

Supplemental Information for  
*The Celebration of the Christian Mystery—Sacraments*  
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Session 9: “Penance and Reconciliation, a Sacrament of Healing”

### **Suggested Environment**

You might consider adding a tent card with the words “Reconciliation Room” on it, much like you would see a place card at a table with a name on it. It might even prompt a bit of conversation. The difference is that when I was growing up at Sacred Heart Church in Appleton, Wis., our “boxes” for confession were labeled: “Confessional.” It may seem a bit of minor difference between the two choices for naming the sacrament but the emphasis using the former name (Reconciliation) places more importance on the resultant positive effect of our action. St. Cabrini’s Church has the name “RECONCILIATION ROOM” in rather large letters on the door of their “confessional.” Since Vatican II the sacrament has been known more commonly as Reconciliation.

### **Sharing Our Good News**

See notes from Session 8 “Eucharist” in the area of Sharing our Faith. You might prompt a discussion of the difference between a “casual” Amen after the Eucharistic minister says, “Body of Christ,” and an “Intentional” Amen which calls to mind full agreement and belief in the Person one is receiving. Since the point of receiving Our Lord so intimately is to change our hearts, you might even consider asking a general question like, “Did anyone feel just a little different after or during the reception of communion this past week?”

### **Exploring the Catechism**

Sin and what it means can be a most provocative discussion since I remember when I was a young man listening to a Sister at our Catholic grade school talk about Elvis Presley as a “sinner” when he was performing. You may want some of your group to speak to this acknowledgement of the real presence of sin in the world—in all of its diverse forms. Sometimes individuals have difficulty seeing how communities or institutions can “sin” but remember how whole communities practiced racism and how institutions in the banking community violated the practice of justice by “redlining” areas where they would not make loans due to some discretionary/discriminatory rationale. Whole nations can sin dreadfully as did Nazi Germany leading up to and during World War II. At the heart of all sin is a violation of some right relationship that God intends—hence the need to be reconciled or “made right” with God as a sinner.

## **Scripture: Pondering the Word**

### **Luke 15: 11-24 *The Prodigal Son***

11 Then he said, "A man had two sons, 12 and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. 13 After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. 14 When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need.

15 So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. 16 And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. 17 Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. 18 I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

19 I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.'" 20 So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. 21 His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' 22 But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, 24 because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began.

Much can be said and has been written about this marvelous parable. Many times we often find ourselves almost in the place of the older brother (not mentioned in this section of the story) who comes in from working in the field and finds the party going on. Upset at his Father's throwing a party for the wanton son, he lets his feelings be known but the Father reminds his son that this one was "lost but now is found." Wouldn't it be wonderful if Our Father could say that about us? Don't let time concerns crowd out discussion of this in a rush to get to the next long section. Remember, this is Our Lord telling the story, and the Father in this story is God the Father and the whole point is contained in those last few words of this section: "Listen as Jesus explains how unconditional God's love and mercy are for each of us."

### **Sharing Question**

Both questions merit consideration, particularly the second one since it is quite easy to have this sense of God's unconditional love and then to realize how difficult that can be to put into practice in our lives. Think of the times when we've felt our spouse is "always right" and we are upset or that pompous coworker we're stuck with, or that "former" friend who told those untruths about us, or even to forgive ourselves when we find that we have once again given into that favorite sin of ours as Fr. Phil Kraft often reminds us during the penitential rite.

### **Exploring the Catechism (continued)**

There is a great deal of good material in this section. In that first paragraph, you might prompt some discussion within the group by asking if anyone has a favorite of the names used to describe the Sacrament of Reconciliation: "conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, or

reconciliation.” You might even prompt some discussion of the differences of emphasis that these words convey.

Conversion and penance are clearly interior movements that involve our deepest hearts within us. Paragraphs four and five should be taken together with an emphasis on paragraph five of the tie to our upcoming celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the saving death of Christ for us; for it is only through Christ’s death to sin that we are able to die to sin ourselves and enter the life of Christ which our Baptism opens for us. Don’t forget to prompt some discussion about those words in the third line from the top of page 52: “We are called to respond to God by a firm and abiding resolve.....” It is so easy to fall into a saved and justified mentality and therefore we have very little to do ourselves.

Sometimes the words in the middle of page 52 “Every sin is social” need a little clarification. Some would like to argue that if I do something myself, to myself, like some sort of abuse, well, that doesn’t bother anyone so how can that sinful act be in any way “social?” The fact of the matter is that whenever we chose our own selves as a priority in any action that can even have the possibility of diminishing our openness to others, we are in a social situation. Take the example of someone who repeatedly abuses drugs or alcohol. Their entire personality changes from awareness and openness to others into a compulsive drive to get the next “fix” or “hit” or drink. Since we are absolutely social animals, any choices we consistently make to serve ourselves alone break down those bonds that connect us others.

I would encourage you to have someone read paragraph 1447 of the Catechism as is suggested. There is a fascinating history of the first eight or so centuries of this sacrament when individuals mostly confessed all their minor imperfections to one another, with only the most major sins being moved to the penitent/confessional process. Here’s a link to that history, called [Lay Confession](#).

Sometimes our non-Catholic friends question whether Christ instituted this sacrament. They will point out that the Bible never says anything about confessing to a priest. Here’s a key section responding to the concern from New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia:

But as the [Council of Trent](#) declares, [Christ](#) principally instituted the Sacrament of Penance after His [Resurrection](#), a [miracle](#) greater than that of healing the sick. "As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them; and he said to them: Receive ye the [Holy Ghost](#). Whose [sins](#) you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose [sins](#) you shall retain, they are retained' ([John 20:21-23](#)). While the sense of these words is quite obvious, the following points are to be considered:

- [Christ](#) here reiterates in the plainest terms -- "sins", "forgive", "retain" -- what He had previously stated in figurative language, "bind" and "loose", so that this text specifies and distinctly applies to [sin](#) the power of loosing and binding.
- He prefaces this grant of power by declaring that the mission of the [Apostles](#) is similar to that which He had received from the Father and which He had fulfilled: "As the Father hath sent me". Now it is beyond [doubt](#) that He came into the world to destroy [sin](#) and that on various occasions He explicitly forgave [sin](#) ([Matthew 9:2-8](#); [Luke 5:20](#); [7:47](#); [Revelation 1:5](#)), hence the forgiving of [sin](#) is to be included in the mission of the [Apostles](#).
- [Christ](#) not only declared that [sins](#) were forgiven, but really and actually forgave them; hence, the [Apostles](#) are empowered not merely to announce to the [sinner](#) that his [sins](#) are forgiven but to grant him

forgiveness—"whose [sins](#) you shall forgive". If their power were limited to the declaration "[God](#) pardons you", they would need a [special revelation](#) in each case to make the declaration valid.

- The power is twofold -- to forgive or to retain, i.e., the [Apostles](#) are not told to grant or withhold forgiveness nondiscriminately; they must [act](#) judicially, forgiving or retaining according as the sinner deserves.
- The exercise of this power in either [form](#) (forgiving or retaining) is not restricted: no distinction is made or even suggested between one kind of [sin](#) and another, or between one class of sinners and all the rest: [Christ](#) simply says "whose [sins](#)".
- The [sentence](#) pronounced by the [Apostles](#) (remission or retention) is also [God's sentence](#) -- "they are forgiven . . . they are retained".

The key of course is recognition that the Church instituted by Christ is the vehicle through which the sacraments are operative in the world as the bishops, the successors of the Apostles, ordain priests to be "other Christs" in every age to the people of God.

Final comment, last paragraph, page 53, bottom: After Vatican II opened the door for what we would call a communal penance service, the Church decided to continue for the main part the practice of individual confession but to also encourage the practice of communal gathering to foster the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Such has been the norm for the Church up to today. A communal celebration with general confession and general absolution is possible in an emergency but has rarely occurred.

### **Sharing Our Faith**

Good questions that need no comment.

### **Living the Good News**

I would definitely suggest that one could tie an action to the fifth bullet point under the previous section—"Whom do I need to forgive?" This may be a chance to point out your "Reconciliation Room" place card and encourage everyone to share a contemplated action with the group since we are all together in the .... "Reconciliation Room" and that of course means we are under the "seal" of confession—what happens in this room, stays in the room—to paraphrase a popular advertisement.

### **Lifting our Hearts**

You may want to encourage spontaneous prayer and offer to begin with something like, "Lord, for all the times I lost my patience with my spouse, I ask forgiveness." Then encourage everyone to follow this and other spontaneous prayers with the phrase said together "Lord, hear our prayers" "Lord, for all the times I have ignored someone with an outstretched hand, I ask forgiveness." And so on...

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to

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