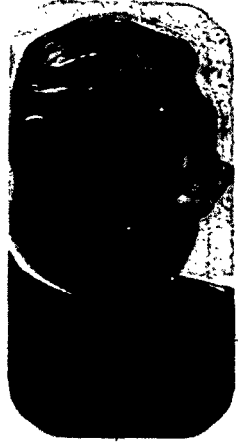


# The Sacrament of Penance - Part V

## Concluding Reflections

The brief history presented in the previous articles offers ample proof that the exercise of the ministry of reconciliation has gradually evolved and at times even dramatically changed in the life of the Church. I should like to offer some concluding reflections that can perhaps help us to see more clearly the value of the Sacrament of Penance and the effects it should have in our lives.



### (1) The Sacrament of Penance needs to be seen as a celebration of the Gospel.

The Sacrament of Penance is the celebration of the Good News of the Gospel. And what is that Good News? It is that in Jesus Christ the mercy and loving forgiveness of God have been lavished upon us. (The word "lavished" is St. Paul's.) Penance is the celebration of divine philanthropy, of God's prejudice in our favor, of the fact that He is for us and not against us. We do not approach the Sacrament of Penance asking for a forgiveness that might be refused to us; we are assured beforehand of that forgiveness.

Our Lord once told a parable that is helpful in getting a true perspective on the Sacrament of Penance. We call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The whole point of the parable is that it is a happy story. Part of the happiness of the prodigal son is to be able to admit to his father that he has sinned. He confesses that he is a sinner, not because he sees the father as some one who wants to pass judgment on him or as some one who demands that he reconstruct the story of his crimes. No, he wants to acknowledge his sins—so that he can open his heart to the forgiveness that the father is so eager to give him.

The wonderful thing about the prodigal son is his absolute confidence in his father's love. The thought never even crosses his mind that his father would not forgive him. In a word, his acknowledgment of guilt is not just a neat listing of all his past sins; rather it is a sign that he has opened his heart to his father's love and forgiveness. And the story ends just right: the father embraces his son and they have a celebration. The father orders a banquet in honor of his son's return.

Perhaps we shall never really come alive to what actually happens in the Sacrament

of Penance, until we stop saying: "I am going to confession," and begin saying, meaningfully, "I am going to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance."

### (2) The Sacrament of Penance needs to be seen as a celebration of reconciliation and conversion.

The fundamental demand which the Gospel makes on all men is a conversion of spirit. The call of the Gospel is not simply a call to repentance and reparation for each individual transgression. It is the call to a new attitude toward God and our fellowman. It is a call to make the fundamental option which we accepted in Baptism—the option of saying Yes to God—all-pervasive in our lives. We tend to think of the Sacrament of Penance as looking to the past: to wipe out its failures. As a matter of fact, the Sacrament looks more to the future than to the past; for its precise purpose is to make it possible for us to take a new stance for the future.

### (3) The Sacrament of Penance needs to be seen as a community celebration.

We have to see to it that it is not simply the priest and the penitent, but the whole community of the Church that celebrates and proclaims the mercy and loving forgiveness of God. We are reconciled to God by being reconciled to the community of His people. It should, therefore, be the whole Church that shares in the joy of the repentant sinner. It should be the whole Church that intercedes on his behalf.

Our present form of celebrating the Sacrament of Penance has tended to obscure this community dimension of Penance which was so prominent in the early Church. Our serious involvement in communal penance rites celebrated in our own parishes will perhaps help us to evolve new forms of celebrating divine forgiveness that will restore a proper place to the communal dimension of the ministry of reconciliation.

### (4) We need to come to a more profound understanding of what it means to confess.

The fundamental meaning of the word "confess" in the Bible is not a cataloging of sins, but a praising of God. To confess to God is first and foremost to proclaim the wonderful works of God; and to proclaim His works is especially to proclaim His mercy. "for His mercy is above all His works." The psalmist prays: "Let us confess to the Lord that His mercy endures

forever." (Psalm 135) Confessing our sins, therefore, is simply a way of confessing God's mercy. We confess our sins to praise God for having forgiven them.

But God's forgiveness always includes a call to change and conversion. Hence, confessing our sins is much more than a listing of our transgressions. My confession is a statement of the degree of self-knowledge I have achieved—a presentation of who I am in the core of my being. My confession is an opening up of myself to the possibilities of growth which that self-knowledge reveals. Too often we tend to see our sins as extraneous growths on our person which we wish to have removed. Instead we should see our sins as manifestations of ourselves and of our need to undergo a change of heart and, at the same time, as indications of the direction which that change of heart should take. This is why in confessing our sins we praise God not only for His mercy but also for the insight He has given us as to the road we must take if we are truly to effect conversion in our lives.

### (5) We need to appreciate more clearly what the role of the priest-confessor is.

The role of the priest-confessor is not primarily that of a judge who decides what is right or wrong for the penitent; though there may be times when it will be his responsibility to counsel the doubtful in this regard. His role is not primarily to decide whether forgiveness is to be given or denied; for it is chiefly the penitent's role to decide whether he really wants God's forgiveness. He is not there primarily to decide what is the state of conscience of the penitent; though he may need to help the penitent to discover the answer to this question for himself. He is not there to substitute for the conscience of the penitent or to be the conscience of the penitent; though there may be times when he will help the penitent to come to a more mature development of conscience. Neither is he there, primarily as a counselor or as a spiritual director; though this can be an invaluable dimension of the sacrament, when the priest has the charism to be a spiritual guide.

He is there primarily to proclaim publicly and authoritatively that God's mercy has been given to the penitent. He is there to be a witness to that mercy and a sign that it has been given. And the more the compassion of Christ expresses itself in his words and demeanor the more truly is he a sign of the mercy he proclaims.

## A Science Fiction Prophecy Nears Fulfillment

A sign splashed on a wall in downtown Rochester cryptically states, "1984 Is Here." Given the evidence of the latest report by the presidential Commission on Population and the American Future, it may be true.

Voices have been raised loud, though obviously ignored, about the dangers of reproduction manipulation. These voices have not only been the moral pronouncements of our bishops but also the prophetic satire of many science fiction writers.

"Nonsense," has been the implication of the retorts of those willing to roll along with this nation's self-immolating appetite for comfort. "They are only worried about overpopulation."

So are most people but we are not all willing to abort babies to that end, nor are we ready to go along with "voluntary" sterilization or contraception which, it is becoming obvious even to the

most naive, are only pit stops in this nation's mad rush to governmental control of the regenerative processes.

And certainly population is a problem, more so in other parts of our world than here in our own country. In fact, this country with its vast stretches of unoccupied land and great fertility could be expected to help these other peoples.

But things now look ominous for those waiting to come to these shores. This commission, in a couple of days, will come up with Number 3 of its reports. It will deal with immigration. However, with self-comfort as its visible goal, it is not likely others will be invited to the feast.

A country which once reveled in its invitation to "send your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to be free" has taken to slamming the "golden door" on the toes of the offspring of its own people.

But then a country wallowing in war, racked by increasing crime, pandering to obscenity, weakened by self-gratification and tolerating racism may not be the ideal place in which to live anyway.

True, many see overpopulation as contributing to some of these problems but they seem blind to the conceivability of governmental birth control becoming a weapon against segments of our society.

The United States Catholic Conference, the nation's bishops, has called for "benign neglect" as the antidote to the latest commission report. Presumably they are urging this tack on the President who is stuck with making decisions in regard to the commission's proposals.

Certainly no concerned American can neglect the implications of this report nor the trend it fuels.