

Penance

Not just the church, but our country and indeed the whole world needs the ministry of reconciliation now more than ever. Catholic priests are known for some unusual aspects of our ministry - celibacy and exorcisms, for example. But we are also known as the ones who hear confessions. Some people resist confessions because they do not want to tell private matters to a priest; others feel drawn to confessions because they yearn to tell private matters to a priest. Reconciliation is one of the most characteristic features of our ministry in the world.

The pertinent liturgical book carries the title *The Rite of Penance*, even though the sacrament is more popularly known as “reconciliation” or “confession”. The book embraces more than the three forms of going to confession - individual, communal, and general. It also contains penitential services that do not involve the sacrament.

As in the other liturgical books, the introduction contains a section on the ministers of the sacrament. It opens with an acknowledgment of the whole church, the priestly people, who call others to repentance, intercede for them, and serve as an instrument of absolution. It also affirms that God alone can forgive sins. Then it treats the service of priests within the ministry of the church.

General introduction, paragraph 9. a.: “The Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and priests. By preaching God's word they call the faithful to conversion; in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit they declare and grant the forgiveness of sins. In the exercise of this ministry priests act in communion with the bishop and share in his power and office as the one who regulates the penitential discipline.”

The context for hearing confessions, then, is the homily. Once I went to a neighboring parish to help with a communal penance service just before Christmas, and surprisingly few penitents showed up. I remarked to the pastor, “This will take no time at all because so few sinners are here.” He said with false humility, “Yeah, we don’t have many sinners. The preaching in this parish has been very effective.” Our preaching is supposed to move people’s hearts toward conversion. Sometimes preachers veer into other purposes. Some homilies are primarily catechetical. Others scold. Others marvel on devotional piety. Some bewail the loose morals of society and the sins of elected officials. But the ultimate purpose of the homily is exhortation. It unpacks the mysteries of God in a way that urges people to live a better life. A good homily will help everyone come away from it with a plan to pursue a better spiritual life. I’ve heard some preachers humbly say, “If I can just touch one person with my homily, I feel that it has been worthwhile.” Well, no. You have to set the bar a whole lot higher than that. No one should escape your homily unscathed. All should feel called to repentance and belief.

Note also the centrality of the name of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The wording here is very precise: the priest declares and grants the forgiveness of sins. It is God who forgives; it is the Spirit who has the power. We

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priests are ministers of that forgiveness when we say, “I absolve you.” We declare and grant the forgiveness that comes from God.

Note the centrality once again of the bishop’s power and office. Our ministry of reconciliation is in concert with his. If our own relationship with the bishop needs reconciliation and healing, we will be better confessors if we can make some progress with him.

The sacrament of reconciliation is not the only way that the faithful participate in the mystery of forgiveness, but it is our most perfect way. Some people pursue forgiveness without us priests; others want more of us than we may care to give. Since moving into hispanic ministry five years ago, it feels as though I’ve heard more confessions in those years than in the previous 30+ years of my ministry. If church leaders think that Catholics have lost their love for confession, then they aren’t very familiar with hispanic ministry.

Hispanic penitents are sometimes looking for something more. They see the confessional as a place to seek and receive advice, to learn judgments about whether certain actions were indeed sinful, and most characteristically a place where they can wail about the injustices of life. Sometimes I’ll hear a long litany of sins, as if someone were reading the table of contents of a morality manual. But other times the confession is a reading of a table of woes, not really a confession of sins, but a lamentation of sorrows. For these penitents there is a fine line between the sorrows we bring upon ourselves when we sin and the sorrows handed to us by the decisions of others. I’ll hear about husbands who drink, kids who do drugs, unfaithful text messaging, and the misbehavior of neighbors. All of this comes with a suspicion that the penitent is somehow responsible for these sorrows, or at least is responsible for how she or he reacts to them. But it always sounds to me as if they are bringing their complaints to their confessor in the same way that any of us bring our complaints to God. We accept our half of the responsibility, but we believe God is responsible for the other half. The confession is part, “I’ll apologize in hopes that God will fix what someone else should apologize for,” and part passive aggression, an attempt to look peaceful and penitent while simultaneously launching an attack, a declaration of injustice. I don’t know if it works, if in addition to forgiveness the penitent also obtains a change in other people whose misbehaviors create an environment that coaxes sin from the penitent/victim, but it is a clever way to approach the confessional.

The introduction continues: “b. The competent minister of the sacrament of penance is a priest who has the faculty to absolve in accordance with canon law. All priests, however, even though not approved to hear confessions, absolve validly and lawfully any penitents without exception who are in danger of death.”

When you think about this, this is quite a deal. Even a priest who has left the sacred ministry, married illicitly, and hasn’t functioned as a priest for years, can still validly absolve the sins of anyone in danger of death. The church believes forgiveness is so central to its ministry, that even priests who have been laicized can still forgive sins when there is a danger of death. In a related matter,

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upon the death of a pope, all the Vatican officials lose their positions except for two of them: the camerlengo, who supervises the election, and the cardinal in charge of the apostolic penitentiary, so that the Church's ministry of forgiveness may continue even without a pope. In recent years Pope Francis extended to the seemingly schismatic Priestly Fraternity of St. Pius X the validity of the absolution they give to any of those unquestionably among the faithful. It is in keeping with the nature of God that we can put no brakes on divine mercy.

The introduction continues: "10. a. In order that he may fulfill his ministry properly and faithfully, understand the disorders of souls and apply the appropriate remedies to them, and act as a wise judge, the confessor must acquire the needed knowledge and prudence by constant study under the guidance of the Church's magisterium and especially by praying fervently to God. For the discernment of spirits is indeed a deep knowledge of God's working in the human heart, a gift of the Spirit, and an effect of charity."

This breathtaking statement maps out the terrain of the ministry we offer, both in terms of its study and its application. Priests are expected to understand the disorders of souls and to act as a wise judge. We need knowledge and prudence to apply appropriate remedies. We will be equipped for this by constant study under the magisterium and by praying fervently to God. Confessors do obtain a unique view into the window of the human heart. We become privy to the struggles of the faithful, who trust their inmost hopes and sins to us. The gaining of that trust is nothing we have done on our own, but something that other priests have won for us. Over the past few decades our reputation has been damaged, as any polls will show. But we keep hearing confessions, and we keep rebuilding the trust that society longs to place in us. The Church's magisterium will guide us to a deeper appreciation of right and wrong, and God's merciful nature will enlighten us the more time we spend in prayer.

This paragraph concludes with a dense description of our task, which is the discernment of spirits. That discernment has three descriptions: It is a deep knowledge of God's working in the human heart; it is a gift of the Spirit; and it is an effect of charity. We will better discern the spirits as we help people explore how God is working in their heart; as we open our minds to the gift of God's Spirit, who can speak more eloquently through us than we can ourselves; and we will discern better when we ourselves are charitable. One fruit of our charity is the ability to discern the spirits in others. When we gain experience in charity, we can guide others along its path.

Good pastors develop an uncanny ability to judge the human spirit. That comes from the experience we have in dealing with a wide variety of people across different ages, economic brackets, cultures and expressions of life. It also comes from hearing confessions, as we learn what is troubling people, how they make sense out of their sin, and how they yearn for God's grace.

The introduction continues, "b. The confessor should always show himself to be ready and willing to hear the confessions of the faithful whenever they reasonably request this."

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At St. Anthony's, this has been a tough call because I am more accustomed to the anglo community, which will usually come for confessions - if they come for confessions - at the appointed time. But in the hispanic community, several people may spontaneously ask me for confession several times a week. If I scheduled confessions every day, I'd be busy every day. Sometimes the request comes at an unreasonable moment. I have had to learn to judge this. I want to be generous with my time, but someone asking for a confession five minutes before Sunday mass is scheduled to start will probably get a no from me. If it's 15 minutes before, maybe, unless it's Palm Sunday, when I have a lot on my mind, and when penitents should know better. Someone who asks for a *momentito* to confess after my third mass on Sunday, a person to whom I say all right, and a person who then begins confession with sighs and tears and a solemn introduction to a persistently woeful family situation, that person may hear me say, "OK, this is not a *momentito*." But in general, I try to respond immediately and generously when asked.

The introduction continues, "c. By receiving repentant sinners and leading them to the light of the truth, the confessor fulfills a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and reflects the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. He should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who accomplished the saving work of human redemption by mercy and by his power is present in the sacraments."

Clearly this paragraph will be accused of sexism. Mothers also have a heart. Mothers are also good shepherds. Those are not necessarily paternal functions. Fair enough. Perhaps these descriptors are telling us what kind of fathers we should be: fathers with a heart who give good guidance. Our ministry is the ministry of Christ. He showed mercy. And his power - not our fickle personality - should be present in these sacraments.

Finally, the introduction says this: "d. Conscious that he has come to know the secrets of another's conscience only because he is God's minister, the confessor is bound by the obligation of preserving the seal of confession absolutely unbroken."

The brotherhood of priests regards this as a sacred trust, and anyone who even hints at breaking the seal of confession will soon learn the thunderous consequences that it brings. Once a parishioner called me on the phone to discuss his confession. But he had confessed to me anonymously. I told him I do not discuss confessions with anyone. He insisted that he was a penitent I'd spoken to a few days earlier. But how was I to know? I recognized his voice. I was 99.9% sure it was him. But even so, I don't discuss confessions, especially those made anonymously, and penitents need to know that and value it.

Some people feel moved to confess at specific times of the year. We have many requests before Christmas and Easter, for example. These are the most popular times for penance services. We can offer penance services at any time of year, but the demand is higher just before the holidays. Priests are generous with their time even in the busiest season.

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Cincinnati has had some success with its campaign “The Light is On for You.” We considered a similar effort in our diocese, but we found it very hard to guarantee that all 99 parishes in our corner of rural and urban Missouri could make this work. If a priest was unable to be present in his church, he may have a difficult time finding another priest to travel the distance and cover for him. But the idea is worthwhile. Anything that encourages people to return to the sacrament can help expand God’s grace. It’s like when the library grants amnesty on the fines for overdue books. A lot of people return them when they don’t have to pay too much, but even more when they know that they’re not the only ones with an overdue book. Library amnesty gives you a sense of forgiveness, purity and a fresh start.

In mainstream America, the decrease in the number of confessions seems to coincide with a changing attitude toward sin. People are less likely to obsess over small sins. They have an increased awareness of God’s mercy and - outside the hispanic community - they think that confession is less necessary for them to receive communion. People are busy with other matters, and they are more comfortable confessing to God privately at home than to a priest in his confessional at church. But again, the hispanic community is an exception. They have a deep regard for the priest and for confession, and they will likely stay away from communion if they have not been to confession in a while.

In much of our culture, though, people don’t consider themselves sinners. They respond favorably to advertising campaigns for products that encourage them to look after themselves: “You deserve a break today;” “Pamper yourself.” A friend of mine told me shortly after his divorce to his flight attendant wife, “You know that part of the security routine where the flight attendant tells you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping anyone else? My wife applied that principle to most of her life.”

But this is how our culture trains us. Our job market encourages self-confidence. And for all the hoopla to stop bullying in schools, it spreads unchecked on talk radio. People love bullying so much that advertisers pay to keep it on the air.

Our litigious society has created a sense a victimization. There are legitimate lawsuits that need to be brought forward for the sake of justice. But there are other cases where people turn themselves into victims and seek pity. One counselor I know says that this is a peculiar trait of bullies. They will yell and scream at you, and push you around, but if you come back at them, they suddenly become the victim. Falsely claiming victimhood is bullying in disguise.

Certainly the church’s teachings on sex and marriage have caused people to reevaluate sin. The percentage of American Catholic women on artificial birth control is high. Many of them believe that birth control is morally responsible, not sinful, especially if children have already been welcomed into the family. The gap between the Church’s teachings on artificial contraception and the practice of ordinary Catholics has caused some Catholics to feel more at home in the world of dissent from other items in the church’s catalog of sins. It is generally thought

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that this discrepancy has affected acceptance of the church's moral teachings as well as the authority of its leaders. It has beclouded some people's judgment of what is a sin.

Pope Francis gives witness to the value of confession by plunking himself down in front of a confessor regularly. If we make confession a part of our spiritual lives, we will more authentically speak about it in public. It feels good to hear words of forgiveness, but some people never do because they are more attracted to dodging admission of guilt. I had one parishioner who rarely admitted wrongdoing; if we suggested how she might try doing something better, she pointed out why our concern was misdirected. She was not responsible; other people were. We all fall into this pattern from time to time. It's one reason why not everyone enjoys confession. It's hard to sell the beauty of forgiveness when people think they should apologize for nothing.

One of the obstacles to going to confession is that people have forgotten how to do it. As we all know, no two confessions are alike. Although *The Rite of Penance* describes how a typical confession is supposed to take place, it almost never happens that way. Most people still begin with "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," or "*Ave, María purísima*," even though neither of those is explicitly scripted out in *The Rite of Penance*. Consequently, I think it's good every so often for a priest to explain to the people how to go to confession, or at least what he expects when they go to confession. He probably isn't doing it by the book either, and it would take a heroic effort to retrain Catholics and priests in the ways of celebrating forgiveness.

Perhaps more important is to live in a way that our lives present the message of God's mercy. Are you holding grudges? Are your sins very public? Then perhaps you can demonstrate more mercy. Are you building walls? Then consider the ministry of bridges. Find ways to be agents of reconciliation, especially with the people in your own parish.

The private prayers of the priest at mass offer a tedious litany of repentance: "Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away." "With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord." "Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." "Free me by this, your most holy Body and Blood, from all my sins and from every evil; keep me always faithful to your commandments, and never let me be parted from you." "May the receiving of your Body and Blood, Lord Jesus Christ, not bring me to judgment and condemnation, but through your loving mercy be for me protection in mind and body and a healing remedy." Time and again, when we pray privately, we are praying for mercy. It will prepare us to hear the sins of others, and to forgive.