

## **A Catholic Understanding of Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

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As we in the panel are members of different Christian traditions all reflecting on a strong and major current in our faith—reconciliation and forgiveness—I looked for an angle of approach that might represent something distinctive from my tradition. You will understand, then, why in trying to enrich our conversation from a Roman Catholic point of view, I have chosen to approach the topic through what the Catholic church calls “The Sacrament of Reconciliation” and what it reveals to us about the dynamics of forgiveness and reconciliation.

A sacrament is understood to be a personal encounter with God in Christ through another or others in the community of the church. Forgiveness, in this sacramental context, refers to the removal of obstacles that lie in the way of intimate union with God and others. Traditionally, forgiveness has been understood as directed towards guilt for sin which destroys or weakens the relationship with God and neighbor. Forgiveness is thus part of a broader *process of reconciliation* with God, others, the world, and oneself.

Reconciliation is a complex biblical term which includes God’s invitation and our response to ongoing conversion within a community of faith. Conversion is of necessity ongoing because the new life received in initiation into the Christian community through baptism has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence. Thus, the Christian life is marked by struggle for a true, interior conversion of the heart.

Along the way of our living, we regularly miss the mark, deviate from the path that leads to life, abuse our God-given freedom. In other words, we sin. During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them. A remarkable sign of this is the

fact that Jesus receives notorious public sinners at his table, a gesture that expresses in an astonishing way both God's forgiveness and the restoration of relationship with the community. In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins, the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church.

This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ's solemn words to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.": In the Catholic Church's understanding, the office of "binding and loosing" which was given to Peter was also assigned to the whole college of apostles who in turn commission their assistants in ministry to do likewise. The import of that transmission is, to say the least, notable: Reconciliation with the Church thus becomes inseparable from reconciliation with God.

In its historical evolution, the sacrament of reconciliation as a process reveals to us something important for our time and context. Originally, the context for forgiveness in the process or reconciliation was communal. It took the form of public penitential works. This communal emphasis faded in the seventh century when Irish monks took to continental Europe the "private" practice of penance which did not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation could be realized with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament has been administered in secret between penitent and priest. The focus shifted from community well-being and the individual's solidarity with the community to an emphasis on experiencing forgiveness, healing and consolation.

Throughout the Middle Ages the "penitential system," as it was called, stressed purification and grace rather than reconciliation with God in the community. It thus became primarily therapeutic. In our society, the need for forgiveness, when acknowledged, is generally understood in an individualistic way.

It is for that reason often denied or avoided. The corrective we have tried to apply since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), is to encourage individuals to reflect on their need for forgiveness not simply in terms of *personal* sins but rather in terms of their *broader responsibilities to the community and thus to God*. Toward this end, a new, communal form for the sacrament of reconciliation was created. Communal celebrations of reconciliation and forgiveness witness more clearly to the ecclesial and social dimensions of both sin and conversion. It is this more communal and public emphasis that marked the reconciliation process in South Africa in the 1990s.

As demonstrated in South Africa, the spiritual values of forgiveness and reconciliation have become important political concepts. But what are the steps in the process? It is here that a close look at the sacrament of reconciliation is helpful because it is a microcosm of the dynamics that must find public and communal expression between communities and nations. There are basically three “movements” that come into play for penitents in the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. The first is repentance. The second is admission of sin. The third is reparation.

*Repentance* is sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed together with the resolution not to do it again. In the *admission or confession* of our failures, we look squarely at the sins we are guilty of, take responsibility for them, and open ourselves again to God and the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible. And in *reparation* we do what we can in order to repair the harm (e.g. return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). The whole process brings reconciliation not only with God, but also with the community of the Church.

What might these movements look like in the public forum? Pope John Paul II took it from theory to practice and gave us all an object lesson. When he outlined his plans for the jubilee year 2000 in 1994, he called for the church to make a critical self-evaluation of its actions over the past centuries.

The move was hailed in the press as a courageous act of humility and honest, in contrast with the triumphal tone of past holy years. He encountered resistance, however, among his own advisors and the College of Cardinals. In a major meeting in 1994, the idea went over like a lead balloon. Cardinals from former communist countries thought it would unwisely open the church up to a new wave of criticism. Many cardinals from the Third World did not want to dwell on issues that belonged, in large part, to European history. The pope listened quietly to the objections, and then, a few months later when he issued his apostolic letter *As the Third Millenium Draws Near*, he called on the church to purify itself by acknowledging past mistakes in the lead-up to the year 2000. “An examination of conscience is needed,” he told an Italian journalist. “Where we stand, where Christ has brought us, and where we have deviated from the Gospel.”

He then proceeded over the next six years to acknowledge errors in Christians’ treatment of Jews, in the church’s condemnation of astronomer Galileo Galilei, in the behavior of church evangelizers in the New World and in Europe, and in the church’s underestimation of Martin Luther. In some 120 different admissions, he acknowledged that Catholics have failed to live up to their own faith on numerous historical occasions, from the Crusades to the recent civil strife in Rwanda, from native peoples in Canada to Protestants in the Czech Republic. In so doing, he exemplified the first two movements in the process of reconciliation: repentance and admission of failure.

The third movement, reparation, began before the new millennium arrived in the form of a 1997 Vatican-sponsored educational conference on the causes of anti-Semitism and a similar meeting in 1998 to see what could be learned from the Inquisition towards insuring that neither rears its head again. The process continues to take various forms today, from reparation assistance to native peoples to international and national dialogue commissions between Catholics and Protestants aimed at the full communion of our churches.

As you can see, the reconciliation with God and with one another is not allowed to stay in an invisible, “spiritual” or mental realm. Rather, it leads to other real, on-the-ground reconciliations which repair the breeches caused by sin. This is necessary because, while the wrong-doing is forgiven, its concrete effects remain. Thus, through this process, the forgiven offender is reconciled in his/her innermost being where a sense of honesty, integrity, and innermost truth is regained. One is reconciled with others whom one has in some way offended and wounded. One is reconciled with the church. One is reconciled with all creation.

These three actions—of repentance, of admission of having missed the mark, and of reparation—find their answer in the priest’s absolution or words of forgiveness, which frees the penitents and facilitates their reconciliation with others. Because of its freeing and rejuvenating dimensions, forgiveness is an essential dimension of Christian spirituality and a condition for spiritual growth. And its proper context is the process of reconciliation, understood in personal, ecclesial, and communal terms. Central in the process is the recognition of God’s love. It is not our sin but God’s love that is basic. When this love touches us, we see how far we have been from God, and from really living in right relationship with others and with ourselves.

When you think about where forgiveness and reconciliation in the world today is needed—between Iraqis and Americans, between Israelis and Lebanese and Palestinians; between Sunnis et Shias and Kurds in Iraq; between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; between Arab and African Muslims in Sudan—can you imagine these three movements of the heart and spirit finding expression not just personally, but communally and publically as well: repentance, admission of wrongdoing, reparation?

If not, the rhetoric and language of forgiveness and reconciliation may be invoked, but the reality will go missing. But if so, then the long experience of the church has wisdom to offer to the nations today as to how to proceed in forgiving the wrongdoings of the past and be reconciled with one another to face together a future brighter than any past.

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