How to Celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation Today

by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., S.T.D.

What happened to confession? The lines of penitents waiting to enter the confessional on Saturday afternoon seem to have disappeared. Have Catholics simply stopped going to confession? How does one celebrate the sacrament today?

When I was in grade school, each Saturday evening my mom and dad took me to church and we went to confession. I never questioned why we did this, it was simply something that good Catholics did. Now, I would explain the practice by saying that this was a way to assure that we would be in the state of sanctifying grace in order to receive holy Communion at Mass the following day, Sunday morning. Even for those of us without grave sin and who were already in the state of grace—and I certainly would place my parents in that category—Saturday confession was a way to prepare ourselves to be as holy as possible to receive the most holy Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Today two things have changed: The Eucharist itself is seen as a sacrament of forgiveness; and the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not simply (or even primarily) a preparation for holy Communion. It has its own meaning as a wonderful sign of God's love and forgiveness.

THE MASS AND FORGIVENESS

When Mass was in Latin, I never really noticed how frequently the prayers spoke of the forgiveness of sins. Now, Sunday after Sunday, I (together with the whole Church) hear, "May almighty God...forgive us our sins" (Penitential Rite); "You take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us" (Glory to God); "Though we are sinners, we trust in your mercy and love. Do not consider what we truly deserve, but grant us your forgiveness" (Eucharistic Prayer I); "Our Father...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Lord's Prayer); "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world....Lord, I am not worthy...but only say the word and I shall be healed" (Invitation to Communion).

At each Eucharist we hear Christ's command: "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven." And in holy Communion, I am in com-union (union-with) Christ and the Church. As my sins distance me from Christ and the Church, holy Communion draws me back into intimate union with Christ and his members. Meals, especially ritual meals, have traditionally been times of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is not surprising, then, that for many Catholics the Sunday Eucharist has become the usual sacrament by which they experience the forgiveness of their sins.

But are Catholics required to go to confession? The current law of the Church states that a person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess (Canon 916).

Think, for example, of the parable of the prodigal son. The boy who had cut himself
off from the life of the family was now to be readmitted to the daily family table. He admitted his fault and asked forgiveness. Yet to restore the son's place, a special celebration of reconciliation and homecoming was needed. "Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found" (Luke 15:23-24).

For those Catholics who have cut ourselves off from God and the Church by serious (grave, mortal) sin and now wish to return to God's table (many Catholics find this situation rarely happens in their lives), the Church offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation to celebrate their "homecoming." This is the only time when Catholics are required to celebrate the sacrament. But we celebrate Reconciliation not merely because we have to, but because it is a sacrament—a sign and celebration of God showing forth his mercy "by reconciling the world to himself in Christ and by making peace for all things on earth and in heaven by the blood of Christ on the cross"—as we read in the very first words of the Rite of Penance.

RECONCILIATION: A CORPORATE RITUAL

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is not merely a time for spiritual direction (as wholesome as that is), or a time for seeking moral guidance (as necessary as that may be at times). Reconciliation is primarily a sacrament—a corporate act of worship which builds up the Body of Christ. The Church affirmed this understanding in the first document of Vatican II, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: "Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations belonging to the Church" (#26), and "Whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, it is to be stressed that this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, as far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and, so to speak, private" (#27).

That is why, in addition to a rite for Reconciliation that is individual (one penitent and one priest) the new rite offers communal rites for the celebration of the sacrament. Many Catholics have moved from individual confession to these communal celebrations. In parishes across the United States we can find large numbers of Catholics participating in the communal Sacrament of Reconciliation, especially before Easter and Christmas.

Communal celebrations show more clearly that Reconciliation is a sacrament, a corporate act of worship. When we celebrate together as a parish family, we are reminded of the social nature of sin—that every sin, even the most private and personal sin, has implications for the larger community. In addition, when we celebrate Reconciliation with others, we are more clearly reminded of our obligation to "forgive those who trespass against us" even as we ask God to forgive us our trespasses.

Interpersonal forgiveness and reconciliation are part of the hoped-for outcomes of this sacrament. Christianity stresses the relation of the "horizontal" and the "vertical"—interpersonal forgiveness and divine forgiveness. "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23-24).
SAME FOUR MOVEMENTS

But whether one celebrates Reconciliation communally or individually, the corporate dimension of the sacrament remains. In the individual rite, the priest represents the whole Church. In either case, the sacrament has the same basic, ritual shape—a shape it receives from the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not only one of seven, it is the model and source of all the sacraments—they take not only their meaning but also their shape from the Eucharist. The external "shape" (outward sign) of the Eucharist is that of a meal.

Think of a typical Thanksgiving dinner. There are four movements: 1) we come together; 2) we tell our stories and review what has happened since we were last together; 3) we move to the table and eat; 4) then we take our leave and go our separate ways. These are the four movements of the Eucharist: 1) gathering; 2) storytelling (the Liturgy of the Word); 3) meal sharing (bringing the bread and wine to the altar, the Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite); and 4) commissioning (the dismissal, announcements, etc.). The reformed rite for the Sacrament of Reconciliation has this same fourfold structure.

1) We gather and come together as a worshiping community to form the Body of Christ.
2) We get in touch with the sacred story (as revealed in Scripture), which has formed us as a people and which leads us to reform our lives and do penance.
3) We celebrate God's forgiveness for Reconciliation.
4) We turn to the world with our resolve to follow more closely in the way of the gospel, to amend our lives, do penance and sin no more.

The most important thing that happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is what Jesus does. While the examination of conscience, sorrow for sin, telling the sins to the priest and acts of satisfaction are all important elements on our part, the key to understanding the sacrament today is to focus on God's part. The Sacrament celebrates God's gift of reconciliation and peace.

Four Steps in Celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation Individually

The Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents gives many options to both priest and penitent, but it is helpful to see the rite in light of the same four movements as the Eucharist: gathering, storytelling, reconciling, commissioning.

1) **GATHERING**
We enter the reconciliation chapel and we exchange a greeting with the priest. We can sit face-to-face with the priest or remain anonymous behind a screen. Many people worry about what the priest thinks of them when they tell him their sins. They imagine that in confessing their sins the priest sees them at their worst.
Actually the very opposite is true. Everybody sins; however, only some sinners are moved to do penance. When you tell your sins to the priest and express your desire to repent, the priest sees you at your best. The priest sees you, not in your sinning, but in your repentance. As a priest I have found that many Catholics, once they have tried the face-to-face option, prefer it.

After saying hello we move to prayer. Even though there are only two people present, we are about to celebrate a sacrament of the Church, an act of worship. The whole Church is made present through the priest who is ordained to speak in the name of the Church and through the promise of Christ to be present where two or three are gathered in his name. We begin "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The priest will say a prayer and may invite us to pray.

2) STORYTELLING (LITURGY OF THE WORD)
While in this atmosphere of prayer, we turn to Scripture (perhaps the Sunday Gospel) and hear again of God's faithful love. While the reading of Scripture is optional from a legal viewpoint, the rite recommends it, because it is very important for the meaning of the sacrament. Although some priests will have legitimate reasons not to do so, ideally the priest will invite you to read a passage from the Bible (or he himself will read a passage). Every sacramental action is a response to the Word of God.

One of the blessings of the Second Vatican Council is the increasing importance that the sacred Scriptures play in my life and in the lives of most Catholics. "When the Scriptures are read in the church, it is Christ himself who speaks" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 7). When I first started going to confession I was taught to examine my conscience in the light of the Ten Commandments. The whole moral life was divided and categorized under these 10 headings. Today I form my conscience not only from the Ten Commandments, but from all of Scripture, particularly the Gospels. I find this gives a rich variety to my "confessions" as I reflect on the Scriptures in the various seasons of my life and the life of the Church.

As a child, I understood sin to be breaking the law. I learned about laws and obedience from my parents. When I went to school, I learned that sin was breaking God's law. As an adult, I realize that sin must be understood in relation to God's love. In the Scriptures and in the experiences of our daily lives, we see how much God has loved us and continues to care for us.

When we examine our lives in the light of God's love, we come to realize that our love for God, our neighbor and ourselves falls far short of God's love for us. When we consider the difference between these two loves—how much God has loved us and how we have loved in return—we become aware of our sinfulness. Sin, in a sense, is basically ingratitude: our lack of response to the generosity of the loving creator. The creator calls us to life, growth and wholeness.

Sin is the refusal of that gift of life and call to growth. To be aware of sin, we must first be aware of God's love. Those who do not see the constant role that God plays in their lives are not aware of sin. They can recognize that they do bad things or that they break the law, but sin—in this religious meaning of the word—requires a holy person or at least one who is seeking holiness. That's why Scripture is
important for reconciliation: It helps us to understand better how God loves us. Even if your priest does not include a reading during the sacrament, you might consider reading the parable of the prodigal son or some other Scripture in preparation for the sacrament.

Following the reading from Scripture (or the opening prayer, if the Scripture is omitted) the priest invites you to say whatever is in your heart: sins, fears, joys, questions, doubts. The priest responds by applying the sacred Scripture to the situation of the penitent and suggests a penance—something that you might do or a prayer you might say to show or express your conversion.

3) RECONCILING After the exchange with the priest, you turn once again to prayer. You will tell God that you are sorry for your sins—this may be a prayer that you know by heart or you may pray in your own words. Or you may find the Our Father an appropriate act of contrition. The priest then prays the prayer of absolution. If you are not separated by a screen, he may place his hands on your head in the biblical gesture of healing and invocation.

The words of absolution are not merely a legal formula. They are the very heart of the sacrament. While our sins disrupt and rupture the beauty and harmony of creation, God our merciful Father has restored this harmony by the paschal victory of Christ. This restoration and reconciliation give name to the sacrament: Reconciliation. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation the Holy Spirit is sent among us "for the forgiveness of sins." The fruits of forgiveness and reconciliation are "pardon and peace." We receive these gifts of the Holy Spirit "through the ministry of the Church" and the ministry of the priest who is ordained to speak in the name of the Spirit-filled Church:

"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./

(And the penitent answers) Amen."

4) COMMISSIONING
The individual rite closes very simply. The priest says: "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace," or: "Go in peace and God bless you" or some similar words of dismissal. You respond: "Amen," or "Thank you, Father."

When you compare this way of celebrating the sacrament with the way Catholics "went to confession" decades ago, not much seems to have changed, at least externally. We do now basically what we did then. But the primary focus of the rite has changed. As in all acts of worship, the focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is on God and what God does. The focus of confession was often on me and my sinfulness. Even in naming the sacrament we have moved from "confession" (what we do) to "reconciliation" (what God does).
Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., has a doctorate in sacramental theology from Institut Catholique of Paris and serves on the faculty of St. Meinrad School of Theology. He is a popular writer and lecturer whose latest book is *The Sacraments: How Catholics Pray* (St. Anthony Messenger Press).