

Penance: The Background

By Father Robert J. Kennedy

Last week we outlined the "how" of the new Rite of Penance, that is, the order of the celebration of the three forms of this sacrament. This week we want to look at why these forms emerged.

The revision of the Rite of Penance seeks to recapture some important elements that we have lost over the centuries, elements that would fill out the experience and celebration of the sacrament in such a way that it could become a living, healing reality in our lives. Two of these elements would be the role of the community and the value of personal encounter.

From the very earliest times of the Christian experience, the community of faith had a singular role in the work of reconciliation. They knew themselves to be ministers of this reconciliation, preaching the good news about it and bringing this great gift of God's "welcome home" in Christ to those who would believe (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20). When any of their number would turn away from the faith and the community by their sin, they would feel injured and betrayed, the integrity of their faith weakened. But when a fallen brother or sister sought to return to God and be reconciled with the Christian community, they worked

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actively to support that return by prayer, example and works of service. The penitents who engaged in the process of reconversion knew the love and encouragement of the Christian community.

The communal celebrations of penance encouraged by the new rite seek to say these same things: we have been wounded by each other's sins and we frequently join together to commit injustice, so our reconciliation with God must be found in the midst of the community. It is a community "which works for our conversion by charity, example, and prayer."

The individual form should not be devoid of the context of community. In fact, it is in the name of the community that the priest welcomes the penitent home and offers the ministry of reconciliation. The penitent, too, should be aware of the social nature of sin and his or her renewed responsibilities to the Christian community.

week, not to hit him, nor lie to him, nor tell stories about him?

Only children need to be told that certain actions will help a relationship and other actions will hurt it, that weakening the relationship would be immoral and strengthening it would be moral. Israel at Mt. Sinai was but a child. And morally, are we not often children too at the beginning of life?

Moreover, there is this about a negative law: it is less limiting than a positive command. If a law says, "Don't go over 60 miles per hour," you can go 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 m.p.h. have all kinds of choices. But if a law says, "Go 20 m.p.h.," I have no other choice.

The Ten Commandments fall clearly into two sections. One section deals with God, one with man. Regarding God, error is removed: (1st) reverence is inculcated (2nd), and worship commanded (3rd). Then the code moves to man: honor the co-creators of life (4th); life is sacred, do not take it (5th); sex is the gateway of life, do not adulterate the bloodstream of life (6th); life needs support systems, do not steal another's property (7th); nor reputation (8th). Above all, do not be discontent with wife (9th) or possessions (10th), for discontent breeds all other evils.

Briefly, the Ten inculcate two basic things: reverence for God and respect for man. Christianity is two-directional: it looks to God and to man. Without the manward look, religion becomes irrelevant; without the Godward look, man becomes a puppet of the State, as in communist countries.

Christianity did not come into the world like a bolt out of the blue. The Law and the Prophets were the pedagogue unto Christ. And He came not to destroy them, but to fulfill them (Mt. 5:17). In other words, the Jewish Ethic is the foundation of the Christian Ethic and the foundation of the Jewish Ethic is the Ten Commandments. The Ten are not a finished ethic; but they are a primary and foundational set of principles as necessary for nationhood as the times tables are for arithmetic.

It would be well in this Bicentennial year to pledge ourselves to teaching the Ten Commandments again in both public and private schools. The Ten are the charter for freedom — a nation's bill of rights. To seek to build a nation without them is trying to build castles in air. It cannot be done. Even air-drawn castles need foundations.

The second key element in the practice of penance is the value of the personal encounter. The practice emerged with the Irish monks in the sixth century. They were seeking direction on how to grow more fully in the life of the Spirit, the ways in which they could correct and deepen their lives in Christ. Such an encounter provided a personal ministry of reconciliation that bears fruit especially in "a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God."

This personal encounter is familiar to us, but for many it has become routine or mechanical and impersonal. The new rite encourages priest and penitent to use this time of the sacrament to come to terms with the broken areas of one's relationships with God and neighbor, and to celebrate the merciful presence of God in their lives. The call is made to the penitent to share some of his state in life and his spiritual concerns so that the priest can exercise his ministry more fully. A confession of sins that is more than a "grocery listing" of faults, a "tailor-made" act of penance, a prayerful atmosphere for the sacrament, and the opportunity for face-to-face meeting between priest and penitent — all these will enable new life to flow into this form of the sacrament and will make it a more fruitful experience.

COMMUNION SUPPER

Ithaca — A father-son communion supper was held March 6 in the Immaculate Conception school hall. The dinner was followed by a Kung Fu exhibition by the Wing-Chun Kung Fu school of New York City. The group repeated its exhibition on March 7.

ON THE RIGHT SIDE



Fr. Paul J. Cuddy

There are too many upset people in the world. The World? Why, in our own neighborhoods, and among our own friends and relatives. There are people who fret and worry all the time. They trouble themselves. They trouble the people who love them. And rather than enjoying the peace and comfort which comes from a vital faith, and genuine trust in Our Blessed Lord and His promises, they continually agitate themselves.

Why? Probably part of this is chemistry. We are a composite of chemicals as well as of spirit. Part of this worry syndrome is in the psychological system. And with others, it's just a kind of habit. But the important thing is: "What can be done about it?"

About six years ago I ran across a booklet called *Acceptance*. It was a booklet of 32 pages, easy to read, easy to comprehend. And it does not say anything that people don't already know. But there is something about the presentation of the things most people already know that gives courage and a better perspective to many people.

When the booklet was first printed by Abbey Press, St. Meinrad, Ind., the publishers thought if they could sell the first printing of 10,000 copies it would be a huge success. But the booklet has so caught the imagination of people — as well as filling a need for the distressed — that they have sold over one million copies!

I have known the author, Father Vincent Collins, for over 45 years. He has been very successful in

helping people with alcohol problems. And in the course of years, he has helped many with emotional problems. He is a curious man himself: blunt as a board, fearless in his convictions, compassionate with the genuine down and outers, and with the disturbed. His bluntness alienates some people. His honesty has made him a tower of strength to others. I have seen too many people walking around sober, and able to function in society, a joy to their families, not to be grateful for his work; and for his little book *Acceptance*. I was shocked to find that the little book which sold for 25¢ has been reprinted to twice the size, with pictures to illustrate, and sells for \$1. I asked him: "Why such a boost?" He replied: "Publishers are money hungry." However it is still a good investment. It helps people.

Here is the introduction to the little booklet.

"Sooner or later, everyone arrives at a point where life seems to have become too big to cope with. Life is never really too much for us, but it can seem to be. When this happens, we have to get life back in focus. We have lost our perspective, but it can be regained. . . . But my life is just one problem after another. Of course it is — that's life. I don't know how it is with you, but it took me a long time to realize that at least some of these problems were of my own making. For instance, I thought that it was my duty to try to solve other people's problems, arbitrate their disputes, and show them how to live their lives. I was hurt when they rejected my unsolicited advice. I finally learned that you cannot help people unless they really need help, are willing to be helped, and want you to help them. Even then, you can only help them to help themselves.

There is nothing much new about that information, but how many people know how to put it into practice? If you want a copy, you can get it from many pamphlet racks, CCD offices and book stores. It has been a great help to people who needed help badly.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) In. 2:13-25; (R1) Ex. 1:17; (R2) 1 Cor. 1:22-25.

How ironic! When a goodly number of avant garde "catechists" and "theologians" have all but eliminated the Ten Commandments from catechisms and moral textbooks, the Holy Spirit positions them in the very first reading of next Sunday's liturgy. Who is right? These Ten may be a stumbling block to some Catholics and an absurdity to our neo-pagan society. Yet they are words of everlasting life. Rationalization, casuistry, situation ethics, subjectivism — have all so cluttered the temple of the mind and heart that a cleansing is in order.

One of the reasons why the Ten have been frowned upon is that they are negative — a series of "Don'ts." And the in-slogan today is to eschew the negative, and accentuate the positive.

Suppose a little child were playing in the traffic of a busy city street. And its mother suddenly discovered this. Would she not rush instantly to drag her child out of danger? And when rescued, would she not scold it with the words, "Don't you (a negative) ever dare do that again?" Negatives are the clearest and most emphatic forms in which to give a child guidance. Later on, the child can guide itself, but the basic fact would still remain true, namely, that it is still dangerous to play in traffic.

When the Ten were given to Israel, she was in the childhood stage of her moral development. She had been in slavery for years and surrounded by pagans. Of course, it would be silly to list for a young married couple all their obligations toward each other (at their age, they should know these). Similarly, wouldn't it be a crazy kind of friendship if one had to give his friend a list of instructions on his obligations to visit him once a

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