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THE NEW RITE
OF
PENANCE**

by

F. SOTTOCORNOLA, S.X.

Translated by

THOMAS A. KROSNIKI, S.V.D., D.S.L.



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A LOOK AT THE NEW RITE OF PENANCE

Rev. F. Sottocornola, S.X.

In a brief paragraph in the Constitution on the Liturgy, Vatican Council II stated: "The rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament" (Constitution on the Liturgy, no. 72, hereafter = CL). Nearly ten years after the promulgation of the conciliar constitution, the sacrament of penance enters into the picture of "the general restoration of the liturgy" (CL, no. 21). The time need not seem too long if one recalls that during this same period all of the various areas of the liturgy of the Church have been the object of careful revision. The road to the revision of the rite of penance has covered nearly seven years.

Preparatory Work

The first study group for the revision of the rite of penance was brought together in December 1966 under the auspices of the *Consilium ad Exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia*.¹ A preliminary plan of work was submitted to the "Relatores" on the 4th of April, 1967; other directives were sought from the members of the Consilium in the course of its eighth session on the 13th of April.

The group prepared a complete preliminary scheme for the new rite of penance which was submitted to the members of the Consilium in April of 1968 (10th session). In addition to the designation of the criteria used in the revision and a synthesis of the history of the sacrament of penance in the church of the West as well as the East, the scheme proposed three rites: the confession of individuals; the communal celebration of penance with individual confession and absolution; the communal celebration of penance with general absolution without private confession (for those foreseen exceptional cases then already in practice and authorized in the recent document of the Apostolic See).² A new formula for absolution was also suggested which better expressed—according to the desires of the Council—the effect and proper grace of the sacrament of penance.

In the eleventh session (October, 1968) the *Introduction* was examined and approved. Finally in November of 1969 the possibility of a

plurality of formulas of absolution was considered. Implementation would be left to the judgment and decision of the individual episcopal conferences. By this time the work of *coetus 23 bis* "De Paenitentiae" was considered completed. The document raised certain questions which were submitted for examination by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This examination extended to June 16, 1972 when the "Pastoral Norms for the Use of General Absolution" were published.

Before promulgating the new rites for the celebration of penance, it seemed opportune—since more than two years had lapsed since they had been drawn up—to reconsider them once more in order to adapt them to the decisions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to complete the *Introduction* according to the style introduced in recent times in the other promulgated liturgical books and, finally, to enrich the rites themselves drawn up according to the basic lines established by the first study group. For this revision of the rite of penance a new group was established in June of 1972.³ The results of the first revision were presented to the consultors of the Congregation for Divine Worship on the 8-10th of November and to the members of the Congregation in their plenary reunion on November 22. The texts, corrected according to the Congregation's indications and suggestions, were again submitted to the judgment of the members and consultors of the Congregation for Divine Worship as well as the other Roman congregations interested in the rite of penance. The "modi" submitted to the study group (around 300) brought about important changes and numerous corrections. The reworked text was finally discussed anew in the reunion of the consultors which took place on March 1-3, 1973. After it had received the approbation of the Holy Father it was promulgated by the Congregation for Divine Worship on December 2, 1973.

It should not however appear that the work on the new rite of penance was done solely in the study group or by means of the decisions that it received from higher authorities. The two study groups that worked on this rite benefited from the significant theological and pastoral studies of the past ten years as well as the fruits of initiative found to one degree or another everywhere in the Church during this time, as for example from the research, investigation and discussions recently presented on this question in magazines, journals and at conventions.

It is possible to say that the revised common rite of penance in its fundamental structure as well as the penitential celebration which was proposed and approved, are the fruits of research, experimentation and verification of pastoral practice which had matured during the past years in the life of many Christian communities.

The Criteria for the Revision of the Rite of Penance

Vatican Council II had not only requested the revision of the sacramental rite of penance (CL, no. 72), but had also furnished valuable indications for this renewal in its documents.⁴ From the various texts which the Council dedicated to the sacrament of penance it is possible to underline the concern that:

—sin is at the same time an offense against God and an injury to the body of the Church;

—in penance the sinner is reconciled with God and with the Church;

—the entire Church collaborates in the conversion and in the reconciliation of a member who has sinned.

In addition to this fundamental aspect of penance in the Church other elements were taken from the general indications concerning liturgical reform, especially:

a. The importance of sacred scripture and its proclamation in the celebration of the sacraments (CL nos. 24, 33, 35).

As a matter of fact, in the celebration of penance as it was practiced up to the present time there was a complete absence of the proclamation or reading of the word of God.

b. The communal dimension of the liturgy and especially of the sacraments (CL nos. 26, 27).

It was necessary therefore to study the possibility of reestablishing also in the sacrament of penance, in a form adapted to our time, that ecclesial aspect of celebration which had been so great a characteristic during the first centuries.

c. The preference for a clear and simple rite (CL, no. 34) which at the same time would have a certain nobility or dignity as well as beauty (*see ibid.*; "distinguished by a noble simplicity . . .").

The rite of penance as it has been celebrated up to our present day is excessively impoverished. The repetition of the sacrament over a long period by the same confessor with numerous penitents brought about a certain rapid rhythm with an almost total absence of prayer, the disuse of a sign of pardon as, for example, the imposition of the hand, etc. It was necessary therefore to enrich the ritual expression of the sacrament which is so important to the communal life of the Christian community and to the individual. At the same time it was important to maintain a certain simplicity and brevity which would render the celebration practical and easy.

Finally it was necessary to take into account the actual theological orientation of the sacrament which emphasizes the central role of the

paschal mystery of Christ, the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, and the love and the mercy of the Father as the source of salvation to the world. These are elements which up to the present time had not been properly or sufficiently expressed in the prayers within the rite of penance.

The Name of the Sacrament

The name of the sacrament is very important. It serves to identify it and, in one way or another, express its content. Today, as a matter of fact, the sacrament of penance is most commonly called "confession." In fact, with the establishment of the private celebration of the sacrament, the progressive reduction of the aspect of penance or satisfaction, and the insistence upon an integral confession, the element which predominated both in catechetical instruction and in pastoral practice has been the actual confession of sins.

On the other hand the term "penance" which by itself signifies conversion or a profound change in life (*metanoia*), has taken on in modern languages more or less the significance of a work of penance or the expiation of sin. It seemed useful that the new name better emphasize the essential content of the sacrament. This name seemed to be "reconciliation." We find in fact that this term was already used in the scriptures to designate either forgiveness of a brother (Matthew 5: 23-24) or—above all—the work of God which reunites men among themselves (Ephesians 2: 14-16) and with himself (Colossians 1: 20 and Romans 5: 10) by means of the cross of Jesus Christ. A very rich text which repeatedly uses this term and which refers also to the ministerial action of the apostle who acts in the name of God, is that from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians: "It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled. So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God (II Corinthians 5: 18-20).

The ending is common in the ancient Roman liturgy which used it to indicate the absolution of penitents and their reunion with the community.⁵ Finally this conclusion seems to underscore the action of God (while "penance" emphasizes to a greater degree the action of man) since the biblical use of this ending points out the relationship between the work of God who reconciles men among themselves and with himself by means of Christ. Better still, the term *reconciliation* expresses the bilateral relationship of mutual encounter which is proper to the Christian sacraments in which God encounters man with his gift of salvation by means of Christ who acts in his Church, and man

in the same Church and by means of the same Christ receives in faith salvation and the gift of God.

For all of these reasons it seemed fitting to return to the use of the term reconciliation in referring to this sacrament, without replacing the traditional name "sacrament of penance." While we speak about the rite of penance and usually designate this sacrament of the new covenant with the name of *penance*, the rite employs the term reconciliation in the titles of the diverse rites: "The Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents," etc. Thus it will become common to use the word "reconciliation" to indicate the culminating moment of the celebration of penance, the sacramental gesture of absolution, or the reconciliation of the penitent.

This small innovation can aid in a happier catechetical presentation of the sacrament, as well as a pastoral approach which emphasizes the aspect of joyful encounter with God and not only the negative aspect (which is also indispensable) of hatred for one's sin and its expiation; it is the meeting of the father with the son and not only the road of return to him.

Theological and Pastoral Premises

In the publication of the various renewed sections of the Roman ritual, one notes a certain new importance given to the *Introduction*, which is considered as a proper theological-pastoral introduction to the rites themselves.

The rite for the sacrament of penance as well as its practice as known up to the present, terminates a history in which the evolution is so profound and the variety of forms of celebration so noteworthy that it demands a systematic reconsideration of the entire theology of the sacrament of penance. This systematic reconsideration has in fact already begun. Only in these last years has the question been globally and radically considered. Historical research and theological reflection have recently made important steps forward. Nevertheless it is not possible for a discipline so rooted in the practice of the Church and in the mentality itself of the faithful to rapidly undergo a profound transformation. Nor is it proper that a liturgical book serve as a place of decision for theological controversy or to propose an interpretation on the historical data.

The theological premises of the new rite of penance are, and cannot be otherwise, a presentation of the firm and accepted points of traditional doctrine within the Church in this area, as specified since the Council of Trent, keeping in mind the statements and position of Vatican Council II, as well as the evolution of language and of theological discussion.

In this sense it is above all desirable to place the sacrament of penance within the total vision of the mystery of salvation, clearly reuniting it to the reconciliation of man with God which is brought about in Christ and which is continually actualized in the Church especially in baptism, which is the sacrament of radical conversion, and in the eucharist, which unites the faithful to the immolated body of Christ and to the blood poured out for the remission of sins. Sacramental penance appears therefore as a renewal of baptismal grace, in strict relationship with the eucharist which remains the culminating sign of participation in the life of the Church and, by means of it, in the life of God himself (*Introduction*, nos. 1-2).

The sacrament of penance is described as deriving from the Church and from its continual efforts to purify and renew itself. The sinner who has returned to divine life and to full communion with the Church is inserted into that effort of continual conversion and the always more complete realization of baptismal grace which constitutes one of the fundamental postures of the Church of Christ (*Introduction*, nos. 3-4). Thus the communal and ecclesial dimensions of penance appear in which the faithful are not only reconciled with God but also with their brothers and sisters, taking part in a special effort to liberate mankind from the darkness of sin (*Introduction*, no. 5: see nos. 8 and 11).

The constituent elements of the sacrament of penance are presented according to the traditional teaching of the Church: repentance, accusation, reparation, absolution. The succession of these elements does not correspond to the development of the rite as it is celebrated today. In fact the absolution is usually given prior to reparation. There is no reason why in particular circumstances it might not be more opportune for the penitent to complete the sacramental reparation prior to receiving the sign of reconciliation as was the early practice of the Church. In those cases where the bishop has permitted general or collective absolution, reparation does precede absolution. In this way the fundamental importance of manifest repentance on the part of the penitent and absolution on the part of the priest is evident in the structure of the sacrament of penance (*Introduction*, no. 6).

Article 7 in the *Introduction* clearly distinguishes the case in which the celebration of the sacrament of penance is necessary (because of grave or mortal sin) and the use of this sacrament to foster that need for a continual conversion of the Church which expresses itself in various and diverse ways and finds the privileged moment of grace in the sacrament. It appears as the continual celebration of the victory of Christ over sin and as a song of praise to the power and mercy of God who continually purifies his people and renews them with the grace of his pardon.

Of great importance are the norms concerning the adaptation of the liturgy of penance. This adaptation is not only a possibility but an actual obligation on the part of bishops and their communities. The episcopal conferences, in a particular way, are responsible for the translation not only of the texts⁶ but also the composition of new prayers for the minister and the faithful. The actual formula of absolution is excluded. The conferences furthermore are to determine the penitential gesture by means of which in the collective rite of reconciliation the faithful who intend to receive absolution are to manifest their conversion and sincere sorrow. The norms concerning the faculty of absolution on the part of ministers, the place or chair of the confessor, the clerical vestment, etc., are also to be determined by the episcopal conferences. These are to be established according to the various cultures and diverse surroundings with their particular needs and distinct traditions.

The competency of the local Ordinary is to be "the moderator of the penitential discipline"⁷ in his Church. He is to be concerned with the pastoral care of everything that concerns this sacrament in the concrete life of his community, with special attention given to his responsibility of establishing those cases when general absolution may be given within the context of a communal penitential service.

Priests along with their communities are particularly invited to find occasions and plan concrete forms for celebrating the sacrament of penance. The fundamental structure of the rite and the formula for absolution, according to the norms of the episcopal conference, should always be followed (*Introduction*, nos. 38-40).

If these norms concerning the adaptation of the rite of penance are actually and diligently followed by those who are competent, it is possible that a penitential service will develop which is adapted not only to the diverse cultures and local traditions, but also to the various situations and unique life circumstances of the community or group.

The New Rites of Penance

During the last centuries penance was celebrated only in the individual form which had been introduced in the western Church at the beginning of the sixth or seventh century. The new rite of penance, while drawing upon the experience of the many centuries in which the sacrament of penance was celebrated publicly in the early Church, proposes three diverse rites for the sacrament of penance which complement one another and permit one in particular circumstances to stress the various aspects of penance and to better adapt the celebration to the particular needs of the faithful.

1. The reconciliation of individual penitents.

Up to the present time, the reconciliation of a penitent in the Roman rite contained elements from diverse sources. Medieval in origin, they had been collected in the Ritual of 1614 especially from the *Liber Sacerdotalis of Costellani* (1523) and the ritual of Cardinal Santori (1584).⁸

These prayers contain much repetition. In addition they do not express clearly the mystery which is celebrated. There is no explicit reference to the pascal mystery of Christ, to the work of the Holy Spirit, or to ecclesial mediation in the sacrament. The expression "from all bond of excommunication" has become ambiguous. Originally it signified the readmission into the sacramental community from which the sinner had been excluded because of serious sin. Finally, the gesture of imposition of hands (or hand), so characteristic of the ancient penitential practice of the Church and reinstated in the Roman Ritual of 1614, had fallen into disuse.

The revised rite presents a structure that is significantly new, while respecting what preceded. This is shown in the following schema:

<i>Ordo Paenitentiae 1973</i>	<i>Roman Ritual 1952 ed.</i>
1. The welcome of the penitent a. the sign of the cross b. the invitation to faith in God	1. The welcome of the penitent a. the sign of the cross
2. Reading of the word of God (optional)	2.
3. Formula of general confession (optional) and personal confession	3. Formula of general confession (at least a brief form) and personal confession
4. Manifestation of sorrow on the part of the penitent	4.
5. Prayer (1) of absolution. The penitent responds: <i>Amen</i> (the priest extends his hands or at least his right hand over the head of the penitent).	5. <i>Misereatur . . . Amen.</i> <i>Indulgentiam . . . Amen.</i> (the priest extends his hand toward the penitent) <i>Dominus noster . . . Amen.</i> <i>Passio Domini nostri . . . Amen.</i>
6. Praise for God's mercy	6.
7. Dismissal of penitent	7.

Although the new rite is significantly more rich it is not necessarily longer than the preceding one if one recalls the optional character of

certain of its parts. The new elements (the invitation to make an act of faith in God, the scripture reading, the manifestation of sorrow, the praise for the mercy of God, and the dismissal of the penitent) significantly enrich the liturgy of penance even when celebrated individually.

The word of God (read either during or before the celebration of the sacrament) is an invitation to conversion. As a proclamation of the love of God it disposes one for forgiveness. Thus it is an element of great importance; it grants light to the individual conscience in order to be able to distinguish good from evil. It helps one to discover the salvific power of the pardon of God. It helps one to sense the call to conversion. Thus "confession" or the final proclamation of the mercy of God is joined to the "confession" of sins proper to give it a new significance. One is not turned in upon oneself but turned toward God's grace and salvation. In fact, in the confession of sins we proclaim the power of God who saves. Thus confession of one's sins is an act of conversion and of hope, open to the future and to the glorification of God.

A change of greater importance touches the formula of absolution. In the place of the previous four prayers one formula has been substituted which terminates with the essential words already determined by the council of Trent: "I absolve you from your sins. . . ." ⁹

For a renewed catechesis of the sacrament of penance it was necessary that the absolution formula express clearly the mystery of reconciliation that is brought about in the life of the Christian by means of this sacrament. For this reason the new formula indicates that the reconciliation of the penitent brings with it the grace of pardon and of peace (*see* John 20: 19-23) which proceeds from the mercy of God who reveals to the sinner the heart of a father. It places in proper relationship the bestowal of grace and the history of salvation in which God has reconciled the world to himself by means of the death and resurrection of his Son. It underscores the work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion and sanctification of the sinner. Finally it places in true light the ecclesial aspect of reconciliation brought about by means of the minister, that is, the priestly service of the Church (*see Introduction*, no. 19).

In the case of a censure which must be removed prior to the absolution of sins, the new rite of penance provides in an appendix a formula which only slightly alters what has been used up to the present time.¹⁰

Concerning the gesture of the imposition of hands (at least the right hand) which accompanies the formula of absolution, the new rite does no more than reintroduce the classical gesture of the ancient penitential liturgy¹¹ which had fallen into disuse with the progressive substitution of private penance for public penance. It was the Roman Ritual of 1614 which reintroduced this gesture.

However, by prescribing (for the first time) the screen between the penitent and the priest the ritual rendered the use of this gesture practically impossible. The new rite reinstated this gesture in order to indicate the gift of the Holy Spirit through the remission of sins and the manifestation of that reconciliation with God and with the Church which the present formula proclaims and effects.

In order to give the sign of the imposition of hands its true expressive value, it will be proper for the penitent at that moment to kneel or at least bow while the priest stands. It is presupposed that the gesture as a visible sign will be evident to the penitent himself to whom it is directed. Unfortunately, it cannot be easily used with the traditional screen. It should be noted, however, that the new rite does not make any prescription concerning the place of the celebration of penance or the position of the priest and the penitent. Such guidelines are to be made by the episcopal conferences or by the individual bishops according to the diverse religious traditions and cultures of the various peoples and the situations in which the sacrament is celebrated.

The new rite for the reconciliation of the individual penitent is concluded with a very brief dialogue between the priest and the penitent which is an act of joyous praise of God who has "manifested his power above all in his forgiveness."¹² At the same time it is a fraternal greeting from the minister of the Church to the faithful who along with him has celebrated the sacrament of penance (*see Introduction*, no. 11).

2. The Reconciliation of More Than One Penitent With Individual Confession and Absolution

In the first centuries of the Church the celebration of reconciliation of penitents took place in public. This practice, the only one up until the sixth or seventh century, beginning with the sixth century was gradually replaced by individual private confession and subsequent individual absolution.

The principal motive which brought about the disuse of public penance was the fact that it was not to be repeated. The introduction of so-called private penance was especially useful in so far as it offered to the Church the use of penance which could be repeated and done so frequently.

The liturgical movement and Vatican Council II have rediscovered the communal dimension of the entire liturgical life. Recent studies and polls have brought to light that one of the most frequent criticisms of confession was its excessive ritual and psychological-moral individualism. It was requested that the following be brought into greater evidence: the relationship between good and evil, the understanding of sin not only individually but also collectively, and the ecclesial nature of the sacrament of reconciliation. All of this should be done not

only in the catechesis but also and above all in the rite of penance itself which must appear as an act of the Church to which each individual penitent associates himself.

Pastoral experience has repeatedly proposed in these past years a plan for a communal celebration of penance.¹³ The new rite for communal celebration of penance with confession and absolution done individually practically repeats an outline of the sacrament already in use and proposes it for the entire Church of the Latin Rite.

One objection to this rite can arise from the fact that in a context which is communally rich the culminating moment of conversion (that is to say the confession of personal sins as a sign of abhorring them and sacramental absolution) is done in an individual manner. We are not, however, dealing with an interruption in the communal act but rather, as in every sacrament of the Church, with the desire to emphasize at the same time both the communal and the personal aspects. Man is a person and part of a community. In the communal celebration of baptism, the high point is the profession of faith and the washing of the new members of the Church. In the eucharist itself—the communal action par excellence—the culminating moment is the eating of the body of Christ and the individual gesture of drinking from one chalice. In the celebration of the sacrament of penance as well, it is normally preferable that the two aspects be placed in equal evidence. For this reason the normal and preferred form of celebration should be the communal in which the personal elements are given proper emphasis by means of personal accusation and individual absolution.

Perhaps in certain cases it will seem preferable for various reasons to terminate the celebration after the homily and the communal penitential prayer in order to allow each of the faithful to approach a priest with sufficient time to dispose himself for his confession and individual absolution. In this case one is able to have a simple penitential celebration which prepares for the individual celebration of the sacrament or a communal celebration of the sacrament distributed in different moments:

- a. An initial gathering and liturgy of the word followed by general confession and penitential prayers.
- b. Individual confession and absolution within a certain period of time (it could extend from one hour or to several days).
- c. A final gathering in which everyone together celebrates the joy of reconciliation which could also conclude with the eucharist.

3. The Reconciliation of More Than One Penitent With General Confession and Absolution

A difficult question both historically and theologically is the necessity of an integral confession of all serious sins as a part of the very structure of the sacrament of penance. The decision of the Council of Trent with regard to this matter is well known: "if anyone should say, in the sacrament of penance for the remission of sins it is not necessary *Iure Divino* to confess all and every mortal sin which one can recall after due and diligent consideration even those which are hidden and which are against the two last commandments as well as the circumstances which change the species of the sin . . . *anathema sit.*"¹⁴

The pastoral norms of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reemphasize this instruction of Trent without entering into discussion as to its merit.

The fact remains and is very important that the pastoral norms supported by the Instruction of the Apostolic Penitentiary of March 25, 1944, as well as by certain recent directives by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples permit—in extraordinary cases at the discretion of the local ordinary—general absolution after a simple general confession. In this case the accusation of grave sins remain as matter to be confessed at the next celebration of individual penance.

This decision is of no small importance. For those who were waiting for a simple "abolition" of confession (as if it were just a simple ritual or discipline of the Church and not something which touches the very structure itself of the sacrament and its inner dynamics) this new practice seems to change the actual situation too little. For the person who reflects somewhat seriously on the question it will be clear that the new practice touches the liturgical practice of penance in a profound way.

One thinks, for example, of the profound change in the practice and the penitential mentality of the Church when towards the 11th century it became common to grant absolution immediately after the penitent had made his self accusation, permitting him to complete the satisfaction or reparation *after* the absolution. As a consequence the people and the ministers themselves began to understand that penance or satisfaction was one part of the sacrament, but of secondary importance with respect to the other elements. The attention that was given, however, to the accusation was given to the sacrament itself which began to be called the sacrament of confession. Thus an analogous change can take place: the possibility of placing the accusation after the absolution (in those extraordinary cases so designated by the bishop) will help one to understand that greater attention must be given to repentance and to its sacramental manifestation. Thus it will happen that the sacrament of penance will manifest its more important aspects

and its more authentic renewal: the rediscovery of the dimension of conversion, the true demand and sincere renewal of life, the understanding that to confess one's sins is a sign which manifests conversion. But what is more important is to detest them and to remove them from one's life. Thus in the sacrament of penance there will appear more clearly than ever the true reality of the sacrament: conversion.

Finally one can notice that after general absolution the obligation remains to accuse one's self insofar as one is aware of truly grave sins. This is not the time to begin a reflection upon the role of moral theology in renewing the penitential practice of the Church today, but it is easy to note how a good portion of the faithful, if they are properly instructed, will not be obliged to any subsequent accusation.

It is left up to the pastoral prudence of the bishops in consultation with their presbyters to establish the occasions when it is possible to grant general absolution without previous individual confession.

The renewed rite for a common celebration of penance with general confession and absolution generally follows the outline of the rite for the common penance services with individual confession and absolution. The difference lies only in the fact that in the celebration of penance with general confession and absolution the penitents manifest by some external action their desire to be absolved. (This should be determined by the episcopal conference: kneeling, bowing, or some other gesture which expresses a penitential attitude according to the nature of the people involved.) The prayer of general absolution follows this sign.

The Pastoral Norms reemphasize the necessity of a short admonition concerning the necessity of true repentance and a sincere disposition, the obligation to make reparation for damage done or scandal given, and the necessity of eventually confessing serious sins at the next individual celebration of penance.¹⁵

Penitential Celebrations

The renewed rite of penance offers in an appendix several samples of penitential services. Their structure, their importance and purpose were described in the *Introduction* (nos. 36-37). These celebrations consist, for the most part, in the reading and meditation on the word of God followed by a penitential gesture (in most cases a prayer). They serve to foster and express in a communal way the demand for a continual conversion within the Church and in the individual faithful. They can also prepare for the celebration of the sacrament of penance itself which can take place subsequently, individually, in a time which is more opportune for each penitent. They are especially useful in those pastoral situations, today more frequent than ever, in which there is a scarcity of priests who can absolve penitents. In fact, in the absence of confession

to a priest of the Church, the faithful who has fallen into serious sin is still bound to repentance and conversion. Such a situation has brought about at certain times the omission of a catechesis on this most important obligation of conversion. It is possible to see therefore the great utility of such a celebration which also in the absence of priests can be organized by a deacon, catechist or one of the faithful. In these services, by means of hearing the word of God and common prayer, a sincere repentance is fostered—with the desire for the sacrament of penance—the fruit of which is already obtained: God's forgiveness and reconciliation with him and with one's brothers.

These celebrations are very useful in forming a penitential attitude among the young which is consonant with their age and condition, for helping groups and communities in a collective renewal in addition to personal renewal, and in fostering a distaste for sin and a true conversion also among catechumens.

Evidently, the penitential celebrations suggested in the appendix of the rite foster the composition of formulas and schemas better adapted to the needs not only of the diverse cultures and people, but also to various circumstances and situations. Not only the episcopal conferences in their translation and adaptation of the present rite, but the priests themselves with their community must, from time to time, search for ways to prepare the celebration in order that it may be more adapted to the particular occasion.

Towards the Renewal of the Catechesis and Pastoral Theology of Penance

The promulgation of the revised rite of penance cannot be the panacea for the difficult and delicate situation in which we actually find the practice and catechesis of the sacrament. It should be beyond our expectation that the publication of the new rite of penance will automatically change the situation. On the other hand, for some perhaps it introduces too little; for others it provokes the pastoral obligation for undertaking a truly innovative pastoral renewal.

1. It speaks, above all else, of inserting the celebration of the sacrament of penance in the setting of the penitential life of the Christian community. To the renewal of the rite must correspond a renewal of conscience and a penitential effort on the part of the community and of the individuals within it. Without discovering penance as a fundamental dimension of the Christian life, the changes in the penitential ritual will mean very little. To discover this dimension it will be most useful to reconsider the Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini* of Paul VI and its profoundly evagelic message.

2. Penitential celebrations will be the occasion and the privileged instrument for fostering a penitential attitude as well as a penitential force

towards continual conversion within the community and the group. Analogous to the eucharist which constitutes the culminating and indispensable sign of every Christian community, the penitential service must also scan the rhythm of the continuous demand of renewal proper to every authentic Christian group. The preparation, the execution, as well as the actualization in life of these celebrations must become a constant in the Christian life. The time most appropriate for this force towards penitential renewal is without doubt Lent.

3. In the midst of this general attitude toward conversion the pastor of souls must search and propose to his brothers the form of the sacrament of penance most adapted to the celebration. What is most important is the use of a form similar to that proposed in the new order. The individual form is always possible and in itself more indicative of a renewal of one's personal life which touches in a most profound way the individual's conscience and obliges him to an attentive examination of his own particular situation. The communal form with individual confession is more adapted to homogeneous groups or periodic celebrations. The communal form with general absolution is outlined for those exceptional cases provided for by present legislation.

4. The selection and the active, conscious and fruitful celebration of these diverse forms of penance presuppose an adequate catechesis on the nature of penance itself, on the sacrament, its several parts, as well as its role in the individual and communal Christian life. Should not the next season of Lent be the best occasion for a catechetical program which considers this problem in depth? This catechesis must also present the new rites, especially the renewed rite for individual penance. In it and in its pastoral practice the following points must be emphasized:

a. The primacy of one's interior disposition (see the introduction to one of the prayers of the penitent for absolution as well as the Our Father in the communal celebration);

b. The ecclesial dimension of the celebration even in the individual celebration by which every penitent senses the help of the total Church in his personal renewal, and feels that his penance is at the same time reconciliation with God and with his brothers (see the introduction to the communal celebration of penance);

c. The importance of the word of God in illuminating the conscience and inviting one to conversion (see the introduction to the biblical readings in the individual penance celebration, and the important place that they occupy in the communal celebration);

d. The true sense of accusation of one's sins which consists in the penitent's self-understanding not only in an abstract or generic way, but also concretely in the various manifestations of the evil we find

within ourselves (thus the accusation of serious sins becomes a part of penance; after general absolution there remains the necessity of manifesting and completing conversion within the Church);

e. Reconciliation as a mystery of the mercy and love of the Father associated with the victory of Christ and the renewal within us of the gift of his Spirit, going beyond a mere psychological conception of confession in order to more clearly express the true sacramental dimension of penance (see the new formula of absolution and the sign of imposition of hands);

f. The function of satisfaction or penance which must be rediscovered and reevaluated by means of forms which are more moving and better adapted to our times (*see Introduction*, nos. 6c, 18).

g. The necessity of joining a confession of one's personal sins to a proclamation of the mercy of God in an attitude of thanksgiving and praise (see the concluding rite for the celebration of individual or communal penance), so that in the sacrament of penance one places in proper evidence the aspect of worship, sacrifice of praise, the proclamation of the paschal victory of Christ. In this context it is also fitting that the celebration of penance lead one to the celebration of the eucharist.¹⁶ It is also most necessary to rediscover the festive aspect of the celebration of reconciliation which indeed manifests the victory of God's love in the history of the world.

Footnotes

¹ The group was presided over by J. Lécuyer, CSSP, with F. Hegglin (Holland) as first secretary followed in 1967 by F. Nikolasch (Austria). The members of the group were: Z. Alszeghy, S.J. (Rome), P. Anciaux (Belgium), C. Florestan (Spain), A. Kirchgässner (W. Germany), A. Ligier, S.J. (Rome), K. Rahner, S.J. (W. Germany), C. Vogel (France).

² *Notitiae* IV (1968) 183.

³ The president and "relator" of the group was P. Jounel (France); secretary: F. Sottocornola, S.X. (Italy); members: A. Gracia (Spain), P. Visentin, O.S.B. (Italy), H. Meyer, S.J. (Austria), K. Donovan, S.J. (England), G. Pasqualletti, I.M.C. (Congregation for Divine Worship, Rome).

⁴ *Constitution on the Church*, no. 11; *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no. 5; *Constitution on the Liturgy*, no. 109.

⁵ *Sacramentarium Gelasianum* (Reg. lat. 316), Mohlberg, nos. 354, 359, 363.

⁶ See *Instruction on Translation of Liturgical Texts*, Consilium (January 25, 1969).

⁷ *Constitution on the Church*, no. 26.

⁸ The "Misereatur" is found substantially in the Roman-germanic Pontifical (edited by Vogel-Elze, II, 17); the "Indulgentiam" is found in the Pontifical of Durand for the reconciliation of penitents on holy Thursday; in the *Collettaneo cistercense* (MS 114 of Dijon, fol. 148v-149r) is the one absolution formula; the "Dominus noster . . ." is in the ritual of Cardinal Santori (1584) page 288; the formula "Ego te absolvo" appears for the first time in the 12th century (in Radolfus Ardentus, *Homilia 64 in Litania Maiori*: PL 155, 1900 CD) and is already defended by St. Thomas as the one valid one (*Opusc. de forma absolutiones* 3, q. 84, a. 3); "Passio Domini . . ." already known, it seems, by St. Thomas (*Quodl. III*, q. 13, a. 28) is found in the *Penitenziale Valliceliano II* of the 15th century.

⁹ Session XIV, *Doctrina de Sacra Paenit.* C. 3: DS 1673.

¹⁰ *Rituale Romanum*, 1952 ed., Tit. IV, cap. III.

¹¹ See *Didascalia Apostolorum*, II 18/7; II, 43/1 (Funk, ed., pages 66, 130, 134); Ciprianus, *Epist.* 15/1; 16/2; 17/2 (numeration = CSEL); Leo Magnus, *Epist. ad Rusticum Nabonensem* 2: PL 54, 1203; *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua* 20, 21, 65: CC 148, 159-170. See J. A. Jungman, *Die lateinischen Bussriten in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Innsbruck: 1932) 89-91, 129-30, 243-44, 262-265.

¹² *Sacramentary*, Opening Prayer, XXIV Sunday in Ordinary Time.

¹³ For example see among the numerous publications of this type: A. Aubry, J. De Baciocchi, C. Rozier, *Célébrations penitentielles*, Lyon 1968; *Vingt célébrations communautaires de la pénitence* (special edition of *Liturgie et vie chrétienne*, (Montreal: Oct.-Dec. 1967); Gunter Weber, *Zwanzig Bussfeiern mit Kindern* (Donauwörth: 1968); *Der Bussgottesdienst* (Einsiedeln: Switzerland); F. Sottocornola, *La celebrazione della penitenza nella comunità cristiana* (Brescia: 1969).

¹⁴ Session XIV, "Canones de sacramento Paenitentiae 7": DS 1707.

¹⁵ See, for example, the response of the Congregation for the Faith to the bishop of Arua (Uganda) on August 25, 1966 (N. Prot. 3076) published in *Bibliografia missionaria* 30 (1966), Quad. 9, Doc. 5, page 20.

¹⁶ *Pastoral Norms Concerning the Administration of General Sacramental Absolution* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 16, 1972) no. V; *Rite of Penance, Introduction*, no. 32.

¹⁷ *Pastoral Norms, op. cit.*, nos. VI-VII; *Rite of Penance, Introduction*, nos. 33, 35.

¹⁸ The clear distinction between the rite of penance in Mass and the penitential rite must be safeguarded. Thus no impression will be given of reducing the sacrament of penance to a moment in the celebration of the eucharist: see *Pastoral Norms, op. cit.*, no. X.

