

# Changes in the Sacrament of Reconciliation: What do They Mean to Us and Our Students?

By Joseph DeGrocco

Reconciliation is, perhaps, the sacrament with the poorest "reputation" among adult Catholics. The reason for this often boils down to our unpleasant memories of "going to confession" in the past. Fears, misunderstandings, and confusion about it are common, even among catechists. Yet so much has changed about Reconciliation, and so much healing is offered to us through this sacrament that we are the losers if we carry a bleak outlook toward it. And since students are keenly aware of a teacher's attitudes toward the subject matter, we owe it to them to have a positive and hope-filled approach to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Before the Rite of Penance was reformed, "going to confession" meant more often than not dark confessionals, fear and anxiety, worry about a scolding priest, and a sense of routine and impersonalness that sometimes made the experience quite empty, if not distasteful. Indeed, those memories represent a reality that many people have experienced. We should not expect to forget them instantly. But instead of dwelling on what used to be, let's deal as much as possible with the Sacrament of Reconciliation as the church understands and celebrates it today, and as we presently teach it to the children in our religion programs. Let us consider it as an invitation to the loving and healing power of Jesus Christ.

Because of the effect of Vatican II, we are still in many ways a church in transition. This, perhaps, is especially true in regard to Reconciliation. However, the children celebrating the new rite of Reconciliation have no sense of the change. All they know is the new, without any prejudices, preconceptions, or fears of the old (unless their parents or teachers convey such feelings). Of course, we don't know how, or if, the sacrament will change in their lifetime. But let's take a look at Reconciliation as it exists now. What is its emphasis? What meaning and experience are we trying to communicate to our students?

Let's start with the general idea of "sacrament". Sacraments are physical signs or physical realities of Jesus' relating to us in our everyday lives. They signify a particular *conversion* (turning, refocusing) toward God. The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers us the physical reality of Jesus' healing power, which forgives our sins. It is an integral part of our lifelong, ongoing conversion to God. It provides us with the

opportunity to rededicate ourselves to God, with the healing power of the Spirit to help us. This, by the way, begins to answer the common question, "Why do I have to go to confession? Won't God forgive me if I pray to Him?" Certainly this is partly true; God forgives us whenever we pray in honest sorrow and with a true desire to change. But forgiveness is not all that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is about. There is an emphasis on *healing*, as well as forgiving. The Gospels abound with accounts of Jesus' healing power, of physical cures and forgiveness of sins. The Sacrament of Reconciliation, then, offers us, as a physical reality of Jesus in our everyday lives, the experience of healing ourselves and our love-relationship with God when we and that relationship are damaged by sin.

We're missing the point if we see the confessional as merely a place where forgiveness is dispensed. Reconciliation is a much more deeply rooted, much more challenging experience. It is a deeply personal meeting, an encounter with Jesus to which we bring our very selves, acknowledging our sinfulness and seeking His grace to change the sinful part of our lives. The experience involves one's entire life in a conversation renewing and refocusing toward God.

The best way to look at this new approach to Reconciliation is as a change of perspective. We bring ourselves to the same God as we have always brought ourselves to in this sacrament. But our perspective, our viewpoint, of the sacrament has made a radical change. This change of perspective shows up in many ways:

- We used to call this sacrament "Penance" or "Confession"; now we call it the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The emphasis used to be on telling our sins to the priest; now it's on *reconciling* our love-relationship with God, and moving back toward Him after our sinfulness has caused us to move away. We used to be concerned with rules and laws and how we hurt God by breaking those rules. Now we are concerned with our *relationship* with God, and how our actions weaken or strengthen His presence in our lives and relationships every day.
- We used to be overly concerned about reciting our sins to the priest, including the number of

times we committed them; now we emphasize the preparation, the reflection, the examination of conscience *before* the sacrament as being crucial. The praying and reflecting are actually at the heart of the sacrament – what make it not just a routine action but a renewing, refreshing experience.

- We used to think of God as passing judgment on our sins through the priest. We were very aware of the priest-penitent relationship. Now, though, we emphasize God as Jesus revealed Him to us – all-loving, all-forgiving, wanting to share His life with us rather than punish us. The priest, through whom Jesus acts in this sacrament, is not there to judge, but instead to help and to guide. The result is a personal celebration of Jesus' love and forgiveness that takes place between the priest and the penitent.
- Confession used to be dark, anonymous, impersonal, and individual. Now, though, we can celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a personal way, face to face with the priest, or in a communal celebration with the other members of our Church family. Today we are also more aware than before of the communal aspect of sin – how sin hurts not only our individual selves, but the entire community as well.
- Perhaps the best way to sum up the change is to note the shift in emphasis from our past to our future. Confession used to dwell on the things we did wrong in the past; but today, reconciliation celebrates the promise of the future. Renewed in God's friendship through the healing power of Jesus, we concentrate on the change in our lives that has been made by the real grace of the sacrament.

Afterwards, our attitude should not be "Whew! I'm glad that's over," but rather, "I've been renewed, given a new beginning!" It's easy to see the major points we try to communicate to the children as we teach them and prepare them to celebrate the sacrament for the first

time. We stress to them that God loves us as we are, and always forgives us and welcomes us back. All that we have to do is admit where in our lives we have not followed Him and make a strong effort to change. Fear has no place here. Instead, we should know only the joy in once again being close to God.

That last statement is perhaps the most difficult to get across to students, as we try to shake our own hang-ups about the sacrament. Reconciliation forces us to confront an aspect of our lives we'd really prefer to skip over – our sinfulness. Admittedly, there does not seem to be a natural aversion to celebrating this sacrament. Preparation for first Eucharist or Marriage is a naturally joyous occasion. Not so with first Reconciliation.

Maybe we need to build up the sense of celebration that seems to be lacking in this sacrament. We have parties to go along with other sacraments (e.g., first Communion, Confirmation). Perhaps we should have the biggest party of all for children who are celebrating Reconciliation for the first time, or have a coffee cake reception for entire families after the service.

After this look at the changes in Reconciliation, it may seem that very little has remained the same about the sacrament. But in many ways, it is indeed still the same. The effect it is supposed to achieve in our lives is the same; we are still constantly in need of Jesus' healing and forgiving power. And although some aspects of the rite have changed, such as the face-to-face option now offered, some have not changed all that much. A penance, our outward sign of the inward conversion, is still a part of the sacrament, as is the Act of Contrition or Sorrow. The major change we need to communicate to our students is the emphasis on a joyful celebration of God's love and forgiveness, which signifies our conversion back to Him. When we share that joy and peace with our students, we share with them what it means for all of us to be children of an all-loving and all-forgiving God.

---

*Mr. DeGrocco is studying for the priesthood at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception, Huntington, NY. He recently completed his year of pastoral internship in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, NY.*