

The Process of Conversion

PART II

In writing about the process of conversion and reconciliation last week, I spoke of the first part of that process: contrition. Without this essential first step, the other parts of the Sacrament of Penance are mechanical and meaningless, since contrition is the work of the Spirit that moves us to seek out the forgiveness of the Father and reconciliation within the Church.

The confession of sins is the next part of this process of conversion. It is the manifestation of one's sins, and it takes place in the midst of the Church community. In order to confess well, a person needs to know himself "in the light of God's mercy," that is, the penitent should make an inner examination of his or her life, not in fear, but with hope in the goodness and mercy of God. This personal scrutiny of one's heart, based on prayer and trust in God's love, leads the penitent to open his or her heart to the priest as God's minister of reconciliation.

The exchange of the few words between priest and penitent which then takes place should be a helpful, healing one, not judgmental, but full of a willingness to help the penitent know the mercy of God and come to terms with the brokenness and failures of his or her life.

The brief moments of the confession of our sins lead us into the next part of the process: the act of penance or satisfaction. As I read the Introduction to the new Rite of Penance, it seems to me far more concerned with the encouragement to a new way of life than it is with past sin. Paragraph 7 states that in order for the sacrament of Penance to truly achieve its

purpose in the Christian People, "it must take root in their whole lives and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbor." Thus, the act of penance is to be real and constructive, "so that each one may restore the order which he or she disturbed" (paragraph 6). It is not a punishment or act of revenge by God or the Church!

The nature and extent of the penance given should be proportionate to the nature and gravity of the sins being forgiven. It will then serve both as a remedy for sin, helping the penitent to overcome weakness and spiritual sickness, and as a step forward in renewing his or her life according to the pattern of Christ. For example, a penitent might confess the weakness for unkind and uncharitable words, about another. The penance suggested might be to mention the good points about him or her to others, or to compliment them, or to be particularly friendly and considerate to that individual. If the younger penitent confesses talking back to his or her parents, the penance might be helping to prepare dinner, doing some of the housework or washing the car. The act of penance both addresses the area of sinfulness head-on, and also establishes a pattern of behavior that can lead to a renewed life. By making the satisfaction, the penitent, "forgetting the things which are behind him" (Philippians 3:13), again becomes part of the mystery of salvation and turns toward the future.

By these acts of contrition, confession and satisfaction, the penitent manifests the sincerity of his or her change of heart to God in the Church, and asks for absolution, the ministry of reconciliation through the priest, which completes the process of conversion.

The priest has already offered his help, advice, instruction and encouragement to the penitent. He now announces God's forgiveness through the words of absolution. These words, combined with the imposition or laying on of

hands, are the visible sign that God in Christ has renewed the broken covenant with His contrite son or daughter and restored them to full membership in His Body, the Church. How appropriate it is, then, to speak of the "celebration" of this sacrament!

The process of conversion really doesn't stop with this sacramental act of forgiveness and reconciliation. It continues and is expressed "by a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God, for 'love covers over a multitude of sins' (1 Peter 4:8)." (Paragraph 20)

Neither is the sacrament of Penance the only expression of our reconciliation. We know that "in the sacrament of Penance the Father receives the repentant son back to Him, Christ places the lost sheep on His shoulders and brings it back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies this temple of God or lives more fully within it." But, "this is finally expressed in a renewed and more fervent sharing of the Lord's table, and there is great joy at the banquet of God's Church over the son who has returned from afar." (Paragraph 6) Thus, Penance leads to Eucharist.

The process of Christian initiation leads through baptism and confirmation to a full sharing in the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. In the same way, the process of conversion and reconciliation with the Church culminates in the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is our celebration of thanks and praise to God for His mighty saving acts in Christ, rescuing us from the power of sin and death. The restored unity of the Body of Christ, the Church, through Penance is marked by restoration to communion in the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist, then, is the full celebration of our reconciliation with Christ in the Church. Truly, how immeasurable are the depths and riches of the mercy of God!

vatican news

Pontiff Stresses Consistency and Faithfulness

The following is the text of Paul VI's address during the General Audience on 24 March.

We wish to reflect once again on the event that the Holy Year was for us — seeking the historico-spiritual path of this recent celebration in two directions, the origin and the result.

The immediate and decisive origin cannot but be the ecumenical Council, from which the Holy Year drew its doctrinal riches and its renewing fruitfulness. The Council and the Holy Year were, for the Church and for mankind, two coordinated moments, decisive for the future. The past looks to the future, and questions it regarding the result, the consequences, the fruits, which we must expect from such important, binding and promising facts.

As regards the future, we have mentioned the "civilization of love", which should be regenerated by the Holy Year, but the formula, it is clear, lends itself to different applications and amplifications.

What interests our attention now is the fact of this continuity, of this cohesion between one moment and the other, between the originating one and the resulting one, for the life of the Church. Let us give the logical definition of this religious historical process; it is contained in the word "consistency". In this epilogue of the twentieth century, the life of the Church follows a line of consistency. In spite of dramatic shocks and the differences of historical conditions, this has always been the fundamental course of the Church, consistency with herself, or rather consistency with her principles, such as they are

in the Gospel, and with her action, which always seeks the holiness of her children.

Perhaps another word is more expressive on the religious plane, and dearer and better known to us; it is the word "faithfulness". It is a sacred, strong word; it is a word, as regards time, which is two-sided: faithfulness looks to the past, to the starting point, to the source, which is Christ; and it looks to the future, to time which comes and passes, which consumes and devours everything, except faithfulness itself, which remains and wishes to remain, not apathetic, not motionless, not ignorant of the evolution of things and needs, but always alive and equal to itself, and always ready to take its place in history, to give history a direction, a meaning, a process, which is real progress; this is faithfulness.

We must arm ourselves with this virtue; if we wish to use what we have inherited from the past for future acquisitions. It is classified in the sector of the virtues derived from fortitude, one of the cardinal virtues. Faithfulness is a manifestation of fortitude; but in concrete life it is connected with the theological virtues; with that of faith, of which it wishes to be a practical and constant profession; and with that of charity, in the service of which it can reach the summit of Christian perfection.

It will not be difficult to point out that faithfulness, understood as logic-coordinating thought with action, has its repeated apologia in the Gospel: "Not everyone who says to me: Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." So Christ expresses himself and he also warns us repeatedly: "Whoever perseveres to the end, he shall be saved." We must be "strong in faith", the apostle Peter will echo. And so on. In fact, as we know, Catholicism is a perennial act of faithfulness, passing through history.

And here we must pay attention to two

redoubtable objections, which might shake our faithfulness, let us also say our Christian identity, if we were not defended by adequate interior answers.

The first difficulty comes from the lightheaded attraction of novelty, sheer novelty, which pervades and dominates the modern outlook. For man, living in the presence of the spectacle of the philosophical and stoical transformism of our times, taking part, in fact, in it himself, it is easy to come to the conclusion that all stability is negative, all mobility positive. The stage is reached of confusing change with the pulsations of life. Revolution is the normal program. Fashion is the interpreter of the ever new spring. Everything changes, everything evolves.

Truth itself should be subject to this one fixed, inexorable law: change. That this observation may be justified in the instability of the creature, a being, that is, which does not have in itself a sufficient reason for its own existence, no one, perhaps, will deny. But we cannot admit that this substantial inconstancy can be applied to God, to His Word, and therefore to revelation and faith. Here we are dealing with, we can say, the ineffable originality of Christ, the eternal Word of God, come down into the flux of human history: "Heaven and earth", Jesus, the Master, proclaimed, "will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Our Christian faithfulness can find its supernatural root here.

And the other difficulty arises from the fear that faithfulness will paralyze action in conformity with the contingencies of the times and the necessities of love. It is not so. Faithfulness to Christ is an inexhaustible fountain of renewal in the logic of the principles from which it springs. It is newness lived: "we may walk in newness of life" always, St. Paul writes. Let us do so. With our Apostolic Blessing.