

## Sacramental Confession - The Sacrament of Reconciliation

by the Revd Dr William Crockett, sometime professor of Vancouver School of Theology

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Our topic this afternoon is sacramental confession, called the Sacrament of Penance through most of Christian history, but more recently referred to as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I will explain the reason for this shift in the course of my talk.

Let me begin, however, by saying a little about my own experience of this sacrament. I have been making my own confession since I was a teenager. I grew up in a parish, St. Thomas' in Toronto, where there was a general acceptance of this sacrament and regular times for confession in the church bulletin. Not everyone made use of the sacrament, but in confirmation classes the candidates for confirmation were encouraged to make their first confession prior to making their first communion. I probably made my first confession at this time. This is certainly not typical of Anglican parishes, but for me it has been a ministry for which I have been very grateful. I have also been hearing confessions ever since I was ordained a priest; so I have had experience both as a penitent and as a confessor. I think it is important for any priest who is hearing confessions to also make their own confession. I wanted to share my own experience at the start, since I am not speaking to you merely theoretically.

What I intend to do this afternoon is to trace briefly the history and theology of this sacrament in the life of the church, both before and after the English Reformation, and to speak about some of the important changes in the theology and practice of the sacrament in the context of contemporary liturgical renewal, particularly as this is reflected in **The Book of Alternative Services** of the Anglican Church of Canada. Fr. Kevin Hunt will follow this by speaking about the practical aspects of both making and hearing confessions.

It was in the third century that the sacrament of reconciliation first emerged in a recognizable form. During the patristic period sacramental confession was a public act of penitence for grave sins which involved a public confession of sins before the whole community, temporary excommunication from the community during which the person was required to do penance, and subsequent reconciliation to the community by the action of the bishop.

The primary emphasis during this period was on reconciliation to the community. There was no private confession and absolution during this period. The period of excommunication was looked on as an opportunity for conversion and not as a punishment. During this period the penitents were upheld by the prayers of the community. This reconciliation process was available only once in a lifetime.

By the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 it was customary for the bishop to reconcile

the penitents on Maundy Thursday and readmit them to the eucharistic table. This timing was no accident. This linked the act of reconciliation with the church to the time in the liturgical year when the church celebrates the paschal mystery; the mystery of God's saving action through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, from Maundy Thursday, through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, culminating in the Easter Vigil and eucharist.

In summary, the sacrament of reconciliation in the patristic period was a public, communal action of reconciliation leading to a lasting change of heart, which involved the whole community, was presided over by the bishop, and culminated in participation in the liturgical celebration of the paschal mystery.

At the beginning of the fifth century St. Augustine distinguished three kinds of reconciliation with God through the church:

1. The remission of all previous sin through baptism.
2. The daily remission through prayer and fasting of "light and small sins."
3. The formal one-time remission of deadly and serious sin through public penance.

Later in the century, changes in the sacrament were being made even before Augustine died in 430:

1. Presbyters were delegated to be administrators of the sacrament, not just bishops.
2. Pope Leo the Great objected to the public confession of sins and said, "it is enough that the guilt of conscience be revealed to priests alone in secret confession."

By the sixth century Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks who had not known the older system of public penance spread what came to be known as the "monastic" practice of penance through their missionary work. This involved:

1. Private confession to a spiritual father (or mother), not always a priest
2. Reception of an appropriate penance with the goal of restoring the relationship with God but lacking the emphasis on reconciliation with the community.
3. Private prayer of pardon or blessing after the penance was completed.

The Celtic missionaries brought with them *Penitentials*, which were handbooks for hearing confessions composed over a period of three centuries. The early *Penitentials* were mostly a list of sins and the penance appropriate to balance the sin. Later *Penitentials* drew on the Bible and early Christian writers.

The monks put an end to the practice of once-only reconciliation for grave sins and the link with the liturgical celebration of the paschal mystery from Maundy Thursday

through Good Friday to Easter. Penance tended to be punitive rather than viewed as conversion of life and the sacrament came to be understood as the Sacrament of Penance rather than a sacrament of reconciliation.

On the positive side, this monastic practice of the sacrament made the sacrament a part of the normal spiritual practice of Christians rather than a one time period of penitence.

In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council prescribed that all who had “reached the age of discretion should at least once a year faithfully confess all their sins in secret to their own priest” and receive communion. The intention was that this would take place primarily before Easter, which did restore the link between the sacrament and the celebration of the paschal mystery.

In the English Reformation of the sixteenth century the practice of sacramental confession was not abolished. It was retained in the Prayer Book tradition in three places, in the Thirty-Nine **Articles of Religion**, in the **Exhortation to Holy Communion**, and in **The Visitation of the Sick**. Article 25 in the **Articles of Religion** lists Penance as one of the “commonly called Sacraments” (see **BCP 1962**, pp. 707-708). In the **Exhortation to Holy Communion** those who are unable to quiet their own consciences are exhorted to confess their sins privately to a priest in order to receive spiritual counsel, advice, and absolution (see **BCP 1962**, p. 91). In **The Visitation of the Sick** the sick person is exhorted to make a special confession if their conscience is “troubled with any weighty matter,” and a form of absolution was provided, but no liturgical form for a private confession was provided except the absolution.

In Canada a liturgical form for confession was first introduced in the 1962 revision of the **Book of Common Prayer in The Ministry to the Sick** (see **BCP 1962**, pp. 581-582). Apart from these provisions, however, the normal practice through which Anglican Christians have confessed their sins and sought absolution has been the general **Confession and Absolution** in the eucharistic liturgy, which is the normal practice still today

The characteristic Anglican approach to sacramental confession has been to say that it is available for all who desire it, but it is not compulsory. This Anglican attitude has been summarized in the aphorism: “None must, all may, some should.”

Before commenting on the rite for **The Reconciliation of a Penitent** in the **BAS** I want to say something about contemporary developments in Roman Catholic theology and practice since the Second Vatican Council, since this has influenced the renewal of Anglican liturgical rites for sacramental confession, including the rite for **The Reconciliation of a Penitent in The Book of Alternative Services**.

The Second Vatican Council introduced fundamental reforms both in the theological understanding of the sacrament and in the liturgical rites. Vatican II came to understand

the sacrament primarily as a sacrament of reconciliation rather than a sacrament of penance. The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (1964) emphasized that in addition to receiving pardon for their sins, penitents are reconciled with the Church which they have “wounded by their sins.” The sacrament reconciles sinners both with God and with the community of the church.

In the light of this renewed teaching, in 1973 Pope Paul VI in the document *Ordo Paenitentiae* (Order of Penance), re-named the Sacrament of Penance as the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the formula for absolution became:

“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.”

This language grounds the theology and practice of the sacrament in God’s act of reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the paschal mystery) and understands the action of the priest in pronouncing absolution as an expression of the ministry of the church in reconciling the penitent both to God and to the community.

Three different liturgical rites were also offered for the celebration of the sacrament:

1. Reconciliation of individual penitents
2. Reconciliation of many penitents who are absolved individually
3. Reconciliation of many penitents who make a general confession of sins and receive a general absolution (not unlike the general **Confession and Absolution** in the Anglican liturgy, but as a separate rite apart from the eucharist). Grave sins, however, must still be confessed individually.

The important things to observe here are:

1. This makes it clear that sacramental confession is a liturgical action. It is an action of the church, not simply an individual action between the penitent and the priest as confessor.
2. The primary emphasis is again on the sacrament as a sacrament of reconciliation with God and the community, rather than simply on the individual’s relationship to God.
3. Since every liturgical action of the church celebrates God’s reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ, the connection with the paschal mystery in the celebration of the sacrament is made explicit.

Contemporary Roman Catholic theologians and liturgists have done some important theological reflection on the sacrament, drawing out the meaning of these emphases

from the Second Vatican Council.

The foundation of the sacrament of reconciliation is God's gracious act of reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's reconciling action in Christ is the expression of the divine love. We appropriate this reconciling activity of God primarily in baptism and we are constantly renewed in it in the celebration of the eucharist.

Baptism and the eucharist are the primary sacraments of reconciliation. Baptism is the starting point and foundation for understanding reconciliation in Christ in the life of the church. Reconciliation in Christ means breaking down the barriers that separate us from God and from one another. The life that begins in baptism is life in community, in the body of Christ. If baptism and eucharist are the primary sacraments of reconciliation, why is there a separate sacrament called the sacrament of reconciliation? This sacrament is intended to address the sins we commit after baptism and to prepare us for the eucharistic celebration. Through this sacrament we are reconciled with God through reconciliation with the community. In my own personal experience, one of the principal reasons that I go to confession is because I know that when I sin I sin not only against God, but also against my neighbour, against my sisters and brothers in the body of Christ, and that I need to be reconciled both to God and to the community of the church.

Sin is a break in our community with God and with one another and requires the re-establishment of community with God through the community of the church. In the contemporary western world where individualism and narcissism are endemic in society, we need to rediscover the communal dimension of sin and reconciliation, and the sacrament of reconciliation is an important way in which as contemporary Christians we can recover this communal dimension. The positive side of the introduction of private confession and absolution by the Celtic monks is the recognition that sacramental confession can be integrated in our lives as a spiritual practice, but this needs to be understood from a community perspective in the context of God's work of reconciliation rather than in an individualistic way.

This renewed understanding of the sacrament as a sacrament of reconciliation with God through the community of the church has also influenced the theology and liturgical practice of the Anglican Communion and helps us understand the rationale for the rite for **The Reconciliation of a Penitent** in **The Book of Alternative Services** (see **BAS**, pp. 166-172).

The first thing to notice about this rite in the **BAS** is that it is no longer found in **The Ministry to the Sick**, but under the heading **Baptism and Reconciliation**. This makes it clear that baptism is the fundamental sacrament of reconciliation and that **The Reconciliation of a Penitent** is offered as a means of addressing sins committed after baptism. In the second paragraph of the Rationale on page 166 it is stated that "the Reconciliation of a Penitent is available for all who desire it. It is not restricted to time of sickness. Confessions may be made at any time and in any suitable place."

The community perspective on this sacrament and its understanding as a sacrament of reconciliation is underlined throughout the Rationale for the rite. This is evident in the first paragraph which affirms that “the ministry of reconciliation, committed by Christ to his Church, is exercised through the care of Christians for each other, through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship, and through the priesthood of the church and its ministers declaring absolution.”

The Rationale continues with a brief account of the history of the sacrament: “Originally, Christians who sinned gravely were publicly excluded from full fellowship in the Church and publicly restored after suitable penitence. Private penitence and private reconciliation appeared only after centuries of pastoral experimentation.”

The Rationale goes on to make clear that the sacrament, “although private” in the sense that it involves only the penitent and the priest as confessor, is fundamentally “a corporate action of the Church because sin affects the unity of the body.” Nothing could make clearer the community character of the sacrament.

**The Reconciliation of a Penitent** is not only a corporate action of the church. It is also a liturgical action. Every sacrament is not only an action of the church but also a liturgical act of worship. There are two liturgical rites for the reconciliation of a penitent in the **BAS**, a longer form (see **BAS**, pp. 167-170) and a short form (see **BAS**, pp.171-172). The longer form makes it very clear that this sacrament is a liturgical act of worship. It begins on the note of praise and thanksgiving: “Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins” and continues with the reading of a psalm followed by an Invitation to confession and the confession of sins, after which the emphasis on reconciliation with Christ and the community is highlighted by the question “Do you turn to Christ” and the question “Do you forgive those who have sinned against you?” followed by the absolution, the Lord’s Prayer, and a dismissal in peace.

While I have never experienced this longer form of **The Reconciliation of a Penitent** actually being used, it highlights what is implicit if not explicit in the Short Form, which is the most common form used. Here also the context is thanksgiving and praise for the reconciling work of God in Christ.

I have already called attention to the newer form of absolution in the Roman Catholic rites for this sacrament and the way it grounds the theology and practice of the sacrament in God’s act of reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the paschal mystery) and understands the action of the priest in pronouncing absolution as an expression of the ministry of the church in reconciling the penitent both to God and to the community.

This same emphasis is found in the form of the absolution in the **BAS** which departs from the traditional wording found in the Prayer Book, “I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” and uses a form of wording for the absolution which places the emphasis on the act of absolution as the expression of the ministry of the church through the priest in reconciling the penitent to God through

the community.

The Rationale concludes with the important reminder of the seal of the confessional: “The secrecy of a confession of sin is morally absolute for the confessor, and must under no circumstances be broken.”

Until very recently the absolute character of the seal of the confessional was inviolate. Recently, however, the civil law has made it a requirement of law that anyone who is aware of child abuse, including clergy, has the obligation to report it to the civil authorities. Does this obligation override the seal of the confessional or not? This matter is addressed for the Diocese of New Westminster in two places:

The *Sexual Misconduct Policy* of the Diocese puts the matter as follows:

“Under the provisions of the Child and Family Services Act, a special obligation to report child abuse, including sexual abuse is placed on any person who, in the course of their professional duties, believes on reasonable grounds that a child is being abused or has been abused.

It is noted that in British Columbia the duty to report suspected child abuse overrides the privilege of confidentiality. . . . This law dictates that the positive requirements of the obligation to report supersede the confessional seal.” (underlining mine)

The section on “Confidentiality” in the *Pastoral Directives from the Bishop* in the Policy Manual of the Diocese points out that the privilege of clergy confidentiality, including the seal of the confessional, “is not officially recognized by the law.”

In cases where clergy are required to testify to the police or in court, “it is essential that the Bishop be consulted before any evidence is given.”

In summary, the seal of the Confessional is absolute with the only exception being that if a confession is made where child abuse has taken place it must be reported.”

While the current conflict between the obligation of the civil law and the seal of the confessional is important, this is not the note on which I want to end my address.

The note on which I want to end my address is to ask the question: What place can sacramental confession have in our spiritual lives today as clergy?

The traditional Anglican adage still applies: “None must, all may, and some should” Those “should” who have been unable to quiet their own consciences and need the assurance of forgiveness which this sacrament offers. “All may” in our time may mean that we “may” as clergy find this to be a significant spiritual practice to integrate into our spiritual journey. If we take seriously the renewed understanding of this sacrament as a sacrament of reconciliation with God in community, we may be moved to incorporate this sacrament in our lives as a countercultural practice which moves us away from the

individualism and narcissism of our culture and roots us more firmly in the life of the community, the body of Christ.

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