

Day 158 – Tuesday, August 25

How to Celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation Today by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., S.T.D.
(Continued)

RECONCILING Sin is the refusal of that gift of life and call to growth. To be aware of sin, we must first be aware of God's love. Those who do not see the constant role that God plays in their lives are not aware of sin. They can recognize that they do bad things or that they break the law, but sin—in this religious meaning of the word—requires a holy person or at least one who is seeking holiness. That's why Scripture is important for reconciliation: It helps us to understand better how God loves us. Even if your priest does not include a reading during the sacrament, you might consider reading the parable of the prodigal son or some other Scripture in preparation for the sacrament. Following the reading from Scripture (or the opening prayer, if the Scripture is omitted) the priest invites you to say whatever is in your heart: sins, fears, joys, questions, doubts. The priest responds by applying the sacred Scripture to the situation of the penitent and suggests a penance—something that you might do or a prayer you might say to show or express your conversion.

After the exchange with the priest, you turn once again to prayer. You will tell God that you are sorry for your sins—this may be a prayer that you know by heart or you may pray in your own words. Or you may find the Our Father an appropriate act of contrition. The priest then prays the prayer of absolution. If you are not separated by a screen, he may place his hands on your head in the biblical gesture of healing and invocation.

COMMISSION The words of absolution are not merely a legal formula. They are the very heart of the sacrament. While our sins disrupt and rupture the beauty and harmony of creation, God our merciful Father has restored this harmony by the paschal victory of Christ. This restoration and reconciliation give name to the sacrament: Reconciliation. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation the Holy Spirit is sent among us "for the forgiveness of sins." The fruits of forgiveness and reconciliation are "pardon and peace." We receive these gifts of the Holy Spirit "through the ministry of the Church" and the ministry of the priest who is ordained to speak in the name of the Spirit-filled Church:

"God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son/ has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (And the penitent answers) Amen."

The individual rite closes very simply. The priest says: "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace," or: "Go in peace and God bless you" or some similar words of dismissal. You respond: "Amen," or "Thank you, Father." When you compare this way of celebrating the sacrament with the way Catholics "went to confession" decades ago, not much seems to have changed, at least externally. We do now basically what we did then. But the primary focus of the rite has changed. As in all acts of worship, the focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is on God and what God does. The focus of confession was often on me and my sinfulness. Even in naming the sacrament we have moved from "confession" (what we do) to "reconciliation" (what God does).

In the light of eternity, we're here for a very short time, really. We're here for one thing, ultimately: to learn how to love, because God is love. - James Finley

Sincerely,
Fr. Jim Kaptein