Reclaiming the Sacrament of Reconciliation

by

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A thesis submitted to Regis College and the Pastoral Department of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology awarded conjointly by Regis College of University of Toronto, the Toronto School of Theology and the University of Toronto, and the degree of Licentiate in Sacred Theology awarded by Regis College

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Abstract

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is in crisis. Many Catholics lack a solid understanding of the Sacrament and consequently abandon its practice. This study investigated the above-mentioned phenomenon by contextualizing the current Theology and practice of the Sacrament within its broader history – a history that is characterized by diversity, crises and development. The Sacrament’s Christological, ecclesial and personal dimensions were identified as the three fundamental elements that will help reclaim the Sacrament. More concretely, Adrienne von Speyr’s notion of the “confessional attitude” grounds the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Jesus Christ who, through his Church, instils his own attitude within those who celebrate the Sacrament. The same three dimensions present themselves in the teachings of John Paul II for whom the Sacrament is a personal encounter with Jesus and a part of the mission of the Church to be a reconciled and reconciling community. By expanding the understanding of the effects of the Sacrament to include both its ascetic and reconciling dimensions, this thesis argues in favour of the Confession of Devotion and the possibility of Spiritual Direction during the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this way, the Sacrament acquires a more prominent role in the spiritual journey of every Christian and elicits significant implications for the life and mission of the Church.
Acknowledgments

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## Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>AAS</td>
<td>Acta Apostolicae Sedis</td>
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<td>CCC</td>
<td>Catechism of the Catholic Church</td>
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<td>CIC</td>
<td>Code of Canon Law</td>
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<td>Denzinger</td>
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<td>LOR</td>
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<td>La Missione Ecclesiale di Adrienne von Speyr: Atti del II Colloquio Internazionale del Pensiero Cristiano</td>
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<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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Introduction

1. Context

According to Catholic Theology, the Sacrament of Reconciliation was instituted by Jesus Christ¹ and is necessary for the salvation of those who sin gravely after their Baptism.² A valid celebration of the Sacrament (in its ordinary form) requires the penitent to conduct an examination of conscience that leads to contrition,³ followed by an integral confession⁴ and the satisfaction⁵ of the penance that the minister⁶ assigns to the penitent before imparting the

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² Clement VI, Super quibusdam (20 September 1351), 15 in Denzinger, 574a. XVI Ecumenical Council of Constance, Inter cunctas (22 February 1418) in Denzinger 670. XVII Ecumenical Council of Florence, Exultate Deo (22 November 1439) in Denzinger 696. Sixtus IV, Licet ea (9 August 1479), 1 in Denzinger 724. XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 7 (3 March 1547), Canon 10 on the Sacrament of Baptism, in Denzinger 866. Ibid., Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapters 2 and 5 in Denzinger 895 and 901. Ibid., Canons 2 and 6 on the Sacrament of Penance in Denzinger 912 and 916f. Pius X, Lamentabili (3 July 1907), 46 in Denzinger 2046. See also: CCC, 1446. Ordo, 7a. CIC, 988-989.

³ XVII Ecumenical Council of Florence, Exultate Deo (22 November 1439) in Denzinger 699. XVIII Ecumenical Lateran Council, Exsurge Domini (15 June 1520), 11 in Denzinger 751. XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 6 (13 January 1547), Chapter 14 in Denzinger 807. Ibid., Canon 7 on Justification in Denzinger 817. Ibid., Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapter 3 in Denzinger 896ff. Ibid., Canon 4 on the Sacrament of Penance in Denzinger 914. Innocent XI, Decree of the Holy Office (4 March 1679), 57, 60 and 64 in Denzinger 1207, 1210 and 1214. See also: CCC, 1450-1454. Ordo, 6a.


⁵ XVII Ecumenical Council of Florence, Exultate Deo (22 November 1439) in Denzinger 699. XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapter 8 in Denzinger 905f. Ibid., Canons 13 and 15 on the Sacrament of Penance in Denzinger 923 and 925. See also: CCC, 1459-1460. Ordo, 6c, 11. CIC, 981.

⁶ Leo I, Solicitudinis quidem tuae (11 June 1452), 2 in Denzinger 146. XII Ecumenical Fourth Lateran Council (1215), Chapter 21 in Denzinger 437. XVI Ecumenical Council of Constance, Inter Cunctas (22 February 1418), 20 in Denzinger 670. Ibid., Exultate Deo (22 November 1439), in Denzinger 699. XVIII Ecumenical Fifth Lateran Council, Exsurge Domine (15 June 1520), 13 in Denzinger 753. Ibid., Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapter 6 in Denzinger 902f. Ibid., Canon 10 on the Sacrament of Penance in Denzinger 920. Ibid., Session 23 (15 July 1563), Chapter 1 in Denzinger 957. Alexander VII, Decree (24 September 1665), 13 and 16 in Denzinger 1113 and 1116. Innocent XI, Decree (12 February 1679) in Denzinger 1150. Pius VI, Auctorem fidei (28 August 1794) in Denzinger 1537. See also: CCC, 1461-1467; Ordo, 9-10. CIC, 965-966, 977-980.
absolution. The Sacrament is an efficacious sign of the redeeming Christ who reconciles the penitent with God, with the Church and with self. Paragraph 1469 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the Sacrament of Reconciliation “does not simply heal the one restored to ecclesial communion, but has also a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church which suffered from the sin of one of her members. Re-established or strengthened in the communion of saints, the sinner is made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among all the living members of the Body of Christ, whether still on pilgrimage or already in the heavenly homeland”.

This brief synthesis of the official teaching of the Church on the Sacrament of Reconciliation seems to contrast with the contemporary use of the Sacrament. The numbers of those who celebrate this Sacrament plummeted in the last century, even amongst clergy and religious.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is in crisis. Several reasons have been put forward to explain this: individualism, pluralism, the negative influence of media, a loss of the sense of sin, and lack of solid catechesis of the faithful to mention but a few. Yet, the term ‘crisis’ can be misleading for it seems to imply that for two millennia the Church had used a single penitential rite that

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7 Ordo, 6d. See also: CIC, 960.
9 CCC, 1475-1477.
10 As stated in the Catechism (CCC, 1423-1424), the Sacrament of Reconciliation has several names where each one seeks to highlight a particular aspect of the whole sacramental process. For the purpose of consistency, only the term “Sacrament of Reconciliation” will be used in this thesis and will refer to the entire sacramental process of reconciliation and penance.
somehow remained unchanged. Modern historical and liturgical studies on the Sacrament reveal, however, that though its substance remained immutable (for it was instituted by Christ), the Sacrament had to face several crises that led to its development. Also, it was never the case of a smooth evolution of one rite but the co-existence of several rites that emphasized various dimensions of the whole reconciliation process according to the particular needs of Christians in their particular historical, social and religious situations. Therefore, the current crisis – which is not unique in the history of the Sacrament – calls for a study that is able to contextualize the present situation within the larger picture of the Sacrament and to harmonize its various components. This is, according to James Cardinal Stafford, what the 1973 Rite of Penance attempted to achieve: “The new Rite balances the following elements of the 2000 year-old tradition of the Church: the theological and liturgical principles of reconciliation and salvation, reconciliation and the Church, sacramental conversion and reconciliation, and finally the importance of penance.”

Now, almost forty years after the promulgation of the revised Rite of Penance, it is worth re-examining the Sacrament and identify those aspects of our Tradition in need of further development for an enhanced understanding and celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Special attention may be given in this regard to the “confessional attitude” that Adrienne von Speyr presents in her book Confession. This thesis will argue that this notion can help reclaim

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the Sacrament for it captures the Trinitarian-Christological basis of the Sacrament yet without jeopardizing its personal and ecclesial dimensions.\textsuperscript{16}

Von Speyr suggests that the Sacrament of Reconciliation be centered on God and characterized by the attitude of the Son, namely his “confessional attitude.”\textsuperscript{17} The one who is without sin proclaims the forgiveness of God and effects it by taking upon himself the sins of the world and “confessing” them on the cross before the Father.\textsuperscript{18} The “confessional attitude” of the Son is embodied in his complete transparency before the Father (“being naked before God”\textsuperscript{19}) and unreserved openness to his will and judgment. In the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the penitent is invited – as a member of the community of saints and sinners which is the Church – to participate in and conform to the “confessional attitude” of the Son and then to extend it in his or her daily life.\textsuperscript{20}

At this point, the valuable contribution of John Paul II to upholding the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be explored. As pastor and vicar of Christ, Pope John Paul II tackled the crisis on various levels. He engaged with it early on in his pontificate with the College of Bishops at the 1983 Synod which resulted in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}. He talked frequently about this Sacrament with the clergy, particularly in his annual Messages to the Apostolic Penitentiary, during the \textit{Ad limina Apostolorum} of several bishops and in his Letters to Priests for Holy Thursday. He also


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 11-20, 23-87, 174.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 50-55, 78.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 51, 184.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 23, 195-212.
addressed the universal Church at his General Audiences and the publication of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which provided a concise and systematic presentation of the beliefs of the Church pertaining to this Sacrament. His teachings will be examined in this work, focusing on the effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The primary effect of the Sacrament is the forgiveness of sins. In *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* John Paul II describes the present world as shattered by conflict yet with an earnest desire to restore wholeness. In order to be effective, this reconciliation must reach and heal sin, the root of all division. True reconciliation demands *metanoia*, a change of heart that leads to the rejection of and the freedom from sin. Reconciliation is a gift that God bestows, through the ministry of the Church, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. However, this is not the sole fruit of the Sacrament.

During his pontificate, John Paul II constantly drew attention to the secondary effect of the Sacrament, growth in holiness. It goes beyond the purification of the penitent to include enlightenment as well as a unifying encounter with Christ. The Sacrament is “the school which formed the great saints” and “an irreplaceable school of spirituality” where the Christian can grow in virtue, find the strength to battle life’s challenges and live the universal call to holiness

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21 CCC, 1422-1498.
22 *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 2-3.
23 Ibid., 3.
24 Ibid., 4.
25 Ibid., 4, 10, 19, 31 §1, 28. See also: *Ordo*, 8.
for which *Lumen Gentium* called.²⁹ As part of this ascetic dimension the so-called “Confession of Devotion”³⁰ will be explored, that is the frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation for venial sins or for mortal sins that have already been confessed.³¹ Nearly all the popes of the twentieth century promoted this practice. However, many today question its value.³² This thesis will argue for Confession of Devotion as the sacramental symbolization of the intent of the believer to be part of a life-long process of conversion *from* sin and conversion *to* Christ.³³ It may also serve as an expression of faith in God’s infinite mercy which overflows into a profession of praise for this divine love.³⁴

Moreover, although the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not identical to Spiritual Direction, the former can nonetheless be a graced moment for the priest to assist the penitent along the path of conversion and holiness.³⁵ The confessor can assist the penitent in becoming more aware of personal sin, helping in the formation of conscience, pointing out spiritual obstacles that hinder one’s openness to the divine will, offering encouragement and supporting the process of conversion.

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³³ Chappell, *Regular Confession*, 117, 139.

³⁴ Ibid., 121.

discernment. Thus, both “the ministry of reconciliation and the service of spiritual counsel and direction are contextualized by the universal call to holiness which is the perfection of Christian life and ‘the perfection of charity.”

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is indeed in crisis today; many Catholics fail to grasp the rich meaning of the Sacrament and abstain from its benefits. More attention needs to be given to the “confessional attitude” with its emphasis on the Christological dimension of the Sacrament. It is also worth emphasizing the ascetic effect of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with its ecclesial implications for, besides the forgiveness of sins, the Sacrament can attend to each member of the Mystical Body of Christ in their spiritual journey on earth towards union with God. In this sense, the Sacrament helps Christians to grow in holiness and to manifest in the world the holiness of the Mystical Body of Christ.

2. Thesis Statement

This thesis will address and analyze the contemporary crisis of the lack of appreciation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation amongst Catholics. It proposes to reclaim the Sacrament by grounding it in Adrienne von Speyr’s theological understanding of a “confessional attitude” and broaden the understanding of the effects of the Sacrament to include both its reconciling and ascetic dimensions. In celebrating this Sacrament as members of the Church, the faithful are freed from sin and empowered by grace to complete in their lives the holiness they freely received from God at their Baptism. Grounding the Sacrament of Reconciliation in von Speyr’s “confessional attitude” that is rooted in Trinitarian relations, manifested to humans in

36 *Lumen gentium*, 40.
38 *Lumen gentium*, 40.
Christ and promoted by the Church for the lives of her members, and given a broader understanding of the effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation to include the ascetic as well as its reconciling fruits, assist a deeper understanding and possibly renewed practice of this embattled Sacrament.

3. Thesis Methodology and Overview

The methodology of this thesis will be primarily expository. The first part will present a theological analysis of the current crisis of the Sacrament and set it in the larger historical-liturgical context. With this understanding of the crisis, the thesis will proceed to the “confessional attitude” and the effects of the Sacrament in relation to the universal call for holiness. The twentieth century Swiss medical doctor and mystic Adrienne von Speyr and the Polish philosopher and pope John Paul II will be the interlocutors in this analysis. The final section will be pragmatic in nature, reserved for the pastoral implications of the above-mentioned dimensions.

More specifically, this thesis will have an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will explore the contemporary crisis of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and contextualize it within the rich history of the Sacrament. The following chapter will discuss von Speyr’s notion of the “confessional attitude,” revealed in the Son and passed on to the Church to promote amongst her members.\(^{39}\) It is the mission of the forgiven sinner, then, to return to the world in order to live from the same confessional attitude of Christ, a life of obedience and openness to the Father and the Spirit.\(^{40}\) The third chapter will have the fruits of the Sacrament for its focus. The first section will explore the key fruit, the forgiveness of sin, by reflecting on

\(^{40}\) Von Speyr, *Confession*, 206-212.
the mystery of sin, the mystery of Christ and the Sacrament of Reconciliation as the Church’s prolongation of Christ’s own victory over sin. The components of this sacramental process will be explored. The rest of the chapter will examine the ascetic fruits of the Sacrament. Particular attention is given to Confession of Devotion and the relationship between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Spiritual Direction. The conclusion will take a more critical approach by weighing the pastoral implications of the previous chapters.

In summary, this thesis will explore the multifaceted crisis of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and make proposals to reclaim the Sacrament – assisted by the valuable insight of Adrienne von Speyr and John Paul II – by emphasizing its Christological basis, its personal nature and its ecclesial implications. A more nuanced understanding of the Sacrament, with its manifold effects, could lead to a deeper appreciation of the Sacrament and may foster its integration within the journey of the Christian towards holiness.
Chapter 1
The Crisis

In *Habits of Devotion*, James O’Toole describes the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the mid twentieth century at the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City, a typical North American parish with a total population of about 3,200 people:

In 1952, the two priests there heard 9,431 confessions, an average of about 182 per week; by way of comparison, the parish reported only 26 marriages for the year, 140 baptisms, and a confirmation class of 90. Confessions were scheduled every Saturday from 4 to 6 o’clock and 7:30 to 9:00, but they were also heard on the eves of holy days and on Sunday mornings. The aggregate numbers suggest that the typical parishioner (of course, there is really no such thing) was going to confession about four times a year, though obviously some individuals went more frequently and others less.41

It is fairly obvious that the above description does not reflect any longer the pastoral situation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The numbers of those who celebrate this Sacrament have plummeted in the last century, even amongst clergy and religious.42 The Sacrament of Reconciliation, in its individual and private form, is in crisis. Several reasons have been put forward to explain this: individualism, pluralism, the negative influence of media, a loss of the sense of sin, and lack of solid catechesis of the faithful to mention but a few.43 An endless list of questions remains: Can the quantitative drop be equated with a qualitative drop in the practice of the Sacrament? Does this crisis mark an inevitable death of the Sacrament or is it a sign of

transition to a still unfamiliar way of celebrating the Sacrament? Logically, one cannot presume to have the key that will unlock this complex puzzle. Nor should one make rash generalizations that fail to take into consideration contributing factors (such as age, gender, state in life, ethnic and cultural diversity) that alter one’s perception and practice of the Sacrament. Aware of these limits we may still venture towards a better portrait of the current crisis by contextualizing it.

First, how does the current situation fit into the larger picture, the history of the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Secondly, how did twentieth century Catholic Theology relate to the crisis? Thirdly, how did the Magisterium respond in the last century? One hopes that this discussion may offer a more nuanced perception of the current situation of the Sacrament and accentuate essential aspects for reclaiming the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

1. A Historical Overview

According to the Synoptic Gospels, all the preaching of Jesus Christ focused from the very beginning on *metanoia* as the only way for one to become part of the Kingdom of God.\(^{44}\) This *metanoia*, a radical and definitive conversion of one’s whole life, is a divine gift that requires the cooperation of its receiver. The parable of the Prodigal Son is an unmistakable example.\(^{45}\) In addition to his preaching, Jesus incarnated the mercy of his Father in his countless encounters with sinners,\(^{46}\) guiding them to conversion,\(^{47}\) granting them forgiveness in virtue of his own authority,\(^{48}\) demanding transformation and reparation,\(^{49}\) but without diminishing their human

\(^{44}\) Mt 4:17; 11:2-24; 18:3; Mk 1:15; Lk 5:32; 19:40-44; 23:28-31.
\(^{45}\) Lk 15:11-32. This parable portrays the pitiful condition of humanity burdened by sin, the slow and painful process of conversion, as well as the infinite love of God who respects the sinner’s freedom but responds with compassion to the repentant one that returns.
\(^{46}\) The paralytic man (Lk 5:17-26), the adulterous woman (Lk 7:36-50), the good thief (Lk 23:39-43), and Peter the apostle (Lk 22:54-62; Jn 21:15-17).
\(^{47}\) The Samaritan woman (Jn 4:6-42).
\(^{48}\) The paralytic man (Mt 9:2-8).
dignity and freedom. Nonetheless, Jesus could be stern with the Pharisees who resisted his call to repentance. The Church of the New Testament believed that she had been commissioned by Christ to continue his mission of forgiveness.

Primarily, the Church effected this forgiveness in Baptism when according to the theology of the sacrament one enters the Paschal Mystery and becomes dead to sin. Although aware of her holiness, the apostolic Church remained painfully conscious of the sinfulness of her members. The Pauline writings seem to offer two forms for the forgiveness of her members: the ordinary form that consisted of fraternal correction, prayer and confession of sin, and the solemn form for grave sins consisting of the exclusion of the sinner, in the name of Jesus Christ, in order to protect the holy community and her weak members as well as provoke the sinner to conversion. The Christian community, however, never ceased to pray and suffer for the

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49 Zaccheus (Lk 19:1-10) and Peter (Jn 21:15-17).
50 The Samaritan woman (Lk 15:11-32) and Judas Iscariot (Mt 26:21-25; 26:47-50; 27:3-10). : José Ramos-Regidor, Il Sacramento della Penitenza: Riflessione Teologica Biblico-Storico-Pastorale alla luce del Vaticano II (Turin: Elle Di Ci, 1992), 115-118.
52 For a modern discussion on the classical texts of the institution of the Sacrament of Penance (Jn 20:33; Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18) see Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations 2, 140-152 and ibid., 15, 6-8; Zoltán Alszeghy and Maurizio Flick, Il Sacramento della Riconciliazione, Teologia Attualizzata, vol. 12a (Turin: Marietti, 1976), 50-57.
53 Rom 6:3-11; 1 Jn 3,9; 5:18; Eph 5:27; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:6; 1 Cor 1:2. Louis-Marie Chauvet notes that at Pentecost Peter preached repentance and Baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). After Baptism, one’s whole life became an ongoing metanoia and penance became a fundamental attitude. Louis-Marie Chauvet, “Penance,” in Encyclopedia of Christian Theology, 1st ed.
54 1 Cor 5:1; 2 Cor 11:13 ss.; 12:20-21; Gal 2:4; Rv 2:18-22; 3:1-3; 2 Pt 2:20-22; 1 Jn 2:1.
55 1 Tm 5:20; 2 Tm 2:25-26; Gal 6:1-2.
56 2 Thes 3:6 ss.; 1 Cor 5:9-11.
57 1 Cor 5:3-4; 2 Cor 13:3-10.
58 2 Thes 3:6,14; 1 Cor 5:2,6,9,11.
59 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tm 1:20; 2 Cor 2:11; 2 Thes 3:15. Rouillard distinguishes in Paul between ‘reconciliation’ and ‘excommunication-readmission.’ The former (reconciliation), unique to Paul in the New Testament, concerns primarily God’s initiative to reconcile human beings to himself (Rom 5:10-11; 2 Cor 5:18-19). Reconciliation seems to address God’s relationship to the human person and to take place on the interior and spiritual level rather than the liturgical and sacramental. The latter notion (excommunication and readmission) seems to be more focused on the relationship of the baptized to the community of the faithful. Rouillard, Storia della
salvation of the sinful one. The sinner’s return, out of contrition, was nothing less than a grace that the sinner receives from God through the Church and a victory of the community over Satan. Other non-Pauline texts of the New Testament speak of the sinner’s reconciliation with God through the Church: fraternal correction and the judgment from the leaders of the community, encouraged by the prayers of the community, and a confession about which very little is known. The New Testament does not provide a particular penitential ritual.

At the end of the apostolic age, the Shepherd of Hermas proclaimed the possibility of penance once after Baptism. This testimony from the second century was neither a universal dogmatic principle of the time nor an unprecedented innovation. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258), Hippolytus of Rome (d. c. 235) and the early Tertullian (d. after 220) upheld the

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60 1 Cor 5:2.6; 2 Cor 2:5.

61 2 Cor 2:7.10.

62 2 Cor 2:11.

63 Mt 18:15-18.

64 1 Jn 5:16; Jas 5:16; Mt 18:19-20.


67 Shepherd of Hermas, *Mand.* 4.1.8 4.3.6, The Ante-Nicene Fathers II, p. 21, 22. The content of the Shepherd’s revelation was “not the opening of a new, previously non-existent possibility of penance, but the impossibility of a later penance” (Rahner, *Th. Inv.* 15, 73) for the end of the world was near. Rahner believes that “as much as this eschatological notion of penance in Hermas with regard to the imminent arrival of the last day is based on subjective and erroneous assumptions, it also contains a nucleus of truth which today is only too easily forgotten: the person who sins after baptism puts himself in a situation which, despite the fundamental possibility for penance and forgiveness, from man’s viewpoint contains no guarantee of a new forgiveness. This is because the sinner is deprived of the certainty that he will in fact have again the interior (he has sinned as a believer!) and the exterior (he can always die) possibility of a conversion. If then this possibility is indeed granted to him, it is not simply the mere application of a universal, institutional possibility of forgiveness, but an ‘actual,’ always ‘once and for all’ grace of God, over which he has no control… Hermas is more correct than he appears at first sight” : ibid., 76.

68 His work *De paenitentia* (c. 203) upholds the Church’s authority to forgive sins but his later work *De pudicitia* (c. 212) is tainted by his Montanist extremism which argues for limitations to the Church’s powers to forgive.: : W. Le Saint, “Tertullian,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed.
practice of a second chance for salvation “after escaping shipwreck”69 when faced by the rigorism of the Montanist and Novatian heresies70 and the return of the lapsed (that is, those believers who failed to testify for their faith when faced by persecution).71 Allowing for some ritual differences from church to church, those baptized who were guilty of apostasy, homicide or adultery,72 were excluded from the Eucharistic liturgy and admitted to the ordo paenitentium (order of penants) to complete the actio poenitentiae (penitential acts) assigned by the bishop while the whole community offered its efficacious intercession. The rite included the imposition of hands by the bishop and, at times, an exomologesis (confession) from the sinner which, however, was never a detailed public confession of sins.73 Having completed a lengthy period of prayer, fasting, almsgiving and repentance, the repentant sinner was forgiven and readmitted as a full active member of the Christian community at a liturgical rite. Nonetheless, the reconciled Christian remained subject to several ‘interdicts’ for the rest of life.74 The penitential form became more structured75 in the fourth century when canons were set up to regulate this

70 Montanism originated in the second century with Montanus as its founder. The movement saw itself as the spiritual elite that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit will renew the Church to its original enthusiasm. It was their faith that the Church cannot or should not forgive certain sins because of their gravity: W. Le Saint, “Montanism,” in New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed. On the other hand, Novatian (b. c. 200) was concerned that great emphasis on God’s pardon may jeopardize God’s judgment. Thus, Novatian insisted on penance and compunction for obtaining God’s mercy. Eventually, his followers denied the forgiveness of all grave sins for the baptized: P. H. Weyer, “Novatian (Antipope) and Novatianism,” in New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2nd ed.
72 For less serious sins Christians were able to confess to one another, celebrate the Eucharist for the forgiveness of sins, pray, fast and practice deeds of mercy. Origen presents five ways (besides Baptism and the discipline imposed on penitents): martyrdom, almsgiving, fraternal forgiveness, fraternal correction and charity: David N. Power, “Sacrament and Order of Penance and Reconciliation,” in Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin eds. Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 549-550. Augustine tells of three modes of penance (the catechumenate, the great or canonical penance, and everyday penance). He lists prayer, fasting, almsgiving and forgiveness as examples of daily penance but gives priority to the prayer of the “Our Father”: Kate Dooley, “Reconciliation in the Early Church: Lessons from History,” New Catholic World 227 (January-February 1984): 20.
73 Leo the Great cited by Ramos-Regidor, Il Sacramento della Penitenza, 156.
74 Rouillard, Storia della Penitenza, 37.
75 Ramos-Regidor outlines the responsibilities associated with this penitential process (general, ritual and penitential), its degrees (the flentes, audientes, substrati and consistentes) and its duration: Ramos-Regidor, Il Sacramento della Penitenza, 157-158.
penitential practice, hence the term ‘canonical’ penance. Although this process can be praised for its liturgical character and for its attention to the role of the ecclesial community that intercedes for the sinner and effects the reconciliation, it fell into disuse by the mid-fifth century for its severity, unrepeatability, and exceptionality. Eventually a second tradition, known as tariff penance, appeared in the West.

The term ‘tariff’ alludes to the work of penance assigned by a confessor according to a ‘penitential book.’ The tariff penance was promoted by the Irish missionary monks and became widely available by the eighth century. Unlike the penance of exclusion that preceded it, the tariff penance had a more personal character, was repeatable, available to both lay and clerics, could also be granted by a priest instead of a bishop, and was not limited to a particular time of

76 The councils of Elvira (306), Arles (314), Nicaea (325), Orange (441), Angers (453), and Orleans (511, 538) created such canons. In addition, bishops developed canons for their own respective churches: Power, “Sacrament and Order of Penance,” 548. For instance, the fourth century bishop of Caesarea Basil the Great asks for twenty years of penance for wilful homicide: four years to mourn for personal sin and ask for the prayers of the faithful, five years as a ‘hearer’, seven years as a ‘faller’ and another four years as a ‘stander’ within the community though still unable to partake in the Eucharist. Half of this time – ten years – is to be served for involuntary homicide: Epist. 217. To Amphilochnius 56-57, The Fathers of the Church XXVIII, p. 108-109. See Paul F. Palmer, Sacraments and Forgiveness: History and Doctrinal Development of Penance, Extreme Unction and Indulgences, Sources of Christian Theology, vol. 2. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), 74-76.

77 Justification is twofold: the seriousness of sin and conversion as well as the seriousness of post-Baptismal sin. In regards to the latter, one should keep in mind the ancient belief that unlike at Baptism, Penance did not grant the afesis, the forgiveness of sin and its consequences. Hence Penance was a “laborious Baptism” that called for the receiver’s metanoia: Ramos-Regidor, Il Sacramento della Penitenza, 161.

78 Although unable to grant reconciliatio, the Church never abandoned the relapsed sinner who still benefitted from the Church’s prayers and was allowed to remain in the order of penitents: ibid., 160.

79 Apart from the fact that this form of penance was reserved for grave notorious sins, it was not available for clerics, monks, or those who were previously part of the order of penitents. Only some older and fervent Christians dared to join the ordo paenitentium while the rest of those who were in need of it were advised by their bishop to postpone it and to lead a life of preparation for penance in extremis. Monastic profession or life as a conversus were also considered as a “second Baptism” and admitted to the Eucharist: ibid., 162-163, 169-170. Besides, Martos notes that as early as the third century, several Christians revealed their conscience to a spiritual ‘guide’ who may not have always been ordained. However, this practice was not a Sacrament in the strict sense: Joseph Martos, Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church, rev. ed. (Liguori, MO: Liguori and Triumph, 2001), 290-291.

the liturgical calendar.\textsuperscript{81} Initially, the penitent generally had to go a second time to the confessor for the absolution of sins. Gradually, the penitent was reconciled even before completing the penance. The tariff penance included a complex system of commutation of penance where severe penances could be commuted to acts of charity, prayer and sacrifice. Sadly, this form of penance was not immune to abuses.\textsuperscript{82} The Carolingian Reform\textsuperscript{83} aimed at replacing the tariff system with the canonical system. However, the end result was a dual form of penance depending on the notoriety (not the gravity) of one’s sin: canonical penance (solemn or non-solemn) for grave public sin and tariff penance for grave secret sin.\textsuperscript{84} Typical examples of the non-solemn public penance include the penitential pilgrimage and the pilgrimage to Rome during the Holy Year.\textsuperscript{85} These forms of reconciliation tended to emphasize the penance of the penitent.\textsuperscript{86} On the other hand, Peter Abelard’s\textsuperscript{87} theology of the Sacrament insisted on the penitent’s contrition.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{81} Rahner, \textit{Th. Inv. 15}, 14.
\textsuperscript{82} A penitent had the option of hiring a monk to perform the penance. In return, the penitent would make an offering to the monk’s monastery. It was also possible for the penitent to make an offering in order to substitute masses for long periods of fasting. However, these options created an unjust situation for the poor penitent who was often unable to pay the offering : Nathan Mitchell, “The Many Ways to Reconciliation,” in N. Mitchell ed. \textit{The Rite of Penance: Commentaries}, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Liturgical Conference, 1978), 34-35.
\textsuperscript{83} This reform unfolded in the mid eighth and ninth century and was initially led by the Carolingian rulers. The intention was to strengthen the institutional church, eliminate corrupt practices, renew and educate the clergy, bring uniformity in liturgical practice, and invigorate the spiritual life of the entire Frankish territory. : R. E. Sullivan, “Carolingian Reform,” in \textit{New Catholic Encyclopedia}, 2nd ed. The Carolingian Councils of Tours and Rheims (813), Paris (829), and Mainz (847) were all critical of the tariff system : Dallen, \textit{The Reconciling Community}, 111.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{85} Rouillard, \textit{Storia della Penitenza}, 57-63.
\textsuperscript{87} Peter Abelard (1079-1142) was a French theologian and philosopher. \textit{“Ethica or Scito te ipsum} (“Know Thyself”) [is] a short masterpiece in which he analyzed the notion of sin and reached the drastic conclusion that human actions do not make a man better or worse in the sight of God, for deeds are in themselves neither good nor bad. What counts with God is a man’s intention; sin is not something done (it is not \textit{res}); it is uniquely the consent of a human mind to what it knows to be wrong.” : David E. Luscombe, “Abelard, Peter,” in \textit{The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropædia}, 15th ed.
\textsuperscript{88} O’Loughlin, \textit{The Future}, 71-77.
Under Abelard’s influence, the minister’s responsibility changed from calculating and imposing the tariff to assessing the genuineness of the penitent’s contrition. This new emphasis on contrition demanded that one take also into consideration the intention of the penitent and other subjective factors in determining the moral value of particular human actions. Sadly, a large number of the Catholic laity felt unable to engage on this level of self-analysis while the clergy often felt ill-equipped to guide and enlighten their flock. In order to defend the unity and orthodoxy of the Catholic community against the threat of heresies, the Fourth Lateran Council sanctioned annual private confession for all the faithful. The new mendicant orders were deeply involved in the implementation of this obligation; under their influence, several pious believers, known as the perfectissimi, resorted to frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation to receive spiritual guidance. But the majority of Christians did not confess frequently. This was the situation by the time of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).

For Aquinas, God is already at work prior to the reception of the Sacrament of Penance to help the sinner move towards the Sacrament. The Holy Spirit is the divine impulse (instinctus divina) that moves the will of the human person to dispose itself for the infusion of grace. If needed, the justifying grace of the Sacrament can perfect the penitent’s imperfect contrition to contrition. During the celebration of the Sacrament, the process of conversion taking place in the heart of the penitent (the res sacramenti of the external penance; the sacramentum of the forgiveness of sins) finds expression in the interaction between the acts of the penitent (contrition, confession and satisfaction; the quasi matter of the Sacrament) and the absolution of the priest in the

89 XII Ecumenical Fourth Lateran Council (1215), Chapter 21 in Denzinger 437.
90 Rouillard, Storia della Penitenza, 74.
91 Chauvet, “Penance.”
deprecatory and indicative form (the form) to constitute the sacramental sign and cause. Duns Scotus (d. 1308), however, focused on the absolution of the priest. He believed that the absolution was able to remit sin whenever the penitent had at least imperfect contrition. In due course the centre of attention shifted to the priest’s absolution.

In response to the teachings of the Reformers who rejected in various degrees the need for the Sacrament of Penance, the Council of Trent declared penance as a true Sacrament, distinct from Baptism necessary for baptized sinners who are aware of mortal sins and profitable for forgiveness of their venial sins. The acts of the penitent (contrition, confession and satisfaction) are quasi materia (quasi matter) and required by divine institution. Contrition is the most important of the acts of the penitent. Perfect contrition can reconcile before the Sacrament is actually received, though it must include the desire to receive the Sacrament.

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93 Rahner, *Th. Inv. 15*, 14-16.


96 XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 14 (25 November 1551), Canon 1 on the Sacrament of Penance in *Denzinger* 911.

97 XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapters 1-2 in *Denzinger* 894-895.

98 XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapter 2 in *Denzinger* 895. See also ibid., Session 6 (13 January 1547), Chapter 14 in *Denzinger* 807 and ibid., Canon 29 on Justification in *Denzinger* 839.

99 Ibid., Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapter 5 in *Denzinger* 899.

100 The *Roman Catechism* used in 1913 (II, v, 13) explains: “These actions are called by the Council quasi materia not because they have not the nature of true matter, but because they are not the sort of matter which is employed externally as water in baptism and chrism in confirmation” : cited in Edward Hanna, “The Sacrament of Penance,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1st ed.

101 Ibid., Chapter 3 in *Denzinger* 896.

102 Ibid., Chapter 4 in *Denzinger* 897.

103 Ibid., *Denzinger* 898.
Imperfect contrition (attrition), however, does not grant reconciliation but is itself a gift of God that can help its receiver to obtain reconciliation in the Sacrament.\textsuperscript{104} Public confession of sins was not prohibited by Christ but cannot be demanded by the Church.\textsuperscript{105} Moreover, the Council of Trent defended the propitiatory character of the Eucharist, even for grave sins,\textsuperscript{106} though one should not receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist unworthily but always seek first to confess one’s mortal sins, if a confessor is available.\textsuperscript{107} Complete confession of sins to a bishop or priest (ordained and with ordinary or delegated jurisdiction\textsuperscript{108}) enables the minister to remit sins through a judicial decision (i.e. efficacious pronouncement\textsuperscript{109}) and impose satisfaction\textsuperscript{110} for medicinal and judicial purposes.\textsuperscript{111} Private confession of sins was always used by the Church and is not a later invention.\textsuperscript{112}

The Tridentine teaching and its emphasis on the private form of penance shaped the Church’s understanding and use of the Sacrament of Penance for centuries to come. The rituals that followed became increasingly oversimplified and individualistic. It was indeed providential that the Second Vatican Council called for a renewed theological understanding of the Sacrament, and a revised rite that is able to convey the reality and effects of the Sacrament.\textsuperscript{113}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[104] Ibid.
\item[105] Ibid., Chapter 5 in Denzinger 901.
\item[106] Ibid., Session 22 (17 September 1562), Chapter 2 in Denzinger 940. See also Session 13 (11 October 1551), Chapter 3 in Denzinger 875 and ibid., Session 22 (17 September 1562), Canon 2 on the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in Denzinger 950.
\item[107] XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 14 (25 November 1551) in Denzinger 893. Ramos-Regidor and other authors note that the Council does not state (or deny) explicitly that this precept is de iure divino: Ramos-Regidor, Il Sacramento della Penitenza, 233.
\item[108] XIX Ecumenical Council of Trent, Session 14 (25 November 1551), Chapters 6-7 in Denzinger, 902-903.
\item[109] Ibid., Canon 9 on the Sacrament of Penance in Denzinger 919. See also ibid., Chapters 6-7 in Denzinger 902-903.
\item[110] Ibid., Chapter 5 in Denzinger 899.
\item[111] Ibid., Chapter 8 in Denzinger 904-905. See also ibid., Chapter 9 in Denzinger 906, and Canons on the Sacrament of Penance 13-15 in Denzinger 923-925.
\item[112] Ibid., Chapter 5 in Denzinger 901. Ramos-Regidor notes that the Council of Trent does not affirm explicitly that private confession of sins is de iure divino: Ramos-Regidor, Il Sacramento della Penitenza, 218-223.
\item[113] Sacrosanctum concilium, 72 and Lumen gentium, 11.
\end{footnotes}
This brief historical overview demonstrates how it was never the case of a smooth evolution of a single form of celebrating forgiveness but the co-existence of several forms that emphasized different dimensions of the whole reconciliation process according to the particular needs of Christian individuals and communities in their specific historical, social and religious situations.114 Neither is the present crisis unique to the history of the Sacrament. The crisis, Rouillard notes, is “the fourth or fifth major change the Sacrament has had in its Western history.”115 Dooley suggests that it may be more accurate to speak of a “crisis of confession” to refer more clearly to the penitential system of private confession and absolution that has become the norm since the end of the twelfth century.116 Having said this, it is still possible to observe several elements that constitute the fundamental structure of the Sacrament and have been present since the earliest days of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: the Scholastic notion of ‘contrition’ is similar to the interior and exterior process of the metanoia found in earlier Christianity; the Scholastic notion of ‘confession’ is equivalent to the exomologesis of earlier Christians; the Scholastic ‘absolution’ corresponds to the bishop’s prayer of reconciliation recited at the end of the penitential process found in earlier practice; the Scholastic ‘satisfaction’ can be found in the lengthy process that led the sinner back to God and the Church.117 In addition, one can also consider the valuable nuances preserved in the penitential liturgies found in the Oriental Churches, particularly the therapeutic accent of the Sacrament, the deprecative form of the absolution, and the greater awareness of the remissive value of the Eucharist.118

115 Rouillard, Storia della Penitenza, 125 (translation mine).
2. A Theological Enquiry

Having briefly examined the colourful history of the Sacrament’s liturgy and theology, one may consider the recent crisis of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in relation to a specific time, the twentieth century. The Sacrament of Reconciliation – as well as Sacramental Theology and the whole of Catholic Theology – was enriched by its challenging encounters with modern philosophies, the liturgical movement and renewed interest in the early Church and the Church of the Fathers, the biblical renewal, the flourishing ecumenical dialogue, and the advancements in human sciences. O’Neill identifies three periods concerning the development of Sacramental Theology in the last century, beginning at the turn of the century and leading to the Second Vatican Council.

The first period comprises the decade prior to the First World War. One can observe some efforts, still in their embryonic stage, to challenge the inherited Sacramental Theology constricted by its lack of ecclesial context, its unawareness of the evolving social environment, and the limited Counter-Reformation understanding of the Sacraments as causes accompanied by casuistic preoccupation to define the minimal requirements for a valid Sacrament. The second period identified by O’Neill, spanning from the First to the Second World War, is critical for Odo Casel’s theology of mystery, the rediscovery of the theological understanding of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, and Ansgar Vonier’s interest in the Sacraments as

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119 Martos, Doors to the Sacred, 102-136.
120 O’Neill, I Sacramenti, 263-282.
121 A Benedictine monk and liturgy scholar, Odo Casel (1886-1948) helped “bring out the meaning of liturgy as a celebration of the mysteries of Christ and His Church: the ritual and sacramental deed of the Church makes present Christ’s act of salvation” (B. Neunheuser, ”Casel, Odo.” New Catholic Encyclopedia. 2nd ed.).
122 In his work A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist (Burns Oates and Washbourne: London 1925), the Benedictine theologian Ansgar Vonier (1875-1938) enriched the current conceptual understanding of ‘Sacrament’. Vonier
signs to counterbalance the early twentieth century approach to the Sacraments as causes. Henri de Lubac’s *Catholicisme*\(^{123}\) encapsulates well the insight of this period:

> the Church which is the Body of Christ, is not merely that strongly hierarchical and disciplined society whose divine origin has to be maintained, whose organization has to be upheld against all denial and revolt. That is an incomplete notion and but a partial cure for the separatist, individualist tendency of the notion to which it is opposed; a partial cure because it works only from without by way of authority, instead of effective union. If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in a sense far more real than that in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder’s continuation. The highly developed exterior organization that wins our admiration is but an expression, in accordance with the needs of this present life, of the interior unity of a living entity, so that the Catholic is not only subject to a power but is a member of a body as well, and his legal dependence on this power is to the end that he may have part in the life of that body.\(^{124}\)

It is within this ecclesial framework that the Sacraments are able to effect one’s union to Christ.\(^{125}\) The third period identified by O’Neill, following the Second World War, is dominated by the groundbreaking work of the early Schillebeeckx, *De sacramentale heilseconomie*. In a later work,\(^{126}\) Schillebeeckx explains that as a result of the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus Christ is the encounter between God and humanity, God’s gift of redemption to humanity and humanity’s worship of God, God’s offer of love and its acceptance by humanity. In virtue of his hypostatic union, the human acts of Jesus Christ carry perennial salvific efficiency for they are performed by a divine person; on the other hand, Christ’s salvific acts are also *sacramental* for they take place in visible historic form.\(^{127}\) The mutual love between the Father and the Son in the life of the Trinity is revealed on the human level in the love that Jesus Christ has during his

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\(^{124}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 35.


\(^{127}\) Ibid., 15.
earthly life towards the Father and which the Father accepts and reciprocates at the resurrection, glorification, and establishment of Jesus in his humanity as *Kyrios* and sender of the Holy Spirit. This whole dynamic – the descending dimension of God’s sanctifying grace to humanity and the ascending dimension of human worship to God – is sacramentalized in the sacramental structure of the Church until the *parousia*.128

On their part, David Power, Regis Duffy and Kevin Irwin identify129 three major approaches of the time that were influential to successive Sacramental Theology. The first approach is that of mystery as found in liturgy and sacrament (Casel and de Lubac). The second approach is Karl

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128 Ibid., 20-40.
Rahner’s Symbolic Causality, and the third is the Aesthetics Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Modern theologians seem in accord that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is rooted in the Paschal Event of Christ. As every other Sacrament, Reconciliation can be considered as a Paschal event for in its celebration in the life of the Church, one becomes part of the same Paschal

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130 Starting from a Thomistic-based ontology of symbol, Rahner argues that the Logos is the symbol of the expressive presence of the Father, the humanity of Jesus is the symbol of the Logos, the Church is the symbol of Jesus, and the Sacraments of the Church are the symbols of the grace of God. Being a “real symbol” (i.e. not a mere arbitrary sign) of God’s grace, the sacramental symbol is the cause of grace. It can also be said that the Sacrament is the cause only in so far as it is the sign of the same grace. Although distinct, symbol and grace cannot be separated. For the later Rahner, the Church and her Sacraments do not confer grace on a world that is void of God’s grace. The role of the Church as the basic sacrament of grace to a “world [that] is permeated by the grace of God” (Considerations, 166) is to proclaim her faith in the exhibitive event of the grace of God as eschatologically victorious in Jesus Christ, by pointing to the grace hidden in the world and the human being and in so far causing grace that is historical and hence irreversible (What is a Sacrament?, 144). Doing so, the Church expresses and constitutes herself as the sign of salvation for all of humanity. This view, according to the notion of the symbol, does not make the Sacraments redundant for precisely through their inherently effective cultic symbolism they bring to the fore the hidden presence of God in the world and in the individual who freely celebrates them (Considerations, 175-178). In the case of the Sacrament of Penance, the Church that is the basic sacrament of God’s absolute forgiveness is able to forgive one’s sin by forgiving one’s sin towards herself; the Church effects God’s forgiveness of particular sin by symbolizing this event in space and time (The Sacramental Life, 421-423). See “The Theology of the Symbol” in Th. Inv. 4, More Recent Writings (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 221-252. “What is a Sacrament?” in Theological Investigations, vol. 14, Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 135-148. “Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event” in Th. Inv. 14, 161-184. “The Sacramental Life” in Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 411-430. The Church and Sacraments (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1963). C. Annice Callahan, “Karl Rahner’s Theology of Symbol: Basis for his Theology of the Church and the Sacraments,” in The Irish Theological Quarterly 49 no. 3 (1982): 195-205. David N. Power, “Sacraments in General,” in Systematic Theology, 481-482.


Mystery and benefits from the salvation it symbolizes and effects *hic et nunc*. Ramos-Regidor notes, however, that not all agree on how this takes place.\textsuperscript{133} One theory\textsuperscript{134} takes judgment as its starting-point: the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a *signum rememorativum* of God’s judgment of sin at the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a *signum demonstrativum* of that same judgment taking place *hic et nunc* in the judgment of the penitent by the Church (a judgment of condemnation and grace), and a *signum prognosticum* of the eschatological judgment. Another theory,\textsuperscript{135} however, begins with the conversion and reconciliation of the penitent with God and the Church: the Sacrament is a *signum rememorativum* of Christ’s acceptance of the Cross as a sign of a total love and orientation towards the Father for the salvation of humanity and the defeat of sin, a *signum demonstrativum* of Christ’s acceptance of the cross in the penitent who accepts (with the assistance of the whole ecclesial community) the cross of conversion, and a *signum prognosticum* of full eschatological conversion and reconciliation.

In addition, the communitarian and ecclesial dimensions of sin and reconciliation were also examined. Framing the problem in Scholastic terms, *pax cum Ecclesia* was considered the *res et sacramentum* proper to the Sacrament of Reconciliation such that one’s reconciliation with the Church is nothing less than a visible and efficacious sign of one’s reconciliation with God. Besides being a disruption to the baptized person’s relationship to Christ and the Church, sin also impedes the mission of the Church and her individual members. Consequently, one’s reconciliation must include an ecclesial dimension that requires the participation of all members of the Church.\textsuperscript{136} Several authors\textsuperscript{137} argue that *reconciliatio cum Ecclesia* incorporates both one’s

\textsuperscript{133} Ramos-Regidor, *Il Sacramento della Penitenza*, 263.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 264-266.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 266-270.
reconciliation with the Church and the *paenitentia interior*, that is inner conversion which is signified externally and consecrated by the community as an act of reconciliation with the Church. Both the common and ordained priesthood are at work. The former is active in the acts of the penitent and the intercession of all the faithful. The latter can be seen in the priest who acts *in persona Christi* and *in persona Ecclesiae*, together with and as part of the Church and so renders more efficacious the mediation of the whole faithful community.\(^\text{138}\)

The above-mentioned Christological and ecclesial dimensions were deemed by modern theologians to be the essential underpinnings for the personal dimension of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. One’s personal efforts towards conversion, made explicit in the acts of the penitent, remain always a response to God’s preceding and assisting grace. One’s personal efforts are also embedded in the life of the Church that elevates one’s efforts to the sacramental level. Genuine conversion springs from the proclamation of the Word of God and leads to a confession of sin, a request for forgiveness and reconciliation, and a commitment to amend one’s lifestyle and one’s relationships to unjust social structures.\(^\text{139}\) The “private form” of confession is not, however, the only form available for an ecclesial and efficacious manifestation of one’s process of conversion and reconciliation.


Some of the forms suggested may have sacramental value in the strict sense of the term (such as private confession, private confession within a communal celebration, or confession in small groups followed by general absolution) while others may not (for instance a penitential service or confession to a lay person). Having said this, one must also note that not all scholars agree on the interpretation of the teachings from the Council of Trent regarding the necessity and the mode of sacramental confession. Moreover, some advocated for a greater awareness of the reconciling value of the Eucharist. Practices such as Confession of Devotion and Spiritual Direction as part of the Sacrament of Reconciliation – both to be discussed later – were also questioned. More controversial questions include the possibility of widening the use of general absolution and whether children are able to celebrate the Sacrament in a meaningful way.

3. The Response of the Magisterium

At this point it is important to consider how the Magisterium of the Church responded in the twentieth century. Migliavacca argues that the popes of the last century returned frequently to the theme of penance and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. O’Loughlin draws attention to two decrees published in the first decade during the pontificate of Pius X (d. 1914) to encourage

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143 Ibid., 328-333.
144 Ibid., 337-340.
frequent reception of Communion. This initiative lead to more frequent reception of Communion and Confession, the frequency of which was unparalleled in the history of the Church. Also significant is the strong exhortation of Pius XII (d. 1958) for frequent celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

On its part, the Second Vatican Council did not provide any treatise on the Sacrament. Yet, it made several noteworthy references to penance as a virtue and as a Sacrament. Concerning the latter, as the other six Sacraments of the Church, the Sacrament of Reconciliation draws its power from the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, in order to “sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God. Because they [the Sacraments] are signs they also instruct.” Paragraph 11 of the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium states that the Sacrament of Reconciliation effects not only the forgiveness of sins by God but also reconciliation with the Church that is ‘wounded’ by one’s sin. Incorporating imperfect human beings on their way to salvation, the Church is “at the same time holy and always in need of

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152 Sacrosanctum concilium, 61.


being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal” until Jesus Christ is formed in all her members. Yet, the Church serves as “a kind of sacrament” for the whole world. Also significant is the appeal of Sacrosanctum concilium: “The rite and formulas of Penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament”. This daunting task was fulfilled ten years later by the promulgation of the new Ordo paenitentiae by the Congregation for Divine Worship on the 2nd of December 1973. The new Ordo seeks to recapture the diversity that characterizes the penitential practice of the Church throughout the ages by offering three diverse, though complimentary, rites of reconciliation. In addition, the Ordo is preceded by a concise theological-pastoral Praenotanda and followed by two appendices comprising a vast selection of scriptural passages and scripturally-based prayers, several penitential services, and a suggested examination of conscience.

From the start, the Praenotanda sets the focus on the merciful and loving God as the one who takes the initiative to reconcile the world to himself. The entire history of salvation is God’s
work of reconciliation. For this purpose, Jesus Christ preached repentance, reconciled sinners to God, cured the sick as a sign of his greater power to forgive sin, and experienced the Paschal Mystery. He also instituted the Sacraments and sent the Holy Spirit on the Church to enable her to continue his ministry of reconciliation. The Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation and above all the Eucharist, celebrate in a particular way Christ’s victory over sin. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, one is enabled to share in the history of salvation, as part of the Church, and to renew with faith the covenant of love with God. The revised formulae of absolution, the introduction of the Word of God to all rites of penance (although it can be omitted in the first and third rite), and the attention given to the name ‘reconciliation’ (without diminishing the value of other terms to highlight other dimensions of the Sacrament) can help bring to the fore God’s work of reconciliation. Also clear is the Trinitarian emphasis of the revised Ordo.

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165 Ibid., 46, 55, and 62. The formula of absolution which was in effect throughout the post-Tridentine Western Church until the 1973 rite was: “May almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you your sins, and lead you to everlasting life. R.: Amen. [...] May the almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon, absolution, and remission of your sins. R.: Amen. [...] May our Lord Jesus Christ absolve you. And I by His authority release you from every bond of excommunication (suspension) and interdict, in so far as I am empowered and you have need. And now I absolve you from your sins; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. R.: Amen. [...] May the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merits of the blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, and all the good you do and the suffering you endure, gain for you the remission of your sins, increase of grace, and the reward of everlasting life. R.: Amen.” : Rituale Romanum, Ch. 2, n. 1-3 : The Roman Ritual, Complete Edition, trans. Philip T. Weller (Chicago: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1964) [book on-line]; available from http://www.sanctamissa.org/en/resources/books-1962/rituale-romanum/27-the-sacrament-of-penance-absolution.html; Internet; accessed 25 May 2012. The revised formula of absolution is as follows: “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. The penitent answers: Amen.” : Ordo, 46. James F. Stafford compares and contrasts these two formulae in: James F. Stafford, “Sacraments of Healing: Reconciliation and Anointing” [address on-line].


167 A typical example is: “the sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who ‘first loved us’ (1 Jn 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us (see Gal 2:20; Eph 5:25), and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly (see Ti 3:6).” : Ordo, 5. See also: 6d, 9a, 10c, 19. Dallen, The Reconciling Community, 250-258.
Moreover, the *Ordo paenitentiae* makes manifest the ecclesial character of sin and reconciliation.\(^{168}\) It states:

> The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the Word of God, but it intercedes for them and helps the penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins.\(^{169}\)

In addition, the *Ordo* echoes *Lumen Gentium* 8 in saying that the Church is holy and in need of purification.\(^{170}\) The penitential celebrations offered in the second appendix of the *Ordo* – not to be confused with the communal celebrations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation – can help Christians in this ongoing process of purification.\(^{171}\) In doing so, the Church celebrates Christ’s victory over sin, serves “in the world [as] a sign of conversion to God,”\(^{172}\) and “becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.”\(^{173}\)

The new *Ordo* does not, however, envision the penitent as a passive receiver of grace. The Sacrament incorporates both the “acts of the penitent” and the absolution of the priest that completes it.\(^{174}\) *Metanoia* is the most important act of the penitent;\(^{175}\) the Word of God keeps this process of *metanoia* from degenerating into psychological self-introspection.\(^{176}\)

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\(^{168}\) *Ordo*, 4, 5.
\(^{169}\) Ibid., 8. Tettamanzi notes that the three verbs used – *vocat* (calls), *intercedit* (intercedes) and *subvenit* (assists) – illustrate how the Church lives her triple mission as a prophetic, priestly and royal people while exercising her ministry of reconciliation: Dionigi Tettamanzi, *Conversione e Riconciliazione: Per una Lettura dell’Ordo Paenitentiae* (Milan: Editrice Àncora, 1974), 63-64, 199. However, Crichton remarks, the *Ordo* fails to elaborate on the practical implications of this assertion: J. D. Crichton, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: A Commentary on the Order of Penance 1974* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 32.

\(^{170}\) *Ordo*, 3.
\(^{171}\) Ibid., 37.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 1, 4.
\(^{173}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{174}\) *Ordo*, 6d.
\(^{175}\) Ibid., 6a.
\(^{176}\) Ibid., 15, 22.
conversion (contrition) is externalized in a liturgical way at confession, in a spirit of praise to God for his mercy and love. In his encounter with the penitent, the minister is urged to be a wise and merciful judge, an able discerner of spirits and the one to reveal the Good Shepherd and the heart of the Father. The act of penance (satisfaction) “should serve not only to make up for the past but also to help him to begin a new life and provide him with an antidote to weakness.” Ultimately, the penitent’s reconciliation with God and the Church is expressed in its most sublime way by participating in the Eucharist. The Ordo discusses as well the benefits of the Sacrament for grave and venial sins. The celebration of the Sacrament is necessary for the former and “very useful” for the latter. Although it refrains from using the concept of “Confession of Devotion,” the Ordo alludes to its practice and lists its effects: it is “a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism…to conform more closely to Christ and to follow the voice of the Spirit more attentively.”

Besides the revised Ordo one can acknowledge the relevance of other significant contemporary documents. Not all authors, however, are pleased with these post-Vatican II documents:

177 Ibid., 6b, 7.
178 Ibid., 10.
179 Ibid., 18. See also 7.
180 Ibid., 6d.
181 Ibid., 7.
182 Ibid., 7b. See also Dallen, The Reconciling Community, 269-292.
Much of the ambiguity and ambivalence in the area of penance on the theological level results from a preoccupation with Trent at the expense of the catholic tradition and even more, on the level of church authorities, it is frequently a regression from both the spirit and the letter of Vatican Council II. This is true as well in the understanding and expression of the church’s nature and relation to salvation, but it is most evident when it fixes on the reconciliation of an isolated individual penitent and the ritual expression of clerical authority in that context. Perhaps most of all, on the pragmatic level, the decision must be made whether the commitment and resolutions made after the review of the church’s life at Vatican II will be stuck to.\(^{184}\)

Others such as Pope Benedict XVI reject this “hermeneutic of discontinuity” for “the hermeneutic of reform,” or more precisely the “combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels”: “Basic decisions, therefore, continue to be well-grounded, whereas the way they are applied to new contexts can change.”\(^{185}\)

At this point, we may have a better perception of the present situation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In its proper context it is possible to see, on one hand, the Church’s constant faith (even if at times unexpressed) in Christ’s mission of forgiveness, the efficacy of his Paschal Mystery for the forgiveness of sins, and the fact that Jesus Christ entrusted his own redemptive mission into the hands of the Church. On the other hand, this unchangeable faith has been expressed in a multiplicity of forms, with their particular emphases on the whole sacramental reality, in order to cater to particular personal, religious and historical needs. Perhaps, in this sense, crisis, change and diversity are inevitable for this Sacrament.

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Moreover, both theologians and the Magisterium of the twentieth century endeavoured on various levels, to develop the contemporary practice and understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Three essential areas come to the fore: the Christological, ecclesial, and personal dimensions of the Sacrament. In seeking to reclaim the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it is important to give prominent importance to these three indispensable elements. In the next chapter, we shall see how these essential aspects are explained in the writings of Adrienne von Speyr.
Chapter 2
The Confessional Attitude

The goal of this chapter is to explore the Theology of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as presented in the insightful writings of Adrienne von Speyr, a contemporary mystic of the Church. Her mystical experiences were not mere private revelations for they were intended, according to von Speyr, for the entire Church and her contemporary needs. However, as von Speyr’s confessor and spiritual director lamented, von Speyr and her charism remain fairly unknown and her vital contributions in this area untapped.

It is worth examining first von Speyr’s own search for the Sacrament of Reconciliation – which she preferred to call the Sacrament of Confession – and her experience of it. It is possible then to proceed to the Christological-Trinitarian foundation of the Sacrament within her writings found in the person of Jesus Christ and the inner life of the Triune God. Next to be considered is how the Church received this Sacrament and how she continues to live it. Finally, attention may be

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given to von Speyr’s practical reflections on the essential components that form the practice of the Sacrament, how it can address the penitent’s particular needs and how it can mould the Christian according to the confessional attitude of Jesus Christ and assist participation in the triune life. In this way, the three elements that were proposed in the preceding chapter for reclaiming the Sacrament (the Christological, ecclesial and personal dimensions) are now examined from the perspective of a contemporary lay Christian.

1. The Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Life of von Speyr

Von Speyr was born on the 20th of September 1902 at La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland. Her father, an ophthalmologist, died when von Speyr was still young. For decades she had a difficult relationship with her mother who scolded her and disapproved of her medical studies. Von Balthasar describes her as an intelligent, jovial, humorous, courageous, yet childlike person.

From a very young age, von Speyr loved to spend time with patients and even expressed her desire to suffer for them. For von Speyr, “All her medical studies and practice were seen as an act of obedience to God.”

Von Speyr was raised as a Protestant and surrounded by anti-Catholic sentiments. Nonetheless, there were several unusual experiences in the life of the young von Speyr that made her question the adequacy of the Protestantism she had inherited, namely her encounter with her

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190 Ibid., *First Glance*, 18-20.

191 For instance, “As a small child, when accompanying her father, who was an eye specialist, on one of his visits to the hospital, she asked whether she could be blind for a time, so that a blind child might see.”: ibid., *Our Task*, 27.

192 Ibid., 28.

guardian angel, with Ignatius of Loyola at the age of six, and a vision of Mary at the age of fifteen. In her life von Speyr had to experience several illnesses and had consistently poor health. Nonetheless, she maintained a practice of voluntary penance. When she met Hans Urs von Balthasar, the newly appointed student chaplain at Basel, von Speyr had just lost her first husband Emil to a sudden death and was unable to pray the Our Father. Shortly after her meeting with von Balthasar, von Speyr was received into the Catholic Church and blessed with mystical experiences along with revelations of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Von Speyr’s relationship with von Balthasar continued after her conversion and spanned a period of twenty-seven years till her death on the 17th of September 1967.

Being a mystic, von Speyr was no stranger to visions, mysterious healings in her medical profession, the stigmata, and “mystical deaths”. She was also “transported” in prayer to

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194 Ibid., 21.
195 Ibid., 21.
196 Ibid., 23.
197 Ibid., First Glance, 21. For instance, she had to spend two years away from her family and school to recover from tuberculosis: Ibid., 24.
198 Ibid., 19. At a very young age, her guardian angel told von Speyr that she will have to experience illness (Ibid., Our Task, 23-24) and instructed her on the value of voluntary penance (Ibid., First Glance, 19). This mystery of suffering became clearer throughout her life as she came to experience her poor health and voluntary penance (such as giving up music and her self-inflicted pain) as an expression of her profound dedication to God and neighbour (Ibid., Our Task, 27-29). She even accepted to suffer, as a substitute, for the sins of others (ibid., 27).
199 In von Balthasar’s words, “when I showed her that our saying ‘They will be done’ does not mean we offer God what we are able to do of ourselves, but rather that we offer him our willingness to let what he does take over our lives and move us anywhere at will, it was as though I had inadvertently touched a light switch that at one flick turned on all the lights in the hall. Adrienne seemed to be freed from chains of restraint and was carried away on a flood of prayer as though a dam had burst.”: Ibid., First Glance, 31.
200 Particularly significant is the prophetic call she received at the time: “Tu vivras au ciel et sur la terre” (You shall live in heaven and on earth): Ibid., 34. Cfr. Ibid., Our Task, 183.
202 In von Balthasar’s view, von Speyr’s “Theory of Mysticism” “is of a revolutionary character in the tradition of the Church” (Ibid., First Glance, 87). Authentic Christian mysticism, according to von Speyr, cannot be earned but is always a gift that comes from God, through Jesus Christ, and follows the same criteria as biblical revelation. It does not by-pass the Church nor is it for the aggrandization of the one who receives it. Mysticism is a charism – to be received in Ignatian indifference, obedience, faith and with a Marian fiat – and is at the service of the Church. See also ibid., 57-58, 71-72, 87-90, 95. Ibid., “Understanding Christian Mysticism,” in Explorations in Theology, vol. 4: Spirit and Institution (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 309-335. Ibid.,
places in need of her prayer (such as concentration camps, monasteries and confessionals) and also to heaven “as a kind of guest”. In addition, von Speyr was graced with a unique charism that enabled her to see the saints for who they really are – their confessional attitude and their way of prayer – fully transparent to one another and in their various degrees of holiness. But all this was secondary to her mission with von Balthasar, a “double mission” where their differences became complementary at the service of their common “theological and spiritual work,” mainly the foundation of Johannesgemeinschaft, the publication of von Speyr’s and von Balthasar’s books, and their own particular missions. Despite the fact that she had no

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204 Ibid., First Glance, 34.

205 Ibid., 35. Ibid., Our Task, 91-92.

206 Ibid., First Glance, 44.

207 Ibid., 39-40.

208 Ibid., Our Task, 183-184.


210 Ibid., 16.

211 Ibid., 20.


213 “Adrienne’s [mission] was that of passing on the Word of God into the world; von Balthasar’s own personal mission was that of a theologian, speaker, writer, chaplain, and retreat master.” : Johann Roten, “The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in Schindler, ed., Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work, 73. However, not all authors acknowledge the influence that von Speyr exercised on von Balthasar’s work. : Jacques Servais, “Per una valutazione dell’influsso di Adrienne von Speyr su Hans Urs von Balthasar,” Rivista Teologica di Lugano 6.
formal studies in Theology, particularly significant are her Scriptural commentaries, especially the four volumes dedicated to the Fourth Gospel.

In her youth, von Speyr felt that her Protestant faith lacked two essential components. First there was the need for a mother; this need was fulfilled for von Speyr when she joined the Catholic Church and there enjoyed an intimate relationship with Mary. The other need was for true confession. Prior to her Catholic years, she attempted – in vain – to meet this intense need by asking her peers at school for forgiveness, public confession of sin as practiced by the Salvation Army, and even confessing her sins directly to God. She earnestly desired to confess, even just for once. According to von Balthasar, “Her thirst for true sacramental confession would increase with the years until her conversion and probably remained the most

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215 Ibid., First Glance, 98. Cfr. Ibid., Our Task, 60-62. A list of her works can be found First Glance, 101-111. For a brief overview of her main themes see ibid., Our Task, 64-73.

216 Von Balthasar notes that “Adrienne never, even from a distance, looked into an exegetical work. She would take a text that was deemed reliable and become all ears, as it were, in order to listen to what would be revealed to her from this text. […] [She] listened to the Word in the centre of the Church’s heart, where the self-revealing triune God communicates his eternal mystery of love to the beloved Bride of the Son, the Church.” : ibid., First Glance, 100-101. According to von Balthasar, this charism that von Speyr had can be understood from the perspective of the anima ecclesiastica (the ecclesial soul), an expression coined in the Middle Ages for “the soul [that has been] freed from its egocentric isolation, broadened to the dimensions of the ecclesial (Marian) consent, and capable of being totally formed by God.” : ibid., 52-53, 100-101. For an appreciation of von Speyr’s contemplative interpretation of Scripture see Marc Ouellet, “Due Modi di Interpretare la Scrittura,” in MEA, 155-163. Ignace de la Potterie, “The Spiritual Sense of Scripture,” Communio 23 (Winter 1996): 738-756.


218 Ibid., 24.

219 Ibid., 25.


221 Ibid., Our Task, 26.

222 Ibid., 25.
powerful motive which finally led her to the Catholic Church.”

Von Speyr herself states unequivocally: “All my life I longed for the sacrament of confession.”

Von Speyr’s longing was fulfilled when she celebrated the Sacrament of Confession as a member of the Catholic Church. The French confessor, the Curé d’Ars, captivated von Speyr. She experienced him in a mystical way as the confessor *par excellence* who was able to penetrate the confession of her sins in order to reach the most serious sin in its relation to God and also her disposition to God.

Von Speyr’s Theology of the Sacrament is encapsulated in what she called the “confessional attitude,” that is to say a permanent and complete attitude of openness to God and the Church. Von Speyr regarded this kind of attitude to be far different – and superior – from psychoanalysis or any other human technique that seeks to assist the individual in coming to terms with ‘fate’ and ‘faultiness.’ In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it is God himself who practices “psychoanalysis” by presenting his own Son as a mirror to the sinner. Therefore, according to von Speyr, this Sacrament has to be understood in light of the life of Jesus Christ, particularly his confessional attitude as manifested in his divine authority to forgive the sinner as the Father’s representative and his solidarity with the sinner in order to be their representative before the Father. In this sense, von Speyr’s Theology of the Sacrament is unmistakably Christocentric.

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223 Ibid., *First Glance*, 22-23.
224 Ibid., 190.
225 Ibid., 169-171.
226 Ibid., *Our Task*, 27, 64. For von Speyr’s own disposition in confession see: *First Glance*, 172-178.
227 *Confession*, 20.
228 Ibid.
2. The Confessional Attitude of Jesus Christ during his Public Life

According to von Speyr, the Lord’s confessional attitude shapes his public ministry. Jesus Christ allocated a substantial part of his ministry to preaching the forgiveness of sins, relating to sinners on a personal level and forgiving them. His ministry and authority to forgive sin came in response to humanity’s eager desire for forgiveness as recorded in the Old Testament. In fact, humanity’s thirst for forgiveness found its fulfilment in the overabundant forgiveness that sprang from Jesus Christ. In *Drei Frauen und der Herr*, von Speyr presents the encounter of Jesus Christ with the woman who was a sinner as an unambiguous example.

For von Speyr, the woman’s encounter with the Lord contained “in germ” the redemptive hope that later will become part of the Sacrament of Confession. Von Speyr comments that the woman is identified as a sinner in order to stress the distance between her and Jesus Christ. In this way, she is also presented as a symbol of every human being who though perhaps in a less public way, is also guilty of sin. In going to Jesus, the woman expressed her openness to him.

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229 William Schmitt notes that von Speyr addresses this aspect in her commentary on the Gospel of Mark, *Markus: Betrachtungspunkte für eine Gemeinschaft* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1971). His activity is considered in relation to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In fact, the same transparency and openness to conversion that Jesus demanded from his followers will be expected from the penitent in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Even his miracles can be seen in relation to this Sacrament for they are a revelation of his authority to forgive sins and reconcile with God. : William Schmitt, “The Sacrament of Confession as a ‘Sequela Christi’ in the Writings of A. von Speyr” (Ph.D. diss., Pontifical Lateran University and Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, 2001), 72-76.

230 Von Speyr reflects, according to Schmitt, on this longing for forgiveness in her meditations on the Song of Songs, *Das Hohelied* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1972). The bride of Song of Songs that searches for her bridegroom is a representation of every human being that searches for forgiveness. However, the love of the bride (and her chorus) is impure and her confession remains imperfect. All this is a prefiguration of the purified love of the Church as the Bride whose search for Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom, finds its fulfilment in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. : Schmitt, *The Sacrament*, 66-69.


233 *Three Women and the Lord*, 52.

234 Ibid., 53-54.

235 Ibid., 56.
The alabaster jar she brought with her symbolized both human merit as well as her confession of sins. Though she never made a vocal confession of her sins, her tears were considered by von Speyr as nothing less than a confession. Moreover, she surrendered herself completely to Jesus Christ and allowed him to utilize this action as part of his proclamation of the Good News to the host and guests who were witnesses of the miraculous encounter between the woman and Jesus.

On his part, the Pharisee who hosted Jesus was scandalized by Jesus’ contact with sin and concluded that Jesus could not be a prophet for he seemed unable to read the heart of a woman who was considered by all as a public sinner. His stagnant faith, endless calculations, and judgmental attitude impeded him from accepting the public confession of the sinful woman and surrendering himself to Jesus. He lacked love.

Having seen the woman’s readiness and the Pharisee’s lack of it, Jesus offered the parable of the two debtors one of whom “suddenly, against all hope,” saw his astronomical debts cancelled by his master. This fortunate debtor represented the sinful woman whom Jesus Christ did not hesitate to forgive and send away in his hope using the same words that eventually will become part of the ritual structure of the Sacrament of Confession, “Go in peace.”

236 Ibid., 57-58.
237 Ibid., 58-59.
238 Ibid., 71-72.
239 Ibid., 62-63.
240 Ibid., 61-63.
241 Ibid., 62.
242 Ibid., 74.
243 Ibid., 67.
244 Ibid., 78-79.
Another scriptural episode where von Speyr perceives the authority of Jesus over sin was at his meeting with the Samaritan woman. Unlike the encounter with the woman who was a sinner, this time it was Jesus himself who took the initiative. (Nonetheless, it was still a response to her deep longing). He did so by opening himself up to the Samaritan as someone who was in need of her service. He appealed to her love – a feminine trait which she already possessed, though in an imperfect way, and which she had already manifested in her past so that in serving him the water that she had she can open herself to the living water that he had to offer.

The Samaritan accepted the invitation and engaged herself in a dialogue with Jesus. Although she could not see him yet for who he really was, she began to realize that he could give her something which she did not possess. So Jesus took another step in order to lead her towards a full confession: he invited her to call her spouse, “a gesture in which the woman admits her sin”. In her response the woman admitted that she had no husband but Jesus Christ did not, observes von Speyr, settle for her (or anyone’s) hesitant half-truth. Instead, he brought the full truth to light by his declaration that she had previously had five husbands.

The clarity of this declaration, made possible by the woman’s openness to Jesus Christ, uncovered his ability to read her heart. This clarity ought to be present also in the Sacrament of Confession where, von Speyr claims, the penitent should strive for openness before God and be humbly aware of the limitations of personal efforts when compared to the power of divine

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246 John, vol. 1, 220.
247 Ibid., 221.
248 Ibid., 227.
249 Ibid.
250 Ibid., 228.
251 Ibid., 229.
252 Ibid.
Remarkably, this degree of clarity does not dishearten. On the contrary, it enabled the Samaritan to inquire about worship, defined by von Speyr as “ceasing what we are and being what God makes of us.”254 Her conversion process was completed by the self-revelation of Jesus Christ.255

As the disciples returned to Jesus with food, they were surprised to see him talking to a woman. In the meantime, the woman was overcome by “the apostolic impulse,”256 left her jar behind, and ran to proclaim the truth to her people. On their part, the people accepted her testimony and flocked to Jesus who did not turn them away because, in von Speyr’s words, “he never converts a person for his own sake alone”.257 Every conversion has a social and ecclesial consequence.

The Samaritan’s conversion had to unfold in a gradual way:

first the light has to fall on her and illumine her darkness from without, make her sin stand out. Only the light can do that. Then she herself has to recognize her sin in quite a different clarity from the one she had before (for until now it mattered little to her) and only then a double movement can take place: that she tries to cast off her sin and that the light of the Lord powerfully falls into the opening.258

The authority of Jesus to forgive sins, however, was only one side of a larger mystery. The other side of Christ’s confessional attitude comprised his solidarity with the sinner in order to free the latter from the self-imposed bonds of sin. Von Speyr reminds her readers that through Adam’s insubordination and refusal to confess before God, humanity lost its original openness before its

253 Ibid., 230-231.
254 Ibid., 232.
255 Ibid., 240.
256 Ibid., 243.
257 Ibid., 251.
258 Ibid., 227.
The Second Adam, Jesus Christ, restored the original openness of humanity through his solidarity with the sinner yet without losing his eternal attitude of complete openness (his confessional attitude) as the Son before the Father. Openness before God implies openness to neighbour. The solidarity of Jesus with sinners is particularly evident in von Speyr’s commentary on the Johannine account of the woman caught in adultery. The Pharisees exploited the sin of the woman caught in a serious sin as part of their wicked strategy to corner Jesus. In the eyes of the Pharisees, the law was unmistakably clear that the woman is guilty. They seemed to forget that the one behind their law was not Moses, a mere human mediator, but God himself. The Pharisees considered themselves outside of the community of sinners, “standing together with Moses in the centre,” worthy to exercise judgment over others and even to prescribe punishment for them. In their perverse desire to usurp God’s power, they had set fear, instead of love, as the heart of the law.

Hence, Jesus Christ found himself standing before sin. First there was the public sin of the woman. She is the only one who ‘confessed’ her sin – even if involuntarily – and could therefore receive his forgiveness. However, beside the woman’s sin, Jesus could also see the concealed sin of all who were present before him. Their failure to acknowledge their sin caused


260 Von Speyr mentions several instances that reveal this confessional attitude of Jesus Christ such as his being a vulnerable child and later on during his temptations in the desert: *Confession*, 33-36, 42-44. See Schmitt, *The Sacrament*, 83-89.


262 *John*, vol. 2, 143.

263 Ibid.

264 Ibid.
“deep pain”\textsuperscript{265} to Jesus for he could not forgive those who do not confess. His invitation to those who were without sin to commence the stoning of the public sinner was one step towards their enlightenment and confession. Their choice to leave the scene is explained by von Speyr as a step in the right direction; it was a refusal to judge and an indication of their own need for love.\textsuperscript{266} In the ones who choose to leave, von Speyr, interestingly, perceives a prefiguration of the community that is required as the context for the sacramental confession of sin.\textsuperscript{267}

At this point, Jesus found himself alone with the woman. Her discomfort did not vanish away for, in the presence of the one who is “the mirror of purity,”\textsuperscript{268} she began to see her sin for what it really was in addition to her inability to live up to the expectation that came to her from the one standing before her. On his part, Jesus now faced a different scenario for both the ones who left and the woman who remained were conscious of their sinfulness and their “solidarity in sin”\textsuperscript{269}. She did not stand before him as an isolated sinner for she was then “involved in the heart of the act of confession…in the fellowship of shame and repentance.”\textsuperscript{270} She was open to receive the love of Jesus Christ who manifested his solidarity towards sinners by taking her sin upon himself. Consequently, the woman was freed from her sin and the discomfort of judgment and sent on a mission, back to the dangers of her ordinary life, to lead a life free from sin.\textsuperscript{271}

It can be said that von Speyr deems this encounter to be the blueprint of the Sacrament of Reconciliation that Jesus Christ will institute later:

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., 145. \textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 147. \textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 147-148. \textsuperscript{268} Ibid., 148. \textsuperscript{269} Ibid., 149. \textsuperscript{270} Ibid. \textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 149-150.}
Much of what confession is in the New Covenant becomes clearer in the case of this woman. First, its necessity: sin must be confessed. Its personal character: the Lord addresses each individual sinner through the priest. On the other hand, its discretion: the crowd of people is sent away; the New Testament does not envisage public confession. Then the Lord imparts absolution and gives an exhortation. The penance lies essentially in the confession itself and in the words, *Go your way*. The woman must return to her daily life, and this means she must return to danger. There she is to *sin no more*.272

3. The Confessional Attitude of Jesus Christ during the Paschal Mystery

Von Speyr considers the self-effacing act of purification by Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet in light of the ultimate purification that will take place on the cross and whenever the Sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated.273 In this sense, the washing of the feet images the “confession” of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Jesus initiated the washing by separating himself from his disciples as he rose from the table, prefiguring his being raised on the cross.274 Then he lowered himself before his disciples, in the position of a servant.275 He divested himself so that, being naked, he could enter in full contact with their dirt to take it upon himself.276 The fact that his followers were totally unprepared illustrates its purpose as a gift, just as no sinner can be freed from sin by their own power. Von Speyr sees in the water and basin used by Jesus the grace and the form that constitute the structure of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.277 The far-reaching quality of grace is symbolized by the fluidity of water and made manifest through its form (the basin) which cannot be substituted in an arbitrary way. In addition, von Speyr also remarks that John the evangelist does

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272 Ibid.
275 *John*, vol. 3, 18.
276 Ibid., 18-19.
277 Ibid., 19.
not say that Jesus used a towel for washing the disciples’ feet but just for drying them. Hence, von Speyr assumes that out of humility, Jesus himself became the washcloth.278

Moving to the strong reaction of Peter against the intention of Jesus to wash his feet, it is worth noting that the latter did not offer any explanations to Peter but expected him to surrender.279 When Peter eventually accepted the offer of his master and enthusiastically offered his whole body to be washed, he was reminded that it is Jesus himself who determines what needs to be washed.280 Similarly, sacramental confession must never become an end in itself for the penitent’s attention ought to remain focused on Jesus.281

Paradoxically, Jesus overcame the distance that separated him from humanity’s sins and “identified”282 himself with them; yet he remained sinless for he took this burden “as someone else’s property”.283 The bearing of all confessed and unconfessed sins of humanity resulted in an intense suffering and the feeling of being abandoned by God.284 The only thing that remained visible in his eyes was the mission he received, summarized in the first words he uttered from the cross: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”285

Von Speyr draws several insightful parallels between the passion and death of Jesus and the Sacrament of Reconciliation celebrated in his Church. The three acts of the penitent find their

278 Ibid., 19-20.
279 Ibid., 26.
280 Ibid., 27.
281 Ibid.
283 Confession, 24.
284 Confession, 50.
origin in the crucified one. The contrition that Jesus felt for each and every sin that he took upon himself during his life was then ‘submerged’ in the pain of his passion. He ‘confessed’ all the sins of humanity, which he freely shouldered, as he hung on the cross, naked before the Father. Finally, his suffering constituted the penance.

As part of her reflection on Christ’s “descent into hell” – a period that begins with his death on the cross and comes to an end with his resurrection – von Speyr notes that in hell (or ‘underworld,’ Hades, Sheol), the Son saw the accumulation of “sheer sin,” “objectivized” and separated from the sinner. What the Father presented to the Son at his descent into hell is somewhat similar to the confessor who, after hearing the subjective confession of sins by the penitent, summarizes and judges the sins which he gets to see on an objective level prior to the granting of sacramental absolution.

286 Ibid., 53, 55.
288 The penitent’s penance “is called penance because the Lord did penance for us and we thereby receive the spirit of penance as a gift through reference to the Cross.” : Confession, 184.
290 Ibid., 66.
291 Confession, 55.
292 Ibid., 55-56. According to von Speyr, this transition from the subjective to the objective – which occurred at the descent of Jesus Christ into hell and which takes place in the Sacrament of Reconciliation – may be compared to “the transition from the muddled layman’s description of a patient to the diagnosis of the physician.” : ibid., 56. See also Schmitt, The Sacrament, 142-143.
The Resurrection also has implications for the Sacrament in von Speyr’s work. On Easter Sunday Mary Magdalene wept “for the Lord”\(^293\) as she faced the empty tomb of Jesus. Her grief exemplifies the penitence that should characterize sacramental confession. The empty tomb reflected the empty space within her, effected by the removal of her sin and transformed into openness for Jesus. Similarly, sacramental absolution “does not simply take sin away, but turns the empty space left by sin into a magnificent place for the Lord in which the angels can appear.”\(^294\) Jesus Christ deepened this openness when he entered in dialogue with her. He communicated the essence of his mission to Mary Magdalene, namely that the Father was both the source and destination of all.\(^295\) She also became “an apostle”\(^296\) to the disciples for, according to von Speyr, “mission is bestowed upon anyone who has made confession.”\(^297\)

Moreover, von Speyr generally\(^298\) connects the event of the resurrection to sacramental absolution. The resurrection is the “reunion” of the Son with the Father. The joy that Jesus experienced at his reunion with the Father – even on the human level – finds its reflection in the sacramental absolution that reunites the penitent with God. Hence, sacramental absolution refers to both the abandonment of sin as well as the embrace of God.\(^299\) In this mission of love, the Son took human form and revealed, through his complete openness, its splendour before the Father; by doing so, the Son glorified humanity and the Father as its creator.\(^300\)

\(^{293}\) *John*, vol. 4, 180.
\(^{294}\) Ibid., 181.
\(^{295}\) Correspondingly, the confessor must show the penitent that God is both the source and destination of sacramental absolution. : Ibid., 193.
\(^{296}\) Ibid., 196.
\(^{297}\) Ibid., 195.
\(^{298}\) Von Speyr relates sacramental absolution also to the ascension (*Confession*, 112) and the cross of Jesus Christ (ibid., 26). See Schmitt, *The Sacrament*, 159-165.
\(^{299}\) Ibid., 60.
\(^{300}\) *Confession*, 61. *Countenance*, 90-91.
This openness of Jesus Christ before the Father is, according to von Speyr, the “prototype of confession”\(^\text{301}\) and reveals the “attitude of God,”\(^\text{302}\) namely how the three divine Persons relate to one another. By instituting the Sacrament of Reconciliation on Easter Sunday, Jesus Christ revealed the inner life of the Trinity so that his adopted siblings may open themselves to God, “confess completely”\(^\text{303}\) and partake in the mystery of God’s intimate love. Thus, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is nothing less than the expression of Trinitarian love and has it as its foundation.\(^\text{304}\)

4. The Gift of Jesus Christ to the Church

The transition from the Christological to the ecclesial dimension of the Sacrament underscores the significant role of Mary. Her confessional attitude has an immense ecclesial significance for she is the “prototype of the Church”.\(^\text{305}\) Paradoxically, it is through her perfect renunciation of herself that she became fruitful and cooperative with God. She is the one who renounced herself out of love so that God alone can be active in her.\(^\text{306}\) Mary’s consent, according to von Speyr, constitutes her “confessional attitude.”\(^\text{307}\)

From the earliest moments of her life, Mary was prepared for the offering of her consent when, at her Immaculate Conception and in anticipation of the passion and death of her Son, she was

\(^{301}\) Confession, 22.

\(^{302}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{303}\) Ibid., 21-22.


freed from original sin so that she can be completely unhindered in her assent to God.\textsuperscript{308}

Nevertheless, Mary’s consent remains a free and human act. Von Speyr notes that at the Annunciation, Mary was able to hear the call of God because she was completely transparent and surrendered to him. The Holy Spirit, already present in her, enabled Mary “to utter her assent together with him”\textsuperscript{309}.

Though sinless, Mary participated in the “confession of sinners” and became their intercessor. In von Speyr’s words:

> The essence of the confessional attitude for her is to become more like the Son. There is no absolution for her; instead, she enjoys the closest proximity to the Son as the Redeemer and purifier of all sinners, and she pours out this proximity in a eucharistic spirit.\textsuperscript{310}

As Mary stood by the cross, her Son entrusted the beloved disciple to her\textsuperscript{311} and widened her assent to include others.\textsuperscript{312} She stood as the prototype of the Church and formed with John “the first living cell of his [Christ’s] Church.”\textsuperscript{313} Her consent and love became fruitful and adopted a more social dimension as the Church came to life. Every imperfect consent that is given in the Church is united with hers and so comes to share in the Son’s perfect consent to the Father.\textsuperscript{314}

\textsuperscript{308} Handmaid, 7.
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid., 9. “When the Holy Spirit overshadowed her the first time, he made the incarnate Son come into being as a concrete individual human being in the womb of her body. The Spirit in her created the physical Son. Then came a second period; the Son within her recreated her in the Spirit, from being physical mother to becoming Bride and Church as well. It was a period of expansion, of transformation of the earthly into the Christian, the catholic, the universal. And so the third period matures: the Son, having returned to the Father, sends the Holy Spirit down upon her again [at Pentecost] so that the whole concreteness of the Church’s body may come into being now in this second overshadowing. […] On account of this the Mother now becomes the norm, the idea, the prototype of the Church. In her alone the Church is exactly as it should be: the Bride without blemish or wrinkle. From her it receives the capacity to correspond in all things to the Bridegroom.”: ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{310} Confession, 262.
\textsuperscript{311} Jn 19:26.
\textsuperscript{312} John, vol. 4, 122.
\textsuperscript{313} Von Balthasar, Our Task, 124.
The attitude of Mary, the one who always is in perfect unison with her Son, is conveyed through the Church in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.  

As for the actual moment when the Church received the gift of sacramental confession, von Speyr maintains that it was instituted by Jesus on Easter Sunday. She reflects in depth on Jn 20:19-23 where Jesus Christ manifested himself to his disciples at Easter, revealed his wounds, bestowed his peace, and authorized them to “forgive” and “retain” sins while breathing on them the Holy Spirit. He did not request their consent before bestowing on them the responsibility to forgive and retain sin. The act of breathing on his disciples is to be understood as an expression of the physical closeness of Jesus Christ to his disciples. Moreover, this action expresses the transfer of what was most intimate to Jesus, the Holy Spirit.

It is of utmost importance that this event be considered as part of the whole mission of Jesus. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the natural unfolding of the mission that Christ received from

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316 “Easter is the feast of the institution of the sacrament of confession.” : Handmaid, 134. See Schmitt, The Sacrament, 192. “It [the Sacrament of Penance] is not an act left to the arbitrariness of the faithful, not a psychological confession, not a public communal confession, not a confession for edification, not a mutual foot-washing by the apostles. Rather, it remains a precisely determined sacrament.” : John, vol. 3, 28. In addition, von Speyr remarks that the humiliation that generally accompanies this process of intimate self-revelation on the penitent’s part is not to become an insurmountable obstruction for the Son himself already subjected himself, out of love, to greater humiliation. : Ibid., 18, 20, 28, 31.
317 Schmitt observes: “The Gospel of John, when it refers to the power conferred by Christ to forgive sins, does not use the terms ‘bind’ and ‘loose’ (Mt 16:19; 18:18) but ‘forgive’ and ‘retain’ (Jn 20:23). von Speyr does not comment directly on the text of Matthew but she often refers to ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ of sin as if there were no distinction between the vocabulary of Matthew and John.” : Schmitt, The Sacrament, 208.
318 As already discussed in chapter one, there are three scriptural texts that are commonly used in theological discourse pertaining to the Sacrament of Reconciliation: Jn 20:23, Mt 16:19 and Mt 18:18. Adrienne focuses on the Johannine text but seems to have the Matthean citations in mind when in (Confession, 65) she refers to the keys that Jesus Christ promised to Peter.
319 Von Speyr maintains that on Easter Sunday, the apostles were “at a point where there is no longer a choice. […] The choice was made already when they decided to follow the Lord, when they could not possibly suspect that this power would one day be bestowed upon them.” : Ibid., 63. See also John, vol. 4, 221-222.
320 Ibid., 219.
the Father\textsuperscript{321} with the intention of communicating in a permanent way through the Church the profound love that God has for humanity.\textsuperscript{322} In virtue of the office entrusted to him, every confessor plays a particular role in mediating Christ’s love. He is called to stand in an intimate “twofold communion”\textsuperscript{323} with God and neighbour: to mediate God to the penitent while standing, simultaneously, in solidarity with the same sinner. The priest should never consider the grace that accompanies his office as something earned but as something to be shared for the edification of the Church.\textsuperscript{324} Nor should he respond to the sin confessed to him with an attitude of indifference.\textsuperscript{325} The Holy Spirit ‘objectifies’\textsuperscript{326} the sin that the priest hears during sacramental confession and helps the priest recognize and judge the sin disclosed to him. The priest is to absolve all sins confessed to him whenever the penitent manifests a proper confessional attitude but to withhold absolution when the necessary confessional attitude is lacking.

Von Speyr then proceeds to underscore the ecclesial implications:

Redemption does not mean that from now on every person has the freedom to shape his life as he pleases and that God will finally pronounce it all as good in a kind of general absolution. Redemption means that those redeemed should come into a form determined by God – the Church – in order to live in it a life pleasing to God.\textsuperscript{327}

Besides, von Speyr offers a helpful distinction between “love” (liebe) and “office” (amt) and explains how these two elements are found \textit{par excellence} only in Jesus.\textsuperscript{328} Those who receive the office from him are enabled to exercise it efficaciously in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as

\textsuperscript{321} \textit{Confession}, 188. See Schmitt, \textit{The Sacrament}, 194-196. \\
\textsuperscript{322} \textit{Confession}, 75. \\
\textsuperscript{323} \textit{John}, vol. 4, 224. It is, according to von Speyr, “conscious representativeness in two directions, and thus the same position which the Lord also occupies: one face turned toward the Father, the other toward the world.” : Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{324} Ibid., 223. See Schmitt, \textit{The Sacrament}, 199-200. \\
\textsuperscript{325} \textit{John}, vol. 4, 225. \\
\textsuperscript{326} “When the priest receives sin [in sacramental confession], he shows himself willing to bear something of its burden. He assumes this burden not subjectively and personally, but officially. This subjective bearing of it is at once objectified by the Holy Spirit. Within the sacrament, there is no subjective representativeness in suffering. Rather, the taking over of this by the Spirit is implicit in the office.” : Ibid., 228. \\
\textsuperscript{327} \textit{Confession}, 68. \\
\textsuperscript{328} \textit{John}, vol. 4, 396-397.
his representatives. The office, however, does not automatically confer personal holiness on its
holder\textsuperscript{329} but relies primarily upon the faith and love of the Church.\textsuperscript{330} Nonetheless, the priest
should never cease to grow in personal holiness and love through his passive surrender to and
active participation with the Holy Spirit conferred on him for exercising his office.\textsuperscript{331} It is in this
sense that “office and person must merge into a genuine unity.”\textsuperscript{332}

Another way von Speyr accentuates the ecclesial implications of the Sacrament of Reconciliation
is by her attention to “the treasury of prayer”.\textsuperscript{333} This treasury of the Church makes it possible
for the sinner to benefit from the love of the other members of the Church. In this sense, no
celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is purely private for it always takes place in an
ecclesial context and leads towards greater unity within the Church. Every single confession can
help build the Christian community for no penitent ceases to be part of the Church.\textsuperscript{334} Moreover,
every member of the Church should strive for ecclesial communion and forgiveness, even
beyond the realms of sacramental confession.\textsuperscript{335} Even this kind of forgiveness amongst
Christians finds its source in the redemptive mystery of Jesus.\textsuperscript{336}

\textsuperscript{329} Von Speyr remarks that the disciples also must confess to the Lord (Ibid., 342). Thomas made his confession
(Ibid., 272), yet it was not a confession in the strict sense for it took place in public (Ibid., 240). John the beloved
is regarded as “the archetype of the person who has made his confession” (Ibid., 342) and he “dwells in his love
as in a perpetual absolution” (Ibid., 415).

\textsuperscript{330} Mary is the one who shared in the perfect love of her Son as he exercised his office on the cross by offering
himself up to the Father for the forgiveness of sins. She shares this love with the Church so that the Church –
and hence her ordained priesthood – may have both office and love for the celebration of the Sacrament of

\textsuperscript{331} Confession, 232. See also 64.

\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{333} Ibid., 69-70.

\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 89-90.

\textsuperscript{335} John, vol. 4, 227.

5. The Practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Having outlined von Speyr’s theological framework, we may consider the equally important pastoral aspect of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Von Speyr initiates her pastoral observations by focusing on the confessor, more precisely at his period of seminary formation. From the example of Jesus, the seminarian learns to surrender everything for the service of God and neighbour. His willingness to identify himself with the communion of sinners prepares him for his future sharing in the office and love of Christ. During this state of expectation, the seminarian must become increasingly more attentive to his sins and to his own confessional practice. The more the seminarian can surrender himself into the hands of his confessor, the closer he will come to the confessional attitude of Jesus and hence the more effective he will be with his future penitents.

It is typical for the newly ordained to feel shocked by the first confession he hears or “exposed helplessly to the storm of grace” when he grants his first absolution. Eventually, the priest must battle routine and over-familiarity by his effort to remain engaged in the sacramental process. The confessor should listen first to the sins confessed in order to discern the veiled attitude of the penitent. Through this process, the confessor uncovers what is particular to the penitent, assumes it in his own stance before God, and assists the penitent to see personal confession and Christian life from the eyes of God. The prescribed prayers of the Sacrament form the much-needed skeleton for this process.

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337 Schmitt, The Sacrament, 212.
338 Confession, 215-216.
339 Ibid., 216-217.
340 Ibid., 219.
341 Ibid., 225-229.
342 Ibid., 239-240.
Reflecting on the seal of confession, von Speyr notes that its most important reason comes from its correlation to the mystery of Holy Saturday, a mystery characterized by the silence of death and the Son’s intimacy with the Father, and protected by the utter silence of the Son on the mystery following his resurrection.\textsuperscript{343} Similarly, the confessor who gets a glimpse of the penitent’s sin and intimate relationship with God and the Church is also bound to silence. The confessor cannot disclose what he hears in confession but may, with the consent of the penitent, use it to offer spiritual direction to the same penitent.\textsuperscript{344}

At this point von Speyr’s practical insights for the penitent may be considered. Two extremes must be avoided. First there is the penitent who considers confession as a mere duty, an unavoidable task that the Church requires at least once a year.\textsuperscript{345} Von Speyr compares this distressing notion to an insurance policy and a savings account.\textsuperscript{346} As both images suggest, the penitent is ready to undergo the unpleasantness of the Sacrament in order to remain eligible for some kind of spiritual reward or protection. This type of penitent does not expect any surprises nor is willing to do more than the basic minimum requires. It is very tempting for the confessor to get dejected and, busy as he is with Lenten confessions, opt not to disturb the penitent.\textsuperscript{347} On the other hand, there is the equally perilous situation of the scrupulous penitent who frequents the Sacrament yet without ever experiencing the peace of sacramental absolution.\textsuperscript{348} Von Speyr traces the problem to the penitent’s lack of trust in divine grace coupled by the penitent’s determination to have the final word.\textsuperscript{349} In the case of genuine scrupulosity, the confessor’s

\textsuperscript{343} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{344} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{345} Ibid., 101-102.
\textsuperscript{346} Ibid., 102-104.
\textsuperscript{347} Confession, 104.
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{349} Ibid.
response ought to be decisive yet compassionate.\textsuperscript{350} The confessor must refrain from any premature labelling of the penitent for at times, according to von Speyr, a penitent’s grace comes enshrouded in scrupulosity and may require more than one meeting before it can start to dissolve and give way to the “obedience to grace”.\textsuperscript{351}

Having explored these two polarities, von Speyr’s understanding of the penitent’s right attitude becomes clearer. The penitent ought to balance the seriousness of contrition with the joy of absolution, consciousness of personal sin with an awareness of belonging to the communion of sinners, spontaneity with ecclesial objectivity, and humility with gratitude.\textsuperscript{352} The penitent cannot presume sacramental absolution but should prepare in prayer for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.\textsuperscript{353} Von Speyr exhorts the penitent to be open towards the confessor and to accept the grace of sacramental absolution as a Christian gift that must be utilized and shared with the Church for the benefit of humankind.\textsuperscript{354}

Having addressed the role of the protagonists of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confessor and penitent), von Speyr also analyzes the various stages that constitute the Sacrament, beginning with prior preparation. In childlike simplicity, the penitent must attempt to cooperate with the Holy Spirit through prayer, faith and reason.\textsuperscript{355}

\textsuperscript{350} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{351} Ibid., 105-107.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid., 107-109.
\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{354} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{355} Ibid., 158.
The second step\textsuperscript{356} outlined by von Speyr, contrition, builds on the “dry insight”\textsuperscript{357} of sins that results from the examination of conscience. According to von Speyr, the contrite penitent must attempt to strike the right balance between horror for sin and trust in God’s grace. In addition, contrition ought to affect both feeling and insight, in fact the whole person.\textsuperscript{358}

Genuine contrition materializes itself in resolutions that can point to the penitent’s progress from one celebration of the Sacrament to another.\textsuperscript{359} Success in this regard depends to a large extent on the penitent’s ability to craft a limited number of concrete resolutions and to adhere to them with a prayerful attitude that relies on grace.\textsuperscript{360} At this moment, the penitent is well prepared to move to the confessional. It is grace that enables the penitent to comply with the demands of discipleship that surface in confession.

Having confessed in humility and truth, the penitent prepares to receive the exhortation of the confessor. The exhortation is, according to von Speyr, God’s word for that particular penitent, yet orienting the penitent towards the Church.\textsuperscript{361} The confessor is duty-bound to deliver the message revealed to him for the penitent by the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{362} With reverence and insight the confessor enters the penitent’s intimate relationship with God and offers practical advice to help

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{356}] Von Speyr understands one’s preparation for the Sacrament as a clearly defined process that “issues from the clarity that the Lord maintains in all his behaviour and actions toward the Father. He came in order to suffer, but as long as the hour has not come he does not anticipate it… From him we should learn to organize and separate the different phases in our examination of conscience.” : Ibid., 161-162.
\item[\textsuperscript{357}] Ibid., 161. “The highest possible objectivity must emerge. One must not perceive the sins merely as a general burden but should rather examine and recognize their number, seriousness and circumstances.” : ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{358}] Ibid., 163-165.
\item[\textsuperscript{359}] Ibid., 170.
\item[\textsuperscript{360}] Ibid., 172-173. Also, “the act of resolution should not consist merely in the acquaintance with certain recipes according to which we hope to overcome our faults but should arise rather from the entire openness to God and to the Church that constitutes our confessional attitude; we must see to it that something of this attitude of openness accompanies us afterward while we carry out those resolutions.” : Ibid., 192.
\item[\textsuperscript{361}] Ibid., 181.
\item[\textsuperscript{362}] Ibid., 232. Yet the Spirit does not extinguish the confessor’s personality while giving the exhortation but preserves it. : Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
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the penitent grow in the catholic sense within the communion of saints.\textsuperscript{363} Equally true is the fact that, in a certain way, the exhortation springs from the confessor’s own intimacy with God.\textsuperscript{364} Consequently, sacramental confession evolves into a reciprocal relationship of trust, characterized by this rich intertwining of what is official and structured and what is human and spontaneous.\textsuperscript{365} However, the penitent should not underestimate the value of what might seem as a ‘bland’ exhortation.\textsuperscript{366} Generally, the exhortation is concluded with a penance\textsuperscript{367} (satisfaction) that the confessor assigns to the penitent, followed by sacramental absolution\textsuperscript{368}.

Besides, von Speyr reminds her readers that the grace of absolution that clears the penitent from personal sins also fills that emptiness and expands it to the extent that God alone dwells in the penitent’s life.\textsuperscript{369} The formula\textsuperscript{370} of absolution recited by the confessor synthesizes the fundamental Christian belief that sacramental absolution is made possible by the power of the triune God, entrusted to the Church, and which the confessor exercises in a definitive way in virtue of his office so that the penitent may return to God.\textsuperscript{371} It marks the end of confession to the priest and is followed by the execution of the assigned penance.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 233-234.
\item\textsuperscript{364} Ibid., 234.
\item\textsuperscript{365} Ibid., 235. Moreover, “Confession means being naked before God, and the shaping is the Father’s exhortation through the Holy Spirit. In demanding confession the confessor represents the Son; giving the exhortation represents the Father and the Spirit. By electing the positive willingness on the part of the penitent to live a Christian life of discipleship, the confessor reveals the participation of the Father in the sacrament of confession, in which the sinner shows himself as he is, to perfect Christian readiness.”; Ibid., 184-185.
\item\textsuperscript{366} Ibid., 183. Nonetheless, this is no excuse for the confessor to avoid making the effort to shape his exhortation according to the particular situation and needs of the penitent before him.
\item\textsuperscript{367} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{368} Ibid., 186.
\item\textsuperscript{369} Ibid., 187.
\item\textsuperscript{370} Although von Speyr reflects on the formula of absolution that was in use prior to the 1973 Ordo, her reflections remain relevant to the present day and age.
\item\textsuperscript{371} Ibid., 188-189.
\end{thebibliography}
This penance may be considered as a punishment for the sin committed and must be accepted by the penitent “in a Christian spirit.” Yet, its disproportion to the seriousness of the sin confessed indicates also that it is God, not the penitent, who takes on himself the burden of sin. In this sense, von Speyr regards the assigned penance as a symbol of and sharing in what has already been accomplished by the Trinity in the mystery of redemption. Furthermore it can be considered as a prayer for it facilitates the way to God by helping the penitent foster a new attitude before God.

6. Living from the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Reconciliation cannot be celebrated in an impersonal vacuum but must always take into consideration the particular needs and mission of the Christian in question. For instance, the first confession of a young girl will be significantly different from that of a middle-aged man who for decades has been alienated from sacramental life. Von Speyr’s work Die Beichte examines the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in relation to the Christian’s state in the spiritual life.

In the case of a Confession of Conversion the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation has the power to transform the penitent’s whole life and unveil a personal mission. This power may manifest itself clearly to both the penitent and the confessor in the most unexpected and uncompromising way. Von Speyr warns the penitent who experiences grace in such a powerful

372 Ibid., 183-184.
373 Ibid., 184.
374 Ibid., 190.
375 Ibid., 115.
way not to become overly attached to this particular experience but to develop instead a strong sense of humility and obedience.\textsuperscript{376}

Another type is that of General Confession which may be requested by the penitent,\textsuperscript{377} the confessor,\textsuperscript{378} the person who desires to join a religious community,\textsuperscript{379} or the retreatant as part of the Spiritual Exercises devised by Ignatius of Loyola\textsuperscript{380}. In all these cases it is important for the penitent to be as objective as possible\textsuperscript{381} and not to misuse General Confession in a way that detracts from the Christian’s ecclesial life or focus on God.\textsuperscript{382} Von Speyr elucidates:

A general confession looks directly at the Lord’s Cross and presupposes the willingness to encounter it in all its fullness – with more willingness, more nakedness, more submission than at any other time.\textsuperscript{383}

The third kind of sacramental confession is Devotional Confession. Here the focus is, according to von Speyr, not so much on the forgiveness of personal sin as much as it is on the higher degree of purity required from the faithful believer who commits to live in a more ecclesial manner by sharing in the fate of sinners in order to share with them the grace of absolution.\textsuperscript{384} This way of celebrating the Sacrament calls for a high level of humility that enables the penitent to feel closer to sinners, not superior to them. The penitent must never overlook the seriousness

\textsuperscript{376} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{377} The penitent “wishes to conclude his entire past and effectively summarize all the conclusions that should have lain in his previous confessions” : Ibid., 119-120.
\textsuperscript{378} For instance, when the confessor needs a better picture of the penitent’s spiritual life. : Confession, 120. See also ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{379} “The new state of life demands a comprehensive act of conclusion, and the new obedience a complete opening-up.” : Confession, 120. See also ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{380} Ibid., 124-126. “Nothing hollows a person out more than does this confession, so that, having been ‘disposed of,’ one can begin to realize the meaning of the meditations on the life of Christ.” (Ibid., 126). However, Adrienne admits that one can also request a General Confession in order to grow in obedience, fight lukewarmness or participate in bearing universal sin. (John, vol. 2, 178-179).
\textsuperscript{381} “During a general confession one must pay particular attention to one element, even more than in normal confessions: namely, that one let the sins one wishes to confess keep the same character they had for the conscience at the time they were committed.” : Confession, 120.
\textsuperscript{382} Ibid., 121, 123.
\textsuperscript{383} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{384} Ibid., 127.
of personal sin. On his part, the confessor must guard himself against anything that may dampen
the penitent’s hope and sense of sacrificial service for Jesus Christ and the Church. Von Speyr’s
advice to the confessor is to “view everything from the perspective of the Son and the Holy
Spirit.”

The priest is the one entrusted with the office to hear the confessions of his brethren. Yet he too
must confess. Unlike the religious priest, the secular priest does not have the Rule of his
religious community to outline his responsibilities in a clear way. Though always assisted by
the grace of his office, von Speyr reminds the priest to remain vigilant, particularly against the
subtle snares of activism and overconfidence. The confessions entrusted to him can help him
become a better penitent. In fact, the priest’s confession is intimately connected to the
community where he serves. While hearing confessions, the priest can neither remain
unaffected by the sins he hears nor can he sink in them. According to von Speyr, it is
immensely beneficial for the confessor to form himself according to the confessional attitude of
the Son who during his earthly life was able to balance his authority and submission.

The confession of the religious person ought to be characterized by a humble awareness of the
failure to meet the expectations of the Jesus, both personally and as a religious community.

385 Ibid.
386 Ibid., 130.
387 Ibid., 130-131.
388 Ibid., 132-134.
389 Ibid., 134.
390 Ibid., 134-136.
391 “The contemplatives are those who bear this situation by means of their lives, and the actives are those who try to
change it by demonstrating the urgency of the call of the Lord.” : Ibid., 138.
Neither the religious penitent nor the confessor\textsuperscript{392} ought to shy away from their failure to love according to the Son’s expectations.\textsuperscript{393} Nonetheless, Jesus still extends his challenging invitation for intimate discipleship and shares his love with such a penitent.

Then von Speyr notes that the contemplative has a twofold mission: first, to approach Jesus through contemplation in order to lead the Church closer to him and, secondly, to share anonymously in the bearing of sin.\textsuperscript{394} The supreme model is Jesus Christ who contemplated the Father and led humanity to him while also taking on himself all sins so that salvation may become possible for the world.\textsuperscript{395} For this reason, one’s contemplative attitude is closely interconnected to one’s confessional attitude and vice versa. It is of utmost importance that the confessor who hears the confession of a contemplative is familiar with the particular mission of the penitent before him.\textsuperscript{396}

In contrast with the contemplative, the active religious seeks to follow Jesus through active ministry. Although contemplation remains an essential component in the life of the active religious for keeping oneself well nourished for ministry, the active religious prepares for the Sacrament of Reconciliation through a careful examination of their pastoral effectiveness (not to be mistaken for mere fame or worldly success).\textsuperscript{397} The confessor should not attempt to take away, with some shallow and misleading solace, the unease of the active religious penitent.

\textsuperscript{392}“The religious who is also a priest and hears confessions will be challenged with particular intensity to share the burden of his penitents”: Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{393} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{394} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{395} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{397} Ibid., 142-143.
before the demands of Jesus for this forms an intrinsic part of this penitent’s vocation and sacramental confession.  

Lastly, von Speyr reflects on the sacramental confession of the married penitent where it is impossible for such a penitent to confess personal sins without “co-accusing” their spouse. This type of confession is shaped in some way by the indivisibility of married life and carries with it a significant degree of humiliation. In fact, sacramental confession brings to light the spouses’ complicity in sin and grace as present in married life. Von Speyr notes that this phenomenon of complicity can help explain the inner dynamics of the communio sanctorum where the Christian’s good and evil deeds have an impact on the entire community.

In addition, the Speyrian view of the Sacrament of Reconciliation assigns a key role to the Sacrament in the life of the Christian. The Sacrament does not come to an end when the priest recites the formula of absolution. Actually, sacramental absolution marks both the end to the sinner’s sin as well as a new beginning. The power of God’s eternal love reveals naked truth to the sinner, liberates from the bonds of sin and sends the renewed person back to one’s old life in order to live it in a new way. The Christian “goes to work with new hope, and this hope

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398 Ibid., 143.
399 Von Speyr explains: “Each [spouse] knows that in the other’s confession the indivisible common element may come to expression, that he in any case is borne by that confession, that the absolution of the one already prefigures that of the other, and that in this shared bearing of sin there lies a very special way in which one can participate in the Lord’s own act of bearing sin.” : Ibid., 144.
400 Ibid., 145.
401 Ibid.
402 Ibid., 195-196. “Once the chains of sin are broken, the chains and series of graces begin. If the possibilities of sin are numerous, and if these sins beget one another in a chain reaction, the possibilities of grace are much more numerous and open a glimpse of eternity itself.” : Ibid., 196.
carries the imprint of the absolution he has received.”\textsuperscript{403} The forgiven sinner now has all the divine help needed to respond and surrender to God.\textsuperscript{404}

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that, for von Speyr, the profound transformation that results from the Sacrament of Reconciliation cannot be equated to a mere mood swing that cannot endure.\textsuperscript{405} Instead, the Sacrament, like all the other Sacraments of the Church, enables the Christian to integrate all actions and moods into a more stable attitude. This attitude is rooted in self-openness before God – an “attitude given to us and infused in us by the Lord”\textsuperscript{406} – and goes beyond the time spent in the confessional. Hence, for instance, one’s meditation on the Word of God which formed part of the sinner’s immediate preparation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation may also find a more permanent place in the Christian’s daily life.\textsuperscript{407}

A key dimension of Christian life that can be enriched by the confessional attitude is that of prayer.\textsuperscript{408} Von Speyr remarks that every prayer is an encounter with Jesus Christ whose attitude is one of “openness before the Father in the service of the world’s redemption.”\textsuperscript{409} Both prayer and sacramental confession can be considered as a dialogue with God that is built on openness and readiness.\textsuperscript{410} Neither prayer nor sacramental confession is meant to be static but in a continuous state of growth. Both place the person in the state of discipleship, following the Son on the way to the Father. In addition, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has an important role to

\textsuperscript{403} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{404} Ibid., 197-198.
\textsuperscript{405} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{406} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{407} Ibid., 204.
\textsuperscript{408} See Schmitt, \textit{The Sacrament}, 243-244. Ricci Sindoni, \textit{Adrienne}, 135-146.
\textsuperscript{409} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{410} Ibid., 211.
play in the mission of every Christian.\textsuperscript{411} In fact, this Sacrament has the power to purify and prepare the Christian for their mission. Thus, the Sacrament of Reconciliation develops into a fundamental experience for every Christian, regardless of one’s mission in life or stage along the spiritual journey. Von Speyr’s interest in the confessional attitude of Christ may trigger a deeper appreciation of this Sacrament along with a more integrated life for the Christian disciple.

Having explored von Speyr’s most salient insights concerning the Sacrament of Reconciliation makes it possible to evaluate her contribution vis-à-vis the current “crisis” of the Sacrament. Admittedly, von Speyr’s meditations may be quite complex and intimidating for general readership. Nonetheless, her Theology is both timely and balanced: it is pre-eminently Christological, yet without minimizing the ecclesial and personal dimensions.\textsuperscript{412} The “attitude of God” is revealed in the confessional attitude of the incarnate Son and imprinted upon the penitent during sacramental confession. Von Speyr seeks, according to Jacques Servais, to bring forward genuine revitalization of the Sacrament of Reconciliation through \textit{ressourcement},\textsuperscript{413} that is to say a return to the centre where Jesus Christ can be encountered and received in faith-full receptivity. Servais explains:

Rather than almost desperately seeking to re-establish by his own efforts the defective balance between God and man, between the body and the soul, which would necessarily have ended in placing the point of absolute equilibrium in man himself, the Christian is called to enter into the attitude of confession with respect to Christ – the habitual disposition of allowing God to act in one’s life, renouncing once and for all the control of things through one’s own judgment and activity.\textsuperscript{414}

\textsuperscript{411} See Schmitt, \textit{The Sacrament}, 244-252. Ricci Sindoni, \textit{Adrienne}, 125-134.
\textsuperscript{414} Ibid., 307.
This observation from Servais may deepen the reader’s appreciation for von Speyr’s insights and help reveal the contemporary significance of her prophetic mission with respect to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Moreover, William Schmitt suggests that von Speyr’s work may help overcome the current “crisis” by redefining it in terms that are primarily Soteriological rather than moral. In this way, contemporary issues related to this Sacrament such as the loss of the sense of sin and the dulling of conscience are considered first and foremost within a Soteriological milieu where Jesus Christ does not shy away from the sinner but freely takes their sin on himself, “confesses” it on the cross and shares the absolution he receives on behalf of the sinner through the Sacrament of Reconciliation that has been entrusted to his Bride, the Church. In this sense, von Speyr’s advice for the revitalization of this Sacrament consists of an in-depth meditation on the person of Christ, specifically his confessional attitude, followed by an active surrender to his attitude for the salvation of humankind.

At this stage, this conversation may be expanded to consider how the Sacrament of Reconciliation may serve as an indispensable tool for authentic reconciliation and spiritual growth.

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416 Ibid., 258-259.
Chapter 3
The Effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are manifold. However, for the sake of clarity, they can be sorted into two main categories: reconciling (forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God, the Church and the human family) and sanctifying (ascetic; growth in holiness). 417 The first category is oriented towards past behaviour and refers to conversion from sin (epistrephein); the second category is present and future-oriented and refers to conversion to God (metanoien). 418

An inquiry into these two complementary categories may uncover the richness of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and how, far from being disconnected from the reality of life, individualistic, quasi-magic, Semi-Pelagian or a burdensome duty, the Sacrament is in truth a privileged encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, the sacramentalization of a life-long process of conversion that is empowered by grace yet in need of human cooperation, personal and nonetheless ecclesial and communal.

Having explored its effects, it may then be helpful to examine the role of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the spiritual life – with particular attention given to the Confession of Devotion and Spiritual Direction – and the implications of the Sacrament in the life and ministry of the priest-confessor. John Paul II is the primary interlocutor in this chapter. His concern for this


Sacrament is tangible. His pastoral advice can be highly relevant because it springs from the life and Tradition of the Church and seeks to counter the contemporary “crisis” of the Sacrament with remarkable lucidity and hope.

1. Forgiveness of Sins as the Primary Effect

1.1 Mysterium Iniquitatis

John Paul II addresses the multifaceted “crisis” of sacramental confession by contextualizing it within the larger situation of the contemporary world. By adopting a methodological approach that parallels the preface of the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes, the pope initiates his treatment with an accurate diagnosis of the current state of worldly affairs. Although humanity has made significant achievements in the areas of science, technology and social communications, John Paul II remarks that today’s world remains “shattered” by all kinds of conflict between individuals, groups, social classes and nations. He presents a series of reasons for this acute conflict that is paralyzing the world: the disregard for basic human rights, discrimination, terror and the unjust distribution of natural resources and wealth to mention but a few. The Church too finds herself vulnerable to serious discord amongst her members.

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420 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 2.


423 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 2.
Faced by an escalating “existential fear” and “unease,” humanity attempts – almost in vain – to unearth the root of all conflict so that reconciliation and peace may be restored. John Paul II identifies sin as the root of all conflict and division and states that every attempt to restore reconciliation must acknowledge and contend with the reality of personal sin and conversion. For this reason, the pontiff proceeds with an examination of the reality of sin, starting from the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

This parable portrays the grave offense of the younger son: an inconsiderate request to the father for his inheritance followed by his departure from the father’s house. After squandering the inheritance, the condition of the younger son was made worse by the calamity that struck the country where he was residing. Only then did he “come to himself” and begin to long for reconciliation with his father. The pope admits that this initial longing, presented in Lk 15:17, may not have had the purest motive – the younger son seemed more distressed at losing his material possessions than at offending his father – but this gradually evolved into an inner awareness of his squandered dignity as a son.

According to John Paul II, “through the complex material situation in which the prodigal son found himself because of his folly, because

\[\text{Dives in misericordia, 11.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 10-12. Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 3.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 2.}\]
\[\text{Lk 15:17 (RSV).}\]
\[\text{“How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!” (RSV)}\]
\[\text{Dives in misericordia, 5.}\]
of sin, the sense of lost dignity had matured."

In fact, the younger son repented of his sin and resolved to return to the house of his father, even if that included humiliation and shame. Yet, the elder son too was in need of conversion and reconciliation. His encounter with the father following the return of the younger son revealed how blinded he was by his self-righteousness, jealousy and hardness of heart. Unless the elder son submits himself to personal conversion – remarks the pope – he cannot experience reconciliation with his father and brother and the banquet thrown by the father remains incomplete.

In *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* the pope explores this parable from the contrasting perspectives of the two sons. In the younger son, John Paul II sees every disenchanted person who longs to be reconciled with the heavenly Father and the human family. In the elder son, the pontiff perceives the painful reality of conflict that is weakening the human family and the challenges that must be overcome for reconciliation to become a reality. However, the true protagonist of this parable remains the father whose actions of mercy and forgiveness reveal his steadfast faithfulness to his own fatherhood. In the most magnificent way, the love of the father expresses itself through mercy that is able to overcome evil by assisting his prodigal son return to the truth and relive his sonship. In an analogous way, the love of the heavenly Father “is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral

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431 Ibid.  
433 Ibid.  
434 Ibid., 5-6.  
435 Ibid., 6.  
misery, to sin.” Yet, this divine gift requires human acceptance and cooperation (“conversion that passes from the heart to deeds and then to the Christian’s whole life,” namely penance).

This kind of human cooperation entails an honest acknowledgment of personal sin. In the first chapter of the second section of *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, John Paul II explores the reality of sin, identified by St. Paul as “the mystery of sin” (*mysterium iniquitatis*). The pope examines the first sin of Adam and Eve and the sin of the people of Babel and concludes that both accounts reveal humanity’s deliberate decision to disobey God’s ordinances in order to be “like him.” The result in both cases is a simultaneous rupture of the vertical and the horizontal dimensions, that is to say one’s relationship with God and the rest of the human family. Even more, every sin may be considered as a “suicidal act” for it refutes God who is the source of life, damages the person’s interior order and hinders external relationships with the larger human family.

John Paul II insists that, strictly speaking, sin is always personal in nature for it is the outcome of a person’s free choice. External influences may condition but never defeat a person’s dignity and freedom. Consequently, external social structures or groups of people can never be entirely

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437 Ibid.
438 *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 4.
439 “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins” (1 Jn 1:8-9) (NRSV) cited in *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 13.
442 Gen 3.
444 Gen 3:5 (NRSV).
445 *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 15.
446 Ibid., 16. “Modern man […] is subjected to the temptation of recognizing himself as an “object” conditioned in many ways, as a “result” of various forces that from within and from without do not allow him to be free. [But] despite all the play of multiple conditionings, he is a true subject, a true “I” who makes decisions about himself, about his actions, about the good and evil of these deeds.”: *Angelus Message* (7 March 1982): “Is Man Truly Free and Responsible?” *LOR* 15 March 1982, pg. 2.
blamed for personal sin. This statement does not deny the existence of “social sin” – understood in an analogous way\textsuperscript{447} – for just as the mystery of the communion of saints shows the positive impact that personal virtue may have on others (the “law of ascent”) so does the communion of sin reveal the negative social impact of personal sin (the “law of descent”).\textsuperscript{448} In this sense, even the most private sin is able to produce a negative social impact and may be considered as a social sin. Moreover, personal sin reinforces that kind of social sin which results from the amassing of personal sins – commonly known as the “structure of sin.”\textsuperscript{449} However, even when sin reaches the extent of a structure of sin that makes it almost impossible to identify its source, the pope insists that such complex situations must not be used as an excuse to brush off personal responsibility but as an additional reason for personal conversion. In fact:

Whenever the Church speaks of situations of sin or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behaviour of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. […] The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals.\textsuperscript{450}

It is worth emphasizing that personal and social sins are not mutually exclusive.\textsuperscript{451} Sin is a self-inflicted “twofold wound”\textsuperscript{452} that has personal and social ramifications.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{447} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 16. See also: CCC 1869.
\item \textsuperscript{448} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{450} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 16. See also: \textit{Sollicitudo rei socialis}, 36-37. \textit{General Audience} (25 August 1999) pg. 7, par. 3. CCC 1869. In addition, John Paul II reminds the Brazilian bishops that “it is fundamental that Christians have a proper sense of personal sin and of its social effects: my community is sinful because I am a sinner; Christ is the Lamb of God who dies to take away the sin of the world and the sin of the world is a very concrete sin, because it is my sin.” : \textit{Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of Brazil}, 20 March 1990 : “Liturgy: All must be involved,” \textit{LOR} 9 April 1990, pg. 4, par. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{451} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{452} Ibid., 15.
\end{itemize}
John Paul II navigates further in the mystery of sin by recalling the classical\textsuperscript{453} distinction between mortal and venial sins. The former (mortal sin) is more serious than the latter (venial sin) for it constitutes a radical departure from God who is the source of all life and merits the eternal punishment of Hell. Mortal sin results in the sinner’s separation from God (\textit{aversio a Deo}) followed by an inordinate turn towards oneself or any other creature (\textit{conversio ad creaturam}).\textsuperscript{454} Moreover, “mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”\textsuperscript{455} Hence, mortal sin cannot be limited just to those rare acts that lead to a change in one’s “fundamental option”\textsuperscript{456} for the latter can also be changed in a profound way by a series of acts that are freely chosen and which constitute a grave matter. On the other hand, venial sin does not rupture the sinner’s relationship with God and merits only temporal punishment for its matter is less serious. Yet, venial sin is not to be taken lightly, warns the pope.\textsuperscript{457} In fact, a critical problem of the contemporary world stems from its loss of the sense of sin.\textsuperscript{458}

\textsuperscript{453} The pope refers to the teachings of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent. : \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 17. See also: CCC 1854-1864.

\textsuperscript{454} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 17.

\textsuperscript{455} Ibid. cited in CCC 1857.

\textsuperscript{456} The pope notes that, according to some authors, “the key role in the moral life is to be attributed to a "fundamental option", brought about by that fundamental freedom whereby the person makes an overall self-determination, not through a specific and conscious decision on the level of reflection, but in a "transcendental" and "athematic" way. Particular acts which flow from this option would constitute only partial and never definitive attempts to give it expression [...] There thus appears to be established within human acting a clear disjunction between two levels of morality [...] This is pushed to the point where a concrete kind of behaviour, even one freely chosen, comes to be considered as a merely physical process, and not according to the criteria proper to a human act.” : \textit{Veritatis splendor}, Encyclical Letter on the splendor of truth (6 August 1993. AAS 85 (1993): 1184-1185), par. 65. For a more elaborate explanation see: ibid., 66-70.

\textsuperscript{457} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 17.

\textsuperscript{458} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 18. It is important to emphasize that in the same paragraph the pope notes that the sense of sin, the sense of God and the voice of the conscience may become obscure but can “never [be] completely eliminated.” Also worth noting that the theme of the loss of the sense of sin is recurrent in the teachings of John Paul II. A few examples are: \textit{Aperite portas Redemptori}, Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee for the 1950th anniversary of the Redemption (6 January 1983) : \textit{LOR} 31 January 1983, pg. 3, par. 8. \textit{General Audience}, 18 August 1999 : “Fight Evil and Sin with Determination,” \textit{LOR} 25 August 1999, pg. 7, par. 4. \textit{Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum} (8 March 2005) : “Be Open and Authentic Ministers of Reconciliation,” \textit{LOR} 23 March 2005, pg. 9, par. 2. The same theme is also prominent in the pontificate of Benedict XVI : \textit{Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum} (16 March 2007) : “Helping Others See Christ’s Face Through Confession,” \textit{LOR} 28 March 2007, pg. 5. \textit{Message to
John Paul II teaches that the loss of human sensitivity to the snares of sin – the loss of the sense of sin – may be associated with the “eclipse” of the moral conscience. When the latter is distorted, the person loses the inner point of reference that enables a proper sense of self-perception, an authentic human search for truth and freedom, and a genuine relationship with God. Thus, the loss of a sense of sin and the obscuring of conscience are accompanied by the loss of a sense of God. It should come as no surprise then that John Paul II makes his own the strong assertion of Pius XII: “the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin.”

John Paul II accuses the following, in particular, for this serious loss: the enticement of Satan, all secularist ideas that have no place for God, all efforts that attempt to relativize the moral norm, and every erroneous interpretation of the human sciences that seeks to exonerate the individual from any sense of personal responsibility or that equate a genuine sense of guilt with psychological immaturity. It is by re-establishing the sense of sin (and the sense of God), explains the pope, that the world can begin to experience reconciliation.

1.2 Mysterium Pietatis

The darkness of the mystery of sin ought to be considered vis-à-vis the light of Jesus Christ for “to offer the response of the Redemption to a world made conscious of sin is to proclaim the

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459 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 18.  
revelation of mercy and the message of hope which is in ‘Christ Jesus our hope’\textsuperscript{464-465}. It is the mystery of religion (\textit{mysterium pietatis})\textsuperscript{466} that, in Jesus Christ, the one who “overcomes evil with good,”\textsuperscript{467} the love of God and his gift of reconciliation take on a very concrete form.\textsuperscript{468} In fact, the entire mission of Jesus Christ may be considered as a mission of reconciliation,\textsuperscript{469} starting with his appeal to “repent, and believe in the good news”\textsuperscript{470} and followed by his continuous emphasis on reconciliation with God and neighbour,\textsuperscript{471} and all the miracles whose purpose it was to reveal Christ’s ability to forgive sins and heal the whole person.\textsuperscript{472} In the mystery of the cross (\textit{mysterium crucis})\textsuperscript{473} – the zenith of the mystery of Christ – John Paul II observes the love of Jesus Christ who, in profound solidarity with the human family, faces the forces of evil that are unleashed against him on the cross. There, “Christ perceives and suffers to the greatest possible extent the tragedy of the division of man from God…and at the same time accomplishes our reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{474} The love of Jesus that manifests itself as victorious over sin, death and every form of evil is for every human being the ultimate revelation of the mercy of the Father.\textsuperscript{475} “Indeed, with Easter the mystery of the Father’s infinite mercy penetrates the darkest

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{464} 1 Tim 1:1.
\item \textsuperscript{465} Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of the United States (15 April 1983) : “Together Let Us Proclaim Christ the Only Redeemer and Reconciler,” LOR 25 April 1983, pg. 6, par. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{466} Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{467} Dives in misericordia, 6, based on Rom 12:21.
\item \textsuperscript{468} Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 7. It may also be said that this divine love makes itself visible particularly in the encounters of Jesus with the pain and unfairness that constitute an unmistakable part of the “human condition” (Dives in misericordia, 3) under the influence of sin. It is significant that Jesus presents his deeds of mercy as proof that he is the promised Messiah: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” : Lk 7:19. Dives in misericordia, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{469} Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{470} Mk 1:15. (NRSV). CCC 1427-1428.
\item \textsuperscript{471} “first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” : Mt 5:24. “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven…forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” : Mt 6:9,12. (NRSV)
\item \textsuperscript{472} Address to Council of the General Secretariat of Synod of Bishops (30 October 1982) : “Through Conversion Man Recovers Awareness of his Dignity,” LOR 29 November 1982, pg. 8, par. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{473} Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{474} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{475} Dives in misericordia, 7-8.
\end{itemize}
roots of human iniquity.” Furthermore, by imparting the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Church, Jesus entrusts the Church with the task of keeping alive his victory over the mystery of sin, more specifically by the Church’s “application to the sinner of the redemption gained through the cross of Christ”. It becomes her fundamental mission to instil, as he did, “conversion and penance in man’s heart and to offer him the gift of reconciliation”.

John Paul II teaches that the Church ought to be for the world the “sacrament” of the redemptive act of Jesus. In other words, the whole Church is in itself the sign and the means of reconciliation and salvation. In order to be a more credible and effective sacrament that reconciles, the Church must first of all be “a reconciled Church” within itself, deeply committed to the ecumenical process and engaged in the “dialogue of salvation” with all those who may not share her faith. The Church prolongs the victory of Jesus over sin by calling every member of the human family to enflesh this essential feature of the Christian faith through reconciliation and forgiveness. The primary means at her disposal are the sacred Scriptures that contain the Gospel of reconciliation for the contemplation and proclamation of the Church, as well as the seven sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

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476 General Audience (22 September 1999) : “Reconciliation with God and One Another,” LOR 29 September 1999, pg. 11, par. 3.
478 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 10.
480 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 23.
481 Ibid., 11.
482 Ibid., 8.
483 Ibid., 9.
484 Paul VI, Ecclesiam Suam (ASS 56 [1964]: 609-659) cited in Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 9.
485 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 8-9, 11.
486 “Forgiveness demonstrates the presence in the world of the love which is more powerful than sin. Forgiveness is also the fundamental condition for reconciliation, not only in the relationship of God with man, but also in relationships between people.” : Dives in misericordia, 14.
At this point, it is possible to reflect on how the fundamental process of forgiveness and reconciliation is sacramentalized in the Church through the essential acts that constitute the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The sacramental process of confession begins with the examination of conscience which helps the penitent to become more aware of the presence and effects of one’s sins in order to assume responsibility for them. The pontiff assures every sinner of the capacity to perceive God’s call to conversion because “if original sin has left deep wounds in him [the sinner], it has not, however, corrupted his fundamental ability to listen with the help of grace and to follow the voice of his conscience, to choose good instead of evil”. The examination of conscience is not an “anxious psychological introspection” but “a coming face to face with the Lord Jesus himself,” claims the pope. In fact, “we can let our heart ‘rebuke us’ because we are certain that ‘God is greater than our hearts’…and for every sin he offers us his benevolence and his grace.” Besides, the penitent’s efforts are accompanied by

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488 On his part, John Paul II calls for “the discovery of the significance underlying the acts we are called upon to perform, according to the dynamics of the sacrament and the Church’s pedagogy when we go to confession.”: General Audience (14 March 1984) : “Examination of Conscience is Most Important,” LOR 20 March 1984, pg. 1, par. 1.
489 See CCC 1454. See also: General Audience (14 March 1984) : “Examination of Conscience is Most Important,” LOR 20 March 1984, pg. 1, 12, par. 1-2.
490 General Audience (5 October 1983) : “God Gave Us the Ministry of Reconciliation,” LOR 10 October 1983, pg. 1, par. 2.
491 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 31. III.
492 General Audience (14 March 1984) : “Examination of Conscience is Most Important,” LOR 20 March 1984, pg. 12, par. 3. Also, Benedict XVI notes that “when one insists solely on the accusation of sins – which must nevertheless exist and it is necessary to help the faithful understand its importance – one risks relegating to the background what is central, that is, the personal encounter with God, the Father of goodness and mercy. It is not sin which is at the heart of the sacramental celebration but rather God’s mercy, which is infinitely greater than any guilt of ours.”: Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum (7 March 2008) : “God Forgives All to Those Who Love Much,” LOR 12 March 2008, pg. 3.
493 1 Jn 3:20.
494 General Audience (14 March 1984) : “Examination of Conscience is Most Important,” LOR 20 March 1984, pg. 12, par. 3.
those of the Church,\textsuperscript{495} including the communion of the saints.\textsuperscript{496} The teachings of Jesus as presented and interpreted by his Church, in addition to the natural moral law that is engraved in every human heart, form the criteria for the examination of conscience. The object of this “confrontation”\textsuperscript{497} is contrition which consists of both the abhorrence for one’s sin and the resolve – with God’s grace\textsuperscript{498} – not to repeat it.\textsuperscript{499} Contrition is the most important act of the penitent for it is “the beginning and the heart of conversion.”\textsuperscript{500} It marks “an internal change of attitude and of approach to God and to the world,”\textsuperscript{501} leaving behind a sinful lifestyle and moving towards God. The term metanoia portrays this movement as an overturn of one’s spirit.\textsuperscript{502}

Another essential part of the Sacrament is the humble and complete confession of sins.\textsuperscript{503} The pontiff adamantly insists that the individual and integral confession of sins with individual

\textsuperscript{495} General Audience (22 September 1999): “Reconciliation with God and One Another,” \emph{LOR} 29 September 1999, pg. 11, par. 5. See also: \textit{Aperite portas Redemptori}, Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee for the 1950th anniversary of the Redemption (6 January 1983): \emph{LOR} 31 January 1983, pg. 2, par. 6.
\textsuperscript{496} “In the spiritual realm, […] no one lives for himself alone. And salutary concern for the salvation of one’s own soul is freed from fear and selfishness only when it becomes concern for the salvation of others as well. This is the reality of the communion of saints, the mystery of “vicarious life”, of prayer as the means of union with Christ and his saints. […] Furthermore, the truth about the communion of saints which unites believers to Christ and to one another, reveals how much each of us can help others — living or dead — to become ever more intimately united with the Father in heaven.”: \textit{Incarnationis Mysterium}, Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (29 November 1998): “Incarnationis Mysterium,” \emph{LOR} 2 December 1998, Special Insert, pg. III, par. 10.
\textsuperscript{497} General Audience (14 March 1984): “Examination of Conscience is Most Important,” \emph{LOR} 20 March 1984, pg. 12, par. 3. God puts in the “human conscience some questions to which he expects an answer in complete interior truth. […] God himself forgives when man answers with the whole interior truth of conversion” : \textit{General Audience} (21 October 1981): “Forgiveness: A Grace and a Mystery of the Heart,” \emph{LOR} 26 October 1981, pg. 12, par. 5.
\textsuperscript{498} Message to Cardinal Baum (22 March 1996): “Confession must be Humble, Complete and Accompanied by Firm Purpose of Amendment,” \emph{LOR} 10 April 1996, pg. 6, par. 5.
\textsuperscript{499} See CCC 1451.
\textsuperscript{500} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 31.III.
\textsuperscript{501} \textit{Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of the United States} (31 May 1988): “Reconciliation of Humanity must be founded on Conversion of Hearts and on the Truth,” \emph{LOR} 20 June 1988, pg. 24, par. 3.
\textsuperscript{502} \textit{Reconciliatio et paenitentia}, 26.
\textsuperscript{503} Message to Cardinal Baum (22 March 1996): “Confession must be Humble, Complete and Accompanied by Firm Purpose of Amendment,” \emph{LOR} 10 April 1996, pg. 6, par. 3.
absolution remains “the only ordinary way”\textsuperscript{504} for the baptized to obtain forgiveness for their mortal sins and reconciliation with God and the Church. John Paul II presents several reasons. First, it is through this personal meeting between confessor and penitent that the confessor can get to know the penitent in order to exercise his role as judge and doctor of the soul.\textsuperscript{505} Secondly, private confession is a liturgical act that symbolizes the penitent’s acknowledgment of sin before God and the Church – both represented by the confessor – as well as the penitent’s faith in and openness to the work of grace.\textsuperscript{506} Thirdly, every penitent has the right to a personal encounter with Christ the Redeemer and vice versa.\textsuperscript{507}

The confession of sins is followed by the three acts of the confessor – the formula of absolution, the imposition of the hand and the Sign of the Cross\textsuperscript{508} – which together constitute an effective

\textsuperscript{504} Ordo, 31. CIC 960. CCC 1484. Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 33. John Paul II observes that the first form for celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation as presented in the revised Ordo Paenitentiae – the reconciliation of individual penitents with individual confession and absolution – underscores the personal dimension of the Sacrament. He also states that the second form – the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution – enjoys all the advantages of the first form but with the additional benefit of calling attention to the ecclesial reality of the Sacrament. The pope, however, is more cautious on the use of the third form, the reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution (Ibid., 32-33). In fact, throughout his pontificate, John Paul II often calls attention to the exceptional nature of the third form in order to safeguard the intention of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Church. A particularly significant example is the Apostolic Letter in the Form of Motu Proprio Misericordia Dei which clarifies the canons of the Code of Canon Law on the use of General Absolution. Other examples are: Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary (30 January 1981) : “Sacrament of Reconciliation Forms Christian Consciences,” LOR 23 February 1981, pg. 19-20. Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of the United States (31 May 1988) : “Reconciliation of Humanity must be founded on Conversion of Hearts and on the Truth,” LOR 20 June 1988, pg. 24, par. 8. Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of Australia, 14 December 1998 : “Set your Face Resolutely Against All that Might Harm the Catholic Faith,” LOR 16 December 1998, pg. 3, par. 5. Benedict XVI too emphasizes the need for individual confession : Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum (25 March 2011) : “The Last Word on Evil is the Mercy of God,” LOR 30 March 2011, pg. 5.

\textsuperscript{505} Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 31.III.

\textsuperscript{506} Ibid. See CCC 1455-1458. Redemptor hominis, 20. As noted by von Speyr, “the mark of a good confession is not the recognition of one’s sin as such, nor the courage to have confessed ‘even that’; for in confession too there is a noli-me-tangere; one turns away from sin so as to see nothing but grace.” : John, vol. 1, 81.


\textsuperscript{508} CCC 1449. Ordo, 46.
sign of the grace of forgiveness that flows from the Paschal Mystery. Furthermore, the pontiff understands the absolution as ‘judgment’:

On the part of the priest, in fact, who acts in the heart of the Church, the absolution expresses the “judgment” of God on the bad action of man. And the penitent, who is accusing himself before God as guilty, acknowledges the Creator as his Lord and accepts his “judgment” as the judgment of a Father who does not want the sinner to die but to turn to him and live.

In addition, it must be emphasized that absolution is never a right of the penitent but a gift from God to the penitent.

The satisfaction (penance) that the confessor imposes on the penitent comprises the last part of the sacramental sign. John Paul II warns all believers that the satisfaction cannot be considered as a payment for obtaining forgiveness but a sincere expression of the penitent’s commitment to live as a follower of Christ, a participation in the redemptive mystery and an effort to counter the side-effects of personal sin (such as the weakening of spiritual gifts) that are not automatically removed by sacramental confession. The satisfaction may entail prayer, deeds or corporal penance. It may also serve as a “reverse therapy” where, for instance, “an appropriate penitential response to the crime of abortion…might be involvement in efforts to aid and defend life”. Besides, the satisfaction may incorporate concrete measures to satisfy restorative justice.

509 Reconciliatio et paenitentia, 31.III.
514 Ibid.
515 CCC 1459. See: Address to Apostolic Penitentiary (18 March 1995) : “Importance of Satisfaction,” LOR 29 March 1995, pg. 5, par. 2. The pope reminds the confessor that, “along with a certain quantitative proportion
2. Growth in Holiness as the Secondary Effect

2.1 Confession of Devotion

The Sacrament of Reconciliation has other vital effects besides the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God and the Church. For this reason, observes John Paul II, even the Christian who is not aware of having committed any mortal sin is advised to celebrate the Sacrament on a regular basis for it is “the path for an increasing sensitivity of conscience and an ever deeper purification, a source of peace, a help in resisting temptation and in striving for a life that responds more and more to the demands of the law and love of God.” These effects are ascetic in nature for they are addressed primarily towards the growth in Christian holiness. Indeed, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is “the effective principle of sanctification, to the very summit of Christian perfection.” Even more, the pontiff states that “one can concretely reach holiness...only if one resorts regularly, humbly and confidently to the Sacrament of Penance”. This ascetic dimension of the Sacrament is highlighted in Confession of Devotion which “has always accompanied the ascent to holiness in the Church”. Consequently, it may prove beneficial to explore the notion of Confession of Devotion and its utility in the spiritual life.
An exploration of Confession of Devotion and its ascetic effects may start by focusing on its identity as a Sacrament, that is to say as a particular action that signifies the cause of grace and simultaneously causes the grace that is signified.\textsuperscript{521} In other words, the Sacrament is a symbolic\textsuperscript{522} action where both God and the Christian encounter one another so that the latter may share in the holiness of God. Starting from the Thomistic concept\textsuperscript{523} of sacramental signification, Arthur B. Chappell investigates the multilayered reality of the Sacrament, with particular attention to the Confession of Devotion.\textsuperscript{524} Because of these various layers, argues Chappell, Confession of Devotion is able to integrate and represent contrasting facets of the sacramental encounter. In fact, this nuanced approach is able to draw attention to the initiative of God towards the penitent yet without disregarding the latter’s active cooperation. Also, the process can be deemed personal in nature yet without diminishing its ecclesial and social dimensions. A careful study of the complex dynamics of sacramental signification may rescue the often-underappreciated practice of Confession of Devotion from the danger of focusing too much on a particular dimension (layer) at the expense of other vital layers of the same mystery.

On the “objective level,”\textsuperscript{525} the symbol of the Sacrament of Reconciliation encompasses the acts of the penitent (contrition, confession and satisfaction). In other words, this level focuses on the outward reality of the sacramental act and not on the interior psychological dynamics of the penitent. By confessing and performing the satisfaction, the penitent exteriorizes contrition,

\textsuperscript{521} Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 41.
\textsuperscript{522} The “symbol” is not to be confused with ‘sign’ or ‘signal.’ According to Chappell, a “sign is something which stands for or points to the concept of another thing.” A signal “not only point to the concept of another reality but also signify the need for some action on the part of the subject experiencing the sign”. Unlike signs or signals, symbols “point beyond the concept of a thing and actually make that thing present in its power and reality.” : Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 76-77.
\textsuperscript{523} For a synthesis of the Sacramental Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas see: Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 39-64.
\textsuperscript{524} Ibid., 39-41.
\textsuperscript{525} Ibid., 97, 111.
takes responsibility for sin and rejects it, and takes concrete measures to make reparation and to live in love.\textsuperscript{526} All three acts are important for together they form a single symbolic act that is able to signify and effect the process of conversion.\textsuperscript{527} Another level, the “contextual level,”\textsuperscript{528} is provided by the confessor who represents the people of God and helps direct the acts of the penitent according to the intention of Jesus Christ and the Church. The confessor’s role in the Sacrament, explains John Paul II, “does not exclude, but rather includes the exercise of the ‘common priesthood’ of the faithful who confess their sins and ask for pardon under the influence of the Holy Spirit who converts them intimately through the grace of Christ the Redeemer.”\textsuperscript{529} On its part, the “subjective level”\textsuperscript{530} addresses what is particular to the penitent. Ideally, the external acts of the penitent on the objective level originate from a mature faith in the love of God and an openness for the grace of the Sacrament to reach beyond the individual acts of sin deep down to the penitent’s root of sin.\textsuperscript{531} Only when the Sacrament is experienced as a personal “encounter with the Living God”\textsuperscript{532} can the penitent feel sorrow for what is confessed and the desire to undergo the penitential works assigned by the confessor as a punishment and a participation in the grace-led lifelong process of purification.\textsuperscript{533}

\textsuperscript{526} Ibid., 112-114.
\textsuperscript{527} Ibid., 115. As O’Neill explains, “the liturgical ceremony does not dispense with sincere interior sorrow and repentance; but neither, on the other hand, is the interior return to God sufficient of itself; it must be externalized, ratified and stabilized by the sacrament.”: Colman E. O’Neill, Meeting Christ in the Sacraments, rev. ed. Romanus Cessario (New York: Alba House, 1991), 254.
\textsuperscript{528} Chappell, Regular Confession, 97-98, 117-126.
\textsuperscript{530} Chappell, Regular Confession, 98-99.
\textsuperscript{531} Ibid., 126-127.
\textsuperscript{533} Chappell, Regular Confession, 128-136. In addition, John Paul II notes that “the sacrament of Reconciliation is not limited to the liturgical celebration, but leads to a penitential attitude of life as an ongoing dimension of the Christian experience.” : Ordo, 31, III. Besides, the grace of the Sacrament contains “the power of spurring the faithful to practice fervent charity, to perform the resulting good works and to accept devoutly the sorrows of life, which also merit the remission of temporal punishment.” : Message to Cardinal William W. Baum, Major Penitentiary (20 March 1998) : “Purpose and Benefits of Sacramental Penance,” LOR 8 April 1998, pg. 5, par. 3. See also: Angelus Message (16 March 1986) : “The Sacrament of Reconciliation Restores Our Joy,” LOR 24 March 1986, pg. 11, par. 3.
The sacramental acts of the penitent and the confessor form a dialectical process between the penitent and Jesus Christ so that the penitent may have the truth of personal sin assumed, “relativized”\textsuperscript{534} and transformed by the crucified one. In this process, the sacramental acts symbolize the helpless condition of the sinful penitent but also serve as a mirror that reflects back to the penitent one’s renewed identity in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{535} The sacramental symbol illuminates the root of personal sinfulness, provokes the sinner to interpret the self at a new level in the light of Christ and evokes a lifelong process where conversion to Christ and the Church becomes a permanent disposition, \textit{in statu conversionis}.\textsuperscript{536}

The full symbol of the Sacrament is conversion: symbolized in the acts of the penitent and effected at a deeper level according to the degree that it is symbolized (that is, according to the penitent’s own dispositions). The satisfactory dimension highlighted by the Sacrament of Reconciliation – and Confession of Devotion in particular – orients the penitent to a deeper conformity to the crucified Christ who offered himself as the absolute satisfaction for all sin.\textsuperscript{537} This penitential attitude, also known as the virtue of penance, goes beyond the time spent in the confessional and transforms the entire existence of the believer. All sins, including venial ones, are interrelated and constitute a life pattern that necessitates ongoing conversion.\textsuperscript{538} Moreover,

\textsuperscript{534} Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 136.
\textsuperscript{535} Ibid., 137-138.
\textsuperscript{536} \textit{Dives in misericordia}, 13. Benedict XVI insists on “the close connection that exists between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and a life oriented decisively to conversion. It is necessary that between the practice of the Sacrament of Confession and a life in which a person strives to follow Christ sincerely, a sort of continuous ‘virtuous circle’ be established in which the grace of the Sacrament may sustain and nourish the commitment to be a faithful disciple of the Lord.” : \textit{Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum (7 March 2008) : “God Forgives All to Those Who Love Much,”} \textit{LOR} 12 March 2008, pg. 3.
\textsuperscript{537} Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 140. O’Neill clarifies: “It is only because we are conscious of our union with Christ that we dare to say we are repentant, ready to make atonement through his sufferings.” : O’Neill, \textit{Meeting Christ}, 264.
\textsuperscript{538} Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 148.
these sins are to be perceived in their relation to the mystical body of Christ, wounded by the sins of its members but working nonetheless for their forgiveness and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{539} In this sense, Confession of Devotion facilitates personal growth in terms of fuller incorporation into the Church.\textsuperscript{540} Unfortunately, many contemporary Christians fail to see the need for a penitential attitude;\textsuperscript{541} hence “pastoral ministry must give a new impetus to a journey of faith growth that stresses the value of the spirit and practice of penance throughout the Christian life.”\textsuperscript{542} Confession of Devotion can be this new impetus for it is an effective sacramental symbol of the need for a conversion that is ongoing, profoundly personal and yet conscious of its ecclesial implications.\textsuperscript{543}

The primary focus of this penitential attitude – also known as the “spirit of compunction”\textsuperscript{544} – is not personal sinfulness but the joy-filled encounter with God who defeats sin. Moreover, the grace of sacramental penance assists in spiritual growth particularly by creating “a likeness to Jesus Christ,”\textsuperscript{545} even to the point of his self-emptying (kenosis).\textsuperscript{546} This self-emptying of Christ characterizes the mystery of the Incarnation and his human condition but reaches its apex on the cross where Jesus Christ freely submits himself to the additional degradation of the cross.


\textsuperscript{540} Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 154.

\textsuperscript{541} \textit{Concluding Address to the Synod of Bishops} (29 October 1983) : “John Paul II Sends Personal Messages to Russia and the United States Not to Discontinue Negotiations,” \textit{LOR} 7 November 1983, pg. 2, par. 2.

\textsuperscript{542} \textit{General Audience} (15 September 1999) : “Penance: Encounter with the Merciful Father;” \textit{LOR} 22 September 1999, pg. 11, par. 1.

\textsuperscript{543} Chappell, \textit{Regular Confession}, 151.

\textsuperscript{544} \textit{General Audience} (4 April 1984) : “A Spirit of Compunction Includes Awareness of Guilt Leading to Joyful Gratitude,” \textit{LOR} 9 April 1984, pg. 1, par. 3.

\textsuperscript{545} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{546} See Phil 2:6-11.
(tapeinosis). In this sense, the voluntary choice to practice Confession of Devotion and a life of satisfaction for personal and universal sin leads to a deeper union with Christ crucified. Thus, the ongoing process of conversion and satisfaction becomes the sacramental symbol that, by divine grace and the instrumentality of the Church, both symbolizes and effects Christian spiritual growth in the pattern of the tapeinosis of Jesus Christ.

As a result of this enquiry it can be asserted that the practice of Confession of Devotion “has nothing in common with a Semi-Pelagian effort to earn salvation, or a sentimental pietism, or a neurotic cleansing or a magical ritualism. With the depth of symbolism of the self required for a true conversion of heart to be actualized in the sacrament, it is a concrete way of manifesting, in a personal kenosis, the power of the gospel imperative to live according to the mind of Christ Jesus in a world desperately in need of his reconciliation.”

This rich understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation may help clarify the threefold process of the Sacrament, outlined by John Paul II, for the Christian’s growth in holiness:

By its nature this sacrament involves a purification, both in the acts of the penitent who lays bare his conscience out of the deep need to be forgiven and to be born to new life, and in the outpouring of sacramental grace that purifies and renews. We will never be holy enough not to need this sacramental purification… Penance is a sacrament of enlightenment. The word of God, sacramental grace, the exhortations filled with the Holy Spirit of the confessor who is a true “spiritual guide,” together with the penitent’s humble reflection, illumine his conscience, make him understand the sin he has committed and dispose him once again to strive for goodness. […] Lastly, the sacrament of Penance brings about a unifying encounter with Christ. Gradually, from confession to confession, the believer experiences an ever deeper communion with the merciful Lord to the point of fully identifying with him, which comes with that perfect “life in Christ” of which true holiness consists.

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547 Chappell, Regular Confession, 156-157.
548 Ibid., 157. See also: O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 298.
549 Chappell, Regular Confession, 158.
550 Ibid., 161.
551 Address to those taking part in the Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary (27 March 2004) : “Confessors Carry the ‘Message of Reconciliation’,” LOR 7 April 2004, pg. 8, par. 3.
Consequently, it will be a mistake to regard Confession of Devotion as an alternative or a separate process that runs parallel to the spiritual life. In fact, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is nothing less than the culmination of the process of growth and conversion that takes place in the spiritual life of the Christian. From this perspective, the Sacrament can play a key role in one’s growth in holiness and virtue.

2.3 The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Spiritual Direction

In analyzing the ascetic effects of the Sacrament, it is clear that there is some overlap with Spiritual Direction. Before examining the relationship between the two, Spiritual Direction needs to be defined. The term ‘Spiritual Direction’ refers to the “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.” This help cannot be restricted to an elite group of the faithful but should be made available to all who are serious in their desire to grow in holiness. The practice of Spiritual Direction – which, although under different names, has always been part of the Christian life – helps “to discern the signs of God’s will for our journey of vocation, prayer, perfection, for our daily life, and for our fraternal mission.”

552 “The regular celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and a Christian life that aspires to holiness are inseparable elements of the same spiritual process of every baptized person.” : Benedict XVI, Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum (7 March 2008) : “God Forgives All to Those Who Love Much,” LOR 12 March 2008, pg. 3.
553 Chappell, Regular Confession, 168. O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 300.
555 Congregation for the Clergy, The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy: An Aid for Confessors and Spiritual Directors (9 March 2011), par. 65, pg. 29.
556 Ibid., par. 78, pg. 34. For Christopher Bryant, “the director’s task may be roughly summarized under four headings: prayer, self-knowledge, vocation and the ordering of daily life.” : Christopher Bryant, “The Nature of Spiritual Direction: Sacramental Confession,” in Cheslyn Jones et al., eds., The Study of Spirituality (London: SPCK, 1986), 568-569.
significant “ecclesial service” that is offered by clergy, religious and lay members of the Church to guide and support the efforts of their brethren towards “configuration with Christ […] in view of ecclesial communion and mission”. As a result, “personal spiritual direction forms true apostles, capable of activating the new evangelization in society.”

Although different in nature – the Sacrament of Reconciliation is primarily concerned with the forgiveness of sin while Spiritual Direction is more addressed towards growth in holiness – John Paul II reminds his flock that the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Spiritual Direction are “frequently and happily linked” to one another. Octavio Balderas explains how the two are interrelated: on the one hand, no sin can be absolved in the sacramental way if the penitent lacks the intention (disposition) to grow in holiness; on the other hand, Spiritual Direction itself will be to no avail if the directee fails to repent. Moreover, both the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Spiritual Direction call for a high degree of spiritual discernment and discernment of the spirits. Jean Grou defends the link between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Spiritual Direction:

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557 Benedict XVI, Message to His Eminence Cardinal James Stafford, Major Penitentiary, and to the participants of the XX Course on the Internal Forum promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary (14 March 2009) : “Formation of Consciences a Priority for Priests”, LOR 1 April 2009, pg. 5.
558 The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy, par. 65, pg. 29-30.
559 Ibid., par. 125, pg. 50.
561 In other words, “the task of the confessor is above all to separate the sinner from his sin, and that of the spiritual director is to introduce the person receiving direction to a greater love of God.” : von Speyr, Confession, 237.
563 Octavio Balderas, “Corso Monografico di Direzione Spirituale” [notes on-line]; Salesian Pontifical University, Rome; accessed 16 October 2011; available from http://corsoformatori.myblog.it/list/documen/direzione_espitsital_balderas_doc.html; Internet, 93-94.
We ought not to draw a distinction between the director and the confessor any more than we draw a distinction between the physician who cures an illness and him who prescribes a rule for preserving health. The confessor hears the acknowledgment of our sins, and absolves us from the guilt of them; he tells us what we are to do, that we may avoid for the future, and he gives us wholesome advice, that we may advance in virtue. The tribunal of penance, then, includes confession and direction, and it is as essential for it to preserve us from faults as to absolve us for them.  

Likewise, the revised *Ordo* seems to promote this relationship:

In the new rite, particularly using the form for individual penance as the model, the penitent and confessor meet in such a way that a personal relationship is established. Yet, the relationship obviously takes place within the context of a worshipping and supportive parish community. Further, the privacy and intimacy of a one to one relationship is maintained. The priest, in today’s educational system, has had both experience and training in understanding the theological dynamics but not nearly so well the psychological dynamics of spiritual dilemma. The process (the length of which is not prescribed) involves in-depth discussion of the problem. The desire to change is explored. The possibility of change is dealt with. Goals are set, exercises in disciplined growth could be suggested. And most of all, if the new process brings about a renewed sense of *regularity* in celebrating this sacrament, then the relationship between priest and penitent develops the potential for genuine spiritual direction in the best sense.

There are considerable advantages to combining Spiritual Direction with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. First, it makes Spiritual Direction more accessible and available to the lay Christians. Spiritual Direction can also be enriched by the liturgical context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and its ecclesial dimension highlighted. In addition, both practices may enjoy the possibility of becoming more holistic rather than limited to their own respective

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fields. Also, having the same person serve as both confessor and spiritual director can be more favourable to the penitent’s/directee’s integration. John Paul II suggests that although the function of spiritual director is not restricted to the ordained ministry, it can be advantageous when it is exercised by “a ‘teacher’ of life, by a ‘spiritualis semor’ (spiritual elder), by a ‘doctor’, by a ‘guide in the things of God’ who is the priest, who is made suitable for special duties ‘in the Church’ by a ‘singular gift of grace’ Furthermore, it may be appropriate that this specific way of pastoral care is exercised by the priest who represents and acts in the name of the Good Shepherd and is entrusted with “the ministry that builds up unity (communion) at the heart of the human and ecclesial community.”

However, several objections may be raised to this close relationship between Spiritual Direction and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Having confessors serving as spiritual directors may lead to an unnecessary clericalization of Spiritual Direction and a lack of appreciation of the charisms that are entrusted to the lay members of the Christian community (including the charismatic of counsel that makes possible the ministry of Spiritual Direction). It is also significant that in the Eastern Church the role of spiritual director is kept separate from that of the confessor.

570 McCarty, “Pilgrim and Penitent,” 827.
571 See: Eph 4:11.
572 Rule of St. Benedict, ch. 4, 50-51.
573 See: Summa Theologica, Supplementum q. 18.
574 Ibid., q. 36, a. 1.
575 Ibid., q. 35, a. 1.
577 The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy, par. 112, 116, pg. 45-46.
578 Ibid., par. 136, pg. 56.
580 Philippe de Régis notes that in the Eastern Church, “one confesses to his parish priest, and does so by virtue of an ecclesiastical obligation. He thus accomplishes a duty of the community life. However, he goes to the starets
Others fear that a close relationship between the two may impoverish the liturgy of the Sacrament\textsuperscript{581} or that it will make it more challenging to keep a balance between the equally important forgiveness of sin that is proper to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the growth in holiness proper to Spiritual Direction.\textsuperscript{582} Kenneth Leech adds three more concerns:

First, the structure is not conducive to openness and equality. The penitent is kneeling in a posture of submission, and the priest, representing the Church, is sitting facing the opposite direction. It is a situation ideally suited to the symbolism of repentance and restoration, not to that of mutual exploration and progress. These are complementary but distinct aspects of the Christian life. Secondly, the time factor is important. If others are waiting, it is impossible to do more than speak a few words of basic counsel. But to do this as a substitute for direction can be dangerous. True spiritual direction demands time, patience and a relaxed attitude. Thirdly it is important for people to realize that they come to confession to confess, and not necessarily to receive advice or guidance. There may, of course, be situation where the formality and secrecy of the confessional makes the expression of certain needs, fears and worries easier, and there are certainly some individuals who find this atmosphere an aid to honesty and truthfulness. But many people do not find this so.\textsuperscript{583}

On his part, Ivan Platovnjak claims that the documents of the recent Magisterium are often quick to call attention to the benefits of a close relationship between Spiritual Direction and the Sacrament of Reconciliation but fail to identify the risks involved.\textsuperscript{584}


\textsuperscript{583} Leech, \textit{Soul Friend}, 224.

\textsuperscript{584} Platovnjak, “La Direzione Spirituale Oggi,” 396.
Having considered both sides of the argument, it is worth asking whether there is a place for Spiritual Direction in the Sacrament of Reconciliation or not. The International Theological Commission acknowledges the deep spiritual and historic roots for both positions:

That form of the confession of sins, which is tied to Spiritual Direction, is a very ancient treasure of the Church. On the one hand, it belongs to the very structure of the Sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ. On the other hand, as can be seen in the monastic and spiritual traditions, it also has a place outside the Sacrament. Both these data are facts in the development that is guided by the spiritual experience of the Church.  

Yet, the same document states without hesitation that to “be able to cope with the crisis of the sacrament of penance…[the sacrament] should contain more elements of Spiritual Direction and of fraternal exchange.” Pius XII couples both functions within the sacrament and exhorts priests to “sit in that divine tribunal of accusation, repentance, and pardon, as judges who nurture in their breasts the heart of a father, a friend, a physician, and a teacher. And if the essential aim of this Sacrament is to reconcile man with God, do not lose sight of the fact that, in the achievement of such a lofty purpose, a powerful aid is that spiritual direction which draws souls close to the paternal voice of the priest, to pour out to him their afflictions, their troubles, and their doubts, and makes them listen trustfully to his advice and admonishments.”

It seems therefore that there are times when the Sacrament of Reconciliation may call for an element of Spiritual Direction. Several penitents expect something more from the confessor than a quick absolution of their sins. The important thing is to keep the Sacrament and Spiritual Direction separate – for not every penitent may wish to receive Spiritual Direction during sacramental confession – but readily available for those who explicitly request it or may clearly

586 Ibid., C.II.2: pg. 248.
If however the confessor finds himself in a position where he cannot offer Spiritual Direction – for instance due to shortage of time or lack of the charism to serve as a spiritual director – it may be particularly helpful to refer the penitent to a competent spiritual director so that the process of conversion and growth may continue to flourish. In any case, the Christian who is deemed ‘worthy’ by the confessor to receive Spiritual Direction ought not feel superior to but rather part of the whole, the Church.

3. The Implications of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Life and Ministry of the Priest-confessor

At this point of the study it may be of use to reflect on the implications that the Sacrament of Reconciliation must have in the life of the confessor so that the Sacrament may bear more fruit. First of all, instructs John Paul II, the priest himself ought to receive the Sacrament “with faith and humility and with a frequency born of conviction.” By doing so, the priest receives the forgiveness of sin, experiences God’s love for him and is alleviated of the pain and disappointments that ministry entails. Moreover, the penitent-priest becomes a living witness and a “prophetic example” of the reconciliation that God offers to all through Jesus Christ.

589 Platovnjak, “La Direzione Spirituale Oggi,” 396. “Without confusing the sacramental moment with Spiritual Direction, priests should know how to identify opportunities to initiate spiritual dialogue outside of the celebration of the Sacrament. ‘Rediscovery and promotion of this practice, also during the various moments of the Sacrament of Penance, is a major benefit for the contemporary Church’ (Congregation for the Clergy, Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests, Tota Ecclesia, 54). Such leads to an awakening of the sense and effectiveness of the Sacrament and creates the conditions necessary to overcome the present crisis.”

590 McCarty, “Pilgrim and Penitent,” 827-829.

591 Von Speyr, Confession, 238.


Failing to do so will have a negative bearing on his identity and mission as a priest.\textsuperscript{595} The bishop too is to have recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation;\textsuperscript{596} in addition he is responsible for upholding the discipline of the Sacrament and encouraging his priests to celebrate the Sacrament as confessors and as penitents.\textsuperscript{597}

Solid formation is another requirement for the one who is called to serve as a confessor. To this end, the future minister of the sacrament is to receive a solid spiritual, theological and pedagogical training.\textsuperscript{598} Above all, the seminarian is to adopt the “sentiments of Christ”\textsuperscript{599} that are to fashion his future encounters with penitents. In addition, every priest is duty-bound to carry on with his formation in order to be better equipped to understand and serve his penitents in their needs.\textsuperscript{600}

The priest is also responsible for catechizing\textsuperscript{601} his flock regarding the need for the Sacrament of Reconciliation by teaching the Word of God in all its truth,\textsuperscript{602} help form the consciences,\textsuperscript{603}

\textsuperscript{595} “If a priest were no longer to go to confession or properly confess his sins, his priestly being and his priestly action would feel its effects very soon, and this would also be noticed by the community of which he was the pastor.” : Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, 31.


\textsuperscript{597} Pastores gregis, 39.


\textsuperscript{599} Angelus Reflection (1 April 1990) : “Training Confessors on the Synod Agenda.” LOR 9 April 1990, pg. 1, par. 3.


\textsuperscript{601} Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, 26.

leading every Christian to an awareness of one’s sinfulness and the urgency of conversion and growth in holiness.\textsuperscript{604} The focus of such catechesis should not be so much on “the gravity of the fault as on the generous correspondence to the limitless love of the divine Friend.”\textsuperscript{605} “The service we must offer our brothers and sisters – explains John Paul II to the French bishops – is not to give up making them reflect seriously, in the light of the Gospel which reveals ‘God, who is rich in mercy\textsuperscript{606}’.”\textsuperscript{607} The Curé of Ars stands as an outstanding exemplar for the contemporary confessor.\textsuperscript{608}

Countless times throughout his pontificate, John Paul II urged his priests to make themselves available to the faithful who would like to receive the Sacrament. It is the Sacrament where, according to the pontiff, the priest “reaches a mystical identification with Christ”\textsuperscript{609} and where “the very purpose of the Incarnation [is fulfilled]: ‘He will save the people from their sins’.\textsuperscript{610}”\textsuperscript{611} Yet, at times, the Sacrament suffers from “\textit{a certain dwindling of our [the priests’] own

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\item all and their great responsibility to teach the People of God the radical requirements of the Gospel.” : \textit{Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum} (11 March 2010) : “Only Priests Who Ask Forgiveness Can Teach Others To Do The Same,” \textit{LOR} 17 March 2010, pg. 7.
\item \textit{Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of Australia}, 14 December 1998 : “Set your Face Resolutely Against All that Might Harm the Catholic Faith,” \textit{LOR} 16 December 1998, pg. 3, par. 5.
\item \textit{Address to the members of the Plenary Session of the Congregation for the Sacraments} (17 April 1986) : “Sacrament of Penance Gives Us a Renewed Experience of God’s Mercy,” \textit{LOR} 5 May 1986, pg. 12, par. 4.
\item \textit{Eph} 2:4.
\item \textit{Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of France} (8 March 1997) : “Guide Your Priests and Faithful to Deeper Participation in the Liturgy,” \textit{LOR} 19 March 1997, pg. 6, par. 6.
\item \textit{Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary} (20 March 1989) : “May Priests Give the Ministry of Confession a Privileged Place Among Their Duties,” \textit{LOR} 3 April 1989, pg. 12, par. 3.
\item \textit{Mt} 1:21.
\item \textit{Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary} (20 March 1989) : “May Priests Give the Ministry of Confession a Privileged Place Among Their Duties,” \textit{LOR} 3 April 1989, pg. 12, par. 5.
\end{itemize}
enthusiasm and availability”. Every priest is called to remain faithful to this sublime ministry which belongs uniquely to him, despite all the sacrifices it may entail. It is noteworthy that, according to John Paul II, “the asceticism of the confessional” deserves precedence over the other tasks of the priest. The love of Christ (Caritas Christi) fortes the priest for this demanding ministry.

In the confessional, the confessor acts in persona Christi to manifest the unfathomable personal love that Jesus Christ has for the penitent. The four recommendations offered by the

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612 Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday (25 March 2001) : “Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday 2001,” LOR 4 April 2001, pg. 2, par. 12. In his own Letter to priests, Benedict XVI writes that “priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this sacrament” : Letter to Priests for the Inauguration of the Year for Priests (16 June 2009) : “There is Little Love of God in that Parish; You Will be the One to Put It There,” LOR 24 June 2009, pg. 4.


617 Address to the Participants in the Course sponsored by the Apostolic Penitentiary (31 March 1990) : “Time for Private Confession is Owed to Each Christian,” LOR 9 April 1990, pg. 1, par. 2.

618 Message to Cardinal William W. Baum (1 April 2000) : “Priests Should Teach Faithful About Indulgences,” LOR 12 April 2000, pg. 5, par. 2. Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary (31 March 2001) : “Catechesis Should Follow Jubilee Return to Confession,” LOR 11 April 2001, pg. 5, par. 5. Benedict XVI adds that “just as in the celebration of the Eucharist he [Christ] places himself in the hands of the priest to continue to be present among his People, similarly, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation he entrusts himself to the priest so that men and women may experience the embrace with which the father welcomes back the prodigal son, restoring his filial dignity and fully re-establishing him as his heir (cf. Lk 15:11-32).” : Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum (11 March 2010) : “Only Priests Who Ask Forgiveness Can Teach Others To Do The Same,” LOR 17 March 2010, pg. 7.

619 Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of Mexico (2 December 1983) : “The Abuse of General Absolution Contrary to the Dignity of Penance,” LOR 20 February 1984, pg. 12, par. 8. The time a confessor spends in the confessional is a visible manifestation that “Each soul is worth time, attention and generosity, not only in a community
Pontifical Council for the Family in its *Vademecum for Confessors Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life* are germane to every penitent and confession: “a) the example of the Lord who ‘is capable of reaching down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin’; b) a prudent reserve in inquiring into…sins; c) help and encouragement to the penitents so that they may be able to reach sufficient repentance and accuse themselves fully of grave sins; d) advice which inspires all, in a gradual way, to embrace the path of holiness.”

Moreover, John Paul II, as part of his meditation on the encounter of Jesus Christ with Zacchaeus, reminds the confessor not to loose heart, even when the penitent seems to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation nonchalantly. The same gaze that penetrated the heart of Zacchaeus can still penetrate today’s penitents and the same grace that opened Zacchaeus’ heart to accept the invitation of the Lord is already at work prior to the penitent’s encounter with the confessor. It is also imperative that the confessor avoids the extremes of severity and laxity. “The faithful and uncompromising proclamation of the radical demands of God’s word must always be accompanied by great understanding and sensitivity, in imitation of Jesus’ own way of dealing with sinners.”

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623 Ibid., par. 5-6.
624 “The first fails to take account of the early part of the story of Zacchaeus: mercy comes first, encouraging conversion and valuing even the slightest progress in love, because the Father wants to do the impossible to save the son who is lost: ‘The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost’ (Lk 19:10). The other of the two extremes, laxity, fails to take into account the fact that the fullness of salvation, not just offered but also accepted, the salvation which truly heals and restores, involves a genuine conversion to the demands of God’s love.” : *Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday* (17 March 2002) : “Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday 2002,” *LOR* 27 March 2002, par. 8, pg. 7.
Furthermore, the Sacrament of Reconciliation can serve as a source of joy\textsuperscript{626} and sanctification\textsuperscript{627} for the confessor. It is also his call for deeper conversion for, although the efficacy of the Sacrament does not depend on the worthiness of the minister, the confessor is urged nonetheless to celebrate the Sacrament in the worthiest way possible.\textsuperscript{628} An “intense and sincere spiritual life” is therefore imperative for the priest.\textsuperscript{629} In this way, the confessor finds himself in a better position to assist the penitent towards growth in holiness and to exercise this fundamental part of his ministry in a credible way.\textsuperscript{630}

At this point it may be possible to offer some concluding observations for this chapter. It is noteworthy that John Paul II does not hesitate to admit that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is in crisis. His response engenders a high level of pastoral realism that is firmly rooted in the...

\textsuperscript{626} “Be Men of Forgiveness and Reconciliation!” \textit{L’Osservatore Romano} (15 April 1992), pg. 5. John Paul II offers additional advice to confessors in: \textit{Address to the Cardinal Major Penitentiary} (27 March 1993) : LOR 7 April 1993, pg. 3.

\textsuperscript{627} \textit{Address to the German Episcopalian Conference} (22 June 1996) : “You must be the moral conscience of German society,” LOR 3 July 1996, pg. 7.

\textsuperscript{628} \textit{Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of Mexico} (2 December 1983) : “The Abuse of General Absolution Contrary to the Dignity of Penance,” LOR 20 February 1984, pg. 12, par. 7. In the words of Benedict XVI: “If, on the one hand knowing and, in a certain way, visiting the depths of the human heart, even its darkest aspects, tests the humanity and the faith of the priest himself, on the other, it fosters within him the certainty that it is God who has the last word over human evil and history, it is his Mercy which can make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5).” : \textit{Message to those taking part in the annual Course on the Internal Forum} (25 March 2011) : “The Last Word on Evil is the Mercy of God,” LOR 30 March 2011, pg. 5.

\textsuperscript{629} \textit{Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary} (31 March 2001) : “Catechesis Should Follow Jubilee Return to Confession,” LOR 11 April 2001, pg. 5, par. 5. \textit{Message to Cardinal William W. Baum} (1 April 2000) : “Priests Should Teach Faithful About Indulgences,” LOR 12 April 2000, pg. 5, par. 2. \textit{Address to the Cardinal Major Penitentiary} (27 March 1993) : “Treat Sinners with Understanding,” LOR 7 April 1993, pg. 3, par. 1. In his Letter to the Priests John Paul II writes: “Since we are called to show forth the face of the Good Shepherd, and therefore to have the heart of Christ himself, we more than others must make our own the Psalmist’s ardent cry: ‘A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me’ (Ps 51:12).” : \textit{Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday} (25 March 2001) : “Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday 2001,” LOR 4 April 2001, pg. 2, par. 11.


\textit{Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary} (20 March 1989) : “May Priests Give the Ministry of Confession a Privileged Place Among Their Duties,” LOR 3 April 1989, pg. 12, par. 4.
Tradition of the Church. He seeks to reclaim the Sacrament from the misguided perception of the Sacrament as an externally-imposed duty by fostering a deeper awareness and appreciation of the privileged encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, the one who reveals the mercy of God and reconciles the world to himself. This sacramental encounter is profoundly personal for it forgives the sinner and leads to personal configuration to Christ. Yet the process remains fully ecclesial for it unfolds in and through the Church and leads to a deeper incorporation into the life and mission of the Mystical Body of Christ. A clear example of this rich understanding is reflected in the pope’s concluding Address to the Synod of bishops in 1983:

we must always have before our eyes the profoundly personal character of this sacrament, which does not exclude in any way the social dimension of sin and of penance. We must also keep before our eyes its central position in the entire economy of the work of salvation, its particular link with the Paschal Mystery of Christ and of the Church.631

John Paul II also reminds his flock that, in the midst of the crisis, there are several reasons for hope such as the high numbers of those who received the Sacrament during the Holy Jubilee of the year 2000 and the World Youth Days, and the contemporary hunger for spiritual growth and meaningful interpersonal contact.632 Without being naïve, the Church must face this crisis with “more confidence, creativity and perseverance”633 and a pastoral plan that incorporates “a renewed effort at catechesis...frequent penitential celebrations including the individual confession and absolution of sins...[and] the availability of confessors, emphasized and publicized in different ways”.634 Recent initiatives such as The Light is On for You635 and Return to Me with All Your Heart636 seem to be a step in the right direction.

634 Ad limina Apostolorum, Bishops of the United States (15 April 1983) : “Together Let Us Proclaim Christ the Only Redeemer and Reconciler,” LOR 25 April 1983, pg. 6-7, par. 6. A similar plan is proposed again three
The Church cannot forget that “by the power of Christ’s Paschal Mystery that is active within her, the Church is capable of responding to all the crises that she ever faces, including this one. But she must make sure that she acknowledges the crisis, and that she adequately faces it with the supernatural means at her disposal.” By doing so, the Church continues to fulfil her mission of revealing Christ, the merciful face of God, so that every human being may obtain the forgiveness of sin and respond with a renewed desire to grow in holiness.

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635 An initiative of the archdiocese of Boston to make every church under its jurisdiction available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation one evening per week during the season of Lent. See: www.thelightisonforyou.org

636 The Canadian diocese of London, Ontario, has one whole day every year – during the season of Lent – when the priests make themselves available for those who are interested in celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For more information on this initiative see: Diocese of London, Ontario, “Return to Me With All Your Heart: Encountering Christ Through Reconciliation,” [Resource binder] (London, ON: Diocese of London, 2011).

Conclusion

The hypothesis of this thesis was that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is in crisis. The first chapter examined the validity of this statement and converged on the need for emphasizing the Christological, ecclesial and personal underpinnings of the Sacrament. This final chapter will present a synthesis of the arguments made in the previous chapters and briefly reflect on several pastoral implications.

The first chapter examined the common assumption of the Magisterium and the greater part of scholars and the laity that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is in crisis. The nature of this crisis was explored by contextualizing it in the larger historical, theological and liturgical practice of the Sacrament. From this perspective, the present crisis was considered in the light of the other crises that the Sacrament had to face throughout its history. Moreover, the current practice of the Sacrament – as a private and repeatable encounter with a confessor who can absolve venial and mortal sins following the confession of the penitent but prior to the fulfilment of the imposed satisfaction – was analyzed within the larger spectrum of penance and reconciliation within the Church. The variety of sacramental rites and penitential services (non-sacramental) found in the revised Ordo as well as its pastoral exhortation for adapting the rites of penance according to the particular needs of the faithful, present a significant step towards recovering the richness of the penitential nature and mission of the Church. The present-day challenge is to continue this process of restoring penitential rites from the earlier Church while simultaneously generating new ones that have the power of responding to today’s needs and engage the person in a grace-led process of conversion and growth. Fraternal correction, prayer, charitable works and pilgrimages are only some examples from the Christian Tradition that ought to receive greater
attention in the contemporary Theology of penance and reconciliation. New avenues to be explored are the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (and similar programs for other addictions) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions which proved highly effective in the recent history of South Africa and other nations that seemed trapped in a vicious cycle of violence, discrimination and sin.

In addition, the previous chapters argued for responding to the crisis by reclaiming the Christological, ecclesial and personal dimensions of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. More specifically, both the investigation that unfolded in the second chapter in regards to Adrienne von Speyr’s Theology of the Sacrament as found in her understanding of the confessional attitude as well as the teachings of John Paul II in chapter three on the primary (forgiveness of sin and reconciliation) and secondary (growth in holiness) effects of the Sacrament, made clear the need for a Sacramental Theology that is able to emphasize on one hand the supremacy of God’s gratuitous and loving initiative to forgive and reconcile the sinner in virtue of the merits of the Son as made available through the Church, and on the other hand every person’s ability and freedom to respond to God’s initiative.

In fact, the Christological (and Trinitarian) dimension of the Sacrament can never be overstated for the whole mission of Christ (and the entire history of salvation) is God’s initiative to forgive and reconcile. It is significant that, according to von Speyr, Jesus himself lived the Sacrament of Reconciliation before entrusting it into the hands of the Church. His life, passion and death are formed by his “confessional attitude,” understood as a fundamental attitude of complete openness before the Father and before every sinner. In this way, the Son takes on himself the sin of the sinner, “confesses” it on the cross before the Father and obtains its absolution on behalf of
the sinner. This same attitude of openness before God and neighbour is progressively created in
the Christian during the celebration of the Sacrament. On his part, John Paul II also emphasized
the Christological reality of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: more than sheer obligation, the
Sacrament of Reconciliation is a joyful encounter with the Redeemer. In the Sacrament, God
responds to humanity’s earnest desire for forgiveness and reconciliation. There, the merciful
face of the Father is revealed in Jesus.

The implications of the Christological factor are substantial. Although essential, the penitent’s
efforts towards forgiveness are secondary – a response – to God’s grace. The divine initiative of
the Paschal Mystery and the history of salvation continues to unfold whenever the Word leads
the sinner to recognize his or her sin in order to experience a change of heart (metanoia) and ask
for sacramental absolution. It is critical, then, that in celebrating the Sacrament of
Reconciliation, the penitent is conscious of the Word that animates and directs the whole
sacramental process, particularly during the Liturgy of the Word that precedes auricular
confession and the scripturally-based prayers of the three rites of confession. Given its
importance, it seems reasonable to insist that the Liturgy of the Word cannot remain optional
when celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The second dimension for reclaiming the Sacrament is its ecclesial nature. This thesis made the
case that the Sacrament of Reconciliation does not transpire within the limited and highly
deceptive confines of an individualistic relationship with God but as part of the Church’s mission
to testify for the definitive victory of Christ over sin by being for the world both a sign of
conversion and an efficacious instrument of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and the
human family. The Church inherited this mission from Jesus so that, under the guidance of the
Holy Spirit, his “confessional attitude” may be made permanent in the world. In other words, the “confessional attitude” of the Son has been entrusted to the Church in order to be lived by her members in its catholic (universal) sense. The preceding chapters showed, with the help of von Speyr and John Paul II, that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is Christ’s gift to the entire Church. In their own respective but complimentary ways, both the common and the ordained priesthood are drawn into the sacramental process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Because the sin of an individual member weakens the life and mission of the whole Church, the entire Christian community must have an active role in every sinner’s process of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the case of the Confession of Devotion when there are no serious sins to be absolved and no reconciliation with the Church is needed, the Sacrament still maintains its ecclesial quality. As noted by von Speyr, the Confession of Devotion constitutes an ecclesial sharing of the penitent in the fate of sinners so that the grace of absolution may be shared with them. Consequently, it is important for the penitent – particularly during a Confession of Devotion – to be aware of the ecclesial dimension of the Sacrament.

The ecclesial element of sin and reconciliation needs to be expressed more clearly on the liturgical level. More specifically, it is difficult to experience the ecclesial reality of the Sacrament when the penitent remains anonymous and when the only reminder of the Church’s presence for the penitent is the confessor. More can be done to take advantage of the ecclesial possibilities of the second rite of the revised Ordo. This rite is more than a practical solution to meet the basic need of Christians for confession! The celebration of the second rite during the season of Lent can serve as an “entry-point” in the most intense penitential season in the liturgical calendar of the Church. This rite has the potential to express how the Church is both a reconciling and a reconciled community. The second rite can also be used as an opportunity to
catechize regarding the ecclesial and social effects of personal sin, the way the Church intercedes with the penitent before God for forgiveness and how the Church’s prayer is efficacious, the way the Church rejoices in the reconciliation of her estranged members and offers praise and thanksgiving to God, how the reconciled penitent is incorporated at a deeper level into the life and mission of the Church, and how the Church communicates through liturgical rituals. Another possibility is to ask several members of the faithful to assist with the planning and implementation of the communal Liturgy of the Word and the examination of conscience that prepare the congregation for personal confessions. In addition, further studies on the Order of Penitents as practiced in the early Church are to be encouraged. It may be possible that, with some adaptations, the Order of Penitents may help recapture the ecclesial sense of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and bear fruit in the vein of the restored Order of Catechumens (the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults).

The third element to be proposed in this thesis for reclaiming the Sacrament was its personal dimension. The sinner cannot be exculpated – warned John Paul II – by blaming internal (psychological conditioning) or external (structures of sin) forces because, although these forces may exert a significant influence, the person remains (generally) free and thus responsible for their sinful actions. Consequently, every believer must acknowledge the presence of sin in one’s own life and assume personal responsibility for it and for its social implications – not an easy feat in a relativistic world that has almost lost its sense of sin and sense of God. With the aid of divine grace, this acknowledgment of personal sinfulness does not lead to despair but marks the beginning of the sacramental process of conversion which unfolds in nothing less than a personal encounter with the Redeemer. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Good Shepherd acts through the Church to take personal care of each member of his flock. For this reason, the priest
who acts in persona Christi must make time in his ministry for private confessions so that he can minister effectively to the particular needs and mission of each penitent, in accord with their particular state in life and stage in the spiritual journey. Although the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is ex opere operato, the confessor must prepare himself nonetheless with a comprehensive and ongoing formation and an intense sacramental and spiritual life.

As a consequence of this personal dimension of the Sacrament, this thesis argued that the Sacrament of Reconciliation may at times be celebrated for the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with the Church (the purifying effects of the Sacrament) while at other times it may incorporate a greater component of Spiritual Direction in order to help the particular Christian to grow in holiness (the sanctifying effect of the Sacrament). In the latter case – which is usually the case with Confession of Devotion – the penitent is to be assisted in living the baptismal call to holiness by learning to live the virtue of penance as a life-long process of conversion. As manifested in the last chapter, this sacramental life of ongoing penance does not run parallel to the spiritual life. Instead, Confession of Devotion is the sacramental culmination of the ongoing spiritual process of growth in holiness. This understanding helps overcome any fictitious dichotomy between the sacramental and the spiritual lives, between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and everyday life. Greater emphasis on the penitential characteristic of the Christian life ought to lead to the regular celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation for which the Christian feels the need to prepare with a daily examination of conscience. This examination calls for a well-formed conscience and should not focus exclusively on the sins of the day but should adopt a more comprehensive approach that enables the person to be conscious of God’s presence throughout the day. Moreover, the rediscovery of the Sacrament depends to a large extent on the ability of the Christian to live from its grace. Put bluntly, the frequent
celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation without a genuine change of heart or without allowing the exuberant joy of God’s forgiveness to overflow in one’s personal life as a witness to others, is nothing less than a caricature of the Sacrament!

In conclusion it may be said that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is indeed in crisis but is certainly not passé. It urgently calls for the attention of scholars and believers to discover at a deeper level this divine gift, permanently enshrined in the Church, as a convincing and personal response for every person’s fundamental desire to be forgiven, reconciled with God, neighbour and self, and to grow in holiness. It is in acknowledging the seriousness of this crisis that the incentive may be found to push forward in order to comprehend more clearly the intention of Christ for instituting the Sacrament, the zeal of countless holy penitents and confessors for the Sacrament throughout the history of the Church, and how this Sacrament, in various ways or forms, can still be relevant for Christian living in today’s world. Thus the Sacrament of Reconciliation is reclaimed so that it may enrich the Church’s self-understanding, animate her efforts in the new evangelization and enkindle every human heart with a relentless desire to grow in holiness!
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