

LOOKING AT THE OBSTACLES TO CONFESSION

In the thirty years of my priesthood, it has always been my hope and desire that I be a compassionate and understanding confessor. I think that I have really tried to communicate the mercy and unconditional love of the Father through the sacrament of Reconciliation. Yet, many people who come to me for confession still experience some difficulty with the sacrament. Even though we have made many tactical changes in the last 25 years - changes such as the creation of warm and friendly reconciliation rooms, easier-to-remember acts of contrition, even the introduction of scripture meant to inspire and not condemn - people still find the experience of penance a difficult one. Why is it that even after we have tried to remove the more frightening aspects of the sacrament, the numbers of people going to confession on a regular basis is dramatically decreasing, not increasing?

One response to the declining number of penitents might be to place the blame on certain groups of individuals whom we feel are responsible for these changing attitudes toward the sacrament of reconciliation. Priests are to blame for not preaching more about sin and the necessity of the sacrament; parents are to blame because they are not encouraging their children to go more often; religious educators are to blame because they are not teaching confession in the schools. Society is to blame because we have become too permissive and no longer have a healthy sense of sin.

But just what is the basic problem here? Is it that educators are lax? Are pastors neglecting their responsibility? Is it that we have merely lost a sense of what sin is all about? Blaming others or even society at large can draw us away from a more fundamental and perhaps more challenging task -- the task to look within and ask myself, "What are my struggles with the sacrament of reconciliation?" Trying to place the blame on others is an easy escape that keeps us from looking inward and trying to discover the obstacles that prevent me from being engaged in this most beautiful celebration of the Father's mercy.

The obstacles that prevent me from entering into the experience of reconciliation with a full and joyful heart may be many: an overwhelming sense of shame and embarrassment, a scrupulosity which makes the experience tortuous and self-defeating, a hopelessness that nothing in my broken situation is ever truly going to change. The psychological barriers, preventing the celebration of reconciliation to be an actual celebration, may be many. This article will not delve into these psychological barriers; rather, I want to look at some of our conceptual misunderstandings regarding the nature and purpose of the sacrament - misunderstandings that, once cleared, may make it easier to address some of the psychological barriers as well.

So, on a "conceptual" level: what is our understanding of the nature and purpose of the sacrament of reconciliation? From the outset, allow me to re-phrase this question in a simpler manner. What do you hope will happen to you when you go to confession? What basic human need is going to be addressed in this sacrament? You see, I believe that all the sacraments are fundamentally celebrations of specific human needs. A sacrament is an active and real sign of the Father's love - that is, it not only symbolizes the Father's love but actually makes that love a

real response to a specific human need. When I say specific human need, I mean to say that there are needs which only we as human beings share as a species - these are needs that are close to the very heart of what it means to be a human person.

We have a need to experience ourselves as possessing a worth, value and dignity which goes beyond our accomplishments - we need to know we are a human being (not just a human doing) - and so to surrender ourselves in loving trust to the One who gives us our meaning, worth and dignity. Such a need is lovingly addressed in the gift of our Baptism.

We have a need for nourishment in community - we have a need to be connected to a family, a community, when sharing our meals (Even if we eat alone we watch T.V. or read a newspaper). Such a need is really addressed in the gift of Eucharist.

We have a need to accomplish a mission in life, that somehow I have been called to further the unfinished work of God's creation. Such a need is really addressed in the gift of Confirmation. I have a need to give myself away in love and be strengthened daily in that commitment to pass on the love I have received from others. Such a need is really responded to in the sacraments of Matrimony and Orders.

When I am feeling sick or broken, I need now only physical healing but also the knowledge that others care for me, are connected to me in my hurts, and are there supporting me. Such a need is really addressed in the gift of Anointing of the Sick.

In each of these sacraments, we understand our own human situation and the loving response which God wants to make to us in that specific situation of need. As I come to experience the promise and fidelity of God's infallible grace gift poured out in response to that human need, the sacrament becomes a celebration, a festive event of meeting the ever-faithful God of the new covenant. And so, in the sacrament of reconciliation, we need to examine:

1. What is the need in my life that I prayerfully bring before the Lord in this sacrament?
2. How does this sacrament celebrate God's faithful response to be present to us in this specific need?

So, the first question: What is my need that I prayerfully bring before the Lord in this sacrament? That question is far more complex than it might first appear. You see, in the past, the need that literally drove us to confession was a need which was very clearly present to our consciousness. I did bad -- I feel guilty -- I need to feel O.K. again -- now I go to the box and get forgiven. But, you see, that so-called clarity was available to us in an age where we were so sure as to where we stood in our relationship with the Lord. Lines were very clearly drawn for us, and we knew, pretty much with absolute certitude, when we had crossed the line. Do you remember the lines that were made which regulated such activities as going on a date -- how far could you go? Or fasting during the season of Lent -- how much were you allowed to eat at the non-main meals? Or fulfilling your Sunday obligation -- how late can I come into the Church and still say that I heard Mass? It was all so clear -- Do this and it's a mortal sin. Do this and it's a venial sin. So here was the simple process of days gone past -- I did bad (because I broke a law, I crossed the

line), I feel guilty and I need to feel O.K. again. I was deeply in touch with that need to feel good again, and the remedy of that need was confession. It all made sense -- and as a result, people stood on endless lines to get themselves emotionally washed clean again and feel relief from nagging guilt.

Well, what happened? For one thing, I believe that we are more in touch now than ever with the complex realities of our interior world. When morality was strictly speaking an external affair, when I could measure my goodness or badness by the deeds I committed, when I saw sinfulness as the resulting state of having crossed some imaginary line, the world was a lot simpler. These are the good guys, these are the bad guys -- these are the sinners, and these are the saints. You could observe activity -- whether your own activity or that of another -- and know with certitude where you stood in your relationship with God. Now, we are more in touch with the psychological complexities of our inner world -- we are more in touch with the limitations of knowledge and freedom that determine our sinfulness. Without going into great detail, some of us are more aware of some of the following issues:

- the brokenness of our own family situation that has wounded us,
- our own victimized pasts (physical, verbal, sexual abuse),
- our own compulsions to please others and win their esteem,
- internalizing the unrealistic demands of others toward perfectionism,

and the list goes on.

As soon as I mention some of these internal struggles that we all face, or as soon as I mention words like, "dysfunctional family -- your wounded inner child, co-dependency and addiction," the reaction of some people might be, "Give me a break -- all that psychological stuff is just another way of our making excuses for ourselves." I believe that even those people who might be led to make that particular judgment deep down really do feel the confusion that occurs when we examine our own interior states, the confusion regarding our ability or inability to respond freely and lovingly to others. In other words, we are all in touch with the complexity of our inner most selves and the resulting ambiguity in making concrete judgments concerning our sin and virtue.

Sometimes, we express our confusion in these words, "I just don't know what is a sin anymore or not." On the surface, we might think that the solution to this problem is to have the teaching authority of the Church speak once again with a clarity and a strictness regarding the external norms concerning what is right and what is wrong. Perhaps that need to draw the lines with clarity is what motivated the Pope's recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* -- ah yes, the splendor of the truth, and knowing with absolute clarity what is right and what is wrong.

However, we cannot escape the reality that now, more than ever, we are in touch with the complexities of the inner world. Another encyclical, another universal catechism, is not going to dispel that ambiguity. Like it or not, we will have to live with that ambiguity as we examine our inner most selves. The reality we find as we look within is that there is a field of weeds and wheat, and not only are we not allowed to pull up the weeds, we are not even sure which is weed and which is a wheat. That's the fact. So, what does all this have to do with the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation? Well, it is my contention that precisely because of the ambiguity and the complexity we discover when we face our inner most selves, we need the sacrament of

reconciliation more so now than ever. Reconciliation is never again going to be that sacramental car wash that makes me feel clean after I have broken a law or transgressed one of the lines. The reality is that reconciliation is the sacrament where we bring our confused and broken self, both victim and perpetrator, the enmeshed web of having sinned and having been sinned against, and I bring that wounded wonder to be embraced by the Lord of life, Jesus Christ.

Quite simply, then, my need for the sacrament of reconciliation is a threefold need of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. What I would like to do is to prayerfully read three passages of scripture, and then ask yourself in which of these three passages do you hear the voice of God echoing in your own heart?

The first passage is a familiar one from the gospel of St. John:

Early in the morning Jesus arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more." -- John 8: 2-11

The second passage is a miracle story from the gospel of St. Mark

There was a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years. She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. She said, "If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured." Immediately her flow of blood dried up. She felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who has touched my clothes?" But his disciples said to him, "You see how the crowd is pressing upon you, and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" And he looked around to see who had done it. The woman, realizing what had happened to her, approached in fear and trembling. She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction." -Mark 5:24-34

The final passage is taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah

"But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, and formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy

One of Israel, your savior. Because you are precious in my eyes and glorious, and because I love you, I give men in return for you and peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; from the east I will bring back your descendants, from the west I will gather you. Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches, For I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink. The people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise. -- Isaiah 43:1-5, 18-21.

Now, granted, there are many reasons why one particular passage might speak to you over the others. For some of you, maybe it was difficult to choose -- perhaps all three passages spoke to you. The first passage, the woman who is caught in adultery, speaks of our human need for forgiveness, a forgiveness in the face of the shame-filled condemnation of the woman's accusers. The second passage concerns the healing of a woman who was hemorrhaging for so many years, reaching out to touch the Lord in faith. The third passage concerns liberation and the human need to be freed. Isaiah tells the people that the Lord God is about to do something new in our life.

If in any way you have been stirred by any of these three passages, then you have come in touch with your specific need which you are seeking the Lord to address in the sacrament of reconciliation. In the Rite of Penance, we read:

"Just as the wound of sin is varied in the life of individuals and of the community, so too the healing which penance provides is varied. Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of Penance to the life they had lost. And those who through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God." The fact that the Rite itself will use words like wound, healing, grave sin, freedom is evidence that there are many needs which are celebrated in this sacrament.

First of all there is the need for forgiveness itself. But what exactly is forgiveness? What is it that we are seeking from the Lord? In the story of the adulterous woman, the words which have always echoed in my own heart is the pronouncement of Jesus: Is there no one here to condemn you? Neither do I condemn you. How much I long and desire to hear those words at those moments when I am in touch with my sins both great and small. How much I desire for one to unconditionally say to me, I accept you in your limitations, for your past, for the ways in which you have not responded to my invitation to wholeness, holiness and life. How much I desire for one to say to me, "You are my beloved, my precious child."

In the story of the prodigal son, or more rightly called the parable of the Forgiving Father, the father yearns to see the son's return, and when there is that slightest movement towards reconciliation, he runs out to embrace his child. In Jesus' day, it was unheard of that an adult male would ever run in public -- and in the parable story, the Father commits every social impropriety -- none of that matters. His desire is to throw his arms around the one who made a bad choice -- not with I told you so's or it's about time. And don't we all long for that celebration. The beauty of the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation is that those words of welcome

and unconditional love can be spoken by another human being -- one who stands in the place of all the humanity both living and dead whom we may have hurt by our selfish choices. It is so sad that there are those who look at the priest reconciler as some kind of middle-man. Why do I need to confess my sins to a priest? Why do I need to receive forgiveness from him? God knows what I did wrong and God forgives.

So, why the middleman? Those who raise this objection are not, I believe, voicing some intellectual problem that they have concerning the celebration of the sacrament. Deep down, our objections to the "middle man" is, based on a sense of shame and embarrassment -- the shame we feel when we vulnerably expose ourselves to another. I am so afraid of being judged -- I am so afraid that if you see me as I truly am, you will judge and condemn me. Sometimes my shame is such a great force in my life, that I live in denial -- I don't want to look within and to see the dark side and to embrace that clod of earth which I am. And so shame and embarrassment can so easily keep me from looking within the dark side of me. My own high standards of perfectionism can drive me away from me, so much so that I become a stranger even to myself.

Sadly, we all have heard of experiences where the confessional was anything but an encounter filled with love and acceptance. But all the times we may have been beat up in the confessional are so few compared with the countless number of times I beat myself up for all my past sins -- those, at least, which I have the courage even to look at. If confession is really to be a celebration, if the sacrament is going to be a real encounter with the living, loving, forgiving Christ, then we need to start first to forgive ourselves, to give ourselves the permission to have been imperfect. Perhaps we might even re-write the traditional five acts of the penitent -- remember those five acts? Examination of conscience, contrition, firm purpose of resolve, confession, and penance. Somewhere in there we have to put the act of self-forgiveness. Even to say to ourselves the words which Jesus speaks to the adulterous woman: Is there no one here to condemn you? Nor do I condemn you. Welcome home, son, daughter.

The need for forgiveness, for unconditional acceptance and welcome home is just one of the needs, however, which we celebrate in the sacrament of reconciliation. We also have the very human need for emotional and spiritual healing. Unfortunately, our own past training regarding the examination of conscience prior to the celebration of the sacrament made us look at isolated actions of our past as if they were disconnected from one another. I did this, and I did this, and I did this, and I did this -- etc. We were never trained to really see how all our actions are related to each other and related to our innermost self that is called to growth and wholeness. It is sort of like looking at all the leaves on a tree without seeing how they are related to the branches and ultimately to the trunk and the roots. If there is something diseased with the leaf, then the problem isn't this leaf or that leaf, but the problem stems from the roots itself. If I am impatient with this child, intolerant of my co-workers, gossiping about this neighbor and not saying my morning and evening prayers -- all those seemingly isolated actions are all inter-related. There is a brokenness inside of me that is calling out for healing. Maybe the root issue, so to speak, is my desire for control, or perhaps an issue of self-acceptance, or maybe a basic lack of gratitude in my life.

It is beyond the scope of this brief little article to present some kind of medical textbook which will inform you about which disease underlies which symptomatically related transgressions. In

other words, I cannot tell you what is underlying all these issues you might be facing in your life right now. That process of discovery is the spirit guided venture within. Technically, the new rite initially invokes the power of the Spirit as a power of light that will help us to see and understand ourselves in need of healing. You see, for most people, they still begin their confession with "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. I did this, I did this, I did this, I did this." The rite itself, however, begins with an invocation to the Lord to enlighten our inner most selves. Among the six or so that are suggested in the rite itself, my favorite is:

"May the grace of the Holy Spirit fill your heart with light that you may confess your sins with loving trust, and come to know that God is merciful."

It is in the light of the Holy Spirit that we can see that brokenness inside of us that is crying out for healing.

Finally, there is the need for liberation. Perhaps more so now than ever, we are all painfully aware of all those elements of our life that bind us and keep us from experiencing true freedom. Before, I had mentioned addictions and co-dependency. An addiction is an obsessive dependency on any person, substance or thing that robs us of our freedom -- freedom to determine ourselves according to the vision and dream that God has for us. It is only within the recent generation that we have come to see that the category of addiction applies to things beyond alcohol and drugs: areas such as sexuality, work, food, exercise, etc. Co-dependency is our addiction to the addict, the situation whereby our own identity is absorbed into the life of the addict. In either case, we are not free. In all twelve step programs, there is the fourth step whereby I take a fearless inventory of myself. The emphasis should be on the word fearless: if I truly believe in the love that the Father has for me, if I truly believe that I am not despicable because I am broken, then I can be without fear as I look inward at my addictive behavior -- I don't have to fear that I am nothing but a no good addict, I don't have to live in denial or shame or embarrassment.

Addictions and co-dependency are one part of a larger picture when it comes to discover my need for liberation. What addictions and co-dependency reveal is that I am both abused and abuser: that I am a victim as well as a perpetrator, that I have a disease that robs me of freedom, and yet I am still able to make choices. Addictions and co-dependency reveal that there is a certain ambiguity in my life: it is never absolutely clear to me when I am being free and when I am so compelled that I am out of control. Do you remember when you were a child, and your mother and father came to break up a fight between you and another sibling, and you would protest, "Well, she started it!" as we grow older, we realize that life isn't that simple: sometimes we react to others when we are hurt, sometimes we instigate the fight, and sometimes you just can't tell who is to blame in the first place.

Trying to figure out with exact certitude where the blame lies in the past does not necessarily free us to love in the present. Sometimes I just have to place myself before the Lord with all my doubts, confusions and ambiguities, and cry out to him, "Free me, Lord."

Perhaps I have been hurt by someone in the past, and I just can't seem to get past the hurt. Free me, Lord.

Perhaps I have seen that, what I thought were good intentions, were really meddling ways in which I have tried to control others. Free me, Lord!

Perhaps I keep trying so desperately to win the approval of others. Free me, Lord.

Perhaps I find myself so jealous concerning the carefree attitude of another. Free me, Lord!

Perhaps I am afraid that I am not truly loved or loveable, that the love and respect of others is something I need to earn, to control, to manipulate somehow for my benefit. Free me from such fear, Lord.

Perhaps I have a unyielding need to be right so that I cannot open myself to see another's point of view. Free me from my righteousness, Lord.

The chains are many -- but the Lord keeps saying to us, "I will free you -- I will unbind you."

Henri Nouwen tells a story concerning a time when he visited the Academia, an art gallery in Florence where the magnificent David of Michelangelo is displayed. Near the statue, there stood an American family; the father was explaining to his son all the techniques which Michelangelo had to use in order to shape this piece of art. The son was obviously bored by his father's long and tedious explanation. The mother said, "Kevin, are you getting anything out of what your father is telling you? And Kevin replied: The way I understand it: David was trapped in the marble, and Michelangelo came and freed him."

Yes, we experience that often times we are trapped -- trapped by past hurts, addictions and fears, or even trapped in all the musts and oughts of life. God sees the magnificent person that is there in each of us, waiting to be freed.

This article is perhaps a start - a road map, I hope, that might guide you in asking the questions that will bring you to a more fruitful and joyous experience of the sacrament of reconciliation. In closing, allow me to say that the experience of being a confessor over these twenty years has been one of the richest, most awesome events of my priesthood. People hand you their very souls, the deepest and most personal part of their being, seeking the wholeness which God can and will bring. I thank God that I can be an instrument of his healing in this sacrament. I pray that I may never take this great gift for granted.