been the ordinary way of obtaining divine forgiveness, nor that the reconciliation of individual penitents has been the only normal and ordinary way of celebrating the sacrament. Both propositions are non-historical orthodoxy run wild.

Nostalgia for familiar ways may indeed be the simplest and truest explanation for the Pope's stance. It is also possible that he is anxious that the sense of personal responsibility and personal worth should not be diminished, an attitude perhaps reinforced by his experience of collectivist societies in which personal dignity has been assaulted. He may also have in mind the psychological theories which encourage wrongdoers to shuffle off personal blame. And matching that is the sometimes powerful effect of personal experience of God's loving care, including the grace of forgiveness, for each and every individual person.

These are serious considerations. Nevertheless it can be countered that, whatever the perils of collectivism, the dangers of atomic individualism are no less unfortunate. When the truth that 'persons become persons through other persons' is lost to sight; when the sense of communal interdependence, communal obligation and communal responsibility is enfeebled, so too is the individual person and a range of

other social relationships, including those of the family. Pastor Niemoller's deadly analysis of the feeble sense of community and social responsibility which opened the way to Nazism in pre-war Germany needs to be remembered. And one wonders how many marriages nowadays crack up because the individuals concerned have no community to provide guidance and support when the going gets tough. Once again there is a human reality which needs theological expression, a necessary balance between the value of the individual person and the value of the community through which full personhood is achieved. Yes, God has called each of us by name, cherishes each of us individually; but he has made his covenant with us as a people, a community of faith. There is an obvious danger in losing sight of either side of that equation.

Can a better balance in the sacrament be achieved without the consequences feared by the Pope? It does not seem impossible if the proper functions of the sacrament are considered without prejudice, and if the human realities I spoke of earlier are kept in focus. It may, for example, be strictly true, as the Pope argues in his exhortation, that the priest-confessor can stand for the whole Christian community and welcome, encourage, forgive, reconcile and counsel in its name and in the name of its Lord. But would not all these functions be far better and more powerfully expressed by and in an actual Christian community? Would not the hurts done to the community by the sinner be more evident in the presence of that community, and would not this community dimension act as an antidote to the notion that sin is something only between me-and-God without wider ramifications? Would it not open up the chance of greater sensitivity to the neglected area of what we now call social sin? And would it not assist the penitent to face his or her real sinfulness if that task were undertaken not in individual isolation but as a sinner in a community of sinners honestly and painstakingly recognising their sinfulness and need for conversion? Contrariwise, would not the community itself come to recognise more clearly its mission to accept, encourage and assist the sinner through the power of God, to be a community in which the face of Christ is more clearly discernible by the world at large, and to admit its deficiencies in the performance of its mission?

As regards the education of the faithful in the full meaning of the sacrament, the creation of a Christian culture of penitence and reconciliation, and the practice of the sacrament as an act of worship, the communal approach is plainly more flexible, more comprehensive and more practical. The size of community can vary from a whole parish to a parish association or retreat group. Instruction in the various elements of penitence and reconciliation can be more regular and range more widely in a one-off service or a series of services, as part of normal parish routine or in special penitential seasons. The theme can vary from sin in general to a specific area of sinfulness—sins against charity, or justice, or truth, for example. And likewise themes such as conversion of heart, reconciliation, and penance can be treated in general terms or in a more specific way. In it

can also be included reference to the other classic means through which the Christian finds forgiveness and reconciliation—the Eucharist, penitential prayer, fasting and works of mercy.

In addition, and crucially important, is the chance such communal celebrations afford of linking what goes on in church with what goes on in ordinary life, especially if this is done imaginatively through drama, poetry, dance, music, story or personal testimony. The key requirement is to draw attention to the various ways in which reconciliation happens, our ordinary experience of forgiving and being forgiven, our ways of making up for damage done and hurt caused, and all the unofficial, unstructured ways in which every member of the community can be a minister of reconciliation in daily life.

But where does that leave the individual? Is he or she bound to be lost in the crowd? Must such communal celebrations diminish the sense of personal responsibility and the awareness of God's forgiving love for each individual person? As for the first, it seems to me that a properly structured communal celebration should heighten and broaden the sense of personal responsibility, indeed be a schooling in obligations and responsibilities previously unrecognised and neglected. As for the experience of being personally absolved, there seems no clear reason why a general absolution should not be applied and experienced personally like a blessing at Mass. But if something more particular is felt to be needed, it should not be impossible, at least where numbers allow, to introduce a brief personal ritual—taking about as long as giving communion—to meet that need: perhaps by each penitent approaching the priest and quietly confessing their most conscious sin or sinful propensity, and by the priest laying his hands on each or performing some other sign of personal absolution.

This may still not satisfy those who identify the sacrament with its Tridentine form. On this a few comments. First, it seems to be predicated on the assumption that in private auricular confession an encounter takes place which leads uniquely to a profound and lasting conversion of heart. That this sometimes happens I do not doubt. Nor do I doubt that in many lives there are times of crisis when this kind of encounter is felt as an almost irresistible necessity. But it surely romanticises reality to suppose that this need, or these effects, have ever been commonplace. Far from being the ordinary means of reconciliation, this version of the sacrament is and always has been extraordinary, and it is precisely the need to make the extraordinary routine which has raised false expectations that in turn have undermined its popular practice. Secondly, for it to have the effects the rigorists look for, it needs to be a leisurely exercise involving a quality of spiritual discernment and guidance requiring special charisms which only a minority of confessors are ever likely to possess. Thirdly, the more thoroughly this rite is performed, the less it lends itself to regular practice. A priest once joked to me that if everyone in his parish went to confession once a fortnight, as used to be encouraged, he would be in the confessional

24 hours a day. The new rite does not recognise that difficulty; in fact it makes it worse.

Fourthly, as well as disregarding all the difficulties associated with private auricular confession mentioned earlier in this paper, the insistence that the Tridentine rite is the most authentic version of the sacrament evades the striking theological and psychological emphasis of this century, that conversion of heart and growth in holiness is not normally the work of a moment, a lightning stroke, but a process, a steady though not always continuous development over a period of years. Private confession and professional spiritual counselling may be contributions, even sometimes necessary contributions, to that process but they are not alternatives to it. Finally, whatever the reasons, the almost universal abandonment of the sacrament in its present Tridentine form has to be taken seriously. The same kind of thing has happened a number of times in the Church's history, and each time it has revised the rite to take account of different cultural circumstances and a change of outlook among the faithful. The fact that once again the faithful have voted with their feet surely calls for a similar response rather than a desperate attempt to cling to the familiar.

In conclusion, then, the way forward requires a genuinely fresh approach to the sacrament rather than a bit of tinkering here and there. It means paying careful attention to the everyday experience of contrition, reconciliation and amendment in ordinary life, seeing in them the hand of God at work, and interpreting and incorporating them in the ecclesial ritual. It means paying proper regard to all the ways in which the Christian by worship, prayer and good works seeks and receives divine forgiveness and is moved to a holier life. It means a reassessment, virtually a redefinition, of sin not as a deliberate personal intention to offend God (which usually seems highly unreal) but as our frustration of God's loving will for us, both communally and individually, through the damage we do to ourselves, to each other and to the natural world, by self-centredness in all its forms (and which we recognise as all too real). It means recognising the social and communal dimensions of both sin and reconciliation, the Church's ultimate mission and the part that each of us is meant to play. It means recognising conversion of heart as a lifelong process which finds ritual expression and fresh encouragement in the rite of penitence and reconciliation; a sort of 'stretched sacrament' if you like, which finds periodic ritual expression, usually in the community but from time to time in a private act.

Above all it means keeping firmly in mind that the sacrament has been given to nourish the Christian life of the people of God, not the people to preserve a particular rite. And that its focus is the wonderful works of God, not the unwonderful works which are so often our response.