

RECONCILIATION AND CONVERSION—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Differing Views of Power in Church and Sacraments  
Convener: Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., Vanderbilt University  
Moderator: Bede Bidlack, Saint Anselm College  
Presenter: Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., Vanderbilt University  
Respondents: Brian P. Flanagan, Marymount University  
Joseph C. Mudd, Gonzaga University

This selected session explored the convention theme of conversion within sacramental theology and practice by studying two significant works on the rites of penance and reconciliation from the early 1980s—one by a woman theologian and the other by the papal magisterium. The main presentation, a twenty-page paper examining the methodologies and arguments of those texts, benefited from further analysis by respondents adept in ecclesiology and theological anthropology. Some forty minutes of nonstop questions and discussion ensued.

The title of Bruce Morrill’s paper, “Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power—Ecclesial and Sacramental—Among Hierarchy and Laity,” placed in the form of a question the title of Monika Hellwig’s 1982 text, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times*, proposing it as still one of the best books on the topic available yet also now a sort of historical record of the hopeful expectations academic and pastoral theologians had for expanded forms of ministry to individual and communal penitence subsequently blocked by the hierarchy. Published two years prior to Pope John Paul II’s post-synodal exhortation, *Reconciliation and Penance*, Hellwig’s work seized on the currents of contemporary theological anthropology, sacramental theology, and ecclesiology—including astute attention to history—to reframe penance in terms of conversion and reconciliation.

Morrill reviewed Hellwig’s sacramental theology of conversion with a view to how she perceives power—both divine and human—to be at work in Christian practices of repentance and reconciliation past and present. Hellwig’s historical chapters follow a conventional two-stage framework for ritual practices of penitence, the first, coterminous with the patristic era, being the public, communal, but severe process of *exomologesis* (“canonical penance”) over which bishops presided for apostates, adulterers, and murderers, and then the second, emerging in the second half of the first millennium, entailing people’s confessing sins privately to monastic men and women, who gave counsel and joined the repentant in prayer and fasting. With the collapse of canonical penance, due to what Hellwig argues was its flawed, exaggerated distinction between saints and sinners, priests became private confessors. Lateran Council IV mandated annual auricular confession to a sin-absolving priest (in contrast to ancient bishops offering prayers of intercession on behalf of the penitent)—the polity confirmed by Trent and in force to this day. And yet, as Hellwig could already point out in 1982, the practice had fallen into desuetude among the majority of Roman Catholics, for which her constructive response was to learn from history how church communities have repeatedly developed rites according to the needs of their times. Rites of a more communal nature, coupled with lay people

seeking and sharing spiritual direction “at the kitchen table” (for which women are particularly adept) are the promising patterns Hellwig gleaned from canonical penance and the service of monks and anchorites.

John Paul II’s exhortation likewise expands the question of reconciliation and conversion into the communal life of church and world, yet the document sharply contrasts from Hellwig’s trusting discernment of patterns in history, instead asserting private confession to a sin-absolving priest as unbroken tradition from the origins of the church. John Paul did not shy from acknowledging the crisis state of the Rite of Penance; however, the pope’s historical concern was with the errors of theologies of liberation (in the South) and fundamental option (in the North) diminishing people’s personal sense of guilt. A large regulatory review of the prescriptions and proscriptions within the Rite of Penance end with exhortation for not only laity but also clergy themselves to recover regular auricular confession as the sole means of salvation for not only individuals but also church and world. That this polity had not found much traction in the global church is evident in John Paul’s acknowledging in a 2002 *motu proprio* the persistent “crisis” of confession, to which he reiterates the strict limits for communal penance rites and mandates the installation of a “fixed grille” for anonymous confession in all churches.

Respondent Brian Flanagan built on Morrill’s close reading of Hellwig and John Paul with further points for discussion: 1) fundamental differences in ecclesiology over not only the “how” but “why” of church in history; 2) the dangers to the life of the church, corporately and in its members, posed by the spectacular collapse in sacramental penance; and 3) the importance of not ignoring the very small but fervent minority of younger Northern Catholics for whom regular auricular confession is meaningful. Joseph Mudd followed, analyzing the breakdown in meaning for this sacrament among U.S. Catholics (data find 75% never or rarely participating) with three contributions from Lonergan’s theological anthropology: 1) conversion as religious, moral, and intellectual; 2) authenticity and the dialectic of authority; and 3) common meaning and the breakdown of community. Mudd’s questioning of whether the differences between hierarchy, clergy, and laity are dialectically related and irreconcilable or open to retrieving common understanding and transformed practice opened the floor to discussion.

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