

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RECONCILIATION

(Catechism nn. 1420-1498)

Names for the Sacrament

Having completed the three sacraments of initiation, the Catechism moves now to a fourth sacrament associated with the forgiveness of sin committed after baptism. It goes under a number of names. When it is called the Sacrament of Penance (Catechism n. 1423), the focus is on the steps taken by the sinner to repent of sin, and to try to make up for the harm caused insofar as that is possible. These steps include personal ones as well as those imposed on the 'penitent' by the Church. It is sometimes called the Sacrament of Confession (Catechism n. 1424), because the sinner confesses (names and admits to) sin, and also confesses (acknowledges in a public way) God's holiness and mercy. It is called the Sacrament of Forgiveness (Catechism n. 1424), for the obvious reason that through the sacrament the sinner is forgiven. Finally, it is called the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Catechism n. 1424), because the sinner is reconciled (restored to communion) with God and with the Church.

The Catechism (n. 1422) commences its reflections on the Sacrament with the following statement, borrowed from the Second Vatican Council (LG 11):

'Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which, by charity, by example, and by prayer, labours for their conversion.'

We are accustomed to reflect on God's merciful forgiveness. Perhaps less often do we reflect either on the ways in which our sin pollutes the environment in which others have to live, or on the ways in which we are being helped by those who live holy lives.

The call to turn (return) to God is a constant call to the whole Church who

'clasping sinners to her bosom, is at once holy and in need of purification, and follows constantly the path of penance and renewal'(Vatican II LG 8).

The word 'conversion'(Catechism n. 1428) picks up the idea of turning back. It is the movement of a contrite ('broken') heart that is drawn and moved by grace to respond to God's merciful love.

The Prodigal Son

This movement of conversion is nowhere better expressed than in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15; Catechism n. 1439). The sin of the younger brother is great. He has no regard for his father, he sells off his share of the family estate, and he squanders the money in dissolute living. It is only when he is in desperate straits that he even thinks of his father, and then it is not sorrow that drives him but the thought that he could use his father by persuading him to hire him as a worker on the property. This would mean he would not have to relate to his father, but would have sufficient to buy some food. With this plan in mind, he heads off in the direction of home. No indication of conversion yet. The moment of conversion comes when he is welcomed with amazing love by his father. For the first time the boy wants to relate to his father as a son. The text reads:

'He set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.'

Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate' (Luke 15:20-24).

Peter's Conversion

We do not earn God's love by conversion. The initiative is with God. Conversion is always in response to God's love. This is brought out beautifully in the case of Peter. At the Last Supper Peter was so sure of himself that he could say: 'Though everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you' (Matthew 26:33). However, when Jesus was apprehended, and when Peter was accused of being a follower of Jesus, he persistently (this is the significance of 'three times') denied even knowing Jesus. Luke recounts the scene in which Jesus turned and looked across the courtyard and caught Peter's eye. Thank God Peter was looking at Jesus. It was then that Peter remembered Jesus' warning and realized what he had done, 'and he went out and wept bitterly' (Luke 22:61-63). We can only imagine what was in that glance. It surely included sadness and hurt, but above all love. Peter's repentance was his response to being loved. We are reminded of Paul's amazement when he writes:

'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8).

John, too, reflects on the forgiveness given to Peter by Jesus. He links this forgiveness with mission. How better to reassure Peter of his being forgiven than by entrusting him with a mission of leadership in the community. Jesus had promised this at the Last Supper when he said to Peter:

'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.'

The scene for Jesus' forgiving of Peter is set by John at a communion breakfast on the beach, a communion that the risen Jesus has prepared for his disciples. Jesus, the good shepherd, has lain down his life for his sheep (John 10:11,15). Now, as the risen Lord, he delegates Peter to be his instrument as shepherd of the flock. We have just been reminded of the fact that we can carry out our mission only to the extent that we are united to Jesus and are living his life. Without him we can fish all night and catch nothing (John 21:3). Peter can shepherd Jesus' flock only to the extent that he is united to Jesus. Jesus, therefore, asks him about his love.

Referring back to Peter's boast, the risen Jesus says to him: 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' The word he uses for love (*agapân*) means: 'Are you committed to me? Will you be faithful to the covenant love we have?' Peter responds: 'Lord, you know that I love you'. However, for 'love' he uses, not *agapân*, but *philein*.

Repentance

He makes no claim to being faithful, for he knows he can fail. He certainly is not boasting that he is better than the others. Rather, he assures Jesus that he is his friend, that he feels for him and cares about him, that his heart is deeply attached to him. Jesus' response is immediate, for the one condition for the pastoral role that he wishes to give to Peter is humble love: 'Feed my lambs'. Jesus remains the Shepherd and they are his lambs, but he is commissioning Peter to feed them.

Jesus repeats his opening question, though now he leaves out all reference to the others. Once again, Peter does not directly answer Jesus' question. He knows his weakness, but he can re-affirm his friendship. And, once again, Jesus says: 'Tend my sheep'. They are Jesus' sheep. He is the good shepherd (John 10:11). They do not belong to Peter, but Peter is to guide them and care for them.

Jesus' third question is different. He no longer speaks of commitment and fidelity. Rather he takes Peter's own word for love (*philein*) and asks Peter is he really his friend. Does he really care about Jesus? Is he truly fond of him? Peter's hurt is a healing one. Jesus is allowing him to make up for the three-fold denial. With a humble, repentant spirit, he declares: 'Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you'. All self-assurance has gone. Jesus, however, is assured of Peter's love and so, for a third time, he commissions Peter to express his love in caring for those whom Jesus loves.

The human frailty that we see in the Prodigal Son and, in a different way, in Peter highlights the power of God's healing and forgiving love. Peter's humility enabled Jesus to entrust him with the care of the others, knowing that he would not be tempted to take the glory to himself. Paul expresses this well (2Corinthians 4:6-7; Catechism n. 1420):

'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.'

Repentance

The Catechism offers a fine description of genuine repentance, without which reconciliation cannot be achieved, for though God offers forgiveness unconditionally (the father of the Prodigal Son kept watching and longing for the boy's return), our receiving it depends on the genuineness of our repentance:

'Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance towards the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change our life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of God's grace'(Catechism n. 1431).

We must once again stress that repentance does not come first. We do not have to do it on our own in order to merit forgiveness. The new heart that we need is itself a gift from God. God is love and so God will not force his gifts on us. It is for us to open our hearts to welcome God's gift.

‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my commandments’ (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

The Church encourages us to look upon the crucifix and contemplate Jesus dying on the cross. As John says: ‘They will look upon the one they have pierced’ (John 19:37). Whatever our sin, the love pouring from Jesus’ heart on Calvary should give us confidence that our sin has not stopped God loving us. It has stopped us welcoming God’s love, but all that can change. As we noted in the previous chapter, Jesus offered his life precisely so that sin would be forgiven:

‘Taking a cup and giving thanks, Jesus gave it to his disciples, saying: ‘Drink from this, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matthew 26:27-28).

Forgiven, healed and commissioned by Jesus, Paul could write:

‘I live now in faith, the faith of the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me. I cannot give up God’s gift’ (Galatians 2:21).

Letter to the Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews is interesting because of the wide range of words used for forgiveness. Different images help us reflect on the different ways in which we experience sin as well as the different ways in which we experience forgiveness. The author speaks of our being ‘purified’(1:3): the fire of God’s love burns away whatever it is that hinders love. He speaks of our being ‘sanctified’(2:11): we experience the joy of being once again in communion with the Holy One who is mysteriously present in our lives. He speaks of the experience of Christ ‘freeing those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’(2:15). He speaks of ‘atonement’(‘expiation’, 2:17). The allusion is to the high priest entering into the inner sanctuary of the temple. In the presence of the Holy One sin simply ceases to be.

He speaks also of ‘receiving mercy’(4:16; 8:12); of having one’s cry heard (4:16). He speaks of our hearts being finely tuned to Christ’s compassion (5:2); of our being healed (‘saved’; 5:9; 7:25). He speaks of the experience of being renewed, having a change of heart (6:6), and drawing near to God (7:19, 25). Part of forgiveness is that the memory of sin is gone (8:12; 10:17), in the sense that the sin is now remembered as forgiven. God delights in forgiving us so that we can get on with loving. We must learn from our sin to avoid repeating it. We must also learn to forgive ourselves. The author speaks of our conscience being perfected (9:9). The experience of being forgiven helps to finely tune our judgment. Knowing the love of God we are strengthened against repeating the sin. He speaks of redemption (9:12, 15): we were slaves, and now we are freed. He assures us that our sin has been ‘cast aside’(9:22; 10:18), ‘annulled’(9:26); ‘carried off’(9:28). The burden of sin has been lifted (10:4). We were tightly caught in the web of sin, and now we are free to move again (10:11).

We are called to forgive

We might reflect here on the words of the English woman mystic of Norwich, known as 'Julian' after the local parish church:

'Full lovingly does our Lord hold us when it seems to us we are nearly forsaken and cast away because of our sin – and deservedly so. Our courteous Lord does not want us to despair even when we fall often and grievously into sin. For our falling does not hinder God from loving us ... Some of us believe that God is all powerful and may do everything; and that he is all wise and can do everything; but as for believing that he is all love and will do everything, there we hold back. In my view nothing hinders God's lovers more than the failure to understand this. As by his courtesy God forgives our sins when we repent, even so he wills that we should forgive our sin, and so give up our senseless worrying and faithless fear'(Showings, chapters 39 and 73).

We are called to forgive.

Peter said to Jesus:

'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times' (Matthew 18:21-22).

Forgiving others is so important that John speaks of it in the final scene of his Gospel. Forgiving others frees us, but it also frees them. John has the risen Christ giving his disciples the Holy Spirit precisely so that they are enabled to forgive:

'Jesus said to the disciples, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,

"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"'(John 20:21-23).

Paul echoes Jesus' teaching:

'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you' (Ephesians 4:32).

Understanding is important, but not sufficient. Forgetting is neither possible nor helpful. The passing of time does not of itself heal. Only love heals. To 'forgive' is to 'give' oneself in love, and to keep on loving (to for-give). We are to accept the other person's repentance and give love. It is God's forgiveness that liberates us to grow in love. If we can allow ourselves to be moved by grace, if we can grow to be the Heart of Jesus in the world, we will find that by forgiving others we are liberated from much of the hurt that they have caused us. We are also offering those who have hurt us an opportunity to live again.

Some hurts radically alter relationships. There is no point in pretending otherwise. But no hurt need choke off our loving. Jesus could pray:

'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.'

His heart was pierced, but he continued to love, and it is this love that he poured out over our hurting world. He offers us this love for us to offer it to others in forgiveness. Let us thank God for those who have held us when we were paralysed, and have carried us to Jesus. Let us thank God for the ‘Good Samaritans’ in our life. When we see someone who is too afraid to move, let us lift them up and take them to Jesus.

The Catechism suggests certain actions that assist repentance and contribute to forgiveness. It speaks of efforts that we make to reconcile with others through acts of love (n. 1434). It speaks of having the courage to bear the cross of daily life (n, 1435). It reminds us of the importance here of the Eucharist (n. 1436), and quotes from the Council of Trent:

‘The Eucharist is a remedy to free us from our daily faults and to preserve us from mortal sins.’

It speaks of spiritual reading and prayer (n. 1437), and of penitential liturgies, pilgrimages and self denial (n. 1438).

The statement from the Council of Trent reminds us that the main sacrament for the forgiveness of ‘our daily faults’ is the sacrament of the Eucharist. It was Jesus’ love that healed sinners, and it is the intimate communion of the Eucharist that heals us from the ordinary failings of daily life. The Sacrament of Penance is principally intended for the forgiving of sins that have broken (not just wounded) our relationship with God and the Church (Catechism n. 1446). These sins are called ‘grave’ because of their seriousness; they are called ‘mortal’ because they cut us off from communion with God, the source of life, and so ‘kill the soul’.

Prior to the Irish influence of the seventh century, the sacrament was only for public sins, notably idolatry, murder and adultery, and was offered sometimes only once and after a prolonged period of public penance. It was reserved to the priest (the leader of the community) to reconcile the penitent to the community and to God (Catechism n. 1447). The public penance element was later abandoned, and the sacrament was used as an occasion for the confession of venial sins and generally for spiritual direction.

The fruitful reception of the sacrament

Sin hurts the Church. For this hurt to be healed certain things are required of the penitent. There are three. The key one is contrition. We must be genuinely sorry for the sin we have committed. Contrition is customarily spoken of as ‘perfect’ when it flows from love (Catechism n. 1452). It is referred to as ‘imperfect’ when it flows from any other source, including fear (Catechism n. 1453). Imperfect contrition can bring us to the sacrament. It can deepen into perfect contrition through the encounter with God’s mercy in the sacrament itself. A second requirement of the penitent is that all mortal sins are confessed (Catechism n. 1456). This presumes a careful and honest examination of conscience. The Church requirement that we receive communion at least once a year carries with it the obligation to confess one’s sins at least once – if we have committed any mortal sins (Catechism n. 1457). There is no obligation to confess venial sins, though this is recommended as a way of sensitising one’s conscience (Catechism n. 1458). A third requirement is ‘satisfaction’: making up to those whom our sin has injured (insofar as this is possible), and by prayer and action counteracting the disorder that our sin has created.

The ordained priest as minister of the sacrament

Every disciple of Jesus is given the grace to mediate God's forgiving grace to others. However, for sins that constitute a breaking of our relationship with God and with the community ('mortal sin'), the authority to forgive and so bring about reconciliation is restricted to ordained priests. In the Catechism (n. 1465), we read:

'When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner.'

We can be truly sorry and be forgiven by God without the sacrament. What the sacrament offers is the environment to encourage the necessary dispositions in the penitent, and the guarantee that when the Church, through the priest, offers absolution, God is offering it. Grave sin binds (constricts) the sinner, who cannot join the community in receiving the Eucharist. When the Church 'looses' the sinner from this binding, God looses the sinner from what is separating the sinner from communion with God: 'Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven'(Matthew 18:18).

The strictest code of confidentiality applies to what is shared in the sacrament. The priest may never, under any circumstances, speak of what the penitent has shared with him in Confession (Catechism n. 1467). Circumstances may arise in which the priest must instruct the penitent to tell other authorities what he has done. The priest may refuse absolution till the penitent has fulfilled this obligation. The priest, however, may never divulge what he has heard in the confessional. Having listened to the penitent, the priest engages him/her in a spiritual dialogue insofar as this is appropriate. When the penitent is ready, the priest assures him/her of God's merciful forgiveness in the following prayer of absolution (Catechism n. 1449):

'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 all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

The Sacramental Rites

In the current discipline of the Church there are three rites for the sacrament. One is between an individual penitent and the priest. Another is when the community gathers to reflect together on God's word and to pray and sing together. At an appropriate time during the common celebration, individual penitents approach the priest, confess their sins and receive absolution as in the individual rite. A third rite is restricted to occasions where both of the other rites are not possible. In this third rite a general absolution is given without prior individual confession. It is required that the penitents have the intention of availing themselves of personal confession when possible.

Paragraphs 36-37 of the Ritual speak also of ‘Penitential Celebrations’:

‘gatherings of the people of God to hear the proclamation of God’s word, in which we are invited to conversion and renewal of life, in which the good news is announced of our being freed from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ.’

Sacramental absolution is not given. It is important to remember that sacramental absolution is necessary only for mortal sin. Penitential celebrations are a way of coming together as sinners and celebrating the presence of Jesus among us, healing us from our daily faults, and constantly calling us to repentance.

In conclusion, the Catechism reminds us that the Sacrament of Reconciliation restores our communion with God (n.1468) and with the Church (n. 1469). It quotes the following words from the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope John-Paul II, called *‘Reconciliation and Penance’*(31.5):

‘Reconciliation with God leads to other reconciliations, which repair the other breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being where he regains his most central truth. He is reconciled with his brothers and sisters whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.’

Indulgences (Catechism 1471-1479)

One effect of sin is to attach us to things in an unhealthy way. The Church not only offers a way of forgiveness; it also welcomes us into a communion of love, a love which helps heal us from these unhealthy attachments. This is the positive value of what are called ‘indulgences’(Catechism n. 1471-1479) – ways in which we open ourselves through devotion, penance and charity to receive the healing love of the Church community with which we have been reconciled. The holiness of one profits others in the ‘communion of saints’.

Even when our sins are forgiven, by others, by the Church, by God, not all the harm caused by the sin to others or to ourselves is wiped away. We and others, in varying ways continue to carry the wounds of our sins. Repentance does not necessarily, of itself, remove the effects of sin. Full purification comes through suffering, till we reach a state of perfect love. We do not take this journey alone. The Church walks with us. Indulgences are offered authoritatively by the Church to aid us in the process. We are not left alone to bear these effects. We are surrounded by the grace of Jesus, and we belong to the Church. We speak of the ‘treasury’ of the love that is in the community because of what Jesus has done, but also because of the response to grace of all the wonderful people who have responded to grace down through the centuries. The Church authoritatively lays down certain acts of piety (prayers, acts of charity, pilgrimages etc), to help awaken in us this sense of belonging, and, in return, surrounds us with the prayer and love of the Church to help bring about full healing.

Indulgences

In the words of Karl Rahner (*Theological Investigations* vol 10, page 165):

‘An indulgence is gained only when the intercessory prayer of the Church achieves its goal. This can take place only in a heart that is disposed to penance, in a person who, working from the basis of faith and grace, strives through his actions and sufferings to ensure that he may become more and more a new creature fashioned after the image of Christ in all the dimensions of his being. It is in order that this may be achieved that the holy Church assures the Christian, by granting an indulgence, of her help and intercession.’