

What Kind of Reconciliation Do Catholics Need?

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INTRODUCTION

Reconciliation manifests Christianity's central belief, death and resurrection. No matter how the world confronts us, we believe that Christ has come as our redeemer, that he was crucified, and that he rose from the dead to promise us hope wherever we encounter death or division.

The pandemic has put our hope to the test. It has caused illness and death. It has polarized political views. It has frustrated trustworthy experts. It has fomented unease as people struggle to deal with stress in healthy ways.

Within this uncomfortable time, the Southwest Liturgical Conference has chosen as the theme of its study week: "Bearers of Hope: Renewing the Body of Christ." As the human body has endured illness and injury, doubt and despair, so the Body of Christ has faced sin and alienation. Our theme this year brings us home to the center of Christian belief: death and resurrection, renewing the body of Christ. As Saint Paul wrote, "if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven." Every Christian is a bearer of hope. Even amid afflictions, the Body of Christ renews itself day by day.

Our study week heads each of its three days with an image of this renewal, calling Christians respectively Beacons of Hope, Vessels of Hope, and Bridges of Hope. I've been asked to develop Bishop Coerver's image of Vessels of Hope, those who offer mercy and forgiveness. The title of my presentation is, "What Kind of Reconciliation Do Catholics Need?" Here is the summary from your program: "Disease, disasters, crime, abuse, and divisions fracture our lives. What kind of reconciliation do Catholics need? What kind of reconciliation does the Catholic Church offer?" Most of this talk concerns our needs, which the conference organizers asked me to address. I will close with a few remarks on what the Church offers in order to frame these needs within our broader theme, a message of hope: Reconciliation manifests death and resurrection.

PART I: WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS

Catholics need reconciliation today especially in three overlapping areas: as a church, within society, and as individuals.

Reconciliation as a Church

As a Church we seek reconciliation in several prominent ways: worship, the abuse crisis, and ecumenism. Regarding worship, we witness disparities in the Mass, the sacraments, and devotional practices. Regarding the Mass, some have returned to Sunday worship; others have not. This division yearns for reconciliation especially among those who draw support from the mere presence of other believers at worship. They wonder, “How do we get people to return?” while those at home wonder, “How do I stay connected to my parish?”

As a church, we have endured the unthinkable during the pandemic: closing our buildings to public worship. A year ago at Christmas, before the availability of vaccines, a typical parish limited the number of people who could worship and required them to register contact information ahead of time in case we learned of someone testing positive. The Catholic Church requires physical participation on Sundays and holydays of obligation. But out of an abundance of caution, we asked people to stay home. Caring for one another’s good health was more important than public worship.

Now that many doors have reopened, now that many arms have been jabbed, we have loosened many restrictions imposed last year. Our attendance has not yet returned to where it was, but a strong percentage of worshipers gathers inside churches from week to week, while many of those at home watch services on screens.

During lockdown, people started forming new habits. Some of them were good: Happily, the diminishment of activities increased family time for many households. Instead of filling up our free time with commitments that isolate us from one another, we discovered the beauty of leisure together. Other habits were not so good. Some people wasted time before electronic screens on addictive pornographic sites offering fleeting satisfaction and enduring regret.

Livestreaming Mass, therefore, came as a mixed blessing. It connected homebound Catholics to their parish, but it also deepened their habit of sitting and watching screens.

The slow return of some Catholics to Mass fits a bigger pattern after the pandemic: The slow return of fans to concerts, patrons to restaurants, and employees to work. Mass attendance is one part of society’s rethinking of values. Those returning to Mass show how important it is to our lives. We are therefore tempted to judge harshly those who stay away, but we owe them our charity. Whether they make their decision based on concerns about health, a loss of connection, or simple laziness, they deserve our generous prayers, not our presumptuous condemnation. One way to approach the reconciliation of those who participate at Mass and those who do not is to presume the others’ good will and to let our beliefs guide us toward worship and kindness.

Attendance at daily Mass has always been smaller than that on Sundays, but the difference now is even greater. One grim reality is that elderly parishioners form the core of those who participate at daily Mass, and they are most at risk throughout the pandemic. Many of them lost their lives. That

contributed to the diminished numbers of those at Mass each day. We don't seek reconciliation with them; we express grief.

Many Catholics who made confession a priority have also returned to that sacrament, but others have not. Having formed new habits of avoiding church at all, some have yet to restore this cornerstone of the spiritual life. Confessors will be ready as each Catholic draws near.

The increased number of weddings in 2021 resulted from adding those postponed from 2020. Couples still fall in love, and many of them still want a Catholic wedding. They have endured additional hardship at a pivotal moment of their lives already rife with stress. Although weddings concern the commitment of two individuals, couples value the witness of family and friends. The Church requires only the witness of one minister and two other people, usually represented as the maid of honor and the best man, but couples want more people there. The crowd of family and friends signifies celebration, but also the size of the marital commitment. The bride and groom want their circle of friends and family to know them as a married couple. Even in 2022 we still need to be careful about gathering in large groups, but our ministry to engaged couples remains an important means of celebrating sacraments, extending a welcome, and practicing evangelization with visitors. Some people coming to weddings have issues with one another and with the church. Through love and prayer, we open a door to reconciliation.

Funeral practices were already changing prior to the pandemic. The traditional Catholic funeral unfolds in three stages: a vigil service in the evening, a Mass the next morning, and interment in a cemetery. In the United States, expediency has introduced two temporal changes in funerals: Many Americans combine the visitation with the funeral, dispensing with the vigil and establishing a single block of time for the rituals. And the increase of cremation has removed the sense of urgency around the death of a loved one. The impact of death produces an intense emotional response that the traditional funeral rites are prepared to receive. Just when grief is at its peak, the mourners gather with family and friends for emotional and spiritual support, and the rituals of the church provide tradition and order where lives have suddenly become chaotic. However, especially because of cremation, funeral rites may be postponed to a more convenient day when people don't have to take off work, and when those who live out of town can more easily travel. You can postpone a funeral, but you cannot postpone grief. The deferring of funerals to a point weeks or months after death has separated the closely entwined purposes of ritual and grief. That was going on prior to the pandemic.

As the pandemic grew, the situation worsened because even those who wished to gather in the days after death could not. Fear of contagion kept people away. Some promised a future "celebration of life," which can bring some honor to the deceased, but these did not always materialize, nor were they able to recapture the significance of grief or the urgency of intercessory prayer at the moment of passage into the portals of death.

Reconciliation of funeral practices will require some deep reflection from all of us. The Catholic Church has experience in helping people deal with grief through the tradition of a three-stage funeral. If the pandemic taught us the importance of gathering after someone has died, perhaps we need to reconsider the direction our funerals have been heading. We have sidelined grief in order to manage our funerals instead of letting funerals manage our grief.

Devotional practices in private and in public have also come under scrutiny. Stations of the Cross, one of the most popular of our public devotions, were suspended when it became too dangerous for groups to gather. However, these are possible again and can pace the Fridays of Lent.

As people stayed home from church, they had opportunity to develop stronger habits of private prayer. This did not always happen. Livestreaming Sunday Mass connected people to church, but it diminished honoring the Lord's Day at home with one's own personal, real time prayer. In retrospect, we may have better helped reconcile the difference between virtual and actual worship by giving households more tools for prayer in the morning, at meal time, or at night. Perhaps we should have provided more orders of service for homes rather than more video footage of church. This could have moved people from watching prayer online to participating in prayer at home. That would have drawn an even more meaningful reconciliation between prayer at home and prayer at church, equipping people with more experience in praying that they could then bring with them when they returned to common worship at church.

A second area in which we seek reconciliation as a church is from the abuse crisis. As unthinkable as it was during the initial stages of the pandemic to tell people to stay home from worship, it was unthinkable before the pandemic that some of our shepherds entrusted with protecting the flock abused children and shielded one another from exposure. Thanks to the media and to courageous victim / survivors, the world now knows the shame of the past. Like the pandemic's long-lasting effects, the ripples of the abuse crisis seem unending. Perpetrators deserve just punishment; victim / survivors deserve our pastoral care. Some people are so scandalized that they have walked away from the Catholic Church, never to return. Others love the Church and their faith, but still struggle for a way to integrate it back into a spiritual life that has suffered damage. Like the pandemic, we cannot ignore it. We have to protect people from hurt and minister to those who have been afflicted. The misbehavior of clergy has been so widespread in different countries and so prolonged across many decades that true reconciliation will take a global effort and a very long time.

Pastoral care demands listening to people who are hurting to assure them that they are not alone. It also demands vigilance so that such abusive patterns do not return. Our leaders were initially too quick to make inappropriate comments such as, "It's time to move on." It's like telling a victim / survivor of a hit-and-run that it's time to move on. Maybe the driver feels that way, but the injured party never does. We will not "move on" from the abuse crisis until we sufficiently "move in"—listening to those who have suffered profound loss and helping them heal on their own terms and in their own time.

Reconciliation is different here than in areas of worship. In worship there may be two sustainably contrasting opinions about what is appropriate to do. But with the abuse crisis, there is only one opinion: It was sinful. It needed to be addressed. Everyone is a victim of the crisis in some way, though some individuals unquestionably suffered more direct abuse. Reconciliation of all this hurt cannot be forced; it evolves, one loving step at a time.

A third area where we seek reconciliation as a church is in the ecumenical movement. Yesterday we began observing the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The reconciling of different branches of Christianity is a goal that many have sought. The Second Vatican Council addressed the issue even in the opening of its first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. The very first sentence listed the aims of the council, one of which was “to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ.” The council’s Decree on Ecumenism stated in number 7, “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from renewal of the inner life of our minds, from self-denial and an unstinted love that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way. We should therefore pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have an attitude of [a sibling’s] generosity towards them.”

Resistance to ecumenism turns up in unlikely places, such as hispanic ministry. In Latin America the relationship among Christian Churches is more competitive than cooperative. Instead of rejoicing in the baptism and faith of other Christians, many Catholics take a wary approach to them. In truth, many individuals who started life within the Catholic fold have transferred into another denomination. This has caused grave concern among many pastors and church leaders. However, an oppositional tone ignores the unifying principles upon which ecumenism is based. Some Catholic hispanic parishes even ban music written by Protestant composers. This puzzles many Anglos. For example, one of the most popular English musical settings of the acclamations for the eucharistic prayer is the Mass of Creation, written by Lutheran Marty Haugen. Not only do Anglo Catholics seem untroubled by this, they may take pride that this setting and a large number of other songs help bridge the gap among different denominations who all share one valid baptism in Christ.

Reconciliation in ecumenism is another need among Catholics. If we reread the Decree on Ecumenism from the Second Vatican Council, we can encounter again the motives behind ecumenical outreach that urge us to seek ways of praying in common what we believe in common.

Reconciliation as a Society

Catholics seek internal reconciliation as a Church through worship, the abuse crisis, and ecumenism. However, as members of human society, we need reconciliation with everyone else. As a society we have endured adversity together. The pandemic is only the most recent example of societal concerns, which include natural disasters that damage and destroy whole cities, and crimes that tear at the fabric of the community from within.

Natural disasters often summon the best of people. As we experience the adversity of others, we realize, “There but for the grace of God go I.” In fact, in legal terms, we somewhat recklessly call these disasters “acts of God,” as if disaster is how God prefers to intervene in human lives. Our Catholic belief inspires compassion toward others, even toward those with whom we disagree. When they experience calamity in life, we immediately recognize how unfair it is. We give money to charities or even offer our muscles to rebuild homes torn apart by wind and rain.

Whereas natural disasters provoke compassion, crime produces revulsion. When someone has become the victim of a crime, our emotions expand beyond compassion for the victim to condemnation of the criminal. Our Catholic sensibilities cry out for justice. Those who perpetrate crimes need to pay a price for them. However, Jesus moved us beyond “an eye for an eye” and requested prayers for the persecutor. We pray for them to amend their ways and grow strong in the faith that we have come to know.

The Catholic Church holds two principles that help us respond appropriately to crime. These distinguish us from others in society, especially in the United States, where the favored response to crime is punishment. As Catholics, we want more than that. We teach principles of forgiveness and indulgence. They are distinct in important ways.

Forgiveness is one theme in the Lord’s Prayer. It appears twice: we ask forgiveness as we forgive others. The problem, of course, is that we don’t always forgive others. In Matthew 6, where Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, when he finishes dictating the prayer for them, he immediately adds this commentary on it: “If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.” Jesus knew that of all the themes in his prayer, the one that would cause the most interior struggle, the one that the disciples would have to face time and again, was forgiveness.

Forgiveness is ill-practiced and well-misunderstood. Forgiveness, the very tool of reconciliation, needs reconciliation too. In the United States, forgiveness has become counter-cultural. We demand punishment, which feels like revenge. In fact, we use the word “justice” as a synonym for “punishment”. The bible does not use the word “justice” in that way. Its justice is setting things right. It may certainly include punishment, but it aims at restoration. At least in theory, the penal system in our states expresses this when it calls itself not the Department of Revenge, but the Department of Corrections. This is what justice concerns. Its main goal is not punishing people, but correcting people, helping them change. Even our prisons serve that goal.

The punishment of perpetrators is important, but it does not always bring peace to a victim / survivor. Capitalism presumes that products have value, and that acquiring a product requires a commensurate payment. So, perversely, if a perpetrator has acquired a “product”, whether it be destruction of property, sexual abuse, or the taking of someone’s life, people in our culture instinctively

seek “payment”, whether that be in dollars, service, or the loss of the perpetrator’s life. Yet even in the most extreme of these cases, the death penalty, capitalism fails. The penalty can never pay back what was lost. It can never bring someone back to life.

Forgiveness seems outrageous to people who have suffered tremendous loss. Its double appearance in the Lord’s Prayer haunts Christians who have not forgiven. Many of us just cannot do it. When the offense is great, forgiving seems cheap.

But forgiveness has different meanings. Some people think that forgiveness means permanently letting go of something in the past. But the bible never says “Forgive and forget.” Shakespeare’s King Lear asked his companions to “forget and forgive.” It’s often best to forgive and remember—to let the offense go but to remember it well enough to prevent it from happening again. In reality the offender has often moved on from the offense, and victims compound their own hurt by not forgiving. Often we want offenders to say something that they will never be able to speak. In those cases, we best pray that God will show us another way forward that does not depend on hearing the words we think will heal.

The Catholic Church distinguishes forgiveness and indulgence. An indulgence remits punishment after guilt has been forgiven. Parents understand the difference. When their child is guilty, they forgive their child, but they still punish their child. When we ask God’s forgiveness, we receive it, but we also face punishment for it. An indulgence removes the punishment.

Often when people say they can’t offer forgiveness, what they mean is they can’t offer indulgence; they can’t remit punishment. Jesus urges forgiveness; you can still favor punishments that keep offenders from attacking again. Indulgence is a separate matter.

All Christians have a responsibility to stem the proliferation of crime. We do it through prayer and example. We treat one other with respect to stitch the fabric of a society that preserves values. Catholics are among the Christians who seek that reconciliation as a society.

Reconciliation as Individuals

As individuals, we experience divisions within our families and among our friends. Political divisions have made it difficult even for people to enjoy holidays together. All Christians face these challenges and sense the disparity between the faith that should unite us and the separations we feel.

Faith and family are both emotionally strong centers in our lives. When the two do not go together, the results are painful. Parents who love their church and love their children feel distraught when their children do not love the church—or when the church seems not to love their children. Faith derives its force both from communality and individuality. We hold our beliefs as individuals, and we find support for them in community. Sometimes individuals who are otherwise close to each other discern faith in different ways. Even though it costs the bond

of a common faith, separation reaffirms individual faith. We can each applaud a person's decision to live according to strongly held principles, even while we wish that that person's principles more closely aligned with our own. Reconciling doesn't mean agreeing with another person. It means respecting them. As long as both parties understand what the other believes, a reconciliation of minds may fail where a reconciliation of hearts will succeed.

The political divisions in our country seem to increase from day to day. Polarizations especially become evident at election time when the choice of one candidate or issue over another forces people to take sides. In truth, there are admirable points in almost every candidate for public office, even when our political system caricatures them in black and white. We have abandoned civil discourse in favor of polarizing speeches.

The word "catholic" means "universal", not "uniform". Our church embraces many viewpoints because the people God created are so numerous and diverse. We can sustain some differences under the same roof. Catholics should be suspicious of exclusionary tendencies in society and offer ways of listening and dialogue to provide reconciliation through respect.

PART II: WHAT THE CHURCH OFFERS

This need for individual reconciliation opens the door to hope. The Church especially offers its liturgy as a useful tool for helping people achieve the reconciliation we need.

The most famous of these is the sacrament of reconciliation, which many Catholics love, yet many do not. This disparity of practice shows a divergent range of opinions about sacramental confession. Yet it remains one of the seven sacraments of the Church and a source of great spiritual comfort, challenge and conversion.

Some Catholics avoid confession for various reasons, but one of them is the belief that someone else is at fault. When the clergy abuse crisis was coming to light, some Catholic leaders recommended that all members of the Church pray, fast and do penance. This made some victim / survivors feel victimized again. Why should they be doing penance? Why should they feel guilty? They have a point.

In other areas of church life, though, when Catholics have contributed to neglect, prejudice or polarization, they do feel drawn to the sacrament of reconciliation to try again to set their attitude in a more helpful way.

The sacrament of baptism forgives all sin. The sacrament of holy communion forgives venial sin. So does the sacrament of anointing the sick. These are the primary ways in which an individual Catholic profoundly encounters Jesus Christ in his ministry of reconciliation.

Lesser known are the tools found in the Catholic Church's Book of Blessings. There we find prayers of healing for people who have suffered some kind of loss. For example, there are blessings for the following: Parents after a Miscarriage, Elderly People Confined to Their Homes, the Sick, a Person

Suffering from Addiction, and a Victim of Crime or Oppression. There is a blessing of Organizations Concerned with Public Need, of a New Hospital or Other Facility, Centers of Social Communication, Technical Installations or Equipment, Tools or Other Equipment for Work, and an Athletic Event, although most people are hoping God would take their side in such contests. You can see how these prayer services could provide a positive impact on individuals, a community, and even through the equipment people use in their work. They remind us that all the ways we spend our time are best devoted to advancing the glory of God.

Many such blessings may be given by a priest, a deacon or a layperson. They are found in the church's official liturgical book, the Book of Blessings with recommended scripture passages to accompany them all.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops publishes a similar volume, *Catholic Household Blessings & Prayers*. Its descriptive title shows the practical nature of the book and how much it could be used in homes for everything from daily meals to annual birthday celebrations. It too includes prayers that foster reconciliation and healing: The penitential psalms popular during Lent, Blessings for those Moving Into and Out of a Home; Prayers at the Time of Death and After Death, for Discernment and Decision Making, for Leaving or Departures, for Arriving or Returns, for Weather; Prayers For Christian Unity, for the Church in Need, a Culture of Life, Leaders in the Church and Community, Migrants and Refugees, Peace, Persons with Disabilities, Social Justice, and Victims of Abuse. There is also a collection of scripture passages in Times of Need such as Anger, Forgiveness, Loss and Grief, and Trouble, Crisis and Conflict. All of these provide inspired ways for people to pray at home. Praying at home—not livestreaming—will create cooperation with one another and dependence on God.

Another source of prayerful inspiration is the collection of Masses for Various Needs and Occasions. The collects in the missal give ready ways to pray for such circumstances as these: For Promoting Harmony, For Reconciliation, For the Unity of Christians, For Persecuted Christians, For the Nation or State, For Those in Public Office, In Time of War or Civil Disturbance, For Refugees and Exiles, In Time of Famine or For Those Suffering Hunger, and several Masses pertaining to extreme weather conditions. There are also Masses for the Forgiveness of Sins, For Charity, For our Oppressors, For Those Held in Captivity, For Those in Prison, For the Sick, and For the Dying. In the lectionary one can find dozens of biblical passages to inspire prayer for these intentions. The Church gives us all these liturgical tools to foster individual and communal prayer. They provide a goldmine of resources.

The Catholic Church needs reconciliation and offers reconciliation. We suffer and we have tools to help. At this difficult time in human history, when we are beset by dangers and disasters within and without, we appropriately focus our attention on the resources we have within. The love of God has already been placed into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who helps us no matter what kind of reconciliation we need.