

# **THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION**

(2/21/06 Topic of Discussion)

Presented by Monsignor Fimiani

## **History of the Sacrament of Reconciliation:**

The Sacrament of Reconciliation has gone through a tremendous evolution.

Reconciliation is also referred to as Confession and Penance.

Forty/fifty years ago, going to Confession (or receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation) was more popular... frightening but popular. For example, at a previous Church where Monsignor Fimiani served, confessions would be heard for 5 hours straight with long lines of people waiting. The priest would see these people waiting and tend to move-it-along not always being able to attend to an individual's spiritual needs. Confession became impersonal. Today, since the 1970's, the Church has tried to make the confession a more personal experience.

Jesus did not invent Sacraments. The Sacraments developed as the Church looked at and studied Jesus' ministry and sanctified daily life focusing on important areas and formalized them.

In the early Church, no one went to Confession/Reconciliation as we do today. The Sacrament of Reconciliation was received only once, the same as Baptism and Confirmation. There was only one chance to reconcile your self to God. When baptized as an adult, all sins are washed away so, in the early church, Reconciliation after that was not needed. St. Augustine (3-4 century) is a good example. He was baptized as an adult. The story is that his mother, St. Monica, prayed and prayed for his conversion and eventually he did convert. He was baptized; all his sins were washed away, absolved through Baptism, so there was no need for further reconciliation to God.

The early Church looked at sin differently. It was a turning away from God resulting in total alienation. Sin alienated people from God and from the community. Sin was public and public penance was done. It

was assumed that a person who sinned was rejected by God and, as a result, was rejected by the Church and by the community until he/she did public penance and reconciled them self to God. People would sit in front of the Church in sackcloth and in ashes. Only once would they go to confession, be reconciled and converted. They then would be accepted back into Church and community. Therefore, confession was very rare.

As time evolved, around the 5<sup>th</sup> century most towns had a monastery with Monks and Friars. The townspeople befriended and supported them in their needs, food, goods, etc. They came to know each other and be friendly. The people began visit and talk to the Monks and Friars about their lives and problems, and would receive spiritual advice and direction. These visits became regular and gradually overtime people came to confess their sins. This was the beginning of 'confession'.

Currently, the Church is coming out of a terrible problem... a scandal in our Church. This is not the first. There were many dark times in the Church. In the beginnings for the Priesthood, there was no formal instruction, no formation...no theology or scripture. There were no seminaries or houses of formation. The Clergy were not always who/what they should be. Young men aspiring to the Priesthood would live in the Bishop's house who was influential. These young seminarians would become lackeys and servants to the Bishop. The Priesthood was bought by the wealthy, having their sons join the 'seminary' to seek influence and power in the Church. As a result, the people and the Church suffered greatly. People were thirsting for spirituality while our Priests were ill-formed lacking in spiritual training. If the clergy is not trained, the people will suffer. A Counsel was formed (there have been many Counsels over the centuries) for reform of the Clergy.

By the 11<sup>th</sup> / 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Church saw more frequency of Confession. Because many Clergy were ill-formed, the Church came up with books and manuals on what was a sin and what was not ...an actual list of sins...Penitential Books, sins vs. Penance. As a result, when people went to confess their sins, they 'listed' them. Sins were marked either venial (not too grave) or mortal (very grave), again creating lists that separated the two. (The early Church did not know

venial vs. mortal...ALL sin was a separation from God, Church and community). These 'lists' made going to Confession automatic.

Overtime, people began to have a great sense of unworthiness. They fell away from going to Confession and from receiving Holy Communion. They did not fall away from the Church, but from these Sacraments. They felt unworthy; they felt they could never be worthy enough to receive them. They felt they could not receive Holy Communion (the Holy Eucharist) without going to confession first, which made the two Sacraments almost blend into one. The two Sacraments became linked together; one would go to Confession and then receive Holy Communion. It made sense, especially if a person had not received Holy Communion in a long time that they should go to Confession first. That is why people thought, and today some still do, they 'had' to go to Confession in order to receive Holy Communion.

Up to about 20 years ago, the confessional room, or 'box' as it was called, was small and dark. It consisted of an area broken into 3 parts with the Priest in the middle and a small box- like room on either side for a penitent to kneel. The penitent would confess to the Priest through a screen. There was a sliding screen that would close off the penitent waiting on the other side. All was supposed to be as soundproof and private as possible. The area was very dark and small, barely any light at all. The Priest would hear one confession than the other, back and forth. People would line up on either side of the confessional and wait their turn. The Priest, always aware of the lines of people, had the tendency to speed up the penitents' confession to move things along. As a result, confession became impersonal, automatic and anonymous.

Why is Confession/Reconciliation stilled feared today? Because the Rite has changed and people do not know how to confess. Years ago we trained little children to 'list' sins. They had a limited understanding of this so parents and teachers would help them develop their 'list' by making suggestions, e.g., "I disobeyed my parents", "I hit by brother". Many adults still confess as when they were children.

Today, most Churches have Reconciliation Rooms where a penitent

has the choice to either kneel in front of a screen or go 'face-to-face' sitting in a chair talking directly to the Priest. All is bright, well lit and spacious. Sins and problems are talked and discussed. Open dialogue is encouraged.

The first experience, and all after, should not be difficult but rather a joyous occasion, a celebration similar to the other Sacraments.

The Church and Religious Education continuously look at the process of Reconciliation to make it as meaningful as possible. Textbooks are now geared to reconciliation, not to 'lists' of sins. . The 'list' is not important. What is important is the "formation of conscious". (Today we use an 'examination of conscience'. These will be handed out at next week's session).

As mentioned above, we trained 'little' children to list their sins. Later, that was moved to second graders and older, which was better because they had a better understanding. Also, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has been removed from receiving the Holy Eucharist. To make each Sacrament a meaningful experience, children, when preparing for these Sacraments, go to Reconciliation months before they receive their First Holy Communion.

Going to confession is an affirmation of your faith.

Changes have been made to all the Sacraments to make each experience more meaningful and approachable.

In the Old Testament, in order to be absolved from sin, an offering or a sacrifice was needed. Now we use a meaningful 'penance' to help a person with conversion and a change of life.

It is hard for us to fathom that God can forgive us. People have a problem with forgiveness in their own lives and find it difficult to understand how God can forgive.

**Sacramental Seal:** A Priest cannot break this Seal. He can never divulge what is told to him in the confessional regardless of the severity of the sin or the consequences.

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**Next week's session will wrap-up 'The Sacrament of Reconciliation' and tie it in with that session's topic "God's Love for Us".**

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