

II. THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Two aspects of the Second Vatican Council seem to me to point out the importance of the topic under discussion. First, the deliberations of the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council were very obviously conducted in a *pastoral* context. While the doctrinal content of the Council document is profoundly important, it was the concern for a relevant and truly personal Christian life among the people that guided the decisions of the Council Fathers. Secondly, the documents of the Second Vatican Council are almost revolutionary in the way they place emphasis on the Church as being a *community* of people.

It seems to me that both of these factors point up the need to make the sacraments a conscious social activity in which the Christian people can become conscious of its identity as the people of God. If this is to happen there must be instruction of people with regard to the social reality of sacrament; but there must also be a revitalization of sacramental forms, so that the experience of doing something in common, the experience of corporate Christian activity, can really become part of the consciousness of our people.

This is neither a luxury nor an accidental feature of Christian life. This is absolutely essential to the advance of the Church's life in our own day. The Church lives more basically from the sacramental actions than from any other activity in which it is engaged. If these sacraments are not fully meaningful, that is to say, if their significance is not clearly operative in the consciousness of people, the effectiveness of sacraments cannot be more than minimal. Sacraments effect what they signify. But signifying involves truly human personal activity. A word is only a word insofar as it conveys a meaning; that is to say, some understood significance. It is clear, then, that for the deepened efficacy of our sacramental activity, our people must engage

in sacraments with much greater understanding than is now generally the case. It is clear, also, that these general statements apply very specially to the sacrament of Christian reconciliation, the sacrament of penance, which has become very largely routine and meaningless in the lives of people.

For reasons which are well known to all of you, the historical evolution in understanding the sacrament of penance was such that for many centuries an excessively individualistic approach has reigned. Our people have lost almost entirely any social sense of the sacrament. It is important that we once more make the sacrament of penance an action which is truly ecclesial, one in which the community is involved, and in which individuals find reconciliation with god in terms of their adherence to the Christian community.

If we are going to have such modification of penitential practice, it is critical that we develop theological understandings to guide this revitalization of the sacrament of penance. Our reform of liturgical practice at the present moment is dependent on careful historical study coupled with advancing theological insights. History can teach us a great deal and in the case of the sacrament of penance this is very true. However, it is not sufficient for us to recover certain forms of sacramental activity from the past experience of the Church. The Church is a growing, living reality; and so we must find sacramental forms which, while retaining the most essential elements of the traditional practice of the Church, fit the contemporary situation of our people.

I would like to divide my treatment into three broad areas. First of all, the presuppositions to the sacrament—that is to say—the sinfulness of man insofar as this quite clearly has a social dimension. Secondly, the action of the sacrament itself—the way in which its intrinsic nature as an action involves an inevitable social aspect. Thirdly, the finality or purpose of the sacrament, which again is social and therefore points in its own way to the social aspect of the action.

First, then, the presuppositions to the sacrament—the social dimension of human sinfulness. Here, as in so many other elements of our Christian life, we discover that the past few centuries have turned us toward a narrow individualism. We have been treating sin

almost totally in terms of an individual repudiation of law, of individual loss of a relationship to God, instead of seeing the full implications of sinfulness as it takes place in the life of the Christian. I think it is extremely important that we do not discuss sin—nor reconciliation for that matter—in the abstract, but see it in the actual concrete situation of a Christian's life. In discussion of the sacrament of penance it is not sinfulness in general which is in question, but rather, sinfulness as it touches the life of a Christian, for it is a Christian who is involved in the sacrament of penance.

In this perspective we must remember that sin for a Christian is always an infidelity to the covenant pledge that he made by his entry into the Christian community. Baptism is essentially the choice of membership in the Christian people and an acceptance of the individual by the Christian people. This baptismal pledge is confirmed in confirmation and is reiterated through the Christian's life by the sacramental actions, particularly by the Eucharist. However, human frailty leads one, on more than one occasion, to be less than totally faithful to the demands of covenant allegiance which come from baptismal insertion into the community.

When we recall how closely grave sin and excommunication were linked in the thought and practice of early Christianity, we can realize how acutely aware those early Christians were of this social aspect of sin.

Secondly, sin is a sharing in the entire human sinful condition. Recent studies of the nature of sin, for example, that of Schoonenberg in this book, *Man and Sin*, have emphasized this mystery of the corporate sinfulness of man, what he calls "the sin of the world." We are becoming increasingly aware that experiences such as the guilt attached to world wars have taught us that all grave sinfulness on the part of human beings has a corporate impact. The individual not only violates his own relationship to God but, by his sinfulness, he participates in the process of alienating man as a corporate reality from a realm of the sacred and the divine. Sin is inevitably a social reality, no matter how private and hidden it may be.

Thirdly, sin is infidelity to God. God, however, is not a neutral nature. The reality of the divine is the three divine persons. And for a Christian, in the context of the full revelation which has come

to us in Christ, sin is most ultimately an infidelity to the relationship he is meant to bear to God the Father. By our entry into the Christian community in baptism we are graced with sonship. Our personal identity is meant to find its deepest roots in this relationship. Grave sin, which is an unwillingness to accept this deeper level of personal identity is, therefore, radical infidelity to God the Father.

However, this relationship to the Father and the rejection of it in grave sinfulness occurs for a Christian in the context of his actual life which is a Christian life. He bears no relationship to the Father apart from his relationship to Christ in the community of faith which is the Church. So, also, his sinfulness occurs in this total context. Neither in his grace nor in his sin can the Christian be individualistically isolated from the realities of life in the Church.

Fourthly, sinfulness, as revelation teaches us, is the infidelity to charity. It is the rejection of profound personal love. While ultimately this rejection of love concerns our relationship to the three divine persons, in the concrete order it generally finds its expression through infidelity to our fellow-man. Sinfulness is a violation of our social responsibilities to others. Even when the sin is one we think of as totally hidden and private, it deprives other people of the gift of our genuine self to which they have a right. By our very humanity we are oriented toward other persons. By our acceptance of community relationship in baptism we are pledged to the gift of ourselves. Thus, to destroy ourselves, to negate the true self, means that we are depriving others of the gift to which they have a right in charity and upon which their own development as human beings is dependent.

A second large sector of sin as a social reality flows from Old Testament and New Testament revelation which views sin as something which not only involves the individual in his social orientations, but involves the society itself. One needs only to read the Old Testament and New Testament literature to become conscious of the fact that it is not only the individual but the people that sins. As a matter of fact, the corporate sinfulness of Israel is something which is pointed to more sharply than the sinfulness of the individual, particularly in the early stages of Old Testament development. It is only with a prophetic movement, and then gradually, that one finds some clarification of the individual's share in the sinfulness of the people as a whole.

Even in the New Testament, when the clarification of individual dignity and responsibility has come in terms of the mystery of Christ, the social emphasis is clear: not only individuals but communities of individuals can be unfaithful to the role which is theirs and to the responsibility that they are meant to bear. It is unavoidably clear that responsibility in the Church is communal; it is not just individuals as individuals in the Church, but the Church as a community of dedicated individuals which bears the responsibility of fulfilling the priestly mission of Christ. It follows that if the responsibility is communal so also would be the infidelity to this responsibility. This infidelity we call "sin." The New Testament literature seems aware of this, and I would cite the fifth chapter of Ephesians as an instance of this recognition. It is quite clearly the community as such which is in need of constant historical purification. It is the Church as the bride of Christ which is to be gradually freed from all stain, until it is prepared finally for union with Christ in the *parousia*. And again, if one looks at the concrete situation of human life in the Church, I think the evidence points quite clearly to the fact that the progressive redemption of the community from its sinfulness, the gradual leading of the Church toward more faithful correspondence with its historical mission, is the context in which the individual Christian must work to fulfill his individual destiny and to be gradually freed from his individual sinfulness. I mention this aspect of the corporate sinfulness of the Church because it seems to me that this is one element that we have largely neglected in our approach to understanding and exercising the sacrament of penance.

Obviously, this discussion of sin could occupy us entirely for a long period of time. I have been able to do no more than suggest a few elements of the social aspect of sin to point out that the situation with which the sacrament of penance is meant to deal is inescapably social.

To turn then to the action of the sacrament itself, and its social aspects. The earliest evidences we have with regard to what we call the sacrament of penance indicate that it involved an intervention of the Church in the reconciliation and penitence of human beings. There was clear recognition that the relationship of the individual Christian to Christ must be authentically his own and that repentance is something that cannot be imposed upon him but must spring from his

own grace-filled decision. Yet it was also seen that for the contrition and repentance of the Christian to find its fullness, there must be an intervention of the community itself to which he owes allegiance and to which he has been unfaithful.

For many centuries, practically to the dawning of the scholastic developments of the Middle Ages, the notion of reconciliation with the Church was an obvious and inescapable element of the sacramental rite. As a matter of fact, it was the Church's prayer for the sinners, coupled with the penance imposed upon them by ecclesial judgment, which was seen as essential to their reconciliation with God. And in this context the intervention of one who bore official position in the Church (the bishop or his delegate) was regarded as indispensable. The rituals for reconciliation of Christians in the early centuries involved the entire Christian community but the final act of receiving the penitents back into communion was performed by the bishop or by one to whom he had delegated this role. Such reconciliation with the community seems, then, to be an essential element in the external action of the sacrament. It is the exercise of jurisdiction by one who is empowered to provide for the community, to exclude if necessary those who refuse identity with the community and its mission, or to introduce back into the community those who, having been unfaithful, wish once more to return to a full acceptance of their communal responsibilities.

There is no trace, in those earliest centuries, of the distinction between two ways of justification (personal repentance or sacrament of penance) which came in with late middle ages and which did a great deal to divert theological thought from the social implications of the sacrament. There is a very integral view in which the reconciliation of the individual to God in contrition is seen as taking place concretely in the act of reconciliation with the Christian people. It is not as if one can be reconciled to God by contrition or by participation in the sacrament of penance. And so, also, these early centuries know nothing about the dispute concerning contrition and attrition which so absorbed theological discussion for more than six hundred years.

Theologians today generally tend to accept the social nature of the sacrament in the sense that the individual is seen as being reconciled to the community. So I believe that we can pass on to another

element which is perhaps not that often mentioned: that in the sacrament of penance it is not just the sinful individual who is reconciled with the community, but the whole community participates in the sacrament by an acknowledgement of its own communal sinfulness. This corporate repentance is quite evident in some of the rituals of reconciliation used in the early Church. One can notice in the ceremonies of reconciliation that while there is the prayer for the sinners who are to be formally reconciled, there is also the recognition of sinfulness on the part of the whole people gathered together and a plea for forgiveness for the entire Church.

This is something which seems obvious when one stops to look at it, but it is something which has been largely neglected in our sacramental discipline. If the entire Church is less than totally faithful to its mission, and it would be hard to deny this fact, then surely the Church cannot expect of its own power to gain such fidelity. Rather, it remains dependent upon the redemption which comes to it from its spouse. It is Christ, and Christ alone, through the power of the Spirit, who can gradually free the Christian community from its tendency to identify with "the old Adam," the human condition of sinfulness.

Thus the sacrament of penance is meant to be an act of reconciliation and redemption that highlights the reconciliation for those who are formally presenting themselves as penitents, but which also touches the entire community present and beyond them the larger community of faith. In this context, the sacrament of penance becomes a community witness to the redeeming action of Christ. It becomes in its own way a preaching of the Gospels, and fulfills what is one of the most basic requirements in all sacramental activity—that it be a profession of faith.

We might study the social aspects of penance from a somewhat different point of view, trying to draw some conclusions from the fact that this action is a Christian sacrament. It is true that the notion of sacrament can be applied only analogously to the seven ritual situations which we call the seven sacraments, yet there are certain elements that are common to all the sacraments; and reflecting on them may throw some further light on the social nature of penance.

First of all, because it is a sacrament, it is an action of Christ

himself in his role as high priest. As such, it is essentially an act of forming a community, remotely the community of mankind, but more proximately the community which is the Church. But since this is a community of faith and charity (as both Scripture and the traditional teaching of the Church, as clearly reflected in Vatican II indicate) it must be a true *sharing* in faith and charity. That is to say, it is not enough for individuals to find reconciliation with Christ and through him with the Father; but the action, because it is a sacrament, is one of Christ dealing with the whole of his people, forming them in faith and love. Actually, if one were to exploit the psychological dimensions of penance as an act of believing and loving and choosing, one would be led, I believe, to many interesting and valuable insights regarding the way in which a communal admission of human culpability and a corporate interest in one another's salvation from sin can be a powerful aid in the formation of true human community.

Secondly, like the other sacramental situations, penance is intrinsically response to the word of God. Perhaps it is in the Eucharist that we see most sharply that the mystery of God's word involves Sacred Scripture and sacrament in one inseparable process. Yet this is true of the other sacraments also. Sacrament itself is part of the mystery of word, yet as an act of decision and commitment it is a response to what has been communicated to us by God.

An analysis of the process of God's revelation indicates that his word has always been, and continues to be, very basically a call to *metanoia*. Hence the sacrament of penance is quite obviously a response to this call to deep repentance, to the kind of decision that will engage the individual in the fundamental option of living as a Christian. But this same analysis of God's word spoken to man indicates also that this word is always addressed *primarily to a people* and to individuals only in terms of their participation in the life of the people. This is still true; the word of God speaks to us today *in the Church*. Scripture is not to be read in isolation. This is the principle for which the Catholic Church fought, and rightly so, at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Unfortunately, it has not been applied to our sacramental life during the past four hundred years. The very fact that the sacrament is meant to be the situation of

public response to the word of God which is addressed to the people indicates that we are both to hear and to respond to that word corporately in a social situation. If the sacrament of penance is to function effectively as response to the word of God, it must necessarily be lived as true social response.

Thirdly, like all the other sacraments, penance is a profession of faith on the part of the entire Church. While the given community assembles for any sacramental rite, it is there by virtue of its identity as a Christian community and exists in continuity with all the other communities of Christians throughout the world. Thus, the sacrament, even though conducted in the individualistic ritual fashion which now characterizes the sacrament of penance, is still by its intrinsic nature something social and connected by its significance to the entire Church's profession of faith. This intrinsic nature is, of course, safeguarded by such elements of our present practice as the official jurisdictional role of the priest. However, I think it would be undisputed that our people almost universally—and for that matter the priests who "hear confessions"—do not see that what they are doing is part of the Church's mystery of corporately professing its faith in the Passover mystery of Christ.

It would seem that the intrinsic nature of the sacrament of penance, an activity of a person being reconciled to community and of the community itself being involved in this reconciliation as part of its admission of a corporate need for reconciliation, indicates the great need we have today to establish liturgical forms for this sacrament which may make more clear and operative the intrinsic reality of the sacrament's activity.

To come, then, to our third major area of discussion: the social finality of penance. There is value in studying the finality of any existent reality, since its finality is another way of viewing its intrinsic nature. Moreover, to clarify the purposes of the sacrament of penance will certainly aid us greatly in trying to achieve liturgical expression of the sacrament that may more effectively achieve these purposes.

Like all the sacraments, penance is intrinsically eschatological. It externalizes through the instrumentality of the Church, Christ's continuing redemptive activity in human history. As such it is to be

terminated in its effective existence only by the achievement of the *parousia*, the fulfillment of Christian life in resurrection. This eschatological orientation of the sacrament is achieved, of course, for the individual Christian when he passes through the mystery of his own death into full sharing with Christ in resurrection. It is also to be achieved throughout the historical process by the gradual purification of the Church to which we adverted earlier.

However, eschatology is something that is meant to operate progressively in the historical career of the Church. Which is to say that the achievement of Christian finality is not one which waits for the final conclusion and resolution of history, but is to come into being gradually throughout history. This indicates that there are immediate objectives of the Church's life—and therefore of its various sacramental actions—which are part of this process and which the sacraments are meant to help bring into being.

Basically, all sacraments, since they are focal activities of the Church, are meant to be part of the Christ's fulfillment of his mission in history. But this mission has two essential moments: the apostolic moment which is one of transforming the life of mankind, and the cultic moment which takes place in the Eucharistic worship of the Father. Penance is meant to be part of this double function of the Christian people as they carry on the priestly mission of Christ.

The sacrament of penance is intended to enter into their lives as a preparation, individually and communally, for the apostolic ministry of transforming the lives of men and the institutions of human society. In order to fulfill its servant ministry in human life, which is in considerable part the overcoming of the evils that afflict mankind, the Christian community itself must be increasingly purified from adherence to the mystery of evil. Thus, there is serious need in the Church's life for the kind of redemption that takes place in the sacrament of penance. And since it is quite clearly not just the individual Christians, but the Christian people as a community, that is directed towards apostolate, it is clear that the action of penance must be essentially social.

Again, the community of faith must be prepared by Christ's purifying action for the public profession of fidelity to the covenant that takes place in the celebration of Eucharist. There is no need to

expand on the reality of this need, nor on the fact that such purification can be effected only in conjunction with the action of the Spirit. What I would like to stress here is that the action of Eucharist is supremely communal in nature; it is the great expression and source of Christian community—and therefore the action of the sacrament of penance as preparatory for Eucharist must itself be fundamentally social. It is obvious that penance is meant to reconcile redemptively the individuals who will participate in the Eucharistic action; but it affects these individuals most importantly in what pertains to their relationship to one another. After all, social justice and charity are laid down in the Gospel as the primary prerequisite for sacrificial worship: "If you bring your gift to the altar and remember that your brother has anything against you . . ." Eucharist is not only a cause of Christian unity, it is the celebration of already existent community; the sacrament of penance exists to help effect this presupposed unity.

Celebration of the sacrament of penance is, then, part of the Church's constant implementation of its Christian mission. It forms a continuum with both apostolic activity and sacrificial worship. It is, therefore, as radically social in nature as the Church itself, the Church which Vatican II has reminded us is "the people of God."

In conclusion we can see that in its presuppositions, in its actual existence as an activity of the Church, and in its finality the sacrament of penance is clearly and thoroughly a societal reality. While it touches individual Christians in what is deepest in them as persons, their conscience, it does so precisely because it relates them to their social existence and responsibility in the community of the Church and the community of mankind. Somehow, we must see to it that the form in which we celebrate this sacrament enables us to experience this social character of penance.

BERNARD COOKE, S.J.
Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin