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Aidan Ryan

Going to
Confession

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During the recent Year of Mercy, we have been invited to consider all the ways in which the mercy of God is communicated in the world. Mercy, we have learned more clearly from the teaching and example of Pope Francis, is at the very heart of the Gospel message. It is an attitude, a mentality, even a lifestyle, that is characterised by compassion for the human condition in all its woundedness and weakness, by a capacity to accept people where they are without condemnation, by a willingness to forgive and be reconciled and by an instinct to reach out to those on the edge, on peripheries of any sort in an inclusive and welcoming way.

Among these ways in which the church tries to communicate the mercy of God is the sacrament of penance, more recently known as the sacrament of reconciliation. The following is a reflection on this sacrament, particularly on how it might best be understood and celebrated in a way that most effectively communicates, in our current cultural circumstances, the forgiveness, mercy and love of God for human beings in their weakness and their inherited tendency to turn or drift away from the friendship which God so much desires to share with his people.

Perhaps it might be helpful to begin with a brief overview of the history of reconciliation in the church. For the first five centuries, it was a very public event involving sinners who had been excluded from the gatherings of the Christian community because of some serious or publicly-known sin – e.g. murder, adultery, worship of pagan gods. Having repented, and confessed their sins to the bishop and undertaken a period of public and often severe and prolonged penance, these penitents were publicly welcomed back by the bishop into the Christian community in joyful liturgy of reconciliation.

When this manner of celebrating reconciliation ceased, during the period after Constantine when Christians became much more numerous, it seems it was gradually replaced by a custom introduced by Irish monks both at home and in mainland Europe. This was a private confession of faults to a wise monk, who

Aidan Ryan is a priest of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois. Address; Ballinahown, Athlone, Co. Westmeath

would offer advice and prescribe a suitable penance. Very often, these penances were quite severe – these were listed in books called ‘Penitentials’ which prescribed certain penances for certain sins. Since many of the monks were not priests, it is not clear if they granted absolution. Some scholars believe that this form of confession always included an understanding that the penitent would, as part of the process, approach a priest for sacramental absolution. The form in which reconciliation was celebrated in the mediaeval period is also unclear (at least to this author). Did St Francis, and the average layman or woman of his time, for example, go to confession and if so, in what way, how often and to whom? What is clear from this period is that the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 decreed that Christians should confess their sins to their priest at least once a year – presumably this applied only to those who had serious i.e. mortal, sins to confess. What was the background to this decree, why was it promulgated and how was it implemented?

The 16th century saw new propositions of the Reformation, including the assertion that only Baptism and Eucharist were true dominical sacraments, instituted by Christ. This led to the Tridentine definition of seven as the number of the sacraments, one of these being Penance. The Counter-Reformation saw the introduction of confessionals (confession ‘boxes’) into churches, first of all in the cathedral of Milan in the episcopacy of St. Charles Borromeo. This gave shape to the form of the sacrament that was familiar to Catholics up to the fairly recent past. It was during this period also that the manuals of moral theology had increasing influence in the manner in which priests approached their ministry as confessors. The stress on the necessity of confessing the number and species of one’s sins also dates to this period.

Confession became more frequent, at least in Ireland, in the 19th century, due largely to the influence of parish missions and the establishment of sodalities which encouraged monthly confession and communion. The first half of the 20th century was marked by a dramatic increase in the frequency of confession for the average Catholic, linked to the encouragement of frequent Communion that was part of the pastoral policy of Pope St. Pius X. Recent decades have seen an equally dramatic decrease in the number of Catholics going to confession regularly, if at all.

SENSE OF SIN?

Why have confessions diminished so dramatically? The first answer one often hears when this question is discussed is the loss of the sense of sin. I’m not so sure about that – surely one can only have a sense of sin if there is first of all a sense of grace in its broadest

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sense, a sense of the goodness and love of God that evokes a deep and habitual gratitude. A sense of sin is simply an awareness of having failed to respond to this. A colleague expresses this with the homely analogy of potholes – a pothole, he says, is not a thing in itself, it is simply the absence of road where road should be. In a similar way, sin is not a reality in itself, but the absence of grace where grace should be. I wonder if what has been lost is not so much a sense of sin as loss of a sense of guilt, and that might not always necessarily be a bad thing, e.g. when it led to an unhealthy scrupulosity. For many Catholics, I suspect, the ordinary small failures of life in areas such as impatience, custody of the tongue, sexual thoughts, failing to find time for personal prayer, do not really count as sins at all, or if they do they are merely venial and do not necessitate going to confession. There is the related dissatisfaction with a ritual recital of these same peccadilloes in frequent confession, a kind of sense of pointlessness in ‘going through the motions’ over and over again. A further contributory factor in the decline of confession is the contemporary cultural stress on the fundamental equality of all human beings, and in a Christian context, the equality before God of all the baptised. This leads to a questioning of why it is necessary to confess to another human being. The modern person tends to give more emphasis to the person of the priest than to his role as mediator of God’s mercy, and to question such mediation more than a person used to a more hierarchical culture might do.

Underlying all of this is the question of how widespread deliberate personal alienation from God is in the world and in the local church in which we live. The key word here is ‘deliberate’. It is abundantly clear that there is a widespread cultural alienation from God. God is missing, but not missed. This has an effect on the majority of Catholics, who tend as most people do, to go with the cultural flow. The element of personal choice, which is an intrinsic part of personal sin, seems however to be largely missing.

All of this seems to raise the question, especially in the context of the Year of Mercy, of how the mercy and compassion of God can best be celebrated sacramentally in the context and culture of our times. Certainly Pope Francis has enthusiastically promoted the traditional form, both by his teaching and by his personal example. The pastoral initiative of ‘Hours for the Lord’ halfway through Lent has met with a good response in some places and has potential for growth

However, one thought occurs to me regarding that traditional form. Would it be accurate to suggest that it is a merging of two separate strands in the Christian liturgical tradition – the earlier strand of once-in-a-lifetime reconciliation with God and with

the church after serious sin, sincere sorrow and desire to change (metanoia) and public penance and the later strand of a more personal and private encounter such as that popularized by Irish monks? If so, might it be helpful to disentangle the two strands and find ways to celebrate each separately in a manner appropriate to the particular situation?

This dual influence in the history of the sacrament might find an echo in two imaginary penitents who might come successively to a confessional, one returning to the church after years of immoral living and the next a weekly penitent whose sins, if they can be called that, are at the lighter end of the venial spectrum. It seems odd that the liturgical expression of reconciliation and forgiveness is exactly the same for both penitents.

Is the following line of reasoning valid, I wonder? The church requires as essential the confession of only serious/mortal sin. Most ordinary Catholics, most of the time, do not commit mortal sin in which all three conditions are present – grave matter, full knowledge, full consent. Therefore most Catholics, most of the time, are not bound to go to confession. This does not in any way devalue the practice of going to confession, but is it true that most of the confessions that were heard in the days of larger numbers and greater frequency were in fact what could be described as confessions of devotion, rather than what might be called confessions of necessity? It is arguably somewhat inaccurate to describe such sacramental encounters in terms of reconciliation, since there was no real prior alienation from God.

On the other hand, it could be argued that all of us who suffer from the effects of original sin are in some sense and to some degree alienated from God. In this perspective, the regular confession even of venial sins is part of a lifelong process of conversion, a constant – even if gradual and uneven – turning of our lives away from selfishness and towards God. Regular confession – even of venial sins – can provide a salutary opportunity to review our lives and perhaps to identify areas of moral ‘slippage’ before they become more serious. The biblical adage ‘He that contemneth small things shall fall by little and little’ still has validity. Regular confession can serve as kind of spiritual check-up, and analogous to the regular physical check-up so frequently recommended by doctors.

Perhaps this is why Pope Francis places such emphasis on confession, hearing confessions during most of his pastoral visits, and very publicly approaching the sacrament himself during penance services in Rome. In the first interview he gave after his election, he was asked ‘Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?’ and after a long pause he answered ‘I am a sinner’. What exactly did he mean by that? Did he mean ‘as a young Jesuit Provincial I made

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some mistakes that with hindsight I regret' or 'as a human bring I am enmeshed in a world order that is a net or web of sinfulness that oppresses the poor, insults human dignity and is progressively poisoning the planet?' or does he mean 'I could try harder not to fall asleep when I pray in the late evening. I could be more patient in my thoughts about those who frustrate or annoy me. I should fast more than I do'? These three expressions of sinfulness – which would be replicated in the lives of most Catholics – will obviously influence our understanding and practice of confession.

It seems to me that confession of devotion has a great potential for good if we can envisage it differently, not only as forgiveness of sins, but as a source of encouragement and as a simple form of personal spiritual direction. People always need encouragement and will welcome it. Many people would welcome spiritual guidance in their lives, and re-assurance regarding their status as the beloved children of God. But this would involve a significant change of mindset on the part of most priests and most laypeople who would celebrate the sacrament as a confession of devotion. Rather than an emphasis on failure, however little or great, there would need to be an attempt to clarify how the 'penitent' – if that is the appropriate word in this context – understands himself/herself in relation to God, how deeply the gospel message of God's infinite love and compassion has penetrated into the heart and soul, and how it might be enriched by a deeper experience of prayer. The emphasis would move from guilt to gratitude and from vices to virtues and values. The sacrament, in this context, could be described as a sacrament of affirmation and encouragement, a sacrament of guidance and spiritual direction, at least as much as a sacrament of reconciliation. The emphasis would be more on growth in loving and being loved by God than on the elimination of imperfections and of the many minor lapses that mark the human condition as lived in daily life. Imperfections and lapses there certainly are in every human life, but the language of 'striving for perfection' is less attractive to the modern ear than the language of 'doing the best I can' or 'realizing my potential for spiritual growth'.

AN ADAPTED RITE 2

In the average Catholic parish in Ireland now – certainly in rural parishes – the main way in which the sacrament of penance is celebrated is in the form of an adapted version of Rite 2. This is usually celebrated in Advent and Lent. The celebration is communal in character, with those participating coming forward to a priest to whom they either mention one specific area of their lives or simply make a general admission of sinfulness and a request for God's mercy and forgiveness. The priest gives individual absolution and

a penance and the rite ends with a communal thanksgiving. Some describe this – perhaps disparagingly – as a ‘Rite Two and a half’. There are some who are unhappy with this, because they feel it goes beyond what the Rite envisages and lacks sufficient emphasis on the need to name sins by number and species. However, it seems to make the mercy of God more accessible to many, including to some who have not been inside a confessional for many years. I have the impression that most of those who participate in services of this kind are seeking not so much reconciliation with God – from whom they do not in any case feel alienated – but a blessing on their lives, what they sometimes describe as ‘the grace of the sacrament’. Many of the participants are elderly and what they seek is often reassurance regarding remnants of guilt which still remain with them from the preaching and teaching of the culture of the church in which they grew up, particularly in the area of sexuality. These services seem to be effective in communicating (to those who come) the mercy of God as expounded particularly by Pope Francis during the recent Holy Year.

Regarding those in a more real and serious situation of alienation from God through life-styles and attitudes at variance with the call of the Gospel the call to repentance still needs to be addressed in a challenging yet compassionate manner. Opportunities need to be provided – perhaps especially in places where many people go on pilgrimage or in centre city churches where there is a large passing ‘footfall’. Priests who are gifted with an ability to welcome, to rejoice with and to encourage, can be found who would enter, in such places, into a ‘waiting’ ministry, inspired by the mentality and the spirituality of the father of the prodigal son.

Mercy, compassion, forgiveness – these, as Pope Francis consistently reminds us, are at the heart of the Gospel. One of the ways in which the Lord wishes to communicate these to the wounded and the lost is the sacrament we have been considering. The challenge of our time is to find ways to unblock whatever may have been impeding the flow of his loving welcome through this sacramental channel, so that the heavenly rejoicing over even one repentant sinner may continue in our time.