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Can Reconciliation Be Postmodern?

While enjoying refreshments at the recent annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I noticed an amused expression in the eyes of our waiter. Noticing that all tables were inhabited by meeting participants, I could not resist. "What's your take on all these religious types," I asked, hoping for a tidbit of deep insight that would interpret the late-twentieth century for me. "Weak tippers and every conversation I walk up on is about postmodernism," came the resigned reply.

While still confused about the late-twentieth century, the wisdom of this one observer of human commotion confirmed to me that postmodernism as a term has become as culturally *derigueur* as the World Wide Web, *ER*, and mega-churches. While we may differ as to its specific definition, we agree that its result is a situation of radical pluralism where diversity of every calibration is celebrated and valued. As swimmers in such a cultural ocean, we cannot but ask the big questions about the future role of that human activity known as religion. But at this moment I want to ask only a little question: In our postmodern milieu, does reconciliation, as a delineated "sacrament" within the larger Roman Catholic project, make any sense? In other words, in an age that values diversity, is ecclesial activity to ritualize human conciliation merely a holdover from an age when truth was uniform that the Church alone defined and mediated? To explore this question, I will take a brief look at the ritual practice, catechesis, and history of the sacrament.

If we look to our present rituals to answer our question, we all know the data. Fewer than half of us in North America even bother to celebrate the sacramental reconciliation at all (NCCB). This, in spite of our best efforts at renewed catechesis and liturgy following the publication of the revised *Rite of Penance* (1974). For sure, each of the forms of the rite has its takers. We might still observe a small cadre of the baptized who, due to piety and/or scrupulosity, regularly engage in the "normative" form of the sacrament, the Rite for Reconciliation with Individual Penitents [15–21]. A larger group shows up for a slight variation on the

“normative” form, the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution [22–30], expressed as parish “communal” penance services during Advent or Lent or for those staged events for children called “First Penance.” Finally, an even larger group arrives for form three, the Rite of Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution [31–35], at least when bishops and pastors decide that pastoral need supersedes curial opposition. Finally, non-sacramental Penitential Services [36–37] are celebrated so rarely that they aren’t even a blip on the screen.

With evidence from the present ritual in mind, let us ask the question of catechesis, but here we find a mixed bag. The rite cannot hide the well-documented internal struggle that preceded the promulgation of the rite (Dallen/*Reconciling Community*). On the one hand, the text embraces diversity when it affirms that the “people of God accomplish and perfect . . . continual repentance *in many different ways*” [4, italics mine] and that “the whole community . . . acts *in different ways* in the work of reconciliation” [8, italics mine]. On the other hand, the document liberally references the Council of Trent and Trent’s attempt to privilege one way and one ministry over others: “An individual, complete confession and the receiving of absolution constitute the sole, ordinary means for a member of the faithful who is conscious of serious sin to be reconciled with God and the Church” [31] and “God grants pardon for sin through the Church, which works by the ministry of priests” [6]. We are left with a contradictory text and a conflicted catechesis about reconciliation. It is effected through many ways yet one way, many roles yet one role. Go figure.

Finally, does the history of this sacrament shed any light on the question of reconciliation in a pluralistic age? Here I believe the evidence is most helpful. This is a sacrament that has changed its ritual clothes often and has even worn more than one outfit at a time; yet, each ritual expression effected reconciliation with God and the Church. We have seen it all: the process-sensitive order of penitents; the severe and pastorally ineffective canonical or solemn penance; the innovative Celtic experience of individual spiritual direction, examination of sin, and lay confessors; the satisfaction-driven tariffed penance and the resulting Irish penitential books; the intense piety of the penitential pilgrimages; special penitential practices for the dying and for Lent; and the privatized definition of Trent with its familiar canonical parts of contrition, confession, penance, and absolution (Poschmann,

Dallen/*History*, Favazza). Unfortunately, from Trent to Vatican II, all other forms were “funneled” into Trent’s juridic definition of the sacrament, a process so privileged by the institution that even the revised rite of 1974 could not entirely shake it off (Dallen/*History*). So while the recent history does not bear it out, the broader history of the sacrament is marked by a diversity of forms, each in response to changing cultural and pastoral situations.

The evidence from ritual practice, catechesis, and history leads me to conclude that the current marginalization of sacramental reconciliation in the life of the Church is neither imaged nor permanent. We are in a liminal place, where our ritual and catechetical articulations are still at least partially dammed up by the “funnel” effect of Trent’s privatized vision. If the practice of sacramental reconciliation is to seep into all of the places of our postmodern alienation, we must be open to a plurality of ritual strategies, each efficacious and having roots in both the broader history of the sacrament and the diversity of our cultural context.

Without wishing to be overly pedantic, I perceive three hopeful signs of the resurgence of reconciliation in a postmodern Church. First, recent scholarship in the area of ritual studies has challenged the purpose of ritual. Once assumed to function as a means of social control that established and maintained the borders of community membership (Douglas), new work has incorporated postmodern insights to understand ritual as the negotiation of power between those who control ritual and those who participate in it (Bell). Seeing ritual from this perspective, the present non-practice of the existing rituals of sacramental reconciliation is itself efficacious: it expresses a decision on the part of would-be participants that these rituals no longer effect what they intend. I plead with pastoral ministers to listen as intensely to the empty pews at parish penance services as to the filled. The absence of participants cannot be written off solely to the loss of a sense of sin by a narcissistic or materialist society; rather, the baptized are sending a message that new rituals are needed, and are being found, to address the pain, fragmentation, and bondage of alienation.

Second, since the call by Vatican II to revise all the rites of the Church to better reflect their ecclesial dimension, we have come to expect sacraments to be celebrated in community. The community is where conversion and faith happen; the marks of authentic faith is conversion into, commitment to, and celebration in community (Dallen & Favazza). Yet, exactly because we have

done such a good job of ritualizing and catechizing on the role of the community in sacraments of initiation, especially Eucharist, many of the baptized have decided to take us at our word and celebrate Eucharist as THE (translate: only) sacrament of reconciliation. I think this is a good sign. On the one hand, Eucharist really is THE sacrament of reconciliation: sacramental reconciliation must neither be understood as a barrier to be negotiated prior to the table nor as a discreet ritual without connection to the table. Sacramental reconciliation always is incomplete if it does not lead to the table. On the other hand, our success with initiation and Eucharist challenges our present ritual action and catechesis regarding the community's role in reconciliation. Think about it: the normative rituals of initiation and Eucharist happen when the community is gathered, whereas the normative rituals of reconciliation still maintain a one-on-one, juridic, furtive encounter whose efficaciousness is guaranteed without regard to the community gathered (John Paul II).

The third hopeful sign of the recovery of reconciliation is that it is exploding outside the doors of our vestibules. We know the rocketing numbers of self-help and twelve-step groups; those seeking respite from every form of disease, addiction, and psychological trauma have created inviting and efficacious communities, processes, and rituals. Feminist and womanist groups, as well as men's movements such as "Promise Keepers," are doing the same thing for those who feel alienated from dominant cultural values. The point here is that new strategies of reconciliation are being found outside our ecclesial communities. Nothing is served by denigrating or competing with their purposes; rather, we should recognize and celebrate all those moments of reconciliation that are happening along side of our official rituals. Pastoral ministers might consider using the option of "non-sacramental" Penance Services [36–37] to ritualize the staggering plurality of reconciliation strategies to which the members of our communities are engaged and committed.

In a postmodern Church, sacramental reconciliation will survive as a ritual strategy only if its forms become as plural as the age in which we live. Presently it is caught in the lights between its old juridic privatized form and emergent, more truly communal expressions; however, if the history of this sacrament teaches us anything, it is that ritual strategies will both disappear and emerge in the face of new cultural and pastoral contexts. The question remains: Will our ritual practice and catechesis learn from the current non-practice of the sacrament and from other

ritual strategies emerging in a postmodern context? Or will they simply continue towards irrelevancy?

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