

DIOCESAN LITURGICAL COMMISSION NEWSLETTER

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THINKING ABOUT RECONCILIATION

Over the last number of years our experience of the Rite of Penance, in which we celebrate God's love and mercy as we acknowledge our failures and sins, has changed. Many people over the years became used to General Absolution and look back at those liturgical moments with great fondness for the communal nature of these events; there seemed to be an acknowledgement and solidarity in the fact that not only are we all sinners, but that we are bound together in a community rooted in God's grace, mercy and healing.

The reality of sin and the reality of the foundations of our communities of faith surely have not changed. God still seeks out the lost and forsaken, the weary, the broken, the prodigals among us. The healing presence of Jesus, continually offering us his divine mercy, longs to speak to the depths of our hearts. The question posed for us now is, "How do we celebrate this in a ritual way?"

This Newsletter invites us to consider many aspects of the Sacrament of Penance and how we might renew the rites within our parishes and communities. We are not trying to be completely comprehensive here, but rather provide some materials for discussion in parishes and for personal reflection, particularly as we enter the Lenten Season in preparation for the great celebration of the Resurrection. We hope this may be helpful for you.

FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

We need not look far afield in our relationships to find areas where we need to be healed of hurts, offer forgiveness or be forgiven for inflicting pain. Psychology has allowed us to see the residual damage of an emotional hurt which is allowed to fester. It has also exposed the dark side inherent in our being; a place most of us would rather not look and a place where God is often considered absent. To be able to forgive and be healed we need to realize that good and evil are two sides of the same coin and to make sense out of this requires God's mercy; God's way of looking at things as reflected in the Gospel.

Two examples illustrating this point can be found in Matthew 5: 43-48 and Luke 18: 9-14.

In Matthew, we hear Jesus asking us to love our enemies:

"You have heard that it is said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy" But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous...be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Bernard Cooke helps us to see how we can be the "perfect" Jesus is referring to:

"Christian reconciling activity is God's reconciling activity - not in the sense that what

we do substitutes now for what God would do, nor in the sense that God approves of what we do and ratifies it as God's own, but in the sense that there is a genuine co-doing in which God's forgiving works in and through our forgiving and makes ours possible and effective."

In Luke, we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

"...Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself was praying thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers or even like this tax collector...but the tax collector standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Thomas Merton writes, *"It is not dutiful observance that keeps us from sin, but something far greater. It is love. And this love is not something we develop by our own powers alone. It is a sublime gift of divine mercy, and the fact that we live in the realization of this mercy, and this gift is the greatest source of growth for our love and holiness."*

Both Gospel passages and commentaries ask us to look at the world differently, to look at the darkness we hold within us and see God's light working there.

The first passage shows us God's mercy does not operate using a good versus evil model, but rather God's mercy recognizes both good and evil exist within us and calls to the good in the wrongdoer and asks us to forgive, for in doing so we both can begin to heal.

The second passage shows us the great love which opens up to us when we recognize our dark side and respond to God's call within that darkness. The tax collector in the parable was

able to see and desire God's mercy in his darkness, he *"lived in the realization of God's mercy"* and was able to leave the Temple transformed.

Surely the call to forgiveness (to forgive and to be forgiven) is a call for each individual. Yet this call is for communities as well, both local and global, to be communities of reconciliation.

A SHORT BACKGROUND TO THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

As with all sacraments, the Sacrament of Penance is rooted in the ministry of Jesus and His gift to the Church. Forgiveness of sin is a consistent theme of the Gospel (Mt 9:2–8, Mk 2:5–12, Lk 5:20–26). According to John, Jesus gave the power to forgive sins to the church as reflected in one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained"* (Jn 20:22–23). The early church continued Jesus' message of repentance (Acts 2:38–39).

Over the centuries, the forgiveness of sins took on many forms, beginning with "canonical penance" as a very public sacrament and reserved for the most serious sins (for example, apostasy, murder, heresy). This canonical penance was administered only once, demanded a deep conversion on the part of the offender and involved the penitent leaving the liturgy with the catechumens. Over time, the church began to impose lesser forms of penance for less serious transgressions, yet all the while retaining its very public forum. By the end of the sixth century, canonical penance became privatized and came to be known as "confession." During the Middle Ages, several developments occurred in the rite, including the use of penitential books to help the priests discern an appropriate penance.

Gradually teaching associated with the Sacrament of Penance focused on a fourfold rite: contrition (conversion of heart), confession (orally to a priest representing the church), satisfaction (appropriate penance) for sin, and absolution (the effect of the sacrament is the forgiveness of sins).

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council called for a revision of the rite so that it clearly expressed its nature and effect. The revised rite of the Sacrament of Penance was promulgated in 1973 and emphasized that: 1) The church is both holy and in constant need of purification; 2) The church is communal by nature; 3) Sacred Scripture is important to the rite; and 4) Reconciliation with God and the church is the purpose of the sacrament. As a result, the sacrament began to move out of the confessional box and into the body of the church, especially with the use of the Penitential Service in Rite 2 of the Sacrament.

CELEBRATING RITE I

Private confession is an essential element for our ongoing conversion and growth in holiness. The law requires that adequate opportunity be provided for parishioners to receive the Sacrament of Penance. This responsibility is spelled out in detail in Can. 986 §1:

All to whom by virtue of office the care of souls is committed, are bound to provide for the hearing of the confessions of the faithful entrusted to them, who reasonably request confession, and they are to provide these faithful with an opportunity to make individual confession on days and at times arranged to suit them.

When ready to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), the following steps are involved.

Beforehand:

Examination of Conscience: Pray to the Holy Spirit for light and strength, examine your conscience in the light of the Scriptures and the Commandments since your last confession and become truly sorry for your sins.

Going to Confession:

Welcome: The priest welcomes you, the penitent. It is helpful if you indicate the time of your last Confession and anything else that will help the priest hearing your confession.

Scripture: A short passage of Scripture may be read.

Confession: Confess your sins and listen to the advice of the priest.

Penance: The priest proposes a good action or prayer to help make up for sin and deepen virtue.

Prayer of Sorrow (Act of Contrition): Pray expressing personal sorrow and asking for forgiveness.

Absolution: The priest grants absolution in the name of God and the Church.

Praise of God and Dismissal: The priest invites you to praise God and dismisses you with the command to go in peace.

Afterwards:

Spend some time in thanking God for forgiving us and restoring us to full life in Christ.

RITE II - Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution

The second form of the Rite of Penance Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The form of the sacramental rite is given in the following list:

- 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

One challenge in using this Rite with a large number of people is to have them remain for the concluding rite. To fully enhance the communal aspect of this rite is for people to remain, after confession, to be missioned forth as a reconciled community.

RITE III – GENERAL ABSOLUTION

In the case of grave necessity recourse may be had to a communal celebration of reconciliation with general confession and absolution. While there is a provision in Canon Law for general absolution, the condition under which the rite can be celebrated is that of grave necessity. (See Canon 961 and 962) It is for the diocesan bishop to decide when there is grave necessity.

Following the Ad Limina visit to Rome Bishop Colin Campbell sent a letter to the parishes, in late 1999 early 2000, discontinuing the practice of General Absolution for Advent and Lent.

This letter and others can be read in their entirety online by entering a Google search: [General Absolution Diocese of Antigonish.](#)

Pope John Paul II Apostolic Letter on the Sacrament of Penance can also be found on the first search page under [USCCB – \(Liturgy\) In the June 2002 BCL Newsletter.](#) In the Catechism of

the Catholic Church numbers 1422-1498 are the teachings on Penance and Reconciliation and in particular number 1483 explains the teaching on General Absolution.

THE RECONCILIATION ROOM

The pre-Vatican “confession box” was invented to protect the reputation of confessors and female penitents, not to provide anonymity.

The revised liturgy necessitated a revision to the liturgical space for the sacrament. Thus the confession boxes were designed to become reconciliation rooms. The revised rite calls for the proclamation of scripture, homily, shared prayer, offering of moral counsel and imposition of hands. Although the instruction still calls for a screen for those who prefer to remain anonymous, it becomes an obstacle to celebrating the liturgy in its entirety.

Our Place of Worship (CCCB publication) calls for a worthy space for the sacrament of reconciliation. It reminds us, “*This is holy space and should never be used as a lounge or storage area.*” A chair for the confessor should be placed behind a curtain so that he is unable to see the penitent entering the room. A kneeler may be provided for anyone wishing to kneel and remain anonymous. A chair is placed facing the confessor and a bible is placed open on a table for the proclamation of the word during the sacrament. A candle may be placed next to the bible. A crucifix and suitable art may be hung on the wall. The reconciliation room requires a window to protect both the confessor and penitent.

The Reconciliation Room is best located close to the baptistery to highlight the connection between Baptism and Reconciliation. A place for posting times for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation should be incorporated into the exterior design.

