

The Sacrament of Penance — Part I

PART I

The theme that will be emphasized in our diocesan Lenten program this year centers around the Sacrament of Penance. The topic is timely for our reflection, since there is considerable evidence from all sides that we are facing a 'crisis' with regard to this Sacrament. Catholics simply are not frequenting the Sacrament of Penance today as they did in the past. The long lines that used to be seen outside of almost any confessional on Saturday are practically non-existent. There was a time when the priest in the confessional thought himself fortunate to get a few minutes between confessions to read a bit of his Breviary; today the confessional offers him the opportunity of becoming the best read professional man in town. For there simply are not very many 'clients' in the confessional any more. We might well ask the question: "Where have all the penitents gone?" Why is it that the Sacrament of Penance seems to have been pushed to a marginal place in the lives of so many Catholics? How can we account for the decline of the Sacrament of Penance in the Catholic Church?

I would like to suggest a number of contributing factors: First of all, our present practice with regard to the Sacrament of Penance has been largely untouched by the liturgical renewal that has so strongly affected our celebration of the Mass and the Sacrament of Baptism. The sense of community involvement, so conspicuous now in the Mass Liturgy and in Baptism, appears to be practically non-existent in the liturgical form in which the Sacrament of Penance is presently practiced.

The Sacrament of Penance is a liturgical action. Liturgy involves not simply an individual and a priest, but the community of God's people. Yet in the past the penitents who came to church for confession did not form any kind of living community, as they stood in line waiting to go into the 'box.' In fact, probably the only thought that a penitent gave to the community when he went to confession was the hope that the community would not be there, so that there would be no long confessional lines.

In an age of social consciousness and commitment to social responsibility, the apparent lack of any social dimension to our present form of the Sacrament of Penance has made the Sacrament seem unreal and even irrelevant to many people. This has been particularly distressing to young people, who not

The Sacrament of Penance in Crisis

infrequently will say: "If I hurt another person, it seems to me to make much more sense to go to that person and ask his pardon rather than to go into the darkness of the confessional and ask forgiveness of a priest I do not even know."

Another reason for the disenchantment about the Sacrament of Penance especially among the young is the fact of the anonymity of the whole confessional procedure. The darkness of the confessional, the facelessness of the priest — aspects of the sacrament so comforting to an earlier generation — make little sense to young people who have been brought up on the ideal of personal communication and personal relationship. Many students in our high schools and colleges would much prefer to meet the priest in his office, talk over their problems and, perhaps, in such a context ask for absolution.

It also seems true to say that today fewer and fewer people feel the compulsion — that they once experienced — to go to confession regularly simply because they have the vague feeling that they may be in the "state of sin" and want to make sure that they are in the "state of grace." A renewed understanding of the Christian life as a life of grace lived in the Spirit and a deeper insight into the meaning of mortal sin as man's deliberate "No" to God reversing the basic direction of his Christian life have helped people to see that it is a distortion of the Christian life to think of it as a constant swinging back and forth from grace to sin and from sin to grace. Many people are beginning to experience in their lives what many theologians are saying today, namely, that for a Christian who is sincerely trying to live the Christian life mortal sin would seem to be a relatively rare occurrence. Hence, they no longer have the uncomfortable feeling they once experienced in receiving Communion if an interval of some time had elapsed since their last confession.

Again, many people are no longer acting on the conviction, once deeply rooted in their thinking, that if you go to confession regularly, you will "get more grace." They are no longer sure what this really means. A deeper understanding of grace has helped them to see that grace is not a kind of spiritual "stuff" that exists in us in measurable quantities. Grace is rather a relationship — a relationship of friendship and love with God. Routine, unreflective confessions made every two weeks or even every month seem to have little effect, one way or another, on that relationship. As a consequence, an increasing number of people have found the routine of regular devotional confession, at least as they have been accustomed to practice it, becoming less and less meaningful in their total spiritual growth.

These, I believe, are some of the factors that have contributed to the serious drop in the frequency with which people receive the Sacrament of Penance. Whether these factors are valid reasons for less frequent use of the Sacrament is a question that may well be discussed, but that they exist is a fact that no one can dispute. The existence of these factors does not mean that we should eliminate the Sacrament of Penance; it does not mean that we have to face the task of integrating this Sacrament more fully into the total picture of this new understanding of the Christian life. We have to ask some serious questions about our present practices with regard to Penance. The fact that the present crisis has occurred will force us to re-examine the whole purpose and meaning of this sacrament and the effects it should be achieving in the life of today's Christian. Ultimately this can result in great good for the whole Christian community. Perhaps our dissatisfaction with the present forms of the Sacrament will help us to find new forms or perhaps return in modified forms to some of the older practices of this sacrament that have fallen into disuse.

It is interesting in this regard to note that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II directed that "the rite and formula for the Sacrament of Penance are to be revised so that they give more luminous expression to both the value and the effect of the Sacrament." (art. 72)

This directive of the Council is quite significant, for the problems about the Sacrament which I have suggested are concerned precisely with these two points, namely, the value and the effect of the Sacrament. It is precisely the value of the Sacrament, as presently practiced in their lives, that people are asking questions about. It is the effect that the Sacrament is intended to produce that people are not sure of. Obviously a search for new forms will be meaningless until we have a clear notion of the value and purpose of the Sacrament. Until we understand clearly what is supposed to happen, we will not know what to do to make it happen.

For this reason I should like to offer some suggestions as to the changes in thinking we need to undergo and possible changes in practice that we need to reflect on, so that the rite and formula of the Sacrament may give "more luminous expression to both the value and effect of the Sacrament."

Before offering these suggestions — and as a background for them — I should like to give a brief history of the Sacrament of Penance, starting with its roots in Sacred Scripture and seeing how it has developed through the centuries. (to be continued)

Editorial

No Room for Violence in Films or in Sports

In recent years, Americans have had to bear the stinging criticism, from abroad as well as from within, that we constitute a violent society.

The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were the particular instances sparking such critique, with the long-lasting Vietnam war a kind of supportive foundation.

Whether or not a whole people can be classed as violent or as any other single characteristic is a matter for serious and careful psychological and sociological research.

There are, however, some disturbing trends and ominous happenings that should lead to concern, if not castigation.

In a brutal display recently, several members of the Ohio State basketball team

were subject to beatings not only by the opposing Minnesota team but also by frenzied spectators pouring onto the floor.

This may seem an isolated instance but it isn't. Violence and its first cousin, crudity, too often mesquerade under the guise of exuberance at sports events. Players, generally not the instigators of such folly, often are fearful of it.

And young players in so-called kiddie games are subjected to the same boorishness. What makes it worse, these players are still developing emotionally, and the silliness, bulliness and downright vulgarity displayed by grownups at many of these games is bound to leave scars.

A bit afield from sports are our movies and television.

The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, established in

the wake of Robert Kennedy's assassination, in a recent report to the surgeon general, "Television and Growing Up: The Impact on Televised Violence" indicated that violence on television can have harmful effects on large groups of normal children.

Add to television a spate of ultra-violent films making the rounds of movie houses. Kicking, stomping, rape, knifing, mutilation, shooting, bone-crushing, decapitation, all are presented vividly in current films. Granted children supposedly are barred from such vulgarity, but what about the effect on childish adults.

If violence is indeed a sickness of our society then we must begin the painstaking task of ending it. And we must start at home, at the basketball courts and football fields. The most effective thing to do is watch the guy sitting to the left of the man at your right.