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**THE FUTURE OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE: AN AFRICAN  
RECONCILIATORY PARADIGM IN THE LIGHT OF KARL  
RAHNER'S THEOLOGY OF PENANCE**

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In memory of my father Aloysius G. Ssebuggwaawo, a wonderful source of inspiration, who taught me that the best kind of life I could ever have would be one achieved through good education.

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the understanding of reconciliation in the African culture and Karl Rahner's theology of the sacramentality of the Church, this doctoral thesis opens a debate about the kind of renewal required to revitalise the dwindling practice of sacramental confession. The Second Vatican Council, in which the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner played an influential role, initiated a great deal of such renewal, but the process is a never-ending one. More than 50 years later, in the papacy of Francis, who never ceases to proclaim that "the name of God is mercy", it may now be the right time to let this holy exercise be revisited for what might be called reviving "the sacrament of mercy".

In response to the Council's demand of adapting the Rite of Penance to the pastoral needs of individual regions, there seems to be a considerable degree of concurrence between the African concept of humanity or building a strong community life (*ubuntu*) and Karl Rahner's notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia*. Rahner's theological anthropology that articulates penance as reconciliation with the Church grounds the sacrament of penance in Jesus Christ who, through his Church, instils his own spirit of saying yes to God within those who celebrate the sacrament. This understanding contributes significantly to the unique dynamism of the concrete expression of the symbolic communal character of the Church as a means of hope, conversion, forgiveness and hospitality. It could be argued that a renewed understanding and practice of penance is needed because of the secularist revolution that is seeping into today's modern African society bringing a much-diminished use of the sacrament. Reversing this trend requires a changed mentality.

It is a reality that in this era of globalisation and modernisation the practice of the faith, especially the sacramental life of the Church, necessitates great attention. My study examines particularly the crisis in the sacrament of penance caused by external influences, e.g. socio-cultural and religious biases that contribute to the challenges for a proper understanding and appreciation of the rite of reconciliation in the 21st century. We shall explore the African reconciliatory theology and paradigm; Rahner's concept of sin and its implications for humanity; the essence of his notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia*; and the evaluation of the renewal of penance since the Second Vatican Council. Aware of the current predicament of penance, I believe that the Church must try everything within her reach to encourage a renewed understanding of the sacrament. This renewal will bring critical perspectives, views that theologians have struggled to articulate for generations. Down



through the ages, sacramental penance, sincere repentance and conversion, has been a challenging issue. It is both complex and vital.

The study concludes by suggesting critical moves that might assist both confessor and penitent to deepen their understanding and use of the sacrament. These include reclaiming the sense of sin, greater integration and cooperation, deep catechesis, the institutional church's asking for forgiveness as well as the blending of the African reconciliatory paradigm and the Christian spirituality of reconciliation. Such moves and directions are interdependent and belong to a more collaborative understanding of the Church and its ministerial practices. Shaping the future of penance is certainly a continuous agenda and the Church's mission will be more effective when the sacrament is celebrated within a continuing awareness of the Church as a reconciled and reconciling community.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Acts	Acts of the Apostles
AG	Ad gentes
AMECEA	Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in East Africa
art.	article
ATR	African Traditional Religion
c. /cc.	canon / canons
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CCL	Code of Canon Law
ch.	chapter
Co.	Company
Cor	Corinthians
e.g.	for example ( <i>exempli gratia</i> )
ed. / eds.	editor / edition / editors
ET	Encyclopaedia of Theology
et al.	and others ( <i>et alii</i> )
etc.	and others of the same class, and so forth ( <i>et cetera</i> )
GDC	General Directory for Catechesis
ibid.	the same source as above ( <i>ibīdem</i> )
ff	following
Gal	Galatians
GS	<i>Gaudium et spes</i>
i.e.	that is to say ( <i>id est</i> )
Inc.	incorporation
ITC	International Theological Commission
Jn	John
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i>
M. Afr.	Missionaries of Africa
Mk	Mark
Mt	Matthew
no. / nos.	number / numbers
NRT	Nouvelle Revue Théologique (New theological journal)

O.F.M.	Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans)
O.P.	Order of Preachers (Dominicans)
RCIA	Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
RP	Rite of Penance
RWC	Reconciliation with the Church
SECAM	Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar
sess.	session
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>
S. J.	Society of Jesus (Jesuits)
S. M.	Society of Mary (Marist Fathers)
TI	Theological Investigations
Tim	Timothy
Thess	Thessalonians
trans.	Translated by
vol. / vols.	Volume / Volumes
§	paragraph

## INTRODUCTION

### I. The Crisis of Penance: Argument and Overview

Robert Kaggwa, reflecting on the contemporary context of mission in Africa, argues that globalisation and modernisation have not only brought homogenisation and interconnectedness but also fragmentation and uncertainty.<sup>1</sup> It is true that people living in different parts of the world are affected very differently by the impact of globalisation and modernisation, especially with regard to the practice of the faith and transformation of social structures. Looking at the African situation, there seems to be a secularist revolution that is seeping into postmodern African society with the result that Christianity has been marginalised and its practice weakened. The celebration of the sacraments, especially penance, has been greatly affected. For example, the need for repentance so as to attain God's forgiveness has been replaced with a self-serving do-it-yourself morality. Similarly, one can argue that evangelisation has experienced challenges in relation to inculturation ever since the arrival of missionaries from the West. It must be noted that, while imparting the Christian faith to Africans, the missionaries did not fully consider the social and cultural context.<sup>2</sup> Due to inadequate theological development within the community of believers, the commitment of many contemporary faithful towards the foundations of the Christian faith has been significantly reduced.<sup>3</sup>

David Bosch notes that effective mission has to be seen in terms of changing paradigms throughout the history of Christianity. New models come and go, but some may continue to co-exist.<sup>4</sup> Anthropological and cultural changes in our time influence all aspects of life and require an analytic and diversified approach to mission.<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is need to explore history to find out which models of mission could be more effective in our time. In terms of effective pastoral ministry, Scott Detisch argues that the sacrament of penance needs a second naïveté (critical hermeneutic) so as to allow believers both to recognise and overcome the historical and cultural distance between the past moments of reconciliation in Christ's ministry and current sacramental moments. This is because a second naïveté does not

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kaggwa, "The New Catholicity: Rethinking Mission in an Age of Globalisation with Special Reference to the African Situation," *New Blackfrairs* 86 (2005): 185.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1993), 144.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst and Company, 1998), 9.

<sup>4</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 454.

<sup>5</sup> See III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "Relatio Synodi," 2014, no. 5.

allow ritual gestures and words to be reduced to imitation. These sacramental moments are understood as an encounter with the same Christ whose gift of forgiveness and healing is presented in a way that is relevant to their circumstances and faith tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The underlying factors responsible for the diminishing numbers of Catholics going to confession are the triple crises of the loss of the sense of sin; a growing lack of understanding and appreciation of the sacrament; and lack of catechesis.<sup>7</sup> This has created theological, pastoral and liturgical challenges which have resulted in a lack of conviction and commitment to embracing God's mercy. Historically, penance has been extremely dynamic, one of the most adapted sacraments. Catherine Dooley underlines that there has never been a 'golden age' in the history of penance because sacramental practice has been in constant evolution. Yet, in every age, the Church strives to renew itself.<sup>8</sup>

Larson-Miller affirms that there is need for a renewed and informed interest in the practice of sacraments, especially for particular ecclesial communities.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the renewal of sacramental practice, especially penance, was addressed by Karl Rahner over fifty years ago in his *Theological Investigations*.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the attitude of Catholics toward private confession has changed dramatically. The result is that a vacuum has been created. The body of Christ has dried out of healing grace, and this is leaving it drained and weakened, and failing to become the missionary Church that Pope Francis longs for. Instead of a Church flowing with mercy in divine abundance – as it should – it has rather reduced to a drip. In order to rescue the situation, some bishops and priests have instead responded with strong exhortations imploring the faithful to return to the sacrament in its traditional form. They have even tried to set a personal example by going to confession in plain public view. Yet, apart from an occasional and temporary sudden increase of penitents, there is no evidence that the clergy are having any success in reversing the trend.

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<sup>6</sup> Scott P. Detisch, "The Sacrament of Reconciliation: In Need of a Second Naivete," *Worship* 77 (2003): 202.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, nos 27-29. Without prejudice to the sacrament's other names, in the thesis we will keep using the term "penance," which joins together the virtue and the sacrament.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Dooley, O.P., "The History of Penance in the Early Church: Implications for the Future" in *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda*, ed. Robert J. Kennedy (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 84.

<sup>9</sup> Lizette Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016), xv.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Rahner, "Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance", in *Theological Investigations* vol. 2, 135-74. Also see Karl Rahner, "Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church," in *Theological Investigations* vol. 10, 125-149.

We must acknowledge that we live at a time when the concepts of sin and forgiveness have changed in contemporary society. With increasing individualism and an underlying loss of social coherence, with the desire to keep religion as a “private thing,” salvation and grace have become more and more private concepts to be worked out between God and the individual alone. This, I think, has resulted in distorted ideas of God, Church, conscience, law, Christian morality and sacramental practice. Consequently, many Catholics no longer celebrate the sacrament of penance in a manner that signifies an efficacious sign of reconciliation with God and with the Church. Nevertheless, the good news of the salvation of humanity is that God loves us with an everlasting love. However, we cannot repent and be converted unless we take sin seriously.

Since a considerable number of Catholics do not avail of penance today, one could argue that, even though the *New Rite of Penance* was promulgated in 1973, we have yet to fully realise proper renewal. Scott Detisch observes that while the sacrament of penance has advanced theologically in the writings of the Church, in practice it has not moved. He claims that the crisis of the sacrament of penance lies in naively reducing the sacrament to a private moment with a compassionate confessor, a moment which might be disconnected from the community of believers.<sup>11</sup> The continued crisis in the sacrament of penance can never be effectively resolved until the theology informing people’s expectations is implemented and reconciliation becomes a communal reality.<sup>12</sup> Frank O’Loughlin takes the broad view that the main cause of the crisis is the major cultural shift presently occurring in society at large rather than specific changes or decisions within the Church itself. Accordingly, he proposes that the Church needs to rethink its strategy on evangelisation.<sup>13</sup> Monika Hellwig maintains that communal penance celebrations are proving pastorally appropriate to people’s affinity for

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<sup>11</sup> Detisch, “The Sacrament of Reconciliation: In Need of a Second Naivete,” 196, 206.

<sup>12</sup> The continued crisis in the Sacrament of penance has been documented by various scholars. See, for instance, John Paul II, “*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*,” no. 28; James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 350-65. The study commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices indicates that the decline in the celebration of the sacrament stems from a diminished sense of sin and confusion over what is a sin and what is morally right or wrong. See *Reflections on the Sacrament of Penance in Catholic Life Today: A Study Document*. (Washington, D.C: United States Catholic Conference, 1990), 3-4, 6, 8-9. See also Leslie Woodcock Tentler, “Souls and Bodies: The Birth Control Controversy and the Collapse of Confession,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York: Oxford University, 2011), 291, 306-7.

<sup>13</sup> Frank O’Loughlin, *The Future of the Sacrament of Penance* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2007), 176, 192- 9.

hearing in common the biblical word of repentance and mutual conversion that would take place in conjunction with the sacramental word of forgiveness.<sup>14</sup>

Rahner envisaged the proper understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of penance as *reconciliatio cum ecclesia*. He stresses that realisation of such a vision is possible only if all members of the Church are open to both a deeper conversion to the Spirit and a more authentic witness to the Spirit in their communal and individual lives. He, nonetheless, insists that:

It cannot be said, therefore, that the fact that this doctrine was obscured constitutes an argument against its correctness. It was never properly speaking denied or replaced by any other doctrine which was better. Because the general conception of the Church as means of grace receded in the background of man's conscious thought, the ecclesiological aspect of the sacrament of penance could no longer remain clear to him either.<sup>15</sup>

While acknowledging the need for renewal of penance in the Catholic Church as a whole, I strongly believe that a dialogue between the African reconciliatory paradigm and Karl Rahner's notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* would help to reinvigorate the practice of sacramental confession, particularly in Africa. This is because the communal aspect is so pivotal in African culture. This study hopes to demonstrate that the power of communal reconciliation will be the future of a meaningful and fruitful celebration of penance.

## II. Statement of the Problem

As has been documented by numerous sacramental theologians and liturgical scholars, the years following the Second Vatican Council saw the implementation of severe restrictions on the third form of penance by the Catholic hierarchy, making it effectively impossible to celebrate under normal circumstances.<sup>16</sup> General confession and absolution was restricted so much as to make it virtually impossible to use. Thus, there must be grave necessity and any penitents who take part in it must have the intention to make an integral confession through the rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents as soon as possible. So, parishes adopted the first and second forms, but by the 1990s communal celebrations of the sacrament of penance were rare outside of annual penance services during Lent and Advent. As a result,

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<sup>14</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times* (Wilmington, De: Michael Glazier, 1982), 111-12.

<sup>15</sup> Rahner, "Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church," 148-9.

<sup>16</sup> See James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Pub. Co., 1986); Catherine Dooley, "The 1983 Synod of Bishops and the "crisis of confession,"" in *The Fate of Confession*, eds. Mary Collins, David Noel Power, and Marcus Lefébure, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1987); David Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001).



the number of Catholics practicing the sacrament of penance in any form continued to diminish. The most common way of experiencing sacramental forgiveness among Catholics in Africa today is very similar to pre-Vatican II practice: individual confession of sins to a priest, normally taking place in a confessional.

Arguably, much as the revised rite offers a variety of forms, the first form for the reconciliation of individual penitents could foster an individualistic piety. It also seems not to appeal to a good number of Catholics. The paradigm cannot adequately deal with the communal dimension of the sinful structures and sinful climate of society. This does not mean, however, that Catholics have stopped dealing with problems of sin. What is missing is the link between personal experiences of committing sin and the liturgical expression that enriches an appreciation of God's mercy and forgiveness of sins. Therefore, if the ritual of individual confession to a priest cannot fruitfully provide Catholics with a context in which ethics, liturgy, and pastoral care intersect, how can they be enthusiastic in availing of the sacrament?

### **III. Research Question**

How can the African reconciliatory paradigm in the light of Karl Rahner's notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* help to revitalise sacramental penance which has significantly dwindled?

### **IV. Thesis Statement**

The 1973 *Rite of Penance* articulates the ecclesial nature of the sacrament and states that individual confession to a priest is the primary way of obtaining forgiveness and remission of serious sin committed after baptism.<sup>17</sup> The fundamental crisis with the sacrament of penance consists not only in an inadequate theological and catechetical development within the community of believers but also in the Church's failure to liturgically embody ecclesial reconciliation and on-going conversion.<sup>18</sup> Modern historical and liturgical studies on penance emphasize that the whole reconciliation process should be mindful of the pastoral needs of Christians in their particular historical, social and religious situations.<sup>19</sup> This study attempts to

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<sup>17</sup> *Rite of Penance*, nos.3-6, 8; See also, John Paul II, "Reconciliatio et Paenitentia," no. 33; Joseph A. Favazza, "Forum: The Fragile Future of Reconciliation," *Worship* 71 (1997), 240.

<sup>18</sup> Detisch, "The Sacrament of Reconciliation: In Need of a Second Naivete," 207.

<sup>19</sup> See Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Christian Church* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1981), 102-36; Catherine Dooley, O.P., "The History of Penance in the Early Church: Implications for the Future," 83-4, 92-3; Frank O'Loughlin, *The Future of the Sacrament of Penance*, 175-208;

reclaim the sacrament by enriching it with the African sense of community (*ubuntu*) and Karl Rahner's theological understanding of penance as *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* which is rooted in Christ and promoted by the Church for the lives of her members.<sup>20</sup> In the communal celebration of penance, the faithful are given a broader understanding of the effects of the sacrament which will include its reconciling fruits and possibly instil a deeper appreciation and renewed practice of this wonderful sacrament. It is only through such a changed perception and experience that Catholics can fruitfully benefit from penance.

## V. Research Methodology

The methodology followed in this study is historico-theological and liturgical-pastoral in nature. It is primarily a ressourcement approach, namely going back to the sources of Christian doctrine: scripture, liturgy, sacraments and tradition. By reviewing the teachings and instructions of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the 1973 *Rite of Penance* and other documents on penance, the study attempts to explore how this embattled sacrament could be revived. As a practical and pastoral theological project, I situate penance as a ritual with one foot in the cultural and social reconciliation context and the other in the liturgical and theological tradition of the Roman Catholic Church.

To propose the future of the sacrament of penance, my study envisages a dialogue between the African reconciliatory paradigm and Karl Rahner's theology of penance. To do this it analyses the views of African theologians who are more attuned to challenges specific to Africa. It also draws insights from the reactions and interpretations of Rahner's disciples and scholars of his theology who have examined his thinking in new ways, but in the context of the Christian tradition. It is true that different contexts and circumstances have led theologians over time to modify their understanding of Catholicity vis-à-vis the cultural-social situations in which they find themselves. In fact, the 1973 *Rite of Penance* recognises the importance of this cultural need when it provides guidelines for adapting the needs of individual regions and circumstances so that its celebration might be relevant and fruitful.<sup>21</sup> In light of this, the Catholic Bishops of Africa and Madagascar preferred to adopt the

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and Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., "Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power – Ecclesial, Sacramental, Anthropological – Among Hierarchy and Laity," *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 587-8.

<sup>20</sup> A detailed elaboration of the Bantu concept of *ubuntu* (sense of corporate life/community) will be in chapter one while Rahner's notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>21</sup> See *Rite of Penance*, no. 38-40. The sacrament will be mainly referred to as "Penance" though at times reconciliation may also be used and the 1973 Rite of Penance as the "Rite of Penance."

theology of inculturation simply because they considered the so-called theology of adaptation to be completely out of date.<sup>22</sup> Stan Chu Ilo holds that commitment to move Catholic ecclesiology in Africa from a norm which was inflexible to local situations to a more empirical form which integrates both the historical experience and concrete phenomenological social data of African Christians provides a way of facing challenges which are specific to the African social context.<sup>23</sup> This is because official Roman ecclesiology can undermine local churches' creativity and their ability to address local specific issues and challenges. Robert Schreiter, addressing how the Catholic Church should be evolving in terms of its own self-understanding and its approach to cultural and religious contexts, proposes the term "New Catholicity" as the theological concept most suitable for rethinking the Church's mission in the 21st century.<sup>24</sup>

## VI. Thesis Structure

This doctoral research entails a general introduction and five chapters. The first chapter explores the African reconciliatory paradigm and contextualizes it within the contemporary crisis of the sacrament of penance. The next chapter discusses the concept of sin and its implications in the theology of Rahner. In order to understand the theology of penance, the third chapter examines Rahner's notion of penance as *reconciliatio cum ecclesia*. Also, the concept "divine-human relationship" is analysed and why (for Rahner) this dialogue and response within the ecclesial dimension of penance is at the heart of understanding and appreciating the sacrament. The fourth chapter is an evaluation of the renewal of penance since the Second Vatican Council. Its first section explores the foundational context of the sacrament of penance from its simple beginning up to and through the Second Vatican Council. The rest of the chapter examines the three forms and aspects that enrich the sacrament. Particular attention is given to some critical questions around the fate of penance after Vatican II and the impact of Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, *reconciliatio et poenitentia*, a pivotal document of the twentieth century. The fifth and final chapter contemplates the future of the sacrament of penance. We first evaluate Rahner's contribution towards the renewal of penance and the subsequent ongoing influences of his theology on the

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<sup>22</sup> See "Statement of the Bishops of Africa on Co-Responsible Evangelisation," *AFER* 17:1 (January 1975): 58.

<sup>23</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, "Towards an African Theology of Reconciliation: A Missiological Reflection on the Instrumentum Laboris of the Second African Synod," *The Heythrop Journal* 53 (2012): 1006.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Schreiter, *New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Book, 1997), 116-33. Schreiter uses the expression "New Catholicity" to explore the many aspects of globalisation that challenge Christianity at the beginning of the third millennium.

sacrament. And finally, I suggest pastoral and practical strategies which anticipate a hopeful future for the sacrament, particularly for the contemporary Church in Africa.

## VII. Rationale for the Study: Why choose the theology of Karl Rahner?

The whole purpose of revisiting Rahner's theology of penance is to foster a renewed and fruitful celebration of the sacrament. Rahner's theological anthropology and his theology of nature and grace, with their implications for sacraments and ecclesiology, have permeated the pastoral life of the Catholic Church. His theology has been influential in the life of the Roman Catholic Church and given rise to much academic discourse and debate among contemporary theologians, especially due to its influence on the sacramental life of the Church. Surprisingly, however, in recent years, Karl Rahner has moved from being one of the most celebrated Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century to being less prominent in the twenty-first century.<sup>25</sup> Although James Dallen's much-cited history of penance draws on some of Rahner's penance studies, Rahner is infrequently cited.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the unique combination he offers about the speculative and the pastoral, the spiritual and the theological, the traditional and the modern, still has much to offer.

In fact, Rahner is recognised as one of the greatest contemporary Catholic theologians and has made an enormous contribution towards the on-going debate about renewal of the Church.<sup>27</sup> Fergus Kerr claims that many contemporary Rahner scholars do not study Rahner simply as a philosophical foundationalist because they are concerned that they might regard his views in new or even postmodern ways.<sup>28</sup> A revival of interest in Rahner in relation to understanding the foundations of our Christian faith is both welcome and healthy. Robert McCarthy argues that the Catholic concerned about present-day ecclesial challenges should know about the principal theories of the thinkers who influenced Vatican II.<sup>29</sup> There is, therefore, more need than ever to read Rahner's theology with new enthusiasm so as to

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<sup>25</sup> Pádraic Conway and Fáinche Ryan, eds., *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-first Century* (Dublin: Peter Lang, 2010), iv.

<sup>26</sup> See James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo, 1986). In English, for instance, there exist only two substantial treatments of Rahner on Penance: David Fagerberg, "Rahner on the Importance of Reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance," *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996), 349-61; and Annemarie Kidder, *Making Confession, Hearing Confession: A History of the Cure of Souls* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2010), especially 243-56, 318-19.

<sup>27</sup> Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 20-24.

<sup>28</sup> Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 180.

<sup>29</sup> Robert C. McCarthy, *A Critical Examination of The Theology of Karl Rahner, S.J.* (Buchanan: Carthay Ventures, 2001), 1.

understand and appreciate the fundamental truths of our Christian faith, especially during this time when the perception of reality, including matters of faith, seems to be greatly influenced by modernisation and secularisation.

Even though Karl Rahner uses difficult language, derived from his transcendental philosophy, my study aims to show that his is also a pastoral sacramental theology. I am not trying to show that Rahner has the answers for the challenges facing the African Church with regard to penance and reconciliation. Nonetheless, I believe we can learn from his style of thinking and theological *modus operandi*, dialoguing with the tradition and engaging with contemporary religious challenges.

It is envisaged that by drawing on Rahner's theology of sin and forgiveness in conjunction with the African concept of reconciliation, this study will help to enliven sacramental penance at a time when its celebration has significantly dwindled. A rediscovery of the forgotten truths and significance of the sacrament of penance will lead to a nuanced understanding and appreciation of the mystery of God's love and mercy. One of the central elements of Rahner's theological anthropology is the new life which becomes concrete through God's self-communication to humanity.<sup>30</sup> According to Rahner, God offers salvation to every human being through empowering us to say "yes" to Him.<sup>31</sup> It is hoped that reviewing Rahner's theology of sin and forgiveness as well as examining the reasons that tend to keep us away from God's abundant mercy and compassion will help to underline the importance and efficacy of the sacrament of penance in our lives.

On the whole, my thesis offers some pastoral and practical approaches that will help to improve the practice of sacramental confession. Sacramental penance brings with it various perspectives that theologians have struggled to articulate for generations. Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura, reflecting on the healing power of forgiveness, say that the Church has the responsibility to cultivate communal practices and disciplines that will make seeking forgiveness possible on a regular basis.<sup>32</sup> Hence, this study has particular relevance to the discipline of sacramental and pastoral theology because it demonstrates the value of studying cultural and religious practices and the importance of focusing not only on individual care but also on the broader communal and institutional contexts of pastoral care.

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<sup>30</sup> Karl Rahner, "Ideology and Christianity," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.6, 51-52.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1978), 421.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura, *Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 113, 118-19.

A more nuanced understanding of penance, with its many effects, might lead to a deeper appreciation of the sacrament and could foster its integration into the journey of the Christian towards holiness. We must make the experience of forgiveness a way of life in Christian communities. The proposals towards the renewal of the sacrament of penance are not simply a compilation of citations from theologians and Church documents but emerge in dialogue with the African tradition so as to encourage a vibrant and meaningful sacramental practice.

## CHAPTER ONE

### AFRICAN RECONCILIATORY THEOLOGY AND THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE TODAY

#### 1.1 Introduction

Drawing from African thought and culture, this chapter examines the key tenets of the African understanding of sin and reconciliation with a particular emphasis on the sacrament of Penance. African traditional religion, anthropology, spirituality and philosophy are identified as providing the basis for reconciliation. After centuries during which Western theology and philosophy dominated theology in Africa, unique insights of African theologians were at last recognised in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1956 a group of African priests studying in Rome published *Les "prêtres noirs s'interrogent,"* in which they challenged the attitude of missionaries to the African cultures. They called for adaptation of Christianity to the indigenous cultures of Africa. It is recognised that what is known as African theology sprang from the confrontation between missionary Christianity<sup>1</sup> and the traditional cultures of Africa. Not only have African theologians interpreted Christian faith in ways which address the specific context(s) of Africa, but one can rightly add that African theology has made a significant contribution to Christian theology. I will not attempt to present all that might be said regarding the concept of sin and reconciliation, but my focus will be on how an African reconciliation paradigm and theology can reinvigorate the understanding and practice of the sacrament of penance.

This first chapter seeks to illustrate the African concept of sin and reconciliation in general, but with a specific focus on the Bantu peoples. We begin by looking at the Bantu and their ethnological and geographical background. We will then explore the typical African understanding of sin and reconciliation. We will proceed to analyse how the social forces that shape postmodern society namely, secularism and modernisation, have led to a loss of the sense of sin in society, thereby causing a decline in faith traditions and practices, specifically in sacramental confession.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Missionary Christianity' is the term used to describe the period between the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century and the early 60s (a time that coincides with independence of many African countries and in the Roman Catholic Church with Vatican II Council). It is the time when the Churches in Africa were still strongly subordinated to the Western Churches.

In addition, we will examine some of the myths and realities concerning the sacrament of penance and discuss how these might be challenged. The aim is not only to account for the gradual decline of the practice of sacramental confession but also to highlight why its renewal is vital today. We shall conclude by demonstrating how the African paradigm of reconciliation and theology might provide further resources and insights for appreciating the elements of the sacrament of reconciliation: contrition, mediation, confession, forgiveness and penance.

## **1.2 The Meaning of “Bantu:” Ethnological and Geographical**

Africa is the second largest and second most populous continent on earth with a population of 1,276,994,748 as of February 28, 2018, based on the latest United Nations estimates. The African continent is home to 54 recognized sovereign states and countries, ethnically comprising approximately one thousand tribes. For many years the African peoples and their respective languages and cultures seemed impossible to classify. They presented such a diverse set of components that made it impractical to list them demographically. However, thanks to intensive anthropological and ethnological studies which have been carried out over the past few decades, they can now be easily classified using valid criteria with regard to language, culture and history. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the peoples of Africa can be divided as follows: the Negritos (or Pygmies), the Bushmen and Hottentots (or Khoisan), the Negroes, the Hamites, the Nilotes, the Nilo-Hamites, the Bantu and the Semites (or Arabs).<sup>2</sup>

### **1.2.1 The Bantu in General**

Of all the African ethnic groups of peoples enumerated above, the Bantu is the largest. It is used as a general label for the 300–600 tribes in Africa who speak Bantu languages.<sup>3</sup> They inhabit a geographical area stretching east and southward from central Africa across the Great Lakes region down to southern Africa. This covers an enormous area south of a line that runs from the Nigeria-Cameroon frontier, across the Congo region and Uganda, to the hinterland

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<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* vol. 1 (London: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1960). The “Negroes” are listed as distinct from the Pygmies, the Bushmen, the Nilotes and the Bantu; although these too belong to the black race of Africa and are, therefore, in this sense, also “negroes,” according to the etymology of the word. The division adopted here seems therefore to be based more on historical and linguistic grounds than on the colour of the skin. By “negroes” here the author means the group of tribes of black Africans inhabiting the Western section of the continent. These are called the “true Negroes” with no foreign blood, while the other black Africans are a mixture of the “true” Negroes with Hamites and other stocks.

<sup>3</sup> John Butt, *The Greenwood Dictionary of World History* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 39.



of Mombasa. Bantu people include majority of the inhabitants of Tanzania and South Uganda, as well as those in a large and important enclave in Kenya, mainly Kikuyu.<sup>4</sup> The word “bantu” means "people" or "humanity." Its variations include: *watu* in Swahili; *anthu* in Chichewa; *batu* in Lingala; *ubuntu* in Zulu; *andũ* in Kamba and Kikuyu; *muntu* in Kirundi, Runyakitara and Ganda. Philologically, the Bantu languages have a remarkable degree of similarity. In many of them, vocabulary is similar. The difference often lies in just a matter of one consonant or vowel. In addition, the grammatical structure is similar in all areas so that it is very easy to pass from one language to another.

Previous studies have shown that the Bantu form a homogeneous group in their social structure, their culture and their mentality.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it is difficult to envisage that such a high degree of similarity of expression could be purely incidental and completely dissociable from the systems of beliefs and values of the peoples concerned. The systems of beliefs and values of a given society constitute its culture and extend to the way people express themselves and their various spiritual and bodily qualities.<sup>6</sup> John Beattie insists that:

People’s categories of thought and the forms of their language are inextricably bound together, ..... for different peoples have different ways of conceptualizing their social and physical universe, and concepts can only be comprehended and communicated through language.<sup>7</sup>

As for the history of the Bantu, there is a great deal of divergence of opinion among scholars. However, one issue that seems undisputed is that these peoples have a common origin. There must have been a time, far back in their history, when they either formed one community or lived in very close contact with one another. This assumption, based on the linguistic relationships of these peoples, is fully acknowledged by George Murdock:

In the absence of written records, linguistic relationships provide by far the most dependable evidence of historical connections. If two peoples speak related languages, however much they may differ in race or culture and however remote their geographical location, either both have descended from a single ancestral society or the ancestors of one have at some time had such intimate contact with a group thus related to the other that they abandoned their own language and adopted that of their neighbours. Even great paucity or a complete lack of other evidence cannot invalidate this conclusion.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Audrey I. Richards, *The Multicultural States of East Africa* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1969), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Oliver Roland and Mathew Gervase, eds. *History of East Africa I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 58.

<sup>6</sup> See John Beattie, *Other Cultures: Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology* (London: Cohen & West, 1964), 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 89.

Beyond this, nothing seems certain concerning the actual origin and history of the Bantu. It is unclear exactly when the spread of Bantu-speakers from their original homeland in West Africa began or how it developed over the centuries. There are further complexities when one reads or listens to the stories and myths of the individual groups about their origin, past movements and their eventual settlement in the regions that they now occupy. Contemporary scholarly work is still examining this question, and it may take some time before anything like a definite consensus is reached.

### 1.2.2 The Bantu of East Africa

The Eastern part of Africa, encompassing sections of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania as well as the whole of Rwanda and Burundi, is significantly different from the rest of the continent. The inhabitants of this region live between the Great Lakes of east-central Africa and are known collectively as the interlacustrine<sup>9</sup> Bantu. This region is noted for its chain of great lakes which include lake Victoria (the second largest body of fresh water in the world), lake Tanganyika on the border between Tanzania and Burundi, lakes Albert and Edward (which separate Uganda from Zaire), lake Kivu (which marks the border between Rwanda and Zaire) and lake Kyoga in central Uganda. It also has spectacularly tall, beautiful mountains and hills, the most outstanding of which are the snow-capped mountains Kilimanjaro, Kenya, and Rwenzori, separated by vast grassy plains. These natural resources give a special beauty to this part of Africa.

The Bantu of East Africa comprise fourteen major tribes as well as other very small ones annexed to some of them. They may be listed as:

1. The Eastern interlacustrine group which includes the Ganda, the Soga and the Gwere.
2. The Western interlacustrine group which consists of the Nyoro, the Nyankore, the Toro, the Kiga, the Haya, the Zinza, the Amba and the Konjo.
3. The Southern interlacustrine group which comprise the Nyarwanda, the Rundi and the Ha.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> George P. Murdock, *Africa: Its Peoples and their Culture History* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1959), 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> The word interlacustrine is from Latin “inter” means among or between and “lacus” means lake.

<sup>10</sup> See Brian K. Taylor, *The Western Lacustrine Bantu* (London: International African Institute, 1969), 13. The forms used here are without prefixes, and yet the Bantu never use them in this way. We have used here only the roots simply for the convenience of eventual non-Bantu readers who might otherwise be confused with the various prefixes. Also, because these forms are the ones commonly used by anthropologists and ethnologists. Normally, these should be as follows: prefix Bu – for names of regions or country, prefix Ba – for the people, prefix Lu or Ki – for the language.

Examples: Region or Country

The People

The Language

Traditionally these kingdoms have had a political system based on royal kingship and subordinate local chiefs.<sup>11</sup> They all subscribe to a patrilineal system of governance, a factor which distinguishes them from other Bantu societies, particularly those of central Africa who use the matrilineal system to trace their descent from a common ancestor. Interestingly, the people of this region are predominantly Christians, though there is also a substantial minority of Muslims, while indigenous cults also exist throughout the region.

The family has deep roots in African culture, but it is also an important image for the whole of humanity. It is believed that Christians can be more easily enabled to experience and to live the mystery of the Church as community by utilizing the African understanding of family.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the African patrilineal or matrilineal value systems of governance, which sometimes are called ‘lineage,’ present challenges at family, political, social and theological level which must be doctrinally and practically addressed by the Church. This is especially the case when people are baptised in order to build the ‘Church as the family of God.’ This concept makes people understand the nature of the Church and promotes the sense of co- responsibility in evangelisation because, for Africans, members who belong to the same family feel tied by the same solidarity of faith. In light of this, a special synod of Bishops for Africa held in Rome from 10<sup>th</sup> April to 8<sup>th</sup> May 1994 took up the challenge to emphasise the nature and the mission of the Church.<sup>13</sup>

The ecclesiological concept “church as family of God” is based on anthropological and theological foundations. The anthropological aspect is the first ground for the

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Buganda	Baganda	Luganda
Busoga	Basoga	Lusoga
Burundi	Barundi	Kirundi

Some of these forms may still be used in the course of this work. Therefore, this table provides a useful reference.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret C. Fallers, *The Eastern Lacustrine Bantu* (London: International African Institute, 1968), 12. This system of government based on the hierarchy of royal traditional kings and chiefs ceased having political roles after Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi and Rwanda achieved political independence, thereby, becoming republics. Nonetheless, the influence of these traditional rulers is still very strong in minds of their respective subjects, and this is likely to remain so for many years to come.

<sup>12</sup> Bénédzet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: Pauline’s Publications Africa, 1999), 69-106. Also see, Paul J. Sankey, “The Church as Clan: Critical Reflections on African Ecclesiology,” *International Review of Mission* 83 (1994), 437-438.

<sup>13</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa: Special Assembly of the Synod of African Bishops* (Rome, April – May 1994). The African Synod endorsed and emphasised an ecclesiological concept of “the Church as the family of God, especially in the following articles: 2, 3, 7, 10, 20, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 44, 56, 57, 59, 68, 70, 71. Not only did the synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the Church as God’s family, as its guiding idea for the evangelisation of Africa. ... For this image emphasises care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust.

development of this concept because it primarily refers to the African extended family and its values. These good values and practices have been the basis for the faithful to understand and appreciate the mystery of the church. It is not only the African community, but all peoples, who are called to form the family of God. This implies the task of evangelisation, which is to welcome “all peoples and each person into this great family. The notion of Church as family highlights a shift from an authoritative to a ministerial Church in which the role of the laity, especially women, must be acknowledged.<sup>14</sup> The understanding of Church as family must be exercised in the Church through its members, with its ecclesial communities and Christian families as the agents of evangelisation. It is in these institutions that the family of God is an ecclesiological model and fulfils the prophetic role of the Church.<sup>15</sup> This model develops and promotes the experience of fraternity, the spirit of unbiased service, solidarity and a common goal in order to transform the Church as well as society.

It is important to note that the examples given in this chapter will be taken from Bantu tribes which we will use as a representative group. However, more frequently they will be from the interlacustrine Bantu especially the Baganda, which, besides being most familiar to the writer, is also “one of the largest and, for political and historical reasons, has become one of the best known of these tribes.”<sup>16</sup> The Bantu is a collection of a number of tribes, whereby each has some characteristic patterns of living, both within the tribe and outside it. However, there are considerable similarities among them, making them a very appropriate group for this study and one capable of being treated collectively. Thus, the idea of the Bantu peoples can be viewed as a kind of projection of the African continent. What follows then is an attempt to describe how the African culture and tradition is the foundation for understanding an African reconciliatory paradigm.

### **1.3 African Traditional Religion, Spirituality and Philosophy: A Foundation for an African Reconciliatory Paradigm**

The African tradition is endowed with indigenous cultural modalities and social practices that are practical and realistic for achieving reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> It can be a positive resource for

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<sup>14</sup> Augustin Ramazani Bishwende, “Le synod African, dix ans après: enjeux et défis,” NRT 127 (2005): 548-549.

<sup>15</sup> See *Ecclesia in Africa*, nos. 27-28. Also see Patrick Ryan, ed., *New Strategies for a New Evangelisation in Africa* (Nairobi: Pauline’s Publications Africa, 2002), 66-72.

<sup>16</sup> Fallers, *The Eastern Lacustrine Bantu*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002), 106.

enrichment and fulfilment of human life.<sup>18</sup> Some of the key features associated with an African worldview which can enrich endeavours toward reconciliation include African traditional religion, spirituality and philosophy. It is important to note that in Africa, traditional religion, spirituality and philosophy are intricately linked and intertwined.<sup>19</sup> For instance, African traditional religion and spirituality are intimately concerned with matters pertaining to its philosophy. Likewise, African philosophy is meaningless if analysed outside the context of African traditional religion and spirituality.

Given their inherent interconnectedness, it might be presumed that an attempt at drawing a distinction of the three categories would do them all an injustice. However, such dilemmas are common in modern scholarship. In addition, some conceptual or theoretical distinctions seek to simplify the task of analysis, however vague and slight they might be. Interestingly, proposing that these three elements contribute to social reconciliation in the African context does not mean that what African tradition has to offer is merely relevant to Africa. It has implications for all humanity. We will now examine how African traditional religion and spirituality is a resource for reconciliation.

### 1.3.1 African Traditional Religion and Spirituality

African traditional religion (ATR) is considered to be part and parcel of an African worldview.<sup>20</sup> Ikenga-Metuh says that a people's worldview is defined as the complex of their beliefs and attitudes concerning the nature, structure and interaction of beings in the universe with particular reference to man.<sup>21</sup> In light of this, Agwaraonye observes that the human person is at the centre of the African worldview and that every ontological and material activity revolves around the human being and is geared towards his or her welfare and

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<sup>18</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 296.

<sup>19</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1998), 36. Magesa gives a detailed explanation of the connection between the disciplines of African traditional religion, anthropology, ethics, philosophy and theology.

<sup>20</sup> See David Hammond-Tooke, *Boundaries and Belief: The Structure of a Sotho World View* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1981b), 22. ATR represents a world view which is non-western, and which explains life in mystical terms. Hammond-Tooke mentions four main aspects of the African world view and religiosity which include: a sky-god, the ancestor cult, witchcraft beliefs and pollution beliefs, (p. 29). Elsewhere, he mentions other characteristics of African religion, such as dependence on the supernatural, belief in local and not universal gods, and membership through birth and not by choice. See also David Hammond-Tooke, *The Roots of Black South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993), 167.

<sup>21</sup> E. E. Ikenga-Metuh, "Igbo Worldview: A Premise for Christian Traditional Religion Dialogue," *West African Religion* 13 (1972): 52.

happiness.<sup>22</sup> Among Africans the universe is conceived as two worlds, the visible and invisible. All beings belong to either of these two worlds. According to Ikenga-Metuh, at the core of this worldview lies the conception of the hierarchy of beings, which comprises five classes: a Supreme Being, human beings, animals, and physical entities such as river gods, tree gods, and gods of the evil forest.<sup>23</sup>

It is religious beliefs and practices that inform how Africans view the world, and this in turn has a bearing on their religiosity and spirituality. This implies that African traditional religion is about the whole of life and not a segment of it. Traditional religion, according to Mbiti, is embodied in the lifestyle of people:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and, if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death.<sup>24</sup>

African religion and spirituality reflect an African worldview, which is essentially holistic, integrated, and interdependent. African spirituality is above all a spirituality that relates to the whole of life.<sup>25</sup> Hence, African religion and spirituality are closely connected so that it is difficult to make a distinction between the two. Both religion and spirituality are intimately part of the African way of life. Ugwu asserts that:

Africans are truly religious people of whom it can be said as it has been said about the Hindus that they eat religiously, dress religiously, sin religiously. ... religion to Africans is their existence and existence is their religion.<sup>26</sup>

One might presume that the influence of African religion has decreased due to the effect of colonialism, Christianity and secularisation. However, the ethos of its approaches to life is still evident, at least in the subconscious minds of many.<sup>27</sup> The major dimensions of

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<sup>22</sup> C. Agwaraonye, "African Traditional Religion and Culture at Cross-road with Globalisation: Igbo Experience," (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2014), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, "Igbo Worldview: A Premise for Christian Traditional Religion Dialogue," 54.

<sup>24</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Lesiba Teffo, "Remarking Africa Through Spiritual Regeneration," in *Crises of Life in African Religion and Christianity*, ed. Hance A. O. Mwakabana (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2002), 135.

<sup>26</sup> C. O. T. Ugwu, "The Demise of the African God/s: Fallacy or Reality," (84<sup>th</sup> Inaugural Lecture, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> According to the official report on the special Synod of Bishops for Africa held in Rome in 1994, Dialogue with ATR is very important because ATR is still very strong and widely practised in many places. For example, the AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in East Africa) in its report to the consultation organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), Rome, held at Kumasi, Ghana, in

religion that are apparent in African traditional religion (as well as in other religions) are ritual, mythology, doctrine, ethics, society, experience and the material.<sup>28</sup> The spiritual dimension is actually part of the human personality; ... it is pre-eminently part of the African personality.<sup>29</sup> Okeke et al. insist:

Religion in African traditional society partakes fully of all features of world traditional religion, including its beliefs, sacred myths, oral qualities, strong appeal to the hearts of adherents, high degree of ritualization, and possession of numerous participatory personages such as officiating elders, kings, priests and diviners. Everyone is in fact a religious carrier. There are no missionary elders to propagate the religion, and one individual does not preach his religion to another as is the case with non-traditional proselytizing religions.<sup>30</sup>

It must be noted that African spirituality is manifested in a vast number of ways. There are variations in the religious practices of Africans, but these do not in any way make Africans alter their strong belief in God. Although African traditional religion has local manifestations, one can argue that it has common basic elements which testify to its unity regionally and at continental level. These common elements include belief in one God,<sup>31</sup> an invisible world and the unity of the universe.<sup>32</sup> African traditional religion is not confined to a physical structure nor is it hierarchy bound; and it is also not an institutionalised religion.<sup>33</sup> It can be deemed pluralistic in nature and is quite hospitable to other forms of belief systems.

For the traditional African, the overall guiding principle for peace and harmony in society is the harmonious co-existence between the spiritual world and the physical world. This entails a harmonious co-existence between humans and spiritual beings, between two individuals or more as well as between people and the environment or nature. This guiding principle is so strong that if there is interference in the harmonious co-existence (for example,

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January 1998, reported that over 23 million people are still adherents of ATR in its area. Hence, the Church cannot afford to ignore this reality.

<sup>28</sup> Ezekiel Lesiba Matsaung, "Perceptions held of Religion in Education: A Religion-Educational Perspective" (PhD Dissertation University of Pretoria, 1999), 46

<sup>29</sup> Aylward Shorter, *African Spirituality* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), 45.

<sup>30</sup> Chukwuma O. Okeke, Christopher N. Ibenwa, and Gloria T. Okeke, "Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Ibo Example," *Sage Open* 7 (2017): 2.

<sup>31</sup> See John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1979). In ATR, God is seen as the author of life, the maker of everything. God is active in creation. African traditional religious belief does not offer any other version of the creation. It is simply the work of God, the omnipotent, the everlasting, ever faithful, and merciful Father of all and cannot be forced to do anything. For this reason, no sacrifices are offered to God, but only to ancestors.

<sup>32</sup> Africans believe in the "spiritual dimensions of the world." See Philip Moila, "Toward an Anthropologically Informed Theology: The Kingdom of God Theology, Christian Presence, and Conflict in Pedi Society," (PhD Dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1987), 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Lesiba Teffo, "Remarking African Through Spiritual Regeneration," 137.

through wrongdoing either of an individual or a group of people) this would bring about disharmony, chaos and general suffering in the community. Similarly, good acts (such as caring for others, hospitality, reaching out to the needy etc.) bring about peace, harmony and the blessing of both humanity and nature.

Research and experience indicate that community life and well-being is the primary focus of African religion practice. Buys and Nambala maintain that kinship and community are the prime preoccupations of the African people.<sup>34</sup> Ceremonies that foster or restore community relations are paramount. These include, for example, celebration of marriages and the reconciliation of estranged persons and communities. African traditional religion commits so much towards the sustenance and preservation of community-building that it helps mitigate against division and social alienation.<sup>35</sup>

### 1.3.2 Bantu Concept of Sin and Reconciliation

Among the Bantu, social order and peace are essential and sacred. This order is conceived primarily in terms of kinship relationship. Since everybody is related to everybody else, a person is not an individual but a corporate entity. The occurrence of sin or manifestation of evil produces tension and simultaneously deepens the sense of damage in the community. Magesa notes that in African religion the concept of sin or evil is conceptualised and explained as wrong-doing, badness or the destruction of life. The emphasis is on the wrong or bad actions which emanate from bad people, people who have an “evil eye” or a “bad heart.” For, even when invisible forces or natural factors intervene in human life to cause harm, sin or evil do not and cannot exist except when perceived in people.<sup>36</sup> The sense here then is that sin is always attached to a wrong-doer and that ultimately the wrongdoer is a human person. People create scapegoats for their sorrows. Mbiti argues that the shorter the radius of kinship and family ties, the more scapegoats there are.<sup>37</sup> This, however, does not mean that abstract notions of sin and evil are non-existent in African religious consciousness. It is rather that the moral perspective of African religion is quite concrete and pragmatic.

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<sup>34</sup> G. L. Buys and S. V. V. Nambala, *History of the Church in Namibia, 1805-1990: An Introduction* (Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan Publishers, 2003), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Hammond-Tooke, *The Roots of Black South Africa*, 89. He notes further that the relative smallness of the community is another important factor which strengthens the unity of its people. In relation to intimate village life, quarrels and disputes can be extremely disruptive. What is crucial is not abstract justice but the urgent patching of the rift.

<sup>36</sup> Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 148ff.

<sup>37</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 209.



The traditional African view of sin differs from that of significant segments of Western Christianity. Western theology usually sees sin as something which we are punished for by God, instead of something that God rescues us from. This understanding led Western missionaries to try to induce a sense of guilt for sin in their indigenous Christian hearers. The 19th century missionaries with an Enlightenment background often had trouble inculcating such guilt. In their frustration at their failure to generate this sense of guilt, they complained that Africans had no sense of religion and no sense of sin.<sup>38</sup>

According to Ganda culture, the Bantu know that God is the creator of everything including society. They recognise Him as the architect of the cosmic order of which the hierarchical social order is an integral part. Any disturbance of this order angers, in the last analysis, God and the spirits, and calls for a proportionate punishment to be inflicted not only on the author of the disorderly act but on the whole community. Society, according to their belief systems, is a moral entity as the creator provides a moral code which directs individual behaviour patterns. However, this moral code can be violated, and any infringement of it is regarded as sin, which earns the displeasure of God. Such sinful acts include immoral behaviour, breaking of the covenant, ritual mistakes, breaking taboos, committing an abominable act, or an offence against God or man, and pollution. While Christians often conceptualise the source of evil as the devil or an evil power, African spirituality tends to locate the source of evil firmly in the human world, in the disruptive ambitions and jealousies of people.

For the Bantu, there is no evil or sin that could not happen without a wilful intelligent cause. The common African traditional understanding is that calamities like sickness, drought, famine, earthquake, barrenness, death, or any physical evil that might otherwise appear to be an accident is usually seen as having a deliberate cause behind it. These unfortunate incidents are associated with witches, or sorcerers, or a deceased member of the family. The Baganda, for example, say “*omuntu teyefiira*,” which literally means a person never dies without a cause. Sin creates imbalance in the relationship between God and a human being, or between individuals. Since fellowship is considered the most important or primary human quality, usually such an imbalance not only affects the offender but also the whole community. The suffering of one is conceived as the suffering of all. For instance,

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Hayes, “African Initiated Church Theology,” in *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, ed. Simon Maimela & Adrio Konig (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 175.

African people say “we have been killed” if one member of their community is killed. Not only the offender, but the whole community takes responsibility for the misdeed.<sup>39</sup> John Mbiti refers to a situation when a husband and wife have marital problems that the whole community gets involved in reconciling the partners.<sup>40</sup>

The sense of corporate life is so deep in Africa society that the solidarity of the community must be maintained. Disintegration and destruction are not tolerated. As such, the sin of an individual is an offence to the whole community and its consequences affect not only the offender but also the whole body of his/her relatives. In support of this, Harry Sawyerr says:

God does not enter directly into any discussion of sin among African peoples... Sin is seen within the context of community life (as opposed to individualism) in which the clan relationship embracing the living, the dead and the unborn is essentially a covenant relationship. Any breach which punctures this communal relationship amounts to sin, whatever words may be applied to it. (So) the corporate solidarity of the family, the clan and the tribe become a fundamental factor of life... This solidarity is indispensable for the maintenance of ethical conduct and a common standard of behaviour... This *sensus communis* seems to us to play a very important role in regard to sin.<sup>41</sup>

To a large extent, the African notion of communitarianism has a lot in common with Christian spirituality. In accordance with the perception of the universe (as one, undivided, hierarchy of beings, spiritual and physical) Africans have a sense of sin, although this differs from traditional Christian spirituality. Both attribute human suffering to the “sin” of man who is liable to suffer from some form of punishment from God.<sup>42</sup> However, African spirituality to a great extent exonerates God (the Supreme Being) from being the cause of human suffering. Tempels explains:

According to the Bantu conception, the diminution of a superior force by an inferior one which is subordinated to it is a metaphysical impossibility.<sup>43</sup>

The blame is put on an individual(s) within the community or on an angry “god” or “ancestor” because of acts contrary to the sustenance of the harmonious coexistence. To

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<sup>39</sup> See Simon Maimela, “Salvation in African Traditional Religions,” *Missionalia* 13 (1985): 65. Also see J. O Ubruhe, “Traditional Sacrifice: A Key to the Heart of the Christian Message,” *Journal for Theology in Southern Africa* 95 (1996):18.

<sup>40</sup> John Mbiti, Interview on 20 January 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 30-32.

<sup>42</sup> The African notion of ‘sin against the community’ has resonances and parallels with Vatican II’s (and Karl Rahner’s) idea of reconciliation with the church/community, and this will be exploited further in chapter four of this thesis.

<sup>43</sup> Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue* (Lovania: Elisabethville, 1959), 99.

maintain this harmony, Africans emphasise strict observance with family, clan or tribal beliefs and practices. Acting outside these rules and regulations is what brings about disharmony. Therefore, suffering and premature death occur. Otherwise, death which is the most feared phenomenon would only be a natural occurrence, as a result of old age.

Teffo emphasises that, besides being a system of belief and way of life, African religion is also a system of ethics and morality, i.e. a code of conduct in private and communal life.<sup>44</sup> He notes that African ethics and religious thought is built upon a fundamental belief in “supreme goodness” which is present in all people. This belief is, perhaps, what provides a basis for spiritual life in Africa.<sup>45</sup> In effect, African religion could be considered an avenue of dealing with sin or any activity by which an individual attempts to diminish and threaten the lives of community members.<sup>46</sup> It is through rituals and religious ceremonies that the community is prevented from the effects of sin and evil and through which harmony is established. Magesa maintains that reconciliation rites aim at re-establishing ties between estranged people, and that is why many religious leaders particularly encourage them.<sup>47</sup>

In addition, Moila claims that the preoccupation of African traditional religion is health and healing.<sup>48</sup> The African definition of health is holistic and all-encompassing.<sup>49</sup> Thus, physical, psychological, social, spiritual and environmental wellness is important for all members if the society is to flourish and function well. Based on this perspective, African traditional religion is not only concerned with individualistic personal wellbeing but advocates a holistic view of life which predominantly corresponds with the interconnectedness and interdependence of the universe at large.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, the African concern for health becomes apparent in considering with the role of traditional doctors, herbalists or diviners.<sup>51</sup> These “health care providers” function as officers of religion and indeed are considered to be religious leaders as well. The traditional

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<sup>44</sup> Teffo, “Remarking African Through Spiritual Regeneration,” 129.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 127

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>47</sup> Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 208.

<sup>48</sup> Moila, “Toward an Anthropologically Informed Theology,” 35ff.

<sup>49</sup> Philomena Njeri Mwaura, “Healing as Pastoral Concern,” in *Pastoral Care in African Christianity*, ed. Douglas W. Waluta and Hannah W. Kinoti (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1994), 67.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Umar Habila D. Danfulani, “Pa Divination: Ritual Performance and Symbolism among the Ngas, Mupun and Mwachavul of the Jos Plateau, Nigeria,” in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Lupona (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 97.

doctors' role is to re-establish order, harmony and wellness in communities. They are generally considered the protectors of society. They are charged with the responsibility to see to it that things are right between the visible and invisible world and in the visible world itself.<sup>52</sup> Usually they are regarded as counteracting the malicious work of witches and wizards, who are believed to cause destruction and disruption to individuals as well as to society at large. They are responsible for dealing with the chaotic forces or any other form of hardship that create suffering such as illness and disharmony in the community.

Emphasising the African sense of community, Hammond-Tooke observes that belief in ancestors is also significant to African traditional religion. This is because ancestors are considered as much part of the community as the living. In fact, they are commonly referred to as the living dead, and occupy an important role in the affairs of the community.<sup>53</sup> Since their influence on the community is very strong, ancestors are invoked at all important undertakings. It is through sacrifices that the living ask favours of ancestors, thank them for blessings, or rebuke them when things go wrong. For instance, Moila mentions that adequate feeding of the ancestors leads to well-being and social prosperity.<sup>54</sup>

Buys and Nambala point out that rituals are performed towards ancestors to secure their kindness, offer security for the family, and as a form of reconciliation and atonement for the wrongs committed.<sup>55</sup> Normally these traditional ritual ceremonies are accompanied by music and dancing. This expresses the community's sense of belonging and participation. Krige remarks that music and dance is an important factor in maintaining the sense of group solidarity.<sup>56</sup>

We have established that in African traditional religion and spirituality sin refers almost exclusively to the area of inter-human relations. Individuals do not regard sin as being directly "against" God as Christianity teaches. Nonetheless, African thinking has a communal dimension regarding sin as being normally at the level of inter-human relations. God is rarely brought into the picture as far as individuals are concerned, although at community level this may happen. The reality is that the African concept of sin as well as the way of dealing with it is quite different from the Western perspective.

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<sup>52</sup> Magesa, 71.

<sup>53</sup> Hammond-Tooke, *The Roots of Black South Africa*, 154.

<sup>54</sup> Moila, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Buys and Nambala, *History of the Church in Namibia*, 6-7.

<sup>56</sup> Eileen Jensen Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1974), 336, 338.

Kasomo points out that the missionaries often transferred the terms sin and reconciliation into the African setting without much consideration of existing language and cultural traditions.<sup>57</sup> It is, therefore, imperative for African scholars to connect African notions of sin and reconciliation to the Christian use of the terms so that the Christian perspective can be appreciated in an African context.

### 1.3.3 African Traditional Religion and Spirituality: A Resource for Reconciliation?

Theo Sundermeier suggests that traditional African religion is the clearest example of what may be called a “religion of reconciliation.” He bases this assessment on the understanding that:

Religions of reconciliation are oriented toward the community; their prime focus is on nurturing relationships and restoring breaches in society. They are committed to the world in which they live, and do not seek to escape from it. Rather, their ethos is one of participation and involvement.<sup>58</sup>

Given these characteristics that emphasize community building and its focus on achieving social harmony and well-being, African traditional religion and spirituality is certainly perceived as a good vehicle for reconciliatory activity. Moreover, its emphasis on the interconnection of all that is seen and unseen (past, present and future) and the serious effects of social imbalances and hostility proves that Africans regard reconciliation as being highly significant for the entire universe. This is central not only on a personal, physical, psychological level, but also on a social, political and even environmental level. Accordingly, the desire and commitment towards reconciliation and elimination of unpleasant situations in the community are dominant in the African perspective.

Durkheim asserts that the prime embodiment or mechanism of African religion is ritual.<sup>59</sup> Through religious rituals Africans feel there is something outside themselves that is reborn, forces are reanimated, and life reawakens. The renewal is no way imaginary, and the individuals themselves benefit from it, since the particle of social being that each individual bears within him/herself necessarily participates in this collective celebration.<sup>60</sup> This is because African religiosity and spirituality is about the totality of life and how to enhance it.

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<sup>57</sup> Daniel Kasomo, “An Investigation of Sin and Evil in African Cosmology,” *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 8 (2009): 155.

<sup>58</sup> Theo Sundermeier, “Erlösung oder Versöhnung? – Religionsgeschichtliche Anstoße,” *Evangelische Theologie* 53 (1993), 124ff.

<sup>59</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 352.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

It seeks to address elements of social disruption and hostility. The focus is always on keeping reconciliation practices down to earth and pragmatic so as to avoid settling for pretence with regard to societal harmony.

#### 1.3.4 African Philosophy

It is argued that the basic life patterns and ethics of African society are derived from philosophy.<sup>61</sup> One can really say that in Africa there is an intimate relationship between philosophy and life. Using Akan philosophy as an example of African philosophy, Kwame Gyekye insists that it is intrinsically “oriented toward action and practical affairs.”<sup>62</sup> However, he points out that the most obvious and greatest difficulty in studying or researching African traditional philosophy is the fact that it is an unwritten or an undocumented phenomenon.<sup>63</sup> Hence, it can be easily overlooked when compared to Western or European philosophy.

African philosophical thought is indeed diverse given the numerous languages and dialects in Africa. This reality to some extent affects the unanimity of opinion and discourse of philosophical thought.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, it is undeniable that African philosophical thinking and ideas exist despite the lack of written literature and despite the difficulties connected with trying to attain its formulations. Gyekye maintains:

African philosophical concepts, ideas, and propositions can be found embedded in African proverbs, linguistic expressions, myths and folktales, religious beliefs and rituals, customs and traditions of the people, in their art symbols, and in their socio-political institutions.<sup>65</sup>

In other words, Gyekye claims that it is the common visible features in the cultures and thought forms of sub-Saharan African peoples that justify the existence of an African philosophy.<sup>66</sup> With reference to the Bantu and Dogon people, Jahn states that there is rudimentary agreement in the philosophical systems of many African peoples.<sup>67</sup> Oral literature, thoughts and actions of people, proverbs, myths, folktales, folk songs, poems,

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<sup>61</sup> Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, trans. Marjorie Greene (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 116.

<sup>62</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 66.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>66</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 189.

<sup>67</sup> Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, 99.

rituals, liturgies, customs, etc. can be recognised as the sources of African philosophy.<sup>68</sup> It is oral tradition that suggests an emphasis on storytelling while tales and fables are woven out of everyday experiences.<sup>69</sup> Myths are prose narratives dealing with the creation of the world, God and spirits as well as the origin of things and the natural phenomena.<sup>70</sup> Fables are usually animal stories, but can also involve humans and they point to a moral lesson.<sup>71</sup> Gyekye argues that philosophy is the product of a culture. It is not an individualistic affair, although it is also practiced by individuals, and undeniably certain individuals play a large part in formulating it.<sup>72</sup>

Jahn advances the notion that African philosophies share a common denominator which allows them to interpret the whole African culture.<sup>73</sup> One aspect of this common denominator is the principle of *ntu*, connected to the unity of the universe.<sup>74</sup> The themes in African philosophy that are shared by most sub-Saharan ethnic groups include personhood, metaphysical thinking, epistemology, morality in relation to community, democracy and consensus in politics, aesthetics and art.<sup>75</sup> Gyekye submits that metaphysics is the foundation of African ontology.<sup>76</sup> According to Prinsloo, African philosophical issues frequently revolve around ontologies relating to the cosmos, conceptions of God, the philosophy of mind, a communalist and humanistic notion of moral responsibility, and consensual philosophy of politics.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. trans. Henri Evans (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 46ff.

<sup>69</sup> Jahn, 199.

<sup>70</sup> See Brevard Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament Studies in Biblical Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SCM Press, 1968), 17. According to Childs a myth is an expression of man's understanding of reality.

<sup>71</sup> G. P. Lestrade, "Traditional Literature," in *The Bantu Speaking Tribes of South Africa: An Ethnographical Survey*, ed. I Schapera (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1956), 292.

<sup>72</sup> Gyekye, 25.

<sup>73</sup> Jahn, 26. However, it must be noted that not all African philosophers agree with this assertion. For instance, Kwame Appiah holds that Africans share no common traditional culture, common languages, common religious or conceptual vocabulary ... we do not even belong to a common race. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In my Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>74</sup> Jahn, 96-7. Using the Kinyarwanda language, Jahn describes the different categories of Bantu languages all of which share the suffix of *ntu*. The first class is that of "*Muntu*" (the human being). The second class is "*Kintu*" (thing). The third is "*Hantu*" (place or time), and fourth is "*Kuntu*" (modality), (99). Everything, therefore, must necessarily belong to one of these four categories and must be conceived of not as substance, but force (100).

<sup>75</sup> P.H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, eds. *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 34.

<sup>76</sup> Gyekye, 195.

<sup>77</sup> E. D. Prinsloo, "Western and African Philosophy," in *Contributions of the African and German Philosophies to the Formation and Creation of Communities in Transition: Report on a Seminar by the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg* (Johannesburg: Goethe-Institut, 1998), 41.

In view of the distinction between African and other philosophies, Hountondji claims that African philosophy is called to assimilate and transcend Western philosophy.<sup>78</sup> Africans share an inherently pluralistic ontology, which recognises and allows for other categories of being besides its own.<sup>79</sup> It is also a spiritualistic ontology, but without denying the reality of the empirical world. Causality is a concept intimately connected to African ontology as are ideas surrounding destiny or fate, free will and moral responsibility.<sup>80</sup> For that reason, the predicament of evil is a genuine problem for African philosophy and theology.<sup>81</sup> In terms of epistemology, the primary mode of knowing in African thought is beyond the scope of normal scientific understanding.<sup>82</sup> In addition, reason and experience, spirit mediums, divination and witchcraft are considered viable epistemological categories.<sup>83</sup>

As indicated above, the main modes of expression are indeed the strong living practices of oral culture. Oral communication especially through storytelling is quite vital when discussing African philosophy. Ellen Kuzwayo, as quoted by Villa-Vicencio, maintains that Africa is a place of storytelling. She stresses:

We need more stories, never mind how painful the exercise might be. This is how we will learn to love one another. Stories help us to understand, to forgive, and to see things through someone else's eyes.<sup>84</sup>

Certainly, one can easily see that Africa's gift and natural tendency for storytelling is beneficial to society in many ways. It serves as a medium of Africa's holistic philosophy and inclusive worldview. Likewise, it enables fellowship and builds community life. Telling stories broadens our personal, social and even national horizons, and breaks down barriers between people. Interestingly, Villa-Vicencio argues that not telling stories may hinder the well-being of communal life as this restricts communication and mutual interaction.<sup>85</sup>

### 1.3.5 How can African philosophy be a Resource for Reconciliation?

Like traditional religion and spirituality, African philosophy provides conditions that facilitate a process of social reconciliation. It supports a holistic and well-balanced view of

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<sup>78</sup> Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 47.

<sup>79</sup> Gyekye, 196.

<sup>80</sup> See Gyekye, 68, 76, 104, 199, 119.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-201.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>84</sup> See Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Telling One Another Stories: Toward a Theology of Reconciliation," in *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches*, eds. Gregory Baum and Harold Wells (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1999), 37.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*



reality, promotes a perception of inter-dependence and mutuality of all the forces of the universe. Based on these elements, it is reconciliatory and accommodating, rather than exclusive and alienating. In addition, African philosophy is inclined towards action and the practical affairs of life. It does not create theories about things that are not related or significant to people's lives. This means that it provides a practical approach to social problems. Therefore, such an approach is certainly relevant in the quest for social reconciliation rather than an approach which focuses on theoretical ideas.

African philosophy is community oriented and strives for the well-being of everyone. Its aim is to reveal and foster human aspects that inherently link human beings to one another and the universe. It attempts to lead people towards an understanding and appreciation of their traditional heritage, which in itself can be a reconciliatory experience. Given its pluralistic ontology, African philosophy essentially embraces diversity. It also attempts to harmonise and accommodate what seems to be different instead of eliminating or belittling it. Claudia Nolte-Schamm argues that such an inclusivism and openness must be an advantage to any reconciliation process.<sup>86</sup> She goes on to say:

African Philosophy dictates that the “other” – be it an “other” ethnic group, an “other” worldview or religious system, an “other” way of communicating or whatever – is incorporated rather than expelled.<sup>87</sup>

African philosophy using its key characteristic of storytelling encourages building comradeship after a period of separation. No doubt, acceptance and incorporation are necessary for reconciliation between formerly alienated entities. Hence, storytelling makes African Philosophy an important resource for social reconciliation. It promotes communication and interaction between people who otherwise for whatever reason would be estranged from each other.

### **1.3.6 African Cultural Rituals of Reconciliation**

Every society has its own procedures through which sin is dealt with or any wrong-doing is resolved in a way that has a rich symbolism. Among the Bantu, reparation and reconciliation are handled through offering sacrifices and by ritual purifications. A person conscious of his/her sin and under fear of punishment ritually transfers the guilt to an animal which is

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<sup>86</sup> Claudia M. Nolte-Schamm, “A Comparison Between Christian and African Paradigms of Reconciliation and How They Could Dialogue for the Benefit of South African Society,” (Doctorate Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2006), 99.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

sacrificed (killed). By so doing, the sinner asks the Supreme Being or the spirits to accept that offering as a substitute in his/her place. These rites have a communitarian aspect. More often than not they include a communal meal at which all present partake. Harry Sawyerr writes:

These rites are associated not only with cleanness and uncleanness; guilt and sickness; peace, coolness of heart and reconciliation, absolution and restoration of health. But also, with concern for the well-being of the dead by the living and active help and support for the living by the dead; group fellow-feeling, sometimes between members of a tribe but most times between members of a family or a clan or between a group of two or more bound together by a common purpose; disruption and restoration.<sup>88</sup>

The aim of these sacrifices and ritual purifications is to cleanse the offender and community of the impurity contracted as a result of an offence in ritual matters or violation of an important taboo. Some of these rituals include; throwing blood of the sacrificed animal in the air, blowing water out of the mouth, throwing away firewood, food, clothes or something else, and so on. Very often it entails an explicit confession of the sins. A typical example is that of the Kikuyu of Kenya. They have a purification rite which they call “vomiting the sin:”

A goat is slaughtered, and its stomach contents taken out. An Elder presides over minor occasions, but a medicine man is necessary for major offences. The stomach contents are first mingled with medicines. Then the officiating elder takes a brush with which he wipes off some of the mixture on the tongue of the offender. Each time the offender spits out the mixture on the ground he/she enumerates the offences committed. Afterwards the walls of the house are brushed with the same mixture. If the house is not so cleansed, it must be demolished.<sup>89</sup>

This denotes that the notion of the confession of sins is not foreign to the Bantu. The norm is that sins must be explicitly confessed especially in moments of crisis, either in a ritual context or without ritual. This could be by word of mouth or by symbolism. Among the Baganda, for example, in case an act of adultery was involved on the part of one of the parents, this sin must be confessed before the child is given a name or initiated in the family and clan. Otherwise, it is believed that infidelity would cause the child to fall sick or even die. The only remedy is for the guilty parent to confess his or her sin to the other partner. The Baganda also believe that if a man went out to fish and had set his traps to catch fish, there were a series of taboos which he and the members of his family were supposed to observe as long as the traps were in the water. So, if anybody violated the taboos, he or she had to

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<sup>88</sup> Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa*, 69 -70.

<sup>89</sup> See John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 210.

confess it officially to the family. Otherwise, a grave misfortune was bound to happen. However, such confessions were required only for some specific kinds of sins and only under specific circumstances.

Reconciliation is, therefore, perceived as an act of settling matters between living persons as it imposes a solution for the offences or evils committed in the society. So, the Superior Being or the spirits are not directly brought into play as such. Nevertheless, the action itself is of a social nature and may include a religious gesture such as libation. For difficult situations that necessitate reconciliation, a third party will intervene to facilitate this. The procedure will definitely vary depending on the nature and status of the parties being reconciled be it relatives, young, old, group, etc. The ultimate aim in all of this is to bring about peace, unity and communion of life.

In this section (1.3), we have examined how the key pillars of the African worldview (traditional religion, spirituality and philosophy) can offer an effective impetus for social reconciliation endeavours. Through pragmatic methods such as rituals, communal interactions and celebrations, African culture has developed powerful resources for promoting a social reconciliation process. These do not only provide a strong foundation for an African reconciliatory paradigm but also can be useful in the quest for renewing and revitalising the celebration of the sacrament of Penance.

#### **1.4 The Current Status of the Sacrament of Penance in a Postmodern African Society: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives**

It is a fact that postmodern society today has been beset by many profound and rapid changes that have influenced the practice of the faith. The contemporary secularist tendencies have marginalised the traditional Christian culture thereby weakening its good values and practices. Charles Taylor in his comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the issue of secularism acknowledges the drastic changes that have taken place in society over the centuries. He remarks that the revolution of intellectual developments contributed to the growth of a culture of individualism and materialism whereby freedom, self-expression, and personal choice were encouraged and promoted.<sup>90</sup> This secular mind-set has unfortunately

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<sup>90</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 489-92. Actually, Taylor's analysis of secularism specifically reflects the situation in the West. However, in many ways his observations also apply in the African context although there are certain points of convergence and divergence. Notably, the rate at which Africans are adopting the characteristics of a secular age such as individualism, materialism etc. is worrying, and thus Taylor's study is relevant to the African context.

become an acceptable option or choice for a good number of people today in Africa to the extent that some have lost the ability to love and have devotion to God. Interestingly, Taylor notes that this way of life sometimes “just seems obvious.”<sup>91</sup> The attempt to push religion out of people’s minds, hearts and, indeed, way of life has massively affected the practice of the faith among Christians, thereby impacting the celebration of the sacraments. For example, the need for repentance, to return to obedience of God’s commandments has been greatly neglected even among those who regard themselves as practicing Catholics. As a result, obedience to God has been replaced with a self-serving do-it-yourself morality.

The increasing brokenness of human and religious values has led to a number of Christians finding themselves in delicate and almost inextricable situations. The contemporary lifestyle of a considerable number of people, one would argue, is contrary to the traditional Christian way. For instance, there are people who are divorced and remarried, some living a polygamous lifestyle or cohabiting and there are those constantly using contraceptives. These situations pose significant pastoral and theological challenges which create barriers to benefiting from the sacramental life of the Church. Actually, such symptoms of society’s brokenness cripple the religious practice of the affected Christians in that they are not well-disposed or cannot meaningfully celebrate the sacrament of penance.

The reality of the contemporary pastoral challenges facing the Church mainly due to the increasing loss of the sense of sin poses serious concerns. A renewed pastoral approach is needed to support people facing some sort of spiritual crisis so that they do not feel separated from the Church or neglected in any way. Pope Francis points out that the Church, as the dispenser of God’s mercy, should focus on a pastoral approach that supports and reaches out to all the children of God in need of reconciliation with Him, with oneself and with others so as to allow them grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel.<sup>92</sup> In any case, the doctrine and official Church practice calls on confessors to be caring in dealing with penitents. However, it does not give the confessor the mandate to administer God’s forgiveness cheaply or where there is little evidence of a desire to change.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, the Church should maternally support Christians in complex situations of sin, encouraging acts of

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 569.

<sup>92</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation: *Amoris Laetitia* (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 2016), 22.

<sup>93</sup> Penance requires the sinner to be contrite, confess with the lips and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction. For a detailed explanation of the acts of the penitent see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1994), 326-28.

piety, apart from sacramental ones, so that they may follow a path to full reconciliation at the hour that providence alone knows.<sup>94</sup>

The number of Catholic Christians who wish to continue their sacramental practice but cannot do so due to their personal conditions is increasing. This is basically because their situations are not in harmony with the teaching of the Church. Such people find difficulties in embracing and appreciating the unique value of penance and reconciliation thereby posing a pastoral dilemma of how best to spiritually care for them. In such difficult situations of the need of reconciliation and forgiveness, Pope Francis recommends that the Church be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than immediately imposing a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God's mercy.<sup>95</sup>

Another challenge worth noting is that of scruples and relapses simply as a question of conscience. Scrupulous penitents are those that go from one confessor to another out of fear that the first one did not understand their sins, or because they feel the need to confess them over and over. Relapsing souls, on the other hand, are those that continue to fall into the same sin which they repeatedly confess. One of the reasons for this may be that not many people reach a high degree of moral maturity, and even when they do, they still carry within themselves the infant and adolescent they once were. They can be troubled by guilty feelings from the past. The childhood understanding of the sacrament of penance as a way of avoiding the punishment of hell still explains much of the adult attitude towards it among many Catholics. The perception of the sacrament of penance for a good number seems to regard it as a kind of mini-trial involving a judging God and punishment for sin. These feelings of guilt therefore become a prominent feature of their moral life. Consequently, they start to feel as if they are condemned or that it is impossible to recover from their sinful life. So, they choose either to repeatedly confess the same sin, or shy away from celebrating the sacrament. They need to understand properly the meaning of penance and its efficacy beyond this sort of misconception of the sacrament.

In addition, one could argue that the other reason for the existence of scruples and relapses is an imbalance in the Church's teaching and preaching, that is to say, relying too

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<sup>94</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation, Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 1984), 58-9.

<sup>95</sup> Pope Francis, "Concluding Address of the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," (24 October 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26-27 October 2015, 13.

much on fear and threat of punishment. This causes anxiety, which is fertile soil for guilt feelings. The emphasis on law and the concern with precise measurement aggravates the tendency to scrupulosity, which is also a great source of exaggerated guilt feelings. The sexual dimension of life is certainly a difficult area to navigate. When it becomes the central concern of morality, as it is for many people, it adds its own turbulent and mysterious force to the experience of guilt and fear. This leads to the notion of perceiving God as annoyed and quick to punish, thereby nurturing a fear of going to confession.

There are also those who stopped confessing or lapsed long ago. At the outset, one might say that penitents queuing to enter the confessional seem to have disappeared. Much of the formerly existing motivation for “going to confession” is gone. It appears that the genesis of the decline in sacramental confession is primarily the change of people’s attitude towards sin and the loss of docility to the Church’s teaching that saw great value in certain regular practices of religion whose meaning, purpose and value is now questioned.<sup>96</sup> This makes us ask; what is happening to the sacrament of penance? And, what approaches can enable Catholics who have stopped going to confession celebrate this sacrament again today? Answering these will help to clear away the various misconceptions and perhaps help Catholics to wake up and re-embrace neglected Christian fundamentals which would make confession more meaningful.

To talk about the crisis of sacrament of penance today, in other words, means to face up to the process of secularization in a positive way. And in a concrete way this will call into question any and all “sacramentality” that is detached from the sacramentality of the entire Christian community.<sup>97</sup> In many ways, the radical secularist agenda has influenced people’s perceptions of life, sin and faith. One can certainly argue that the Catholic Church is struggling to come to terms with an increase of nominal Christians and is therefore seeking to adapt the sacramental ministering to this changed pastoral situation. Segundo suggests that the people of God need to celebrate sacraments as an ecclesial community. This includes the sacrament under discussion. It must be perceived and appreciated as a true and efficacious

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<sup>96</sup> For a sustained reflection on aspects of postmodern spirituality and its Challenges to theology, see Jack Finnegan, “Postmodern Spiritualities and the Return of Magic: A Theological Reflection,” *Milltown Studies* 39 (1997): 5-26.

<sup>97</sup> See *Lumen Gentium* no.1; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no.5. The Council Fathers teach that God wills that all people be saved not just as individuals but as a people.

sign of salvation.<sup>98</sup> Only through promoting this reality, or this effort, will the entire Christian community get beyond the crisis posed by the process of secularization.

I concur with Maxwell Johnson's observation that the increasing phenomenon of Pentecostal churches and their perception of sacraments, is but 'one' of several challenges to historical priority of sacramental practice in the Catholic Church. He argues that what appears to be at stake in this is a particular theological understanding of how God is believed to act in the world and Church.<sup>99</sup> It is certainly true that some Catholics are still struggling to understand the ministry of the priest as the confessor and the unique encounter through him with the forgiving Christ.<sup>100</sup> There is increasing questioning among the faithful that if God forgives before confession at the moment of repentance, then what is the point of confessing to the priest? The present lack of access to the sacrament reveals a quiet, steady and firm suggestion that the manner of the sacrament is still in need of reform. In the face of conflicting perspectives, or perhaps lack of proper catechesis, there is a need to confront this period of crisis before it becomes worse, even though it began a number of decades ago. It is important to underline as carefully and clearly as possible the richness and power of penance as well as celebrating the sacramental acts of Christ and the Church, as we are urged to do by Vatican II. In this regard, I believe that revisiting Karl Rahner's notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* might be helpful in renewing its contemporary celebration. This will help to encourage the reception of God's abundant love and mercy rather than mistakenly celebrating the sacrament based on fear of judgement and punishment.

According to a study by Paavo Kettunen, the boundaries between confession, pastoral care and counselling are unclear.<sup>101</sup> Sacramental confession doesn't function as intended because it is confused with spiritual guidance, counselling, psychotherapy and other practices that deal with emotions and the roots of feelings of guilt. Much as spiritual guidance or direction should not be confused with the sacrament of penance, there is no doubt that more and more Christians are rediscovering the place of reconciliation and conversion in their lives through such pastoral care and spiritual counselling. In addition, the Catholic tradition of

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<sup>98</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Sacraments Today* (London: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), 15.

<sup>99</sup> Maxwell E. Johnson, ed. *Sacraments and Worship: The Sources of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), xiii.

<sup>100</sup> Declan Marmion, "The Unloved Sacrament: The Demise of the *Sacramentum Paenitentiae*," *Milltown Studies* 43 (1999): 56.

<sup>101</sup> Paavo Kettunen, "The Function of Confession: A Study Based on Experiences," *Pastoral Psychology* 51(2002): 16. This study examined people's experiences of confession in Finland. However, the findings with regard to confusing sacramental confession with pastoral counselling and psychotherapy are also true for Africa.

using the confessional is sometimes not observed. Confessions are increasingly heard not in the confessional but in an open space i.e. face to face with confessor. However, for some people celebrating the sacrament of penance in a confessional seems to have a psychological effect and is important since it offers more privacy. For others it is insignificant.

It is a fact that all people have personal weaknesses and struggles. Nonetheless, despite humanity's sinfulness, no Catholic should feel that he or she can never recover from life's struggles or simply be allowed to shy away from celebrating the sacrament of penance. Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, the regent of the Apostolic Penitentiary, notes that the Church needs its pastors to be better trained to overcome particular difficulties by paying attention to some unique aspects of the confessor's mission, especially in their dealings with certain categories of penitents classified as 'special.'<sup>102</sup> This means that confessors need to make a special effort to assist through prayer and counsel those struggling to overcome their weaknesses. This will enable people to realise the need for God's mercy and forgiveness which awaits all repentant sinners and also reassure them that it is within their power to do so, if they are sincere.

### **1.5 Fundamental Causes of the Decline in Sacramental Confession**

The sacramental life of the Church has gone into decline at different points in Church history. But the decline we are now witnessing particularly in relation to the sacrament of penance has a distinctive feature that makes it not only new but unique, and this crisis in recent years is no secret to anyone.<sup>103</sup> Undeniably many attempts have been made whether by Vatican II or by local dioceses to renew the sacrament of penance particularly in terms of leading to a viable understanding and practice.

As matter of fact the confession queues – at least the long ones have disappeared from the Catholic Church. It appears that many people no longer feel the need of weekly, monthly, sometimes even annual confession. Nevertheless, a greater percentage of Catholics who attend Mass receive Holy Communion every Sunday, more than it used to be four decades ago. What has happened? I can't claim that we shall address all the reasons for the decline

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<sup>102</sup> Gianfranco Girotti, Sacrament of Penance in Crisis, Zenit Daily Email Newsletter, March 6, 2008.

<sup>103</sup> For a detailed analysis of the history and theology of the sacrament, see James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986). Perhaps it might be more accurate to say that it is not so much that "confessions" have declined, rather, such "confessions" now occur in different contexts, for example, on radio and TV talk shows, phone-ins, etc. The traditional way of confessing before the priest has dwindled and yet the psychological necessity of confession remains.



over the years, but it seems to me that very few people would deny that the following changes have taken place.

### 1.5.1 The Loss of the Sense of Sin

Humanity according to the Christian view is rooted in the sense of God who is the Creator, Lord and Father. This sense is linked to humanity's moral conscience which is closely connected with the search and the desire to make responsible choices. Freedom is that which characterizes a person, and it is only then that one makes choices which can be regarded as virtuous or sinful. Sin, unfortunately, is an integral part of the truth about the human person due to the misuse of freedom. In contemporary African society people tend to look to science and modernity to excuse selfish behaviours that take away the peace and harmony of society. This sort of mentality has changed the way of speaking about sin, and yet sin is real. I strongly believe that any kind of perception that tends to neglect the reality of sin and its consequences would be taking away the responsibility human beings have in relation to their decisions which are detrimental to self, family or others. Basically, the sense of sin has been lost because when the moral conscience is weakened, the sense of God is also obscured, and people do whatever they feel like, regardless whether it is right or wrong.

This alarming crisis of the general loss of the sense of sin in the world today is clearly reflected in behaviours such as greed, dishonesty, corruption, alcoholism, broken relationships, exploitation of persons, increased violence, pornography, contraception and abortion. Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, which reaffirmed the Catholics prohibition on artificial means of birth control, triggered a widespread negative reaction to the sacrament of penance.<sup>104</sup> A more recent factor is the scandal of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Bishops themselves have acknowledged the impact of abuse on the sacrament of reconciliation.<sup>105</sup> In his response to the new reports of clerical sexual abuse and the ecclesial cover-up of abuse, Pope Francis urges the Church to be close to victims in solidarity, and to join in acts of prayer and fasting in penance for such "atrocities." Looking ahead to the future, the Holy Father calls for "concrete and effective" measures against those who are

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<sup>104</sup> See James Dallen, "The Confession Crisis: Decline or Evolution?" *Church* 4, no.2 (Summer 1988): 13; David Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 200; and Timothy Brunk, "Consumer Culture and Sacramental Reconciliation," *Worship* 92 (2018): 339. Brunk notes that Catholics who used such methods in good conscience and who judged that they could no longer turn to the Church as a moral guide in sexual ethics increased.

<sup>105</sup> See George Lucas, "Pastoral Letter on Reconciliation" (February 10, 2008); and Timothy Dolan, "The Altar and the Confessional: Pastoral Letter on the sacrament of Penance" (March 17, 2011).

guilty and to ensure that no effort is spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening.<sup>106</sup>

There are also new social sins which have appeared on the horizon of humanity as a result of the unstoppable process of globalization e.g. drug/human trafficking, excessive wealth, widening divide between rich and poor, abuse of power/violation of the fundamental rights of human nature, environmental degradation, immoral scientific experimentation and genetic manipulation. These modern social sins clearly affect our global relationship with each other not only in actions of personal immorality, but also the interrelated aspects of global relationships that immoral actions cause for all of God's children. Arguably, this perception may be seen as a good development in that it highlights the repercussions of sin, especially for our entire society which therefore calls for collective responsibility to fight moral evil. It also denotes a changed understanding of sin away from an individualistic perspective to a greater awareness of social sin. Pope Francis reminds us in his ecological document, *Laudato Si* that the environment is our common home, and that destroying it is a sin often caused by our irresponsible and selfish behaviour (a throwaway culture).<sup>107</sup> It must be said that all humans ought to modify their modern lifestyle by reducing waste, planting trees, separating rubbish, recycling and indeed preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources.

Has the increased presence of evil reduced sin to a state of insignificance? I certainly believe that this is not the case, although it poses a great threat to society's wellbeing. It requires courage to address this complex phenomenon. Pope John Paul II in his 1984 Apostolic Exhortation "*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*," warns that the loss of the sense of sin is a form or fruit of the negation of God. The Holy Father adds that the recognition of individual sinfulness is the first and essential step in rising from our weaknesses and failures so as to reconcile ourselves with God and the Church.<sup>108</sup> This calls for personal responsibility as well as self-determination as individuals and communities especially in choosing to abandon evil and embrace the perfection of love and the fullness of Christian life.

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<sup>106</sup> See Pope Francis, "Summit to Address Clergy's Sexual Abuse of Children" (February 21, 2019).

<sup>107</sup> See Pope Francis, "Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*: On Care for Our Common Home" (May 24, 2015), nos. 5-6, 21-23.

<sup>108</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 29

### 1.5.2 The Complexity of the Human Person and Human Freedom

The human person is and can be understood through actions which should depend on the reality of knowledge and freedom. God created humans as rational beings, conferring on them the dignity of persons who can initiate and control their own actions.<sup>109</sup> For example, a person knows that it is his/her obligation to attend Sunday Mass and so he/she attends not only because it is his/her obligation but rather because he/she has chosen to do so. However, since time immemorial humans have had a complex behavioural system. So, due to the changes in the contemporary structure and dynamics of human civilization as well as the increasing interdependence of the global economic and social environmental demands, understanding humanity is becoming more complex. This is because along the way the conditions of life change, driven by social and economic changes, which themselves involve collective actions.

Modern African society has become more complicated in terms of dealing with the reality of sin and evil. It therefore requires more effective actions and means to counteract this situation other than the traditional practice of storytelling in form of taboos. Otherwise, it might be impossible or at least much less likely for us to maintain social order and peace given the current perception that one has a right to do what he/she likes, regardless of its effects. From an African perspective, human freedom and human dignity often seem to be irreconcilable values. Human freedom, in essence, demands personal autonomy. However, Josiah Cobbah argues that African communitarianism has ingredients that should aid the formulation of positive entitlements to individuals and groups of people.<sup>110</sup> This relationship shapes, and will continue to shape, much of our co-existence as human beings. Hence, human freedom must be assigned some limits if it is to remain a strong foundation for the values of humanity.

### 1.5.3 Double Crisis of Theology and Liturgy

Many people would acknowledge that the disintegration of theology and liturgy is partly responsible for the decline of sacramental practice. This notion of the crisis of the relationship between theology and liturgy builds on the earlier work of Alexander

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<sup>109</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World in *Vatican II: Vol.2, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1982), no. 17.

<sup>110</sup> Josiah A.M. Cobbah, "African Values and the Human Rights Debate: An African Perspective," *Human Rights Quarterly* vol. 9 no. 3 (1987): 310.

Schmemmann who wrote about the need to recover the Church's sense of *lex orandi* as the ground for *lex credendi*. He believed that theology and liturgy are no longer the conscience and the consciousness of the Church in the way of addressing her real life and needs.<sup>111</sup> He further points out:

Theology has ceased to be pastoral in the sense of providing the Church with essential and saving norms; and it has also ceased to be mystical in the sense of communicating to the people of God the knowledge of God which is the very content of life eternal.... This crisis is the growing nominalism of the liturgical life and practice... Liturgical tradition is little by little disappearing from practice while faithfully preserved in liturgical books.<sup>112</sup>

In the context of the sacrament of penance, I would claim that the theology of penance seems to be alienated in practice or simply ignored. Faith in the mystery of the sacrament is no longer identified primarily with the experience of the worshiping community and yet this addresses the centrality of worship in the life, identity and mission of the Catholic Church. According to Schmemmann, this is contrary to the practice of the Eastern Churches for whom faith continues to be the total and living experience of the Church.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, one cannot help being worried by the growing discrepancy between the demands of tradition on the one hand, and the nominalism and minimalism of the liturgical piety and practice on the other. This is evident, for example, with the erosion of some traditions like penitential services, use of confessional boxes especially when provided for, sometimes confessors hearing confessions without observing the use of liturgical vestment i.e. the stole as well as seeking or administering general absolution without following the norms as prescribed in the third rite for reconciliation of penitents with general confession and absolution.<sup>114</sup> To some these developments might be thought negligible, but I submit that this deviation from the traditions which are supposed to be the foundations of the Church's life and the mystery of the sacrament is a crisis in itself whether we acknowledge it or not.

In fact, tensions surrounding the theological understanding and practice of the sacrament of penance are not new. The Church over the centuries has had to address the two extremes of rigorism and laxity. However, even with the promulgation of our present Rite of

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<sup>111</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgy and Theology," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* vol. 17 no. 1 (1972): 87.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>114</sup> On the theological ambiguities surrounding the term "communal penance" and the practice of general confession and absolution, see Kenan B. Osborne, "The Ambiguity of Communal Penance," *Chicago Studies* 34 (1995): 123-35; and for a detailed explanation of the third rite of penance, see *Rite of Penance*, nos. 31-35.

Penance in 1973 which articulated its three forms of celebration, this is an ongoing challenge. Theological ambiguities and practices surrounding private confession and communal penance are still evident if not increased. Finnegan, for example, notes that there is the sense that private celebration of the sacrament is rather old-fashioned and out of place in today's modern culture.<sup>115</sup>

Interestingly, Scott Detisch observes that while the sacrament of penance has advanced theologically in the writings of the Church, it has not moved in practice. He claims that the crisis of penance lies in naively reducing the sacrament to only a private moment with a compassionate confessor, a moment which may be disconnected from the community of believers.<sup>116</sup> The continued crisis in the sacrament of penance can never be effectively resolved until theology informs people's expectations correctly and sees reconciliation as a communal reality.<sup>117</sup> Frank O'Loughlin takes the broad view that the main cause of the crisis is a major cultural shift presently occurring in society at large rather than specific changes or decisions within the Church itself. He, therefore, proposes that the Church needs to rethink its strategy on evangelisation.<sup>118</sup> Monika Hellwig maintains that communal penance celebrations (the rite of reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution) are proving pastorally suitable to people's affinity for hearing in common the biblical word of repentance and the mutual conversion that can take place in conjunction with the sacramental word of forgiveness.<sup>119</sup> However, the juridical obligations of both priest and penitent concerning a valid and licit confession rule out restricting penitents to mentioning just one or two sins deemed representative. Also, it is not proper to generically name only kinds of sins, especially in case of mortal sins, while neglecting the obligation to state the number of times they are committed.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Finnegan, "Postmodern Spiritualities and the Return of Magic," 9.

<sup>116</sup> Scott P. Detisch, "The Sacrament of Reconciliation: In Need of a Second Naivete," *Worship* 77 (2003): 196, 206.

<sup>117</sup> The continued crisis in the Sacrament of penance has been documented by various scholars. See, for instance, John Paul II, "*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*," no. 28; Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 350-65. The study commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices indicates that the decline in the celebration of the sacrament stems from a diminished sense of sin and confusion over what is a sin and what is morally right or wrong. See *Reflections on the Sacrament of Penance in Catholic Life Today: A Study Document* (Washington, D.C: United States Catholic Conference, 1990), 3-4, 6, 8-9. See also Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "Souls and Bodies: The Birth Control Controversy and the Collapse of Confession," 291, 306-7.

<sup>118</sup> Frank O'Loughlin, *The Future of the Sacrament of Penance* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2007), 176, 192- 99.

<sup>119</sup> Monika Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*, 111-12.

<sup>120</sup> See Pope John Paul II, *Misericordia Dei, Norms on Penance*, no.3. Laxity of commitment among clergy compelled the pope to issue norms on penance so as to support the "enduring efficacy" of the sacrament.

It is important to animate the celebration of penance while holding on to its fundamental theological meaning and liturgical practice. Schmemmann insists that theology cannot recover its central place and function within the Church without being rooted again in the actual teaching of the Church. He further stresses that liturgy cannot be rescued from its present decay by hasty, superficial, and purely external reforms aimed at meeting the vague and doubtful “needs” of a mythological “modern man.”<sup>121</sup> In the light of this, I suggest that addressing the decline in sacramental confession ought to be done while upholding both theological and liturgical traditions so as to reveal to the people of today their true nature and destiny. Therefore, the renewal of penance might be guided by the Latin maxim; “*lex orandi, lex credendi*” (as we worship, so we believe). Drawing from these words of the Christian tradition, we can argue for a catechesis that will deepen the faithful’s understanding of the theology of penance and its liturgical norms.

#### **1.5.4 Secularism, Postmodernism and Christianity**

We live at a time when the concepts of sin and forgiveness within the framework of contemporary society have changed. This has resulted in distorted ideas of God, Church, conscience, law, Christian morality and sacramental practice, particularly with regard to penance. Many people no longer seek forgiveness due to the negative influence of modernity, relativism and secularism to the extent that the sacrament of penance seems to have been forgotten. Many Catholics no longer seem to celebrate the sacrament of penance in a manner that signifies an efficacious sign of reconciliation with God and with the Church. Nevertheless, the good news of the salvation of humanity is that God loves us with an everlasting love. We cannot repent and be converted, unless we take sin seriously.

#### **1.6 Myths and Realities Concerning the Sacrament of Penance**

Given that it is almost fifty years since the new Rite of Penance was introduced, one may question the impact the renewal in the sacramental experience has made. Many Catholics still have a misconception of the notion of penance and a magical idea of the sacraments. The two regular experiences are that so many people still seem to approach the sacrament in a stunted, fearful, and even infantile manner. Secondly, there is a joy in some cases when a person truly enters into the depth which the sacrament has to offer, most often during retreats.

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<sup>121</sup> Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Theology,” 100.

Some people use the sacrament simply as a ‘guilt-shedding’ process with little or no intent of contrition or real conversion. They experience no reconciliation or spiritual growth. Some confess the same laundry-list each time and yet are dissatisfied because it does not enable them to overcome the sinfulness they are struggling with. Also, some confessors still preach the ‘petrol-station’ concept of grace, that is, one can never get enough of a good thing. So, frequent confession keeps one continually ‘topped up’. It appears that few people see the intimate connection between the sacrament of penance and the penitential elements of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, which are involved in conversion.

The Council of Trent’s demand for integral confession of sins, according to number and kind, referred only to mortal sins, though when this aspect is taught to children during catechesis it is an issue, since they are trained to think of it as applying to all sins. So, even as adults they engage in a distressing search for everything they can possibly think of, and they are preoccupied with fear to the extent that this obscures their awareness of the tremendous gift of God’s love and forgiveness. Similarly, too much emphasis on getting a penance gives the impression of seeing a priest’s role as a judge and the entire experience of the sacrament as a criminal court where every fault or guilt must be accurately measured and ultimately paid for.

It is also true that some of the reasons why people went to confession have lost their force. For instance, a sense of fear or concern that one was not worthy to receive Communion unless he or she first went to confession, even if one was guilty of no mortal sin, is gone. This leaves large areas of morality untouched because the motivation for going to confession is not there. Even for those still feeling obliged to go, Hellwig notes that the whole event does not touch the reality of their lives in a way that effects reconciliation and conversion.<sup>122</sup> Since the *Humanae Vitae* debate, whilst many people feel free in conscience to practice artificial contraception, they nevertheless feel guilty about not mentioning it in confession. Perhaps, those who confess it ‘shop around’ for a sympathetic priest and end up with a variety of views and attitudes that are confusing. According to Leslie Tentler, issues of gender, generation and culture have played a role in shaping how people participate in the sacrament of penance. This is because some have disagreements over what behaviour constitutes a sin, especially in matters of sexual ethics. After studying North American women’s responses to

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<sup>122</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times, Message of the Sacraments*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Wilmington, De: Michael Glazier, 1984), 106.

Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, Tentler says that issues around contraception affected the celebration of penance since many women who practiced birth control did not regard it as a sin.<sup>123</sup>

Furthermore, sensitive issues among couples such as living together before marriage, divorced and remarried situations as well as polygamy are becoming increasingly common today. This lived reality of human relationships is a critical factor in moral deliberation such that the sacrament of penance has drifted away from people's exploration and formation of their consciences. However, Catholics who find themselves in situations contrary to Catholic teaching and values, much as they may not go to confession, love their faith and some still go to Mass.

### **Where is the Problem?**

Modern African society's paradigm of becoming influenced by modernisation and secularisation has led to a complete shift of people's perception of sin. This has impacted the moral domain in that individuals make decisions with no consideration of the Church's teaching as binding or even relevant. Sin comprises both the individual and communal element. However, many people think of sin simply as an offense against God so that the Church as community is almost totally bypassed both in confession and in absolution. The other challenge, as Pope John Paul II already noted, is the reality that many priests are not particularly gifted or trained to be spiritual directors even though this would lead to a more effective performance in the sacramental practice and ministry of penance.<sup>124</sup>

Notably, individual and integral confession and absolution are the sole ordinary means by which the faithful, conscious of grave sin, are reconciled with God and the Church.<sup>125</sup> However, in this first rite, the idea of penance as reconciliation is arguably obscured and it is difficult to speak of real reconciliation with the Church since reconciliation of individual penitents mainly fosters an individualistic piety. The rite of reconciliation of individual penitents cannot adequately deal with communal responsibility for sinful structures or a sinful climate of opinion.

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<sup>123</sup> Leslie Tentler, "Souls and Bodies: The Birth Control Controversy and the Collapse of Confession" in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey, Francis Oakley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 293.

<sup>124</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 29. Still, one must wonder whether even if such a renewed formation is offered it can be effective given the clerical culture and qualities in among many clergy who may not be well disposed to deal sensitively with people in a variety of pastoral contexts.

<sup>125</sup> See Pope John Paul II, *Misericordia Dei: Norms on Penance*, no. 1a.



## 1. 7 Challenging the Myths and Realities Concerning Sacrament of Penance

The contemporary challenges facing the celebration of the sacrament of penance compels theologians to engage with the new forces of modernisation and secularisation, but without being simply reactive to them. This means that we must not simply repeat formulae that served us well in the past. Rather we must address complex situations in a way that would help bring about a renewed interest and dynamism in the celebration of the sacrament. We have to take a fresh look at the renewal of penance as emphasised by Vatican II. However, the Church maintains that beneath all change there are many realities which do not change, since they have their ultimate foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Nonetheless, the Council wishes to illuminate the mystery of humanity and to cooperate in finding solutions to the outstanding problems of our time.<sup>126</sup>

What is needed, in my view, is a broader and deeper understanding of the conversion process as the basis and goal of the whole Christian way of life. Attempts to revive the sacrament should focus more on returning to the original concepts and practices of penance which Rahner refers to as the ‘forgotten truths concerning the sacrament of penance.’<sup>127</sup> A much more radical approach is needed in the original sense of returning to our roots.

In order to enhance the communal dimension of penance, the second rite for reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution needs to be promoted more as it emphasizes the ecclesial nature of the sacrament or its relation to the community.<sup>128</sup> Only when a strong sense of communal celebration of penance is deeply integrated into the consciousness of the Christian people will the sacrament be seen as an important part of the spiritual journey of every member of the Church. It is by rediscovering the richness of the Church’s long tradition of conversion and reconciliation in the midst of the Christian community that we can achieve a healthy understanding and a better practice of the sacrament for our time. Tackling this subject would perhaps require linking it to the people’s cultural context so as to speak to them more effectively. This, certainly, will not solve all the

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<sup>126</sup> GS, no. 10.

<sup>127</sup> Karl Rahner, “Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance,” in *Theological Investigations vol. 2* trans. Karl-H Kruger (London: Longman & Todd, 1963), 135-74. Also see Karl Rahner, “Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church,” in *Theological Investigations vol. 10*, 125-149.

<sup>128</sup> See *Rite of Penance*, no. 22. However, Curial officials were worried about some pastoral excesses that had been taking place in the US and elsewhere, especially in the areas of communal celebrations and general absolution. For a detailed discussion of the general principles guiding this rite, see Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 205-49.

problems surrounding the sacrament of penance, as that would be too much to expect from any one intervention. But maybe it could slowly but surely push us along in the right direction. I suppose that if it does that much, it will definitely be worth the effort. With this kind of perspective in mind, we shall now look at how African theology and the reconciliatory paradigm might help to enrich the sacrament of penance.

## 1.8 African Reconciliatory Theology and Paradigm: Characteristics: Strengths

### 1.8.1 African Theology of *Ubuntu*<sup>129</sup>

An important resource for social reconciliation that can be drawn from African tradition is the concept of humanity embedded in the anthropological notion of *ubuntu*. It is a “latent force” within human beings which connects them to one another.<sup>130</sup> The notion *ubuntu* is essentially about interconnection and relationship – relationship between people and their descendants, family, clan ancestors and God, as well as with their inheritance, property and produce.<sup>131</sup> *Ubuntu* is the “common denominator” of all brands of African anthropology (as well as religion and philosophy), and can be shared by all people.<sup>132</sup> It constitutes a crucial pillar of an African worldview.<sup>133</sup> Broodryk argues that *ubuntu* ethos is “a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs and beliefs, and has represented the moral guideline of traditional life for centuries.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Janheinz Jahn argues that for Africans the “common denominator” of humankind is “*muntu*.” *Muntu* is an African concept of humanity and all-encompassing ethos underlying African social life and embedded in African anthropology.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> *Ubuntu* is a Zulu word meaning human being. It is used as a concept that affirms the organic wholeness of humanity, i.e., a wholeness realised in and through other people. See Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 39. Also see Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, 96-7.

<sup>130</sup> Moya Radley, “Some Views on the Concept of *Ubuntu*.” Paper Presented at the Workshop of the *Ubuntu* School of Philosophy, Pretoria, September 1995.

<sup>131</sup> Vincent Mulago, “Vital Participation,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 138, 143.

<sup>132</sup> Kgalushi Koka, “What is African Philosophy?” in *Contributions of the African and German Philosophies to the Formation and Creation of Communities in Transition: Report on a Seminar by the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg*. (Johannesburg: Goethe-Institut, 1998), 34.

<sup>133</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 39.

<sup>134</sup> Johann Broodryk, “Ubuntuism: Philosophy of the New South Africa,” Series of lectures held at UNISA. Goethe Institut Johannesburg: files on “Ubuntu,” 1997.

<sup>135</sup> Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, 18. *Muntu* is a manifestation of “*ntu*”, the universal force as such. “*Ntu*” is the universe of forces.” (114) “It is Being itself, the cosmic universal force, which only modern rationalizing thought can abstract from its manifestations. *Ntu* is that force in which Being and beings unite...

In the opinion of the South African scholar Joe Teffo *ubuntu* is the common spiritual ideal by which all sub-Saharan black people give meaning to life and reality. It can be deemed “the spiritual foundation of all African societies.”<sup>136</sup> Historically, it can be traced to the ancient African philosophy of unity in diversity, a philosophy stressing the unity or oneness of the whole of creation which originated originally in Egypt and Ethiopia.<sup>137</sup> It is both a tool of social analysis and a way of life. “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” is a catchy slogan which John Mbiti offers to sum up African communal lifestyle.<sup>138</sup>

According to Battle, Desmond Tutu is a proponent of “*ubuntu* theology.” This is a theology emphasising that all human beings are created in the image of God. The latter turns the concept of *ubuntu* into a theological concept in which human beings are called to be persons because we are made in the image of God.<sup>139</sup> Mulago claims that many African theologians are convinced that:

The Bantu principle of vital participation can become the basis of a specifically African theological structure. ... Communion as participation in the same life and the same means of life will, we believe, be the centre of this ecclesiological theology.<sup>140</sup>

For Mbiti, African traditional religion (which often informs African theology) is quite compatible with the message and worldview of the Bible and can enhance our view of God.<sup>141</sup> Other theologians, too, perceive *ubuntu* to be the African equivalent of the theology of the *imago Dei*.<sup>142</sup> For instance, Koka asserts that *ubuntu* is a special “embodiment of

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*ntu* expresses, not the effect of these forces, but their being” (101). The other manifestations of *ntu* are *Kintu*, *Hantu* and *Kuntu*. *Muntu* is “an entity which is a force that has control over Nommo”, “the magic power of the world” (121). *Kintu* is those forces “which cannot act for themselves and which can become active only on the command of a *Muntu*.” *Hantu* is “a force which localizes spatially and temporally every event and very ‘motion’” (102). *Kuntu* is an action that someone performs, such as laughing (103).

<sup>136</sup> Joe Teffo, “Ethics in African Humanism.” Lecture held at Goethe Institut Johannesburg: files on “*Ubuntu*.” (1995b).

<sup>137</sup> Mathole Mostshekga, “What is African Philosophy? The Evolutionary Path of Human Thought from Eternity to the Present” in *Contributions of the African and German Philosophies to the Formation and Creation of Communities in Transition: Report on a Seminar by the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg*, 24.

<sup>138</sup> See John Mbiti, “Eschatology” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, eds. Kwesi A Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 108-9.

<sup>139</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 64.

<sup>140</sup> Mulago, “Vital Participation,” 157. However, there are also critics of Tutu’s theology, e.g. Itumeleng Mosala and James Cone. See also Battle, 155f.

<sup>141</sup> John S. Mbiti, “African Theology,” in *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, eds. S. Maimela & A. König (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 142

<sup>142</sup> See for example Ambrose Moyo, “Reconciliation and Forgiveness in an Unjust Society,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 41 (2002): 298.

God's image and likeness, his power and divinity in humanity."<sup>143</sup> *Ubuntu* defines that "quality about a person which elevates him/her to a plane very near to godliness," claims Mogoba.<sup>144</sup> In African thought, spiritual life and biological life meet in the human being.<sup>145</sup>

In Tutu's view, "the reality of *ubuntu* is bound up in Jesus, who creates new relationships in the world."<sup>146</sup> It is seen as a metaphor for human participation in the divine life; fullness of humanity only becomes manifest in community.<sup>147</sup> Tutu believes that God created us in such a way that we need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.<sup>148</sup> This implies that human identities are uniquely made to be more cooperative than competitive. Tutu basically perceives *ubuntu* as life in relation to God and neighbour.<sup>149</sup> *Ubuntu* theology enables us to restore humanity and dignity to both perpetrators and victims of violence, and to create a sense of mutuality among humans who have been alienated from one another.<sup>150</sup> In fact, *ubuntu* is the force that is able to bridge the terrible rifts created by historic injustices and inhumanities. For instance, Antjie Krog maintains that it is a force that counterbalances the evil of apartheid.<sup>151</sup>

### 1.8.2 The Importance of Community and Participation

In *Ubuntu* theology, community is understood as care for others.<sup>152</sup> *Ubuntu* settlements are an interdependent community in which diversity is cherished. They encourage transformation into a new identity akin to the integration of cultures.<sup>153</sup> Perhaps this is why Africans have a strong sense of community and belonging. African society is built around family with community, clan or tribal/ethnic ties. The community remains a strong and organic institution which shapes or moulds the way of life of everyone.

Human community is vital for each individual's acquisition of personhood, self-identity and the sustenance of his/her existence. The community is a fundamental human good because it advocates "life in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual

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<sup>143</sup> Koka, "What is African Philosophy," 34.

<sup>144</sup> Stanley M. Mogoba, "The Erosion of the Bapedi Religious World. A Study of the Impact of Christianity and Western Life on Bapedi Religion" in *Ancestor Religion in Southern Africa: Proceedings of a Seminar on Ancestor Belief*, ed. H. Kuckertz (Transkei: Lumko Missiological Institute, 1981), 56.

<sup>145</sup> Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, 107

<sup>146</sup> Battle, 73.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>151</sup> Antjie Krog, *A Change of Tongue* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2003), 159.

<sup>152</sup> Battle, 48.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 40, 42, 44, 45.

consideration, aid and of interdependence.”<sup>154</sup> *Ubuntu* fosters solidarity, participation, fecundity and sharing in life, friendship, healing and hospitality.<sup>155</sup> Because of this, Sogolo concludes that:

There seems to be a consensus among such scholars as Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor and a host of others that man in Africa is not just a social being but a being that is inseparable from his community.<sup>156</sup>

The universal philosophical concept of “*ubuntu*” includes all human beings, all races and nations, uniting them into a new universal ‘familiness’ where individuals, families, communities and nations discover that they are an integral part(s) of each other.<sup>157</sup> *Ubuntu* is “participatory humanity,” striving to seek and foster consensus and unanimity among people.<sup>158</sup> It carries with it powerful resources for social reconciliation. It ultimately prepares the way for reconciliation in the context of justice.<sup>159</sup> Wiredu insists that a fundamental trait of traditional African culture is its infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation.<sup>160</sup>

The African belief that a community is the primary arena of interaction between humans and God may in fact be closer to the Biblical message than Western metaphysics.<sup>161</sup> John Milbank insists that the idea of the community is thoroughly Christian, and demonstrates that Christ overcomes evil in community with his followers, providing a memory of perfect community and a new language of community.<sup>162</sup> The typical community is not only a prime example of brokenness and wickedness; but a harmonious community may be home to God’s self-revelation. Human beings prosper and grow because of the support of a community. In light of this Desmond Tutu declares:

A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who

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<sup>154</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, 76.

<sup>155</sup> Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 55.

<sup>156</sup> Godwin Sogolo, *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1993), 191.

<sup>157</sup> Koka, “What is African Philosophy?”, 34.

<sup>158</sup> Joe Teffo, “Towards a Conceptualisation of Ubuntu.” Lecture held at Goethe Institut Johannesburg: Files on Ubuntu, 1994a.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 49-50.

<sup>161</sup> John Mibank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to unasked Questions” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 273

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 274.

they are.<sup>163</sup>

Given the great sense of community, a major theme of African theology is the sacredness of life and, flowing from that, respect for the human person or human dignity is to be preserved at all costs.<sup>164</sup> African theology is well grounded in the African world-view, especially with regard to how Africans perceive and locate themselves in the interplay and complexity of inter-relationships – loosely translated as the universe. In support of this view, Sidhom writes:

Existence-in-relation sums up the pattern of the African way of life. And this encompasses within it a great deal, practically the whole universe. The African maintains a vital relationship with nature, God the deity, ancestors, the tribe, the clan, the extended family, and himself. Into each avenue he enters with his whole being, without essentially distinguishing the existence of any boundaries dividing one from the other.<sup>165</sup>

African theological structure is about participation – a principle which stresses the interconnection of all forces and maintains and upholds the web of relations. This is arguably the “cohesive moral value of the Bantu community.”<sup>166</sup> Since all participate in the system of relationships, it is cohesive, solid, interrelated and unified. The ‘unity of life’ is the centre of cohesion and solidarity.<sup>167</sup> Participation is the element of connection which binds together individuals and groups. It fosters solidarity, friendship, healing and hospitality. This gives ultimate meaning not only to unity (which is personal to each individual) but also to unity in multiplicity, that total concentric harmonic unity of the visible and invisible worlds.<sup>168</sup> Communion as participation in the same life and the same means of life is indeed the centre of this ecclesiological theology.<sup>169</sup>

Although “communalism” might be deemed the dominant “social theory” in Africa,<sup>170</sup> the concept of the community is not exclusive of the notion of the individual. Gyekye cites an Akan proverb to explain the relationship between the two: “The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand

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<sup>163</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), 35.

<sup>164</sup> Swailem Sidhom, “The Theological Estimate of Man,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 110.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>166</sup> Mulago, “Vital Participation,” 137.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>170</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 154.

individually when closely approached.”<sup>171</sup> The implication is that a cluster of trees is indeed a unit, distinguishable as a unified whole. The unit is undeniably made up of separate, autonomous entities. In other words, the community does not deny individuality, just as individuals cannot deny belonging to a community.<sup>172</sup> In his own words Gyekye says:

In African social thought, human beings are regarded not as individuals but as groups of created beings inevitably and naturally interrelated and interdependent. This does not necessarily lead to the submerging of the initiative or personality of the individual, for after all, the well-being and success of the group depend on the unique qualities of its individual members – but individuals whose consciousness of their responsibility to the group is ever present because they identify themselves with the group.<sup>173</sup>

Some writers have failed to comprehend the nature of the relation between communalism and individualism or how these concepts really operate in African societies. In Africa, these concepts are not considered antithetical, as they tend to be in European (both capitalist and communist) philosophies. In fact, the African community defines the person, and not some isolated static quality of (individual) rationality, will or memory.<sup>174</sup> Life together is the embodiment of an African understanding of what it means to be human.<sup>175</sup> Fellowship is considered the most important or primary human need.<sup>176</sup> The suffering of one is conceived as the suffering of all. Battle argues that suffering is central to African religiosity, and that the theology of the cross readily takes root in Africa.<sup>177</sup> *Ubuntu* may give rise to actions of self-sacrifice by individuals for the sake of the larger group. This is because *ubuntu* strives for the harmony and security offered by the group.<sup>178</sup> It rests on the pillars of genuine caring and spontaneous sharing.<sup>179</sup> Taking into consideration the most pertinent

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 158

<sup>172</sup> Such a view is similar to that advanced by the Biblical witness. See 1 Corinthians 12. In Pauline thought, the faith community is considered to be a body – the “body of Christ,” i.e. it is one single interdependent unit, functioning as an autonomous entity. However, the different parts or members of the body are considered to have separate functions and purposes (gifts) which all together serve the entire body.

<sup>173</sup> Gyekye, 210.

<sup>174</sup> A. I. Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” in R. A. Wright, ed. *African Philosophy* (New York: University Press of America, 1979), 158.

<sup>175</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio, “Telling One Another Stories: Toward A Theology of Reconciliation,” 38.

<sup>176</sup> E. D. Prinsloo, “Western and African Philosophy,” in *Contributions of the African and German Philosophies to the Formation and Creation of Communities in Transition: Report on a Seminar by the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg*, 53.

<sup>177</sup> See Michael Battle, *Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 6.

<sup>178</sup> Gabriel Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: Balkema, 1976), 33, 37.

<sup>179</sup> Broodryk, “Ubuntuism: Philosophy of the New South Africa,” 1997.

ideals of *ubuntu*, one must agree with Teffo that its basis is love.<sup>180</sup> The African notion of *ubuntu* nurtures and exacts the skills of how to relate properly.

For Koka, African communal life values the ideals of ‘*ujamaa*’ (collective effort and responsibility), ‘*masakhane*’ (let us build each other/build together) and ‘*ukuhlonipa*’ (respect, discipline and good behaviour).<sup>181</sup> These ideals give rise to actions of genuine caring, harmony and reconciliation within the group/community. The idea of reparation in this context does not mean a restoration of a damage done to God or to the spirits but to the community. The Supreme Being cannot really be directly affected or made to suffer damage or loss as a result of man’s actions. To suppose such a thing would be to insult the Supreme Being. The same can be said about the spirits. They are not believed to be really injured by man’s actions, since they are beyond that. In the mind of the Bantu, reparation consists primarily in taking the necessary steps to avert negative effects so as to restore the disturbed order. Morality, therefore, has a conciliatory character.

### 1.8.3 Fostering Morality and Reconciliation

Given the characteristics of *ubuntu* theology, Teffo rightly argues that humans must be regarded as social moral beings.<sup>182</sup> Actually, every effort at maintaining solidarity, improving communication and sustaining relationships is an exercise in increasing the vital force of enhancing people’s peace and life. Life is viewed as a structure of roles and functions. Hammond-Tooke proposes that:

Moral behaviour is ... essentially concerned with ‘good actions.’ How did the Southern Bantu conceive of the ‘good man?’ Firstly, the good man was one who did not disturb the delicate balance between society and nature.<sup>183</sup>

Morality has a social and humanistic basis. Gyekye says that this does not derive from divine pronouncements, but from considerations of human welfare and interests.<sup>184</sup> All ethical and value systems exist to reinforce unity and communal life as well as to encourage mutual participation. Good actions must bring about or lead to social wellbeing. African

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<sup>180</sup> See Joe Teffo "An African Perspective on Intercultural Communication," in *Western Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, ed. Jorn Rusen, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1999), 293. Similarly, Leopold Senghor claims that love is “the essential energy” in Africa. See Alyward Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality*, 53.

<sup>181</sup> Kgalushi Koka, “What is African Philosophy, 31.

<sup>182</sup> Joe Teffo, “The Concept of Ubuntu as a Cohesive Moral Value,” Lecture held at an Ubuntu Workshop, Pretoria, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1994.

<sup>183</sup> David Hammond-Tooke, *The Roots of Black South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993), 97.

<sup>184</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 208



ethics may be viewed as a form of character ethics.<sup>185</sup> The aim and purpose of ethics is nothing other than the restoration of relationships within the immediate community because community life is constantly threatened by the disturbances and forces of chaos. Such forces are evil because they disrupt “the otherwise normal flow of life and force of the universe.”<sup>186</sup> Sin is associated with the idea of evil or the forces of destruction. It includes anything that causes disharmony and disturbance – be it socially, physically, or environmentally. Disruption caused by sin must be counteracted through correct behaviour, thus setting relations right. Taboos, prohibitions and bans are to be understood as counterbalancing forces that seek to diminish the social order.<sup>187</sup>

African theology is, in fact, a moral or ethical theology that dictates a certain way of living and relating which enhances fullness of life. Africans quickly draw ethical conclusions about the thoughts, words and actions of human beings. They do so well in relation to cosmological events by asking questions. These include: Does a particular event promote life? If so, it is good, just, ethical, desirable and divine. Or does it diminish life in any way? If that is the case, then it is wrong, bad, unethical, unjust, or detestable.<sup>188</sup>

What traditional Christianity calls sin or evil is better expressed in African theology by the concepts of wrongdoing, badness or the destruction of life. Although abstract notions of sin do exist in the African religious consciousness, the African moral perspective is more concrete and pragmatic. The African concept of sin is conditional. Sin does not exist in an independent sense, but always within the community and creation. Sin depends on the context and the community, and not only with regard to other-worldly norms.<sup>189</sup>

The Bantu see sin as a breach of or a threat to the community.<sup>190</sup> However, sin is conditional – determined by the context, the actors, time and place, etc.<sup>191</sup> An offence is not seen in isolation from the broader context. So, an offender does not stand alone in guilt.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 147-48. Good ethics and morality are measured by conformity to tribal ethics and laws; yet violation against tribal custom is not sin against God but against the community.

<sup>186</sup> Sidhom, “The Theological Estimate of Man,” 113.

<sup>187</sup> “The social order is based on the ontological order. Every organisation, political or other, which offends this principle, could not be recognised by the Bantu as orderly or normal. ... The social order is founded on vital union, the growth of the inner self and interdependence of vital influence. Ethics and law follow logically from the conception of beings and their ontic connection.” See Mulago, “Vital Participation,” 150.

<sup>188</sup> Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 77, 285.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>190</sup> Thias Selaelo Kgatla, “Dark Valleys of Death and Shining Stars in Traditional African Religions,” *NGTT* 36 (1995): 126.

<sup>191</sup> Philippus F. Theron, *African Traditional Cultures and the Church* (Pretoria: IMER, 1996), 118-19.

His/her family and indeed the community share in it.<sup>192</sup> Kgatla explains that sin is perceived as:

A transgression of the ethical laws and norms derived from the ancestors. Sin constitutes an offence against the human group as a whole, and still further against the ancestral spirits. Sin is inherently the destruction of the group's solidarity so that a person sins, not against God, but against others.<sup>193</sup>

The African world-view is that the community does not only include human beings, but also nature, the world of the spirits, ancestors and even God. Du Toit calls it a kinship with the universe:

African ontology considers God, spirits, humans, animals, plants and inanimate creation to be one. To break up this unity is to destroy one or more of these modes of existence, and to destroy one is, in effect, to destroy them all.<sup>194</sup>

This means that humans' relationships with one another influence all relations in the interdependent universe. An individual who offends his or her neighbour is simultaneously and inevitably in conflict with other human beings or nature. Likewise, natural disasters point to tension or disharmony in the community. An offence against another human, element of nature, or ancestors, is seen as an offence against God. Put differently, service to God demands, first and foremost, service to the community. So, *ubuntu* ethos is not only an anthropological principle but provides the basis for African ethics and morality as well. In African society, ethics is a structured system in which everyone knows where he/she stands.<sup>195</sup> The strong pattern of community life is an effective mechanism for building a meaningful reconciliation process based on communal restorative justice. Hence, Teffo suggests that *ubuntu* is a social ethic with a reconciling vision for all humanity.<sup>196</sup>

#### 1.8.4 The Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions of Reconciliation

African theology is hailed by many as having an important perspective and indispensable contribution with regard to Christian thinking about God.<sup>197</sup> The theological concept of *ubuntu* may be understood as theology from below as it emphasises horizontal relationships built on the importance of the community more than the individual, and this influences

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<sup>192</sup> Sidhom, 112.

<sup>193</sup> Kgatla, "Dark Valleys of Death and Shining Stars in Traditional African Religions," 126.

<sup>194</sup> Cornel Du Toit, "African Hermeneutics," in *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, eds. S. Maimela & A. König (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 398.

<sup>195</sup> Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," 112.

<sup>196</sup> Teffo, 1999), 299.

<sup>197</sup> Arno Meiring, "As Below, so above: A Perspective on African Theology," *HTS Theological Studies* 63 no.2 (2007): 733.

people's thinking and speaking about God.<sup>198</sup> In fact, the particular emphasis of the horizontal human relationships is so strong that it supposes that God is also part of this world.<sup>199</sup> This is because African theology is much more this-worldly focused, and views the affairs of humans as all-important.

African people approach the world holistically and believe that all creatures in creation are linked. When reconciliation is needed, the solution is to reconcile on a horizontal level, and to expect that the vertical dimension will follow.<sup>200</sup> This is the reverse of the traditional way of thinking about our relationship with God, predominantly taught by the Western theology (that the "above" determines the "below"). Western theology, with some exceptions,<sup>201</sup> emphasises that the vertical dimension precedes the horizontal. Our relationship with God determines our relationship with the rest of creation. A broken relationship with God leads to strife among humans and a struggle against nature. Similarly, our relationship with one another can only be restored by first being reconciled to God.<sup>202</sup>

Western Christianity seems to be more otherworldly inclined and focuses more on the vertical dimension than on the horizontal. This does not, however, mean that Western theologians do not take the horizontal dimension seriously. The relationship between fellow human beings is as important for Christians as their relationship to God and is a fundamental truth in the teachings of Christ (Mt 22:37-39). But it always follows from the spiritual relationship.

Addressing the question of reconciliation, Van der Kooi argues that the Christian concept of reconciliation is built on the presupposition that "a real and comprehensive restoration of mutually amicable human relations has its ground and motive in the reconciliation of God with humankind."<sup>203</sup> The healing of the relationship with God brings about human reconciliation on social, economic and political levels. All this is the work of

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 737.

<sup>200</sup> See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1996), 101; Winston N. Ndungane, *A World with a Human Face: A Voice from Africa* (London: SPCK, 2003), 102.

<sup>201</sup> There of course many exceptions, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal theology, the Social Gospel Movement of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Life and Work Movement and the open, this-worldly stance of the participants in the Genevan Ecumenical movement and the Liberation theology.

<sup>202</sup> See Wolfgang Huber, "Conflict and Reconciliation," *Theologia Viatorum* 17 (1990): 43; C. Van der Kooi, "Three Models of Reconciliation: A Christian Approach," in *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation*, ed. J.D Gort, H. Jansen & H.M Vroom (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 105-6; G. J Steyn, "A Framework for Understanding Reconciliation in the so-called General Epistles," in *Friendship and Love where there were None: Biblical Perspectives on Reconciliation*, ed. J.G Van der Watt, D. J Human & G. J Steyn (Pretoria: IMER, 2005), 133.

<sup>203</sup> Van der Kooi, "Three Models of Reconciliation," 104.

God who in Christ reconciled us to himself, and who entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation (2Cor 5:18 - God reconciles, we are ambassadors). This religious vertical focus, where it exists, may be due to the very strong undertone of dualism that still permeates Western Christianity.<sup>204</sup>

African thought reverses the order. According to African theology, our horizontal relations within the community constituting the “below” determine our relationship with God – the “above.” Hence, reconciliation is seen as deriving from humans having been reconciled. Thorpe says that African religion is very much part of the society in which it is found. It is oriented towards this world and has a clear horizontal dimension. But, African religion also entails an awareness of the spiritual, invisible dimension of life:

Trees, rivers streams, rain are more than merely things to be utilised. They have a spiritual quality which unites them to human beings in a greater cosmic whole. The ancestors or living-dead continue to be a spiritual part of this greater cosmos even after they have ceased to exist as a physical part. The creator, and even creation itself, belong to this vertical or spiritual dimension of African traditional religion (ATR).<sup>205</sup>

Even though a theology from below indicates that African thought has a partiality towards horizontal relationships, Africans do take the vertical dimension seriously. But their perception of the vertical dimension regards God as being part of the community of all things. Nonetheless, I think that this theological dimension of horizontal and vertical reconciliation enriches the Christian perspective with regard to sin and reconciliation.

African theology generally perceives sin as an offence against the community. If humans mistreat one another, it displeases God. When they reconcile, they are by the same token also reconciled with God. According to E. Zulu, African society is marked by a willingness to forgive and not to avenge, and there is no emphasis on punishment but rather on making friends again.<sup>206</sup> Lederach claims that in order to provide an environment for sustained reconciliation and peace to thrive, an “infrastructure for peacebuilding” needs to be built.<sup>207</sup> This infrastructure is made up of a web of people, their relationships and activities, and the social mechanisms necessary to sustain peace at all levels of society. The African anthropological resource of *ubuntu* provides such an infrastructure and champions a

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<sup>204</sup> W. Kistner, “The ‘Imprinting’ of Violence: A Challenge to Liberation Theology,” *South African Outlook* 118 (1988): 103.

<sup>205</sup> Shirley A. Thorpe, *African Traditional Religions* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991), 5.

<sup>206</sup> E. Zulu, “Reconciliation from an African Perspective: An Alternative view,” *Old Testament Essays* 11 (1998): 191.

<sup>207</sup> Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, 84.

paradigm of reconciliation that is also cultural. So, the Bantu perspective of reconciliation creates a “spiritual culture” which has the potential to pave the way for a social scenario of co-operation and respect, harmony and peace. Put differently, *ubuntu* theology promotes “an African spirituality of compassionate concern”<sup>208</sup> that can contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Christian concept of reconciliation and penance. The notion of how the African reconciliatory theology and paradigm can be a resource for enriching the sacramental confession will be explored further in chapter five of this dissertation.

### 1.8.5 A Critical Analysis of African Theology and Reconciliatory Paradigm

It is important to acknowledge that the African belief in the community as reflected in the *ubuntu* concept has some drawbacks. Otherwise we fall into the trap of glorifying African theology and its reconciliatory paradigm beyond what is proper. An extremist view of *ubuntu* holds that humanity manifests itself only in community, and that an individual disconnected from the community is nothing.<sup>209</sup> This can have two negative implications. First, persons can be marginalised by virtue of their individuality. Van Niekerk recognises that the African community spirit sometimes entails a dark side, such as harshness or unkindness against dissenting individuals who do not agree with the dictates of the community.<sup>210</sup> Such instances can lead to destructive behaviour or marginalisation of those individuals and yet it could simply be seen as a justifiable punishment or rehabilitation in order to protect the norms of society. Perhaps the most extreme form of such cruelty is when people are accused of witchcraft and are rejected (or ‘hunted’) even though no clear evidence of their guilt exists.<sup>211</sup> If anyone is marginalised for reasons other than social disruption or danger, it is cruel and unacceptable.

Although the African communal reconciliatory paradigm may rightfully be deemed the dominant “social theory” in Africa, Gyekye favours moderate communitarianism and cautions against an extreme or radical view of communitarianism, where individual rights are reduced to secondary status.<sup>212</sup> For this reason, he affirms the importance of both communal

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<sup>208</sup> Battle, *Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 123ff.

<sup>209</sup> John Taylor, *Du findest mich wenn du den Stein aufhebst*: Übersetzt aus dem Englischen (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1965), 83.

<sup>210</sup> Attie Van Niekerk, “Ubuntu and Religion.” Goethe Institut Johannesburg: files on “Ubuntu,” 1994.

<sup>211</sup> See Thias Selaelo Kgatla, “Crossing Witchcraft Barriers in South Africa: Exploring Witchcraft Accusations: Causes and Solutions: A Research Report,” Utrecht University: Faculty of Social Sciences, 2003.

<sup>212</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 35ff.

values and individuality, and sees them as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.<sup>213</sup> Undoubtedly, radical communalism (particularly in terms of abuse or eradication of individual rights and freedoms) undermines African theology and its reconciliatory paradigm.

In addition, individuals' personal responsibilities and duties may become eroded or relegated to the background. In certain instances, the African reconciliatory paradigm of *ubuntu* might bring about a clash between the sensibilities of group solidarity and personal responsibility. Tutu remarks that an extreme expression of *ubuntu* encourages conservatism and conformity. He adds that this undermines individual freedom and restrains personal expression, responsibility and initiatives especially in contexts of authoritarian rule.<sup>214</sup> In cases like this there is a need to emphasise each individual's inalienable rights and obligations. In relation to the sacrament of penance, if communal penitential celebration is elevated above the rite for individual reconciliation, this may result in laziness or lack of individual effort, responsibility and duty, i.e. 'cheap grace.'

Besides its ethos of inclusivity and acceptance, the *ubuntu* concept may at times become exclusive of "other" ethnic groups. This is because family, kin, clan and tribe which represent the inner circle of the African community spirit can descend into nepotism. In fact, nepotism and tribalism have been a great problem in Africa since people want to separate themselves in little groups. Such clusters can become exclusive, Koka admits.<sup>215</sup> Again, this stems from a natural desire to show respect and kindness to one's closest community members. Sadly, it is unfair to those who do not have family, kin or clan members in powerful positions, as they may never be able to have justice or representation or to occupy those places themselves. It is common knowledge that nepotism and tribalism have potential negative outcomes. Such a narrow-minded understanding of African communitarianism causes hostility and ill-feeling, not to mention bribery, corruption and a general break-down in the broader community.

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>214</sup> See Battle, xiii, 51.

<sup>215</sup> Kgalushi Koka, Interview at the Karaites Institute of Afrikology, King-Luthuli Transformation Centre, Johannesburg on 07.07.2004. Koka is an Africanist who strongly rejects such forms of exclusivism. He deems them decidedly un-African, although he acknowledges that some Africans are guilty of them.

## 1.9 Conclusion

An African theologian has remarked that if philosophy is the ‘*ancilla theologiae*,’ then ethnology is the ‘*ancilla theologiae Africanae*.’<sup>216</sup> This draws our attention to the importance of situating theology in the authentic life context of the people for whom that theology is destined. Vatican II spoke of the need for a better integration of philosophy and theology.<sup>217</sup> Interestingly, more recently, African philosophy has proven to be useful and relevant in developing a really adapted theology.<sup>218</sup>

If we wish to understand the link between sin and reconciliation, African theological insights can be valuable because they provide refreshingly undogmatic views. The focus is decidedly this-worldly and addresses the problem of evil and conflict with the intention of offering solutions and explanations. Without a sense of relative superiority, Africans merely say that each African consideration is worthwhile and that we can each learn from each other. In that regard, one might suggest that African theology and the reconciliatory paradigm can also apply to the West and to the rest of humanity and is therefore not only relevant to Africa. This is so because the need for each other, for example, to form alliances (social, political, economic, religious etc.) is common to all human beings, especially in the context of increased globalisation.

Given the characteristics of African theology and the reconciliatory paradigm, I strongly argue that the emphasis on communal reconciliation is compatible with the Catholic Church’s reconciliatory tradition and that this might help to reinvigorate the practice of sacramental confession. In other words, the communal dimension of dealing with sin and reconciliation provided for by African custom and practice has great potential for strengthening the understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of penance. Karl Rahner in his notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* (drawing on the writings of the Church Fathers) emphasizes this ecclesiological aspect of the sacrament whereby the Church is called be a community of sinners reconciled with one another and with God, since reconciliation with the Church manifests reconciliation with God.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Charles Nyamiti, “African Theology: Its Nature, Problems and Methods,” *Spearhead* 19 (AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1971): 33.

<sup>217</sup> See *Optatam Totius*, no. 14, 15, 16; *Ad Gentes*, no. 22; *Gaudium et Spes*, no.44.

<sup>218</sup> Aylward Shorter, “African Contribution to World Church,” (Paper 22, Kampala, Gaba Publications, 1972), 2.

<sup>219</sup> Rahner, “Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance”, 168-173. Also see Karl Rahner, “Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church,” 125-149.

There is no doubt that the question of renewal of penance has certainly been addressed over the years by Catholic theologians. So, looking at this issue again is not to condemn the past or to say that no emphases like these have ever existed before. There is a strong sense of the social character of sin and forgiveness, along with the responsibility of mutual correction and acceptance. However, the Church has traditionally found it difficult to admit its sinfulness concretely, and still finds this difficult. The challenge, then, is how to achieve a credible experience of a penitent Church, of a reconciled and reconciling community.<sup>220</sup> I, therefore, think that Rahner's contribution on penance is compelling and certainly warrants revisiting. There is surely no full proof, but it is likely that a dialogue between Rahner's notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* and African reconciliatory theology, particularly in highlighting the communal approach, might augur well for the future of the sacrament of penance especially given that its celebration has dwindled significantly. Accordingly, we will now explore Karl Rahner's theology of the sacrament of penance in the following chapters.

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<sup>220</sup> This point is well made by Raphael Gallagher, "New Life for a 'Great Sacrament'," *The Furrow* 47 (1996): 199-205. A similar reflection is offered by Declan Marmion, "The Unloved Sacrament: The Demise of the *Sacramentum Paenitentiae*," *Milltown Studies* 43 (1999), 55-57.



## CHAPTER TWO

### SIN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN THE THEOLOGY OF RAHNER

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores Rahner's understanding of the nature of humanity and human freedom, and how these phenomena relate to the reality of the existence of sin in the world especially with regard to the human response to God's goodness and mercy. We will examine Rahner's transcendental analysis of humanity and how human nature can be distinguished from all other natures. More specifically we shall look at key concepts such as the supernatural existential (Rahner's interpretation of the mode in which grace makes itself present to every human being born in the world), and the equally fundamental human existence of freedom and responsibility.

As a basis for understanding Rahner's theology of sin, we shall attempt to bring together two themes: the impact of sin which amounts to destroying humanity and then the necessity for its remission. Within this context we shall look at how Rahner deals with the reality of the existence of sin in the world and then its remission, particularly from the perspective of having a dialogue between God and humanity. This reflects the Christological approach of his theology, influenced by a Thomistic understanding of the relationship between spirit and matter. The implication of contextualizing sin within the overall development of Rahner's theology is to highlight how it contributes to an understanding of the sacrament of penance. His penance studies retrieve the ecclesial dimensions of sin, i.e. the Church's dual duty to reject and to forgive sin.

#### 2.2 Rahner's Notion of the Nature of Humanity

##### 2.2.1 Human Nature and Grace

Rahner's theology has been referred to as transcendental anthropology. He argues that theology and anthropology always go together in that we can't say anything about God without also saying something about human beings, and vice versa. His approach to theology is rooted in the anthropological and experiential elements that allow humans to transcend their basic nature.<sup>1</sup> Just as Copernicus established that the sun, not the universe, is the centre

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1978), 52-3.

around which everything revolves, so Kant maintained that the human person is the centre from which all created ideas flow. Rahner accepts this person-centred way of thinking and its implications. The human being is supernaturally elevated, free, historical, knowing, judging, deciding and a real being. All other created beings are to be measured against this particular being.<sup>2</sup> His distinctive theological anthropology presents humanity as deeply connected to the mystery of God on an ontological level within everyday experiences of life. Rahner maintains that even though his method is indebted to both Kant's transcendentalism and Aquinas' philosophical anthropology, it goes so far beyond them that it deserves to be acknowledged as properly theological.

The relationship between nature and grace has been traditionally presented in such a way that the two elements are seen as two carefully distinguished levels, one superimposed on the other. In this sense, the orientation of nature towards grace may be viewed in a negative way. When God's grace is presented in this way, it can be seen as superstructure added to the soul or even as an ornament and not as the real centre of man's existence. Rahner believes that God's grace is a reality in every person with the result that all people are dynamically inclined in the direction of God. Karl H. Weger, interpreting Rahner's concept of grace, writes:

We cannot say ... then, what man ... would be without God's grace, because we have never experienced ourselves without that grace, and because we are also determined by that grace even when we reject it in sin or guilt.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand Rahner's notion of human nature, it will be useful to describe the traditional view of the human condition. Anne Muggeridge describes it as the belief that we are all fallen – we are equally stricken, our intellect darkened, our will weakened and inclined to evil, our bodies subject to disease and death.<sup>4</sup> St Thomas Aquinas remarks:

Human nature may be looked at in two ways; first in its integrity, as it was in our first parent before sin; secondly, as it is corrupted in us ... In the state of corrupted nature, man falls short even of what he can do by his nature, so that he is unable to fulfil it by his own natural powers... And thus ... man needs a gratuitous strength superadded to natural strength ... for two reasons, in the state of corrupt nature, viz, in order to be healed, and furthermore in order to carry our works of supernatural virtue, which are meritorious.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Man of Today and Religion," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Heinz Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Roche Muggeridge, *The Desolate City* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 189.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q. 109, Art. 2.

This view is supported by the belief that Christ atoned for us to God which gives us a second chance and destroys despair.

For Aquinas, God created mankind in grace and human reason is subjected to God – not merely as a natural gift, but a supernatural endowment of grace. If we may attempt to paraphrase St Thomas, it is this controlling balance of human reason and will by virtue of grace that allowed the human being in his or her original state to be at peace with God. And it was this balance that was destroyed by the original alienation or sin.

In Rahner’s view the human person is that self-transcending spirit who in the act of knowing or willing implicitly experiences both itself as subject (that is free) and something of the ultimate structure of reality. The person’s self-disposition is necessarily related to the gracious mystery, that is, God.<sup>6</sup> This is the case because he believes that the human experience of transcendence is ultimately a spiritual experience, or, in Christian terms, an experience of grace. Rahner assumes a whole, intact, integral, and uncorrupted (unfallen) nature of man since creation, whenever that might have been (even though he questions whether or not mankind began with an Adam and an Eve).<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Rahner rejects the traditional view of the nature of humanity in two respects: first of all, he denies that supernatural grace is ‘added to’ basic human nature. Secondly, he denies that there was any rupture of the balance between grace, reason, soul and body.<sup>8</sup> However, it would be a serious mistake to perceive Rahner’s theology of freedom as denial of the doctrine of original sin. Brian Linnane comments that Rahner’s richer perspective on the human person serves not only to ground the fundamental dignity of all persons, but also to allow for a more nuanced understanding of the role of moral obligation in a way that traditional law perspectives cannot.<sup>9</sup> The implication of this ethical understanding becomes clear when one appreciates that the concept of choice is at the heart of Rahner’s transcendental anthropology and so richly informs all his theology.

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<sup>6</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 119.

<sup>7</sup> See Herbert Vorgimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), 71-72. Rahner’s doubtful view that humanity descended from just one human couple is seen in his articles such as... “on the relationship between the Christian view of creation and evolutionary thought in the natural sciences, on the burden of damnation for humanity and monogenism.”

<sup>8</sup> Robert C. McCarthy, *A Critical Examination of the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Buchanan Dam, Texas: Carthay Ventures, 2001), 18. For further extended comments on the critique of Rahner’s theology, see section 2.7 at end of this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Linnane, “Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion & Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 159.

To advance his idea of an integral human nature that had never fallen or never been compromised, Rahner introduces into Catholic theology the concept “supernatural existential.” By this he meant that every human being, since creation, has within him/her a supernatural element that inclines him/her, unavoidably, like a magnet, toward the supreme divine. Every human being – even the person who does not know or rejects God’s categorical revelation (Scriptures), is never simply “natural human being,” but is always subject to the active and effective saving will of God.<sup>10</sup> Rahner, therefore, objects to the traditional idea that grace can be taken from or added to the human condition. For him the supernatural existential takes the place of grace and is an inherent quality of human condition. In other words, the supernatural existential emanates the grace that enables the human being to transcend. This means that humans in their concrete, historical existence without exception were and are created for communion with God. This loving self-communication of God to human creatures is a supernatural elevation of human nature and, therefore, a supernatural existential. He calls the supernatural existential the inner dynamism of man’s spirituality. It is always supernatural with the result that even the non-Christian performs supernatural actions, that is, actions which contain within themselves a reference to his/her supernatural salvation in God.<sup>11</sup>

Rahner maintains that grace is a reality that is always present at the very centre of man’s existence in knowledge and freedom in the mode of an offer which can be accepted or rejected. Mankind is not able in any way to abandon this transcendent uniqueness of his/her being. In other words, no one is devoid of God’s grace, however suppressed it may be and however deprived its expression may be.<sup>12</sup> Hence, grace is no more or less than God himself dwelling at every centre of the existence of every human being. As an offer, however, it is not external to human race, but something which determines humanity to such an extent that in one’s knowledge and freedom it continues to influence one’s existence even when one refuses it.<sup>13</sup>

Human beings essentially ask questions that enable them to reach beyond. They transcend material realities including themselves so as to deal with realities that are abstract or spiritual. Rahner calls this absolute horizon and ground of all non-absolute being the Holy

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<sup>10</sup> Weger, *Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology*, 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 87. See also Karl Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, 303-305; Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigation*, vol. 4, 165-66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 88. See also Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace,” 313; Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 71-72.

Mystery which he calls God.<sup>14</sup> Our knowledge of both the material realities and ourselves is categorical knowledge, while our knowledge of universal being and the Holy Mystery is transcendental knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, or choosing it – all these ways of behaving constitute the inquisitive searching nature of humanity, and therefore are modes of being. A person is situated in the world not primarily in opposition to others but as one who is thrown into the world to be in a network of relationships that make up the world.

Heidegger, whose classes Rahner attended and found stimulating, holds that to be in the world is to live harmoniously in it and to the full. He insists that the intelligibility of being does not come about as a result of our reasoning processes but is already present in its "there-ness."<sup>16</sup> Rahner, drawing from the Heideggerian perspective of being a person, describes love as the way in which humans actualise this openness to the other, thereby presenting human identity as both a gift received, and task accomplished. In addition, his theology of the human person rejects modern categorization of the secular and the sacred. He insists that no part of human reality is untouched by the offer of grace, and no moment of human life is free from the demands of sanctification. His emphasis on openness, otherness and mystery in connection with epistemology enabled him to perceive the summit of human knowledge not in the intellectual transparency of geometry or mathematics, but rather in the mystical encounter of love.<sup>17</sup>

Rahner claims that God creates human creatures and their creation communicates Godself (uncreated grace) to them in love.<sup>18</sup> Creation is the beginning of the offer of grace. He advances that grace has two theological meanings: first, as uncreated or operative grace (God giving God's self in love to human creatures) and created or cooperative grace (the effect of this accepted self-gift of God which transforms humans and their world).<sup>19</sup> God creates human creatures, offers Godself to them as uncreated grace, and invites them into personal, loving, self-transcending and self-transforming relationship. He characterizes this as the loving self-communication of God to human creatures. It is a supernatural elevation of

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<sup>14</sup> Rahner, "The Man of Today and Religion," 65-66.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 65-66.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, eds. *Concise Theological Dictionary*, trans. Richard Strachan (London: Burns and Oats, 1965), 194.

human nature and, therefore, a supernatural existential.<sup>20</sup> This longing to be in union with God is strictly supernatural. It exists in us precisely because God freely planted it there. Hence, this emptiness in us is there because God wants to fill it.

The communication between God and the human being is an essential reality and when it takes place it is perceived as a categorical transcendence that lies within the human spirit. This communication can be understood as God sharing God-self with persons. Rahner, therefore, claims that the human being is the “product,” so to speak, of God’s self-communication: “Man is the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God.”<sup>21</sup> Stating the same idea more precisely he says: “When God wills to be non-divine, the human person comes to be.”<sup>22</sup> Human beings exist because God wishes to become incarnate, or to express God’s self in the world. Humanity is designed and projected as the medium of God’s self-expression. God’s self-sharing (which Rahner calls “supernatural existential”) indicates an aspect of human life that is not phenomenologically seen but held by faith to be real and present in every person and which is associated with the divine. Such an understanding means that what enables the human intellect (natural reason) to make choices between good and bad takes place through a free and unmerited grace or a God-given illumination.<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, Rahner’s use of the term ‘supernatural existential’ does not destroy the gratuity of grace or the supernatural. The supernatural existential, he declares, is ‘unexacted.’ It is perfectly impossible to conceive of a ‘pure human nature’ without it.<sup>24</sup> However, the human subject is not absorbed into God nor is God reduced to the level of humanity or cease to be transcendent. An indescribable union takes place.<sup>25</sup> In the actual economy of human existence and salvation, this ‘pure human nature’ is no more than a theological construct, a reminder concept. It is what remains when one theologically, and impossibly in the present economy, subtracts the supernatural existential.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, ‘pure human nature’ is an abstract possibility not a reality. For Rahner there is no such thing as a natural human being

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 116.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” in *Theological Investigations* vol. 4, 116.

<sup>23</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 127.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace,” 303-305.

<sup>25</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace,” 313.

because every human being is called to share God's life. And anyone who has been taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an anonymous Christian.<sup>27</sup>

It follows from this theological analysis of the supernatural existential that the human situation in every era is essentially theological as it is basically graced by and revelatory of the Holy Mystery. Theology, as Rahner was so fond of saying, is essentially anthropological, and vice versa. When grace is understood as uncreated grace (God's offering Godself in loving relationship to every human creature), there is no ungraced human being or no ungraced human situation. However, when grace is understood as created grace (the ontological transformation achieved in humans by their loving relationship with God), there are graced human beings and graced human situations only when persons freely accept and cooperate with God's offer of Godself. Uncreated grace is always offered to us for our free acceptance and cooperation; it is never forced upon us.

To emphasize the inseparable relationship between human nature and grace, Rahner insists that God's self-gift or uncreated grace to every created person is a hidden grace. So, we do not always concretely recognise the loving presence of God who is grace. To realise this possibility of grace, we need to make grace visible in some symbolic word or action. We do this 'indeed and in truth' when we perform moral actions in accord with our free consciences led by the grace of God.

### 2.2.2 Human Freedom

Rahner argues that freedom is at the very root of the human being's essential 'nature.' There are two basic types of freedom that the person is capable of exercising. This freedom, like love and revelation, is distinguished as categorical and transcendental. Categorical freedom is 'the person's being responsible for himself. It implies 'freedom of choice,' when an individual is supposedly neutral and decides for one thing rather than the other. It is a choice of particular acts such as to stand or sit, to pray or play, to read or to sing, to kill or not to kill, in space and time.

Transcendental freedom occurs when 'self-realization' takes place so that an individual is able to realize himself to a greater extent. Hence, 'self-realization' rather than 'freedom of choice' is the characteristic of human freedom. Ultimately, transcendental

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 395.

freedom is a person's responsibility for oneself, in knowledge, in love, and in action, in time and space.<sup>28</sup> It is the freedom for the possibility of saying yes or no to oneself.<sup>29</sup> Transcendental freedom, then, is not a freedom from but a freedom for; it is personal, subjective responsibility for self-realization in the affirmation and love of self, of God and neighbour.<sup>30</sup> The experience of this transcendental freedom moves the human being towards the essential ethical ideal and moral obligation that corresponds to our nature.

In its fundamental nature human freedom always concerns the person as such and as a whole. The object of freedom in its original sense is the person himself and all decisions about objects in his experience of the world. In real freedom the person always intends to understand and asserts himself. For Rahner,

Freedom is not a neutral power which one has and possesses as something different from himself. It is rather a fundamental characteristic of a personal existent.<sup>31</sup>

Lawler and Salzman emphasize that human freedom is distinct from but also intrinsically related to daily choices as root and shoot.<sup>32</sup> This is because transcendental freedom is at the core of human nature and enables the person's fundamental choice to be this or that, as well as to be in relationship with the absolute Being. Transcendental freedom makes human choices possible since it is the condition of the possibility of freedom. Daily choices may be a manifestation of transcendental freedom but do not define it unless they derive from it through self-reflection, judgement and decision.<sup>33</sup> This implies that the human being is not absolutely free. Our freedom is worked out in historical time, space and by other persons. As Rahner writes:

A person's freedom is the final and definitive validity of his earthly history itself, and therefore, it is also intrinsically co-determined by the elements imposed on it, which have constituted the situation of the free subject in time. It is co-determined by the free history of all the others who constitute his own unique world of persons.<sup>34</sup>

According to Rahner, human freedom is always threatened radically by guilt of self and others. So, one's free, sinful acts are not his "private affair" which he himself can absolve

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. See also Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 183-186.

<sup>29</sup> Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," 185.

<sup>30</sup> See Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 231-249.

<sup>31</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> See Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, "Karl Rahner and Human Nature: Implications for Ethics," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009): 396.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 107. Also see Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder, 1969), 132.



by his own power and strength.<sup>35</sup> Free actions, therefore, as Ronald Modras notes, “can arise from outside the inmost core which does not affect us as acts of transcendental freedom do.”<sup>36</sup> The implication is that the ‘inmost core’ is not necessarily changed by a single act of categorical freedom. The ‘inmost core’ is what Rahner refers to as fundamental option – one’s own total self-understanding or the total project of human existence.<sup>37</sup>

Errol D’Lima says that it would be a complete misconception of the nature of human freedom to try to understand it as the mere capacity of choice between objects based upon either observation or reasoning.<sup>38</sup> This is so because the spirit of the human person transcends the reality of humanity. And, drawing from a Christian understanding of freedom, it is important to note that with regard to human freedom there is also God who in some way influences or makes possible the realisation of freedom of choice. Interestingly, this freedom is not only made possible by God and is not only related to Him as the supporting horizon of freedom of choice in categories, but it is freedom vis-à-vis God Himself.<sup>39</sup> Rahner insists that the statement that freedom of choice is choice even with regard to God would present no particular difficulty.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.2.3 The Radicalism of Human Freedom (The Doctrine of Fundamental Option)

Rahner believes that human freedom never happens as a mere objective exercise of choice between individual objects but is the self-exercise of the person who chooses objectively. It is only within this freedom that one is capable of self-achievement as an individual who is free with regard to doing or omitting this or that especially in view of one’s own self-realization. This self-realization is a task the human being cannot avoid as it is inescapably imposed on him/her in spite of all the differences within the concrete realisation of one’s self-achievement. It is always either a self-realization in the direction of God or a radical self-

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<sup>35</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 90. See also Karl Rahner, “Guilt, Responsibility and Punishment within the View of Catholic Theology,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 197-217.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Modras, “The Implications of Rahner’s Anthropology for Fundamental Moral Theology,” *Horizons* 12 (1985): 74.

<sup>37</sup> Rahner, “Theology of Freedom,” 185-186. Fundamental option is the freedom of choice in human action to do a particular thing or not. Acting according to this option is making a fundamental choice between love and selfishness as well as between self and God, who is our destiny (as we shall see shortly in the following section).

<sup>38</sup> Errol D’Lima, SJ “The Understanding of Sin and Its Function in the Theology of Karl Rahner,” *Journal of Indian Theology* 3 no. 2 (2010): 2.

<sup>39</sup> Rahner, “Theology of Freedom,” 180.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

refusal towards God.<sup>41</sup> In exercising this freedom, the human being becomes that which God intended him/her to be – a free subject, or in other words able to make choices or perform actions that denote a transcendental experience of freedom.

Rahner's approach to human freedom provides the means for understanding the doctrine of the fundamental option, i.e., the exercise and the possibility of saying "yes" or "no" to God. This is not primarily the ability to choose this or that, but a uniquely final decision about who one is, what one wants to become, what is to be the goal or end of one's existence. Rahner describes the fundamental option as:

A freedom of self-understanding, a possibility of saying yes or no to oneself, a possibility of deciding for or against oneself ... it is a capacity for wholeness.<sup>42</sup>

However, despite the freedom that is even capable of an absolute yes or no to God, human freedom is not absolute. This is because humans are created subject to the socio-historical circumstances of the world in which they live and over which they do not have control, a situation depicted in the doctrine of original sin and its consequences. Nonetheless, Rahner insists that whether these circumstances facilitate or threaten human freedom, categorical or transcendental freedom is lived necessarily in time and space. So, humans must exercise it by accepting and passing through the history pre-given and imposed upon them.<sup>43</sup>

Errol D'Lima acknowledges that Rahner's intention in identifying human freedom with a person's transcendence is to highlight that the notion of fundamental option is an outcome of his grace-saturated theology.<sup>44</sup> It seeks to demonstrate how human freedom is not only a gift given by God in His free self-communication to humanity, but also that this acceptance must be borne by God himself.<sup>45</sup> So, the exercise of human freedom cannot be the compelling motive and reason for human self-fulfilment since concrete freedom is ultimately the capacity for the eternal.<sup>46</sup> This emphasizes that the freedom by which a person decides about him/herself as a whole affects his/her relationship or finality before God. Similarly, the Catholic doctrine of faith declares that the human being cannot, while still a pilgrim on earth, have an absolutely certain judgment about his state of justification or eternal salvation. For

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," 194.

<sup>44</sup> Errol D'Lima, "The Understanding of Sin and Its Function in the Theology of Karl Rahner," 3.

<sup>45</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 96-7. See also Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," 186.

full knowledge and total awareness belongs to God alone according to scripture (Job 21:22; Psalm 33:13-15; Matthew 6:8, Romans 33-36).

Rahner, in my view, is spot on in suggesting that in our present state we may not arrive at absolute clarity and certainty in our decisions, but we are still responsible for the choices we make, good or bad. Undoubtedly freedom is the capacity which characterizes a person, and it is only in realising this that one begins to understand the reality of sin. Richard McCormick writes:

The doctrine of the fundamental option, as understood by Rahner, does not pretend to explain away the mystery of human sinfulness or the mystery of God's redeeming action that brings about the conversion of the person. It seeks to give substance to the human act of freedom in the sight of God, places the human person totally in the arena of God's forgiving love and mercy, and attempts to present human choices in a more comprehensive perspective. It is in this context that the doctrine of the fundamental option is brought into play.<sup>47</sup>

Whether this notion of fundamental option explains human choice satisfactorily or not is debatable. Nonetheless, what Rahner does affirm is that the God revealed through Jesus Christ is eternally the God of love, of mercy and forgiveness, no matter what human stubbornness may attempt and succeed in doing.

## **2.3 Towards Understanding Rahner's Concept of Sin**

### **2.3.1 Freedom, Responsibility and Sin**

For Rahner, the presence of sin in the world is linked to the concepts of freedom and responsibility. The understanding of these concepts is rooted in the history of man's self-realisation and this is based precisely on the history of revelation and of Christian theology. The history of revelation presupposes a permanent knowledge about freedom and responsibility which reflects humanity's relationship or response to God. Christian theology interprets a person's actions as virtuous or sinful in the sense that it presupposes that a human being has the freedom to choose his/her actions including either accepting or rejecting God's self-communication. In the *Encyclopaedia of Theology* Rahner writes:

The supernatural existential in man, which is an inherent attraction of man toward God, is reciprocated by the "permanent offer of God's self-communication in love" and the only real "sin" is the definitive adamant refusal opposed to it," not by individual acts offensive to God, but only by the definitiveness ... of life as a whole.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Richard A. McCormick, "Syllabus of Errors," in *The Harper Collins Encyclopaedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 594.

The question of human freedom and responsibility is really complex. Human beings are not self-sufficient creatures, as they are dependent on God for their being and final fulfilment. However, human persons are capable of true and radical freedom in that they can accept or reject God's offer of communion and eternity. So, they are responsible for their choices. Human freedom and responsibility are not experienced in an environment where the human being is separated from that space in which God is present through the offer of divine self-communication to the creature, but they are exercised in that very space. A person understands freedom as an independent self-possession of man, namely with the possibility of saying a free 'yes' or 'no' to God. In a sense God's grace and mastery, and our responsible exercise of freedom are realities which must give space to each other. Rahner remarks:

The divine freedom and mastery are experienced from the outset as the reason for the possibility of the creature's responsibility and freedom, so that both grow in equal and not in inverse proportion. ... This is obviously what is meant by the Christian statement about man and his salvation and damnation..."<sup>49</sup>

With regard to the essence of sin, Rahner insists that sin is part of human existence because it occurs in actions that do not have to be assumed. For sin exists in a definite way and we become sinners by our own free actions which leave a real impact on our lives even without our consciousness.<sup>50</sup> However, the human being does not construe the entire picture of sin either with the help of logic or natural philosophical knowledge alone. Such an effort is more than speculative. Sin is certainly a reality which poses a deep-seated danger to God's creation and it has eternal repercussions. Thus, all human beings are subject of one divine salvation on the part of one and the same God in Jesus Christ within one unified history of salvation.<sup>51</sup>

### 2.3.2 Sin and Guilt

Often Rahner interchanges the terms sin and guilt and does not always use them in a uniform way.<sup>52</sup> Guilt is a sense of having done wrong deliberately. It is viewed primarily as an act

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<sup>48</sup> Karl Rahner, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 1587.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Rahner, "Guilt, Responsibility, Punishment within the view of Catholic Theology", in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 201.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 36-37.

<sup>51</sup> Rahner, "Guilt, Responsibility, Punishment," 199.

<sup>52</sup> See Karl Rahner, "Guilt and Its Remission: The Borderland Between Theology and Psychology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, 265-267.

which flows from conscious freedom and for which a person is therefore responsible, an act which expresses lack of moral value. In short, it is a free, responsible, culpable act. Similarly, sin attaches to this same act insofar as it is a free decision which ultimately goes against the way that man relates to God. It is expressed in the violation of a moral demand. In traditional language, sin is an offence against (the will of) God.

To appreciate the weight of sin, a distinction needs to be made between the categories of sin: mortal/grave sin and venial sin. A sin is considered to be “mortal” and therefore grave when its quality is such that it leads to a separation of that person from God's saving grace. This is a state of total alienation, which is the categorical ‘no’ to God. A mortal sin is a gravely sinful act or omission, which can lead to damnation if a person does not repent of the sin before death. Such repentance is the primary requisite for forgiveness and absolution. Similarly, one who has committed a mortal sin would require the sacrament of penance before receiving Holy Communion. Traditionally, venial sin is understood as a lesser sin that does not result in a complete separation from God and eternal damnation. One does not break one's friendship with God but injures it. Thus, a venial sin does not deprive the soul of divine grace either because it is a minor offense or because it was committed without full understanding of its seriousness or without full consent of the will.

The term guilt emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of the act; while the general understanding of sin refers to the sense of disrespect or an offence to the infinite mystery. In its deepest theological sense, guilt is defined as:

A free no to God which basically amounts to destroying the relationship of man to himself, to his fellow man, and to things of the world ... (which) strives in isolation to its own finality and irrevocability.<sup>53</sup>

In the socio-political sphere, guilt refers, broadly, to any breach of accepted customs, laws or conventions. More narrowly, it indicates an external action contrary to the penal laws of a society. For instance, in the case of a verdict of culpability, the civil judgement or sentence assumes or attempts to establish that the culprit was free and responsible for his/her actions. This means that both action contrary to civil order and free responsibility are essential constituents in the legal instance of guilt. A theological interpretation would further

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<sup>53</sup> Rahner, “Guilt, Responsibility, Punishment,” 210.

insist that the civic transgression is a morally wrong action only if it does actually run counter to the dignity of the human person and does not merely disobey an unjust law.<sup>54</sup>

Rahner's broader view between theology and psychotherapy allowed him to demonstrate that in order to understand human guilt, and by extension the human person, one needs theology. Only through theological inquiry can one tap into the innermost ground of human guilt, because strictly speaking 'there can be guilt only when one knowingly has sinned against God,'<sup>55</sup> and sin is a theological, not a psychological category. In his theological analysis of guilt Rahner points out that:

For theology and according to revelation itself, guilt and sin are principally and originally acts or events and not states, even though the very frame of mind produced by the sinful act helps to cause further sinful acts and constitutes the atmosphere in which sin thrives.<sup>56</sup>

This reduction of guilt and sin to action may seem to indicate that sins are merely outward phenomena that could be assessed easily by psychological or other scientific methods. However, Rahner refines the definition of 'act' into the freely accomplished attitude and condition that constitutes a person's own active freedom.<sup>57</sup> The true act of freedom occurs within the human person, prior to individual temporal acts. The free act in the person represents the condition for all individual acts. This becomes clear when Rahner maintains that 'the tangible offence against a person's nature' that occurs in an individual temporal act of sin 'is the constitutive sign' of a deeper revolt against God 'in the depth of the spirit.'<sup>58</sup> Here, Rahner refers to the person's act of freedom or the innermost dimension of the person.

Basically, the theological meaning of guilt coincides with that of sin. Both terms designate that the culprit was not only free and responsible for her/his actions, but also involve a state of opposition or contradiction to God, self and others. Rahner himself exhibits a slight preference for the term guilt but we shall follow the ordinary sense of sin to mean an offence against God and guilt to specifically refer to the state of having committed an offence. Sometimes, a distinction is made between subjective and objective guilt, depending on whether the person concerned is subjectively guilty or whether it is attributed to him/her by others. Subjective guilt is the personal awareness of having done wrong and this

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 211-214; see also Karl Rahner, "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, 255-258.

<sup>55</sup> Rahner, "Guilt and Its Remission," 266.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 267-268.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 270.

awareness is not simply rational knowledge, but usually involves feelings of uneasiness, responsibility and remorse.

Furthermore, Rahner aligns sin with disintegration of the person whereby the constitutive physical sign of sin is suffering.<sup>59</sup> However, he does not argue that all suffering necessarily signifies personal guilt, but rather that this guilt, which arises from the innermost core of the person (the heart), often manifests itself as physical suffering. For one's wrongdoing to be considered an objective guilt or moral sin, the particular evil action must involve the person's intention and freedom. This is why, with regard to moral evil or sin, society cannot point to an individual and say that he/she is in sin. Only God, or the individual him/herself, can make this judgment.

### 2.3.3 Freedom and Guilt

The requirement of freedom as a condition for liability and culpability points beyond objective wrongness to a more internal sphere of guilt. To some degree this affects one's physiological, psychological and sociological endowments. Actually, these influences penetrate far into a person's psychic make-up. They limit and shape his or her freedom and provide the context for its exercise. Where they are negative, they can inflict such psychic pain and illness as to impel a person toward wrong choices or actions that have physically and socially disturbing and harmful effects. Inner conflict, suffering, and illness may lead to behaviour destructive to self and others as well as contributing to a psychological sense of guilt. So, morally wrong actions may be either entirely or partly the unfree result of such influences, and therefore not culpable.<sup>60</sup>

Rahner maintains that the social sciences are basically concerned only with the outer sphere of the person rather than the innermost core (the heart) which is the root centre of awareness and freedom.<sup>61</sup> These disciplines deal with levels exterior to the heart, but they are important nonetheless and may even have practical consequences. However, Rahner believes that social issues can certainly impact upon one's freedom in a way which may be more far-reaching than previously imagined. Inner conflict and suffering may spring from undue external influences i.e. from other persons and from one's social environment. This has led to senseless and terrible catastrophes in human history such as cruelty, violence, slaughter, and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>60</sup> Rahner, "Guilt and Remission," 265-267, 272-278. See also Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 26-31.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 277; *Foundations*, 28-31.

horror which cause misery as well as absurdity in the world. We may be inclined to hold that the guilt of human beings, whether due to wrongful action or inner conflict, is something unfree. This guilt appears to be the expression of man as victim rather than as author of his own life.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, it may also be the consequence and expression of a free and responsible personal act, a result of guilt in the theological sense.

For Rahner, the theological sense of guilt focuses on protesting against factors which limit and negate human freedom and deny human dignity. Otherwise, if the human psyche and behaviour are totally determined, the human being would be reduced to the level of a mere animal, since any special dignity is negated. This dignity is inseparable from human freedom, from the orientation of that freedom to the infinite, and from a human capacity for commitment, choice and love.<sup>63</sup> In acknowledging man as a distinctly human and personal being, we must allow for the possibility of a negative as well as a positive free act at the very core of the person. Such guilt would, of course, find expression in an inner state of suffering and wrong outward actions.<sup>64</sup> Since the human being is oriented towards that which is called God, guilt in its deepest sense is a violation of this orientation and of the God towards which it tends. This is the theological sense of guilt.

As previously stated, freedom, for Rahner, concerns the person's fundamental disposition of him/herself as oriented to absolute mystery; while guilt derives from an act done in freedom and for which one takes responsibility. Such freedom implies accountability for the choices one makes, seeks an object of commitment, and has a gift character. These qualities help to clarify the meaning of guilt and the God it betrays. Insofar as freedom concerns one's very self, it can be regarded as having the capacity for a total and irrevocable gift of oneself from the heart, the capacity for love. Responsible freedom must address the question of that to which or to whom one can and should so commit oneself. This implies that ultimate value which is worth the sharing of one's entire life, the total gift of self, and indicates what is meant by "God."<sup>65</sup>

Freedom is also experienced as a gift, as "borne and empowered by God,"<sup>66</sup> as rooted in the mysterious ground and goal of this accountability and self-commitment. In

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<sup>62</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 91-93.

<sup>63</sup> Norman King, *The God of Forgiveness and Healing in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), 28.

<sup>64</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, 254-255.

<sup>65</sup> See Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 182-185.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.



experiencing freedom as gift, one also experiences the ultimate ground or source of this gift, and indeed of oneself as a free being endowed with an intrinsic worth. Thus, that from which we flow as free beings of innate dignity, that to which we are ultimately accountable for our whole selves, and that toward which we are drawn to reach and confide ourselves to entirely is what is designated by the term “God.” This, once again, is the infinite, self-bestowing mystery which “speaks” through the concrete moral demand of a particular categorical situation. Our answer to this demand likewise expresses our response to the mystery.

However, for Rahner not every act of freedom is able to bring about self-fulfilment and a total giving of oneself to God. This is really the dark side of the exercise of freedom. It is part of human experience that a person does not know with absolute certitude that he/she is justified before God. Catholic doctrine holds that there exist material, objective and universally valid norms for the right or wrong exercise of this subjective freedom in the activity of everyday life.<sup>67</sup> The true and absolute condition of the person in his/her acceptance or rejection of God's self-communication is not a matter that is one-sidedly known by the individual. It is best left to the merciful judgment of a loving God.

If the relationship between guilt in the theological and in the ordinary sense is to be defined exactly, it must be understood that it is not given to humanity to pass any ultimate judgement about guilt before God in the form of a reflected objective statement either in one's own case or in that of others. In that regard, it is impossible even from the objective perspective of human action to get any clear idea for such definitive judgment about one's guilt before God. The bottom line is that it is only God who is totally aware of the self, whereas the human being must contend with limited awareness and corresponding responsibility in knowing and understanding the self. If a person cannot be absolutely certain about his/her state of grace, neither can we assume that in every circumstance a person who is acting wrongly is totally aware of what she/he is doing.<sup>68</sup> In keeping with the presupposition of God making it possible for a person to undertake a free act, it is God's judgment alone that validates the act of virtue or sin.

The capacity to be honest with oneself so as to admit possible personal guilt and fully assume responsibility is experienced as something one is enabled to make as a gift. That from which this gift comes to the person is what is meant by God. From this standpoint, God may

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<sup>67</sup> Rahner, “Guilt, Responsibility, Punishment,” 205.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

be conceived as that which unveils and judges what is in the heart of a person. This begs the question as to what Christian teaching implies by the punishment due to sin. Actually, there is no need of punishment being imposed from God's part as a form of reparation. Theologically speaking there are no unconquerable obstacles to the thesis maintaining that all divine punishment is an inherent consequence of guilt flowing from the proper nature of the sinfulness of humanity, and that God is the punisher of sin since He has created the objective structures of man and of the world. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for the keeping of good order in society for civil authority to punish someone for the preservation of the common good. This pattern must not be extended to God's way of dealing with people.

In more traditional language, one may say that the recognition of theological guilt as a personal possibility or actuality implies the experience of a transcendent source which makes possible this recognition and simultaneously grounds the hope for forgiveness. God is that infinite presence within which a person's guilt is enclosed, transcended and forgiven. The human experience of that which is at the core of one's being is at once known, weighed, and, if guilty, forgiven by God. Hence, God comes to be conceptualized and experienced as an infinite nearness which precedes and grounds one's freedom, evokes its total commitment, and yet transcends and forgives its most destructive use.

#### **2.3.4 Sin as a Definitive "No" to God**

As a Christian theologian, Karl Rahner interprets sin in terms of his system of transcendentalism. He begins by sketching out his understanding of the human person vis-à-vis God, the transcendent reality. The notion of sin is traditionally recognised as a breach of rules, a rupture of a relationship, a denial of what is wholesome or good and consequently the means to recover from it. Connected with this understanding are the following: conscience, the freedom exercised by the agent, accountability, the harmful effects of destroying order, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, restitution, punishment, and mercy. Doing good is seen as acting virtuously, whereas doing evil is sinning. Both these actions presuppose the free choice of a person that is exercised either in conformity with the will of God or against it.

Christian faith, according to Rahner, affirms that sin in its essence is a free and definitive "no" to God, a rejection of God's gracious offer of self-communication. He argues that human freedom is so radical and comprehensive that it makes even God an object of choice, a choice which brings the human being to definitive completion as a "yes" or "no" to

God.<sup>69</sup> However, Rahner acknowledges that in the modern era, people find this claim incomprehensible. It is difficult to imagine any human beings uttering such an emphatic “no” to God. Perhaps we can envisage how humans may violate a law of God or deny a finite concept of God, but this is not the same as denying the very person of God.<sup>70</sup> Rahner’s doctrine of sin is definitely shaped by the challenge of modern objections. But he accepts the task of demonstrating the possibility of a fully free “no” to God, the possibility of “really and truly saying “no” to the very person of God –and in deed to God himself. He is saying that a human being can say “no” to God, not just to some distorted or childish notion of God.<sup>71</sup>

Rahner submits that God has freely chosen to be ever-present to each human being in an intimate closeness which is an offer of self-communication. He bases this understanding on his earlier work in which he developed the concept of the supernatural existential.<sup>72</sup> God creates human creatures, offers Godself to them as uncreated grace, and invites them into a personal, loving, self-transcending and self-transforming relationship. This longing to be in union with God is strictly supernatural and it exists in us precisely because God freely planted it there. Rahner stresses that God offers His very person as an object of choice, and so makes possible a free “yes” or “no” to Him. The horizon (God), which makes freedom of choice possible, becomes itself the object of decision.<sup>73</sup>

God becomes the object of this choice, not directly but indirectly. Human beings make decisions about God in the choices they make about finite things since God is automatically present in every act of choice as its ground and goal. God is the author of the world of finite entities, other persons, and our own essential nature. Insofar as we say “no” to this finite reality, we also say “no” to God who is simultaneously experienced as the ground of our subjectivity. Rahner explains:

In the free actions within the categorical reality of our experience which contradict the essential structure of this reality which exists within the horizon of transcendence, there is the possibility of offending against the ultimate term of this transcendence itself.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> See, Rahner, “Theology of Freedom,” in TI, vol.6, 181.

<sup>71</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Rahner’s use of the term ‘supernatural existential’ is to explain the existential fact that humans in their concrete, historical existence without exception were and are created for communion with God. This loving self-communication of God to human creatures is a supernatural elevation of human nature and, therefore, a supernatural existential. For a full discussion of the supernatural existential, see Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations vol. 1*, 297-317.

<sup>73</sup> Rahner, “The Dignity and Freedom of Man,” 246.

<sup>74</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 100.

Rahner, therefore, sees sin, or a definite “no” to God, as a mystery. One cannot in the final analysis conceive how the creature can sin – (the creature) who proceeds from God’s hand and from God only, in whom no element is included that would not witness to the goodness and holiness of God. However, he goes on to say that scripture tells us that sin is real – ‘an actual no to God, which is something other than the inevitable imperfection of the finite creature or a mere transitional phase of development.’<sup>75</sup> Ho-Tsui comments that this insight means that we cannot comprehend sin, but only beg for help and forgiveness.<sup>76</sup> She claims that Rahner’s philosophical works show that sin opposes what is essential; what ought to be is binding. Actual freedom is transcendence toward God.<sup>77</sup>

While there are situations when sin could be committed unintentionally, in normal situations sin is as a result of a rejection of God’s will, and thus destroys the relationship between God and humanity. This rejection takes place in the concrete circumstances of everyday life. The basis of this understanding is the Genesis account of creation in which the human being owes his/her obedience to God. In that context, the sin of Adam and Eve is essentially a rejection of God’s covenantal relationship with humanity. In light of this, Ho-Tsui argues that Rahner’s revision of post-Tridentine theology of grace, restructuring it in terms of God’s universal salvific will in Christ, locates sin within a dialogical structure whereby the human person refuses to act as God’s partner.<sup>78</sup> The human person’s relation to God is revealed fully in Christ since human sin is reversed in God’s self-gift in Christ.<sup>79</sup> Properly speaking, sin consists in unfreedom (subjection). This is not to say that sin as a ‘no’ to God cannot occur. The radical ‘no’ to God can be delivered in the depths of the human person, not just to God’s Law but to God’s self.<sup>80</sup>

Rahner believes that the world of things can be a possible object for the human being’s concern only as a moment of the world of persons.<sup>81</sup> Knowledge of the world, and freedom vis-à-vis the world, achieve their highest intensity and fulfilment in the act of a loving encounter with God.<sup>82</sup> The act of personal love is the all-embracing basic act of the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>76</sup> Emmie Y. M. Ho-Tsui, *Die Lehre von der Sünde bei Karl Rahner: Eine Werkgenetische und Systematische Erschließung* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2011), 80.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 123, 134-38, 143.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>81</sup> Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love God,” in *TI Vol. 6*, 240.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 242.

human person which gives meaning, direction and measure to everything else.<sup>83</sup> This natural openness to the other human being forms the very heart of human essence. It entails the decision to accept or reject one's own internal choice to loving or hating one's neighbour, and therefore, simultaneously to render a "yes" or "no" to God, the creator of both the human being and the world.

Freedom is always mediated by the concrete reality of time and space, of a person's materiality and her/his history.<sup>84</sup> Our final being is a self-realization, a self-achievement worked out in time and space.<sup>85</sup> The history of freedom is the history of our decision about God, others, and ourselves as a whole. Freedom is not merely about finite objects being presented to human subjectivity one after another. Otherwise, there would be no freedom vis-à-vis the total self, a freedom to decide definitively who we want to be. Freedom, according to Rahner,

Is not the possibility of always being able to do something else, the possibility of infinite revision, but the capacity to do something uniquely final, something which is finally valid precisely because it is done in freedom. Freedom is the capacity for the eternal.<sup>86</sup>

However, he maintains that we have access to our total being only in the self-transcendence made possible by the self-offer of the infinite mystery of God.<sup>87</sup> We decide definitively who we will be only as we utter a "yes" or a "no" to this offer. Hence, deciding about God or about the totality of our being are one and the same act of freedom.

In Rahner's understanding, the decision for or against God is made in the real history of our lives. The central event in this history is the personal encounter with other human beings, whereby the categorized explicit love of neighbour is the primary act of the love of God.<sup>88</sup> This act most fully embodies the transcendental decision of "yes" or "no" to God. Nonetheless, in the strict sense, Rahner perceives sin as the free and definitive "no" to the person of God, made by the total human being in a whole life act in an encounter with God as mediated by the world of things and other people. This negative decision is simultaneously about God and the whole human person, and irrevocably brings the human being to completion as a "no" to God.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 241

<sup>84</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 36.

<sup>85</sup> Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," 184-85.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>87</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 39.

<sup>88</sup> Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour," 247.

Rahner's perception of sin at the level of the human person has a theological advantage: it helps theology recover a sense of the need for ecclesial mercy. However, some commentators argue that Rahner's view of freedom is too complicated to be advantageous. The most critical is Ron Highfield who dismisses Rahner's theology of the fundamental option (the freedom to 'say' yes or 'no') as conceptually incoherent and morally unhelpful.<sup>89</sup> Highfield maintains that Rahner allows the human person a 'divine-like freedom' against which theologians must object: 'no being other than God can be thought to decide about God freely and definitively.'<sup>90</sup>

According to Highfield, Rahner's insistence that freedom is perfected in a fundamental option that must be a complete 'yes' or a complete 'no' to God involves him in inescapable conceptual difficulties. This move of attributing to the human being a divine-like freedom creates contradictions and runs the risk of effacing the distinction between Creator and creature, nature and grace, and theology and philosophy.<sup>91</sup> Peter Fritz states that, although Highfield's article treats Rahner's theology of sin with a very critical outlook that other commentators do not share, he is not completely successful. Highfield, he says, is unable to substantiate the assumption that the human freedom Rahner proposes objectifies God.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, it does seem that the unexpressed or implied assumptions of Rahner's theology have led him to be regarded by some scholars as having either gone astray or having allowed himself to be misunderstood.

#### **2.4 An Unresolved Tension: Is the Freedom to say "No" and the Freedom to say "Yes" Equal?**

For Rahner, human freedom is so radical and comprehensive that the human being has complete freedom to respond to God's offer of self-communication with an equally free "yes" or "no." He consistently refers to both "yes" and "no" as decisions made possible in the same way. For instance, Rahner refers to both of them as possibilities for freedom given the

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<sup>89</sup> Ron Highfield, "The Freedom to Say 'No'? Karl Rahner's Doctrine of Sin," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 485-505.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Peter J. Fritz, "Placing Sin in Karl Rahner's Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 80 (2015): 308. Highfield cites a passage from Rahner's article "The Dignity and Freedom of Man" to substantiate his contention that 'the horizon (God) which makes freedom possible becomes itself the object of decision.' See Highfield, "Freedom to Say 'No,'" 487. But, Rahner never says this. See Rahner, "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," in TI 2, 246; "Theology of Freedom," in TI 6, 181. God is not proposed as an object when one decides in freedom for or against God. Rahner's bracketing of the word 'object' is perhaps for lack of a better relating alternative. He must have used the word as a placeholder for God as the goal of transcendence.

human a priori condition. Therefore, morally good and morally bad actions or decisions can freely be made by the human being. He states this possibility in *Foundations of Christian Faith*:

The point of our reflections upon the essence of subjective freedom is to show that the freedom to dispose of oneself is a freedom vis-à-vis the subject as a whole, a freedom for something of final and definitive validity, and a freedom which is actualized in a free and absolute “yes” or “no” to that term and source of transcendence which we call “God.”<sup>93</sup>

Rahner emphasizes the complete freedom and definitive nature of the “yes” and “no” to God. But once again different contexts force him to argue against the equality of the “no” and the “yes.” For example, in his article “Grace and Freedom,” Rahner argues against the equality of the “yes” and “no.” Early in the article he shows that morally good and morally bad actions are both made possible by the supernatural existential. But later he suggests that

The morally good and the morally bad action, good and evil, are not however, in themselves, morally or even ontologically perfectly equal possibilities of freedom. Evil in the source of its freedom and in its objective embodiments has less of being and less of freedom. To that extent it can and must be said that in its deficiency as such it requires no origination by God. ... This shows the creature’s capacity to retain “something” wholly its own, the responsibility for which cannot be shifted to God, yet which does not require (like a good deed) to be returned to him thankfully as his grace.<sup>94</sup>

This passage raises an important question worth considering: Are the “yes” and “no” equally free, and, if so, what are the consequences of such equality? On the surface this dense text seems to suggest that Rahner denies the equality of the transcendental “no” and the transcendental “yes,” and so contradicts his other statements on the question. However, a closer look at it reveals that Rahner is giving his opinion on the traditional problem of grace and human freedom. He lays down two truths that every human act has which cannot be reduced to each other, namely; “total origin from God in every respect” and “independent freedom.”<sup>95</sup>

He maintains that human freedom must not be understood as originating from God in a simple answer to the problem of evil. However, this raises “the problem of the relation between God and wicked freedom.”<sup>96</sup> So, is God then the origin of evil? Rahner says no, for an evil act “has less of being and less of freedom,” and so requires no origination by God. He seems to be saying that an evil act, insofar as it is evil, lacks freedom and being; only these

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<sup>93</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 97.

<sup>94</sup> Karl Rahner, ed. “Grace and Freedom,” in *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1967-69.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 1968.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 1969.

find their source in God. The focus is on the act in itself, and not on the transcendental subject of the act. An act's level of freedom and being may fluctuate. Thus, it is quite evident he is not now discussing the transcendental "yes" and "no." His concern is the categorical transgressions of the moral structures of the created world, namely, "morally bad action" thought of objectively. This recognition though may not solve all the riddles posed by the unresolved tension of the equal absolute freedom to say "yes" or "no" to God, but it does clear Rahner of the charge of contradiction.

But just as we might think we have solved the dilemma, we realise that in *Foundations of Christian Faith* Rahner writes that "'yes' and 'no' to God are not parallel."<sup>97</sup> He argues that though the "no" is one of freedom's possibilities, it cannot bring fulfilment to the human person.<sup>98</sup> It is "something abortive, something which miscarries and fails, something which is self-destructive and self-contradictory."<sup>99</sup> Again we find Rahner denying the complete equality of the "yes" and the "no." He is not making a quantitative distinction in the level of freedom but a qualitative distinction between the results of the "yes" and that of the "no."

A similar kind of statement appears when Rahner argues that the "no" to God cannot actualise human nature as the "yes" can but sets up an inner contradiction between itself and the supernatural existential, which constitutes the essence of hell.<sup>100</sup> He claims in this way that sin is its own punishment. It is certainly important to recognise that in both of these texts Rahner's concern is to keep clear of any implication that human beings may finally escape God and their created nature by having complete freedom to say an absolute "no" to God. Rahner is certainly well aware that to argue for the equality of the "yes" and the "no" at this point would erase the difference between heaven and hell.

It is now important in this summary to consider whether Rahner views the possibilities of the two fundamental options of "yes" and "no" to God as being equal or unequal in some respects. It may be helpful to remind ourselves of the two non-reducible theological facts about the relationship between God and human freedom which Rahner lays down in the article "Grace and Freedom." He maintains that humans have their total origin

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<sup>97</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 102.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Rahner, "The Punishment of Sin," in *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1586.



from God in every respect, but they also have independent freedom.<sup>101</sup> Rahner shifts back and forth between these two propositions and the possibility of a free “no” to God may be seen in a different light. In the context in which he wants to demonstrate the possibility of real sin and full human responsibility for sin, he emphasizes the equally free and definitive nature of both the “no” and the “yes.” On the other hand, when he wants to avoid compromising the omni-causality of God and the eternal and total dependence of the creature on the Creator, he views the “no” as qualitatively inferior to the “yes.”

Highfield, in examining whether Rahner assigns equal standing to the “yes” to the extent that leads to salvation and the “no” precedes damnation, concludes that the answer depends upon the context.<sup>102</sup> In some places, Rahner gives “yes” and “no” equal weight, and yet in others he feels forced ‘to confine’ this equality.<sup>103</sup> This inconsistency results from the fear of portraying a position holding that human freedom can outmatch the Creator’s. Highfield argues that Rahner’s denial of the equality of the “yes” and “no” in the one context demonstrates that he cannot hold to their full equality in the other. Thus, if they are not equal in actuality, they cannot have been equal in potentiality.<sup>104</sup> In light of Christian theology, Highfield maintains that we must admit that this “no” to God cannot be free in the same sense and to the same degree as a “yes.”<sup>105</sup> He certainly makes a definitive point in his critique of Rahner, but he acknowledges that Rahner does not categorically make this admission. This is simply because admitting it would contradict his claim of demonstrating the possibility of the Christian doctrine of sin as a free and definitive “no” to the true God, the central thesis in Rahner’s theology of sin.<sup>106</sup> Peter Fritz notes that the problem with Highfield’s conclusion is twofold: first, that Rahner does not make ‘this admission,’ and second that the answer is not simple.<sup>107</sup>

Despite Highfield’s blaming Rahner for his lack of admission of the discrepancy between the “yes” and “no,” Fritz argues that Highfield knows about Rahner’s admission of this discrepancy. He highlights that three pages in *Foundations of Christian Faith* are important in answering Highfield’s objections.<sup>108</sup> They include two articles entitled “‘Yes’

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<sup>101</sup> Rahner, “Grace and Freedom,” in *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1967-1969. See also *Foundations*, 101.

<sup>102</sup> Highfield, “Freedom to say ‘No,’” 490.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 493.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Fritz, “Placing Sin in Karl Rahner’s Theology,” 309.

<sup>108</sup> Fritz, 309.

and ‘No’ to God Are Not Parallel,” and “On the Interpretation of Eschatological Statements.” These illustrate that Rahner admits the discrepancy and sees this inconsistency as bearing upon eschatological reality.<sup>109</sup> We must reread Rahner to see that his treatment of the “no” is no less serious than his admission that the “no” and the “yes” are not strictly parallel.

Fritz argues that, despite Rahner’s assertion to the contrary, the “yes” and “no” are not equal. Everything ultimately hangs on God’s freedom alone.<sup>110</sup> Otherwise, the door of hell which is ultimately punishment for sin would be locked from the outside, yet it is locked from the inside. However, Rahner insists that the “no” is an indispensable mystery. It cannot be explained away, nor can it be denied: “we shall have to allow this possibility to exist as the mystery of evil.”<sup>111</sup> This is because a free act is that which one wills, and one wills what one is. Rahner believes that a free act “is a coming to oneself, a being present to oneself, with oneself.”<sup>112</sup> He views such descriptions as instructions about the absolute seriousness of human decision to the point that he still treats the “no” as an ultimate possibility for human freedom.<sup>113</sup> He actually leaves us with an unresolved conceptual tension in his doctrine of sin. Highfield maintains that uttering a complete “no” would mean that we intend a world without God, without objective structures and laws, a world in which we are absolute.<sup>114</sup> This cannot be because it is intrinsically and ontologically impossible. Regardless of the effort, we cannot become a “no” to God. In other words, the “no” cannot establish something intrinsically definitive. Such a state is intrinsically definitive, and all potentiality is actualized or fulfilled in the “yes.” A “yes” to God is simultaneously a “yes” to all created reality with its created structures and laws and created human nature. This cannot be said of the “no.”

I think that Rahner does not intend to attribute absolute freedom in every respect to the “no” to God as this would be putting God on the same level as the creature.<sup>115</sup> The

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<sup>109</sup> For the details of this contradiction between the ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ see, Rahner, *Foundations*, 102-104.

<sup>110</sup> Fritz, 308.

<sup>111</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 103.

<sup>112</sup> Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 98.

<sup>113</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 103.

<sup>114</sup> Highfield, 494.

<sup>115</sup> See Rahner, *Foundations*, 128. The ambiguity found in Rahner’s treatment of human freedom is critiqued by some of his commentators. See, for example, Highfield, “The Freedom to Say ‘No,’ 485-505. Also see Thomas Knoebel who uses the unqualified term “freedom” when speaking of the “no.” But when he speaks of the “yes” he says, “it is clear that true Christian freedom consists in self-surrender after the model provided by Jesus. See Thomas L. Knoebel, “Grace in the Theology of Karl Rahner: A Systematic Presentation” (PhD diss., Fordham University, 1980), 202. He adds that the “yes” is “freedom’s highest possibility.” (205). Also, Knoebel states, “freedom, ultimately, is the fundamental option: self-realization in the direction of God or radical self-refusal towards God. (201). However, he insists that true human freedom can be fulfilled in the “yes” and not in the

concept of the free and definitive “no” is an inconsistent and unstable element in Rahner’s thought. The “yes,” however, is never really an issue, because it fully accords with God’s will, whatever the case. So, the concept of an absolute “no” must be abandoned lest divine-absolute freedom and human-absolute freedom conflict.

Nonetheless, given the concept of human freedom, one is free to attempt a “no.” This “no” is one of freedom’s possibilities, but this possibility of freedom is always at the same time something abortive, something which miscarries and fails, something which is self-destructive and self-contradictory.<sup>116</sup> In saying “no,” one denies God’s offer as well as God’s determination of who he most truly is. Based on this understanding, the notion of a “no” is never entirely successful. This is because God’s definition of the human person (as someone loved and called by God) cannot be undone as Rahner articulates:

But however much a “no” can have the appearance of an absolute act, however much, when looked at categorically, it might represent the absoluteness of a decision better than a “yes” to God, it is not for this reason of equal right and stature in relation to a “yes” to God. For every “no” always derives the life which it has from a “yes,” because the “no” always becomes intelligible only in light of the “yes,” and not vice versa.<sup>117</sup>

## 2.5 Suffering as Intrinsic Consequence of Sin

We have seen that human freedom or a person’s fundamental option is exercised in relation to one’s personal make-up and endeavours to imprint itself upon his/her material and social environment. In the case of a morally wrong action, a person’s fundamental decision or choice contradicts the structures, orientation and personal vocation of the self and others within their external world. As such, it distorts, wounds and damages the external levels of the individual, his environment as well as that of others. It violates the general understanding and accepted elements and these resist and protest, as it were, against this distortion. This contradiction is experienced by the culpable agent and is definitely painful. Rahner says that it is the painful protest of the reality which God has fashioned against the false decision of man.<sup>118</sup> In so far as this decision expresses the essence of freedom, it is the consequence of

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“no.” Thus, he claims that grace is the ground of “freedom’s task calling the human person to respond to his or her Ultimate Horizon in an ultimately full and definitive “yes” (208).

<sup>116</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 102.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Karl Rahner, “A Brief Theological Study on Indulgence,” in *Theological Investigations Vol. 10*, 153.

that act. Hence, the effect of guilt is suffering, understood theologically as the painful “clash between reality and guilt.”<sup>119</sup>

The painful contradiction is by its very nature a consequence of guilt. It is only in this sense that we can speak of suffering as punishment for sin. Suffering is a penalty based on one’s free will. In this regard, statements about “heaven” and “hell” are images which express the absolute seriousness of the human decision in its alternatives of either “yes” or “no” to God’s self-communication. Whether or not “hell” becomes an enduring reality for anyone, it results in the possibility of suffering as the intrinsic consequence of a decisively chosen contradiction. Rahner says that:

The radical contradiction between the permanent supernatural existential, the permanent offer of God’s self-communication in love, and the definitive, obdurate refusal opposed to it by the free act will be experienced as the ‘*poena damni*’<sup>120</sup>

In addition, once one’s bad decision or act affects the individual and the surrounding environment, it may continue in existence making itself felt even when the original act ceases or is radically transformed through conversion. Established attitudes and dispositions within oneself (as well as the effects of a physical, emotional or other injury to another person) may persist, even if the initial guilty act is withdrawn. These enduring expressions of sin may continue to inflict suffering upon the culprit and others. In this sense, they may also be termed punishment for sin. They may provide the context or situation out of which subsequent new acts of freedom will operate.

Rahner’s reflections help to shed light upon the concept of God as judge of sin and as forgiving healer. At the same time, they serve as a corrective to people’s naive, excessive and even destructive images of God. Within the context of personal betrayal, as discussed earlier, when an individual is personally accountable in his/her heart, one also experiences himself/herself as judged and summoned to conversion. The ground and term of this personal accountability, judgement and conversion is what is reflected in the very nature of the divine-human relationship. The judgement and call to conversion are not external but are contained within the very experience of the guilty contradiction and its attendant suffering.

The image of judgement and punishment which is derived from penalties imposed against the civil order does not apply here. Such an image would tend to depict God as an

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<sup>119</sup> Rahner, “Guilt – Responsibility – Punishment,” 216. On the notion of suffering as punishment for sin, see “Guilt and Its Remission,” in *TI vol. 2*, 272-278.

<sup>120</sup> Rahner, “Punishment of Sins,” in *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1587, See also “Hell,” in *ET*, 602-604; *Foundations*, 103-104.

external judge who intervenes vindictively from outside to punish people who disobey his irrational commands.<sup>121</sup> It depicts God as merely one particular being and cause alongside others within the world. However, God must be understood as the transcendent origin, ground, and goal of the world in its totality, and at the same time a silently and inexpressibly near presence. If one is to regard God as judge and punisher of sin, it must not be as a strange intervener, but as the ultimate ground of the structures and orientation of humanity and the world.<sup>122</sup> In setting himself/herself against these realities and against his/her own true self, a person experiences the painful contradiction. Sin implies judgement because it is by its very nature self-destructive. The human being experiences the pain of betraying his/her own inmost self which is ordered to the self-bestowing infinite mystery. God is that before whom the person stands unveiled, accountable, and assessed in this contradiction.

Furthermore, the suffering itself testifies to the continuing presence of one's orientation to God, an orientation which is graced yet firmly established. The suffering persists as a call to give careful attention and a response to this graced orientation and its infinite term. The suffering or punishment is thus a call to repentance and conversion, and has a medicinal character.<sup>123</sup> So, God may be conceived as that before whom men and women stand accused by the very pain of their betrayal. They are then called to conversion so that their painful contradiction might be dissolved and receive both forgiveness and the healing of their sinful nature.

It is important at this point to make some further clarifications so as to avoid the impression that all personal suffering springs from one's own guilt. This may also serve to enrich our perception of God. We have seen that the transcendental act of a person's freedom seeks to express or actualize itself in the rest of one's make-up and in one's environment. But the originating act (God) never fully embodies itself, and the outward expression of one's freedom does become relatively independent of that act. As a result, this character trait or pattern of behaviour may spring from a variety of causes. For example, it may stem unfreely from the impact of other people's guilt, from the pressure of one's social or cultural environment, or from the impact of human history. The outward expression may also have

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<sup>121</sup> Rahner, "Punishment – Responsibility – Punishment," 214-217. See also Rahner, "Remarks on the Theology of Indulgences," *TI vol.2*, 194.s

<sup>122</sup> Rahner, "Punishment of Sins," 1587.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 1588.

arisen from an earlier free act of the person, now renounced, the effects of which continue to impose themselves. In addition, it may be a vital sign of one's present or continuing guilt.

An action may be a free expression from within of an individual or of unfree conditioning from a vital external force. It may be something done, or insufficiently done or arising from passion. For Rahner, the same pattern of associations and psychic mechanisms could be set up both by voluntary training and by brain-washing. He adds that, since our reflexive knowledge takes place by means of such actualizations, there is always a certain ambiguity in our understanding of our inmost transcendental act of freedom. We cannot be reflexively certain whether it is an act of guilt or of grace.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, to the extent that any action does in fact violate one's true structures, orientation and vocation, it will imply suffering as a natural consequence regardless of its free or unfree source. This very suffering poses a challenge to one's present free act as does the ambiguity of all our thematic knowledge.

As a result of this situation human beings experience themselves as responsible for their actions, yet not explicitly certain of what is in their hearts. On the one hand, they discern that their moral responsibility and possible guilt embrace not only their external actions but also their very nature. They see themselves as determined, not by appearances or even by ambiguous objectifications, but by the very decisions of their hearts. On the other hand, they experience an ambiguity insofar as they cannot be particularly certain of the most essential act of their freedom.

In this context God may be perceived as that before whom one stands not only as finally accountable, but as unveiled and weighed in one's very heart. One might speak of the God who sees and judges the human heart. There remains the objective uncertainty about one's actual state which may result in trust or anxiety, hope or despair. In the long run, one (at least implicitly) may trustfully confide oneself to that before which one stands accountable, as an ultimately trustworthy and forgiving reality (God).<sup>125</sup> The term "God" here points to that presence which at once grounds and demands total self-responsibility, but which enables, evokes and justifies total self-surrender despite the ambiguity and uncertainty.

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<sup>124</sup> See Rahner, "Punishment of Sins," in *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1586f. See also Rahner, "Guilt and Its Remission," in *TI vol.2*, 275-278; *Foundations*, 96-97, 104-106.

<sup>125</sup> Rahner, "Guilt and Its Remission," 276; See also Rahner "Justified and Sinner at the Same Time," in *TI vol.6*, 224, 229f.

Rahner maintains that the situation which precedes a person's freedom and provides the context for its exercise serves to emphasize the perspective in which the free history of others (including their guilt), plays a role. It is certainly one which always causes guilt and consequent suffering. The human being sights within him/herself the supernatural existential as well as other human structures and those of the world. These urge the individual to positive moral behaviour, prior to his/her actual personal decision. Any violation induces suffering as its natural consequence. However, the person also experiences a counter force, a reverse longing, both within the elements of one's make-up and in the surrounding environment. This drive also precedes and influences a person's free decision.

Even where a person finds that his/her basic decision corresponds positively with one's personality, he/she is still unable to harmonize fully and clearly into this decision all the dimensions of his/her existence. One continually encounters both internal and external forces which resist one's decision, affect him/her contrary to it, and also cause him/her a degree of suffering. This painful conflict, Rahner understands as concupiscence.<sup>126</sup> It is felt by the person to be something wrong, when it is not, and is even more painful for that reason. The human being feels powerless to fully overcome this conflict.

Rahner says that the true interpretation of this condition is found in Christianity where the human situation is always at least partially determined by the manifestations of guilt. As something universal, this guilt is something that goes back to the creation of humanity.<sup>127</sup> He goes on to explain that man is inseparably and mutually both a personal and communal being. The human race is also a unity in its origin, essence, interdependence and goal. Furthermore, the overall situation, which precedes the free human act as its condition and material and which provides the context in which it is exercised, is a sphere that is common to all people. The decision of any one person encroaches upon that of all the others. Humanity's biological as well as historical unity and dependence means that a person's situation in the here and now is determined by the creation of man. It is not merely a chronological moment, but also a unique basis upon which all subsequent history rests.<sup>128</sup>

Any human being's present situation, as attested to by experience and revelation, is not solely determined by an orientation to mystery as nearness. It is also affected by a force

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<sup>126</sup> For Rahner's detailed understanding of concupiscence, see Rahner, "The Theological Concept of Concupiscence," in *TI vol.1*, 347-382.

<sup>127</sup> On Rahner interpretation of original sin, see Rahner, *Foundations*, 106-115; "Original Sin," in *ET*, 1148-1155.

<sup>128</sup> See Karl Rahner, "The Sin of Adam," in *TI vol.11*, 25-43.

towards personal guilt, a reality which is universal and yet sensed as something that should not be. This negative modification of the human situation must, therefore, be traced to the beginning of the human race. Rahner argues that if the human being's situation is always at least partially determined by the manifestation of sin, there must have been an original act of personal guilt which infected the sphere in which subsequent freedom is exercised.<sup>129</sup> This is what is meant by original sin, or the sin of Adam, whether "Adam" is understood as an individual or as a term for the origin of humanity.

"Original sin," therefore, and the "concupiscence" consequent upon it, form a concrete experience for every human being. This experience exists in dialectical tension with the supernatural existential, the orientation to grace in Christ. Whether one opts for guilt or grace, the opposite experience of existence remains, and this is the cause of suffering. The positive decision meets with resistance called concupiscence. The negative decision encounters the resistance of the human structures which it violates but cannot undermine. Rahner writes:

Antecedent to the decision ... man's situation in relation to salvation is dialectically determined: he is in original sin through Adam and redeemed as oriented towards Christ. In personal free decision, the dialectical situation of freedom is annulled in one or other direction. ... By either decision the existential against which the decision has been made is not simply suppressed, for man in this life always remains in the situation of concupiscence and death and in that of having been redeemed.<sup>130</sup>

The human situation is thus one in which a person not only lacks a fully certain objective awareness of her or his own inner state, and so must choose to trust or to despair, but the individual is also drawn in two opposing directions. He or she is always in a state of conflict and suffering, which can never be fully resolved during life on earth.

As the demonstration of another's or one's own guilt, suffering is never merely neutral. Suffering cannot be regarded in purely physiological or psychological terms as a personally indifferent happening, simply to be condemned. It must be seen as incorporated into the total living of the person experiencing it. Suffering provokes, challenges, demands and implies a reaction. It is always understood and responded to in this way or that, and it thereby becomes either the expression of one's own guilt or the material for justifying faith. This is so even in the case of suffering that is imposed rather than incurred. To the extent that one's reaction to suffering is free and from the heart, the reaction is a fundamental way in

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<sup>129</sup> Rahner, "The Sin of Adam," 155-262; "Original Sin," in *ET*, 1152-1155; *Foundations*, 109-115.

<sup>130</sup> Rahner, "Original Sin," 1154.



which one expresses a core response to or a rejection of the self-orientation to God. This means that however implicit and anonymous, this response will be either confirmation of the sin of Adam or a sharing in the passion of Christ.<sup>131</sup>

In a human situation that is to some extent troubled by ambiguity, painfulness, and an inducement to guilt, we are faced with a fundamental option: either hope or despair. We may give up hope because of the final absurdity of human existence in the face of such evil and suffering. Or we may affirm that there is a basis for meaning and hope despite the pain of life, that the acceptance of unavoidable suffering somehow has an enduring worth and validity. In the latter case, the final ground which enables and calls for profound trust in the meaning of life is what is meant by “God.” To believe in God is to show that, despite the challenges of the nature of the world, the greatest source of all reality must ultimately be described in terms of love.<sup>132</sup>

We have explored Rahner’s understanding of guilt as a fundamental option at the core of one’s being, an option which seeks to represent acts contrary to human dignity and thereby implies suffering. Suffering as a result of sin is by its very nature a consequence of guilt. Theologically, it is understood as the painful contradiction between the culpable free decision and the true reality of self, others, the world, and their Creator – the self-bestowing mystery. Suffering is also universal in the sense that to some degree it permeates all the situations in which human freedom operates. From this perspective, God may be conceived as that transcendent presence at the core of one’s being, before which a person stands unveiled and assessed. He is the presence which continually calls the human being to conversion and to a basic trust in life’s meaning, despite the existence of evil and suffering.

## **2.6 Rahner’s View of Sin and Christ as Redeemer**

In discussing his notion of the supernatural existential in every person, which is an inherent inclination of man toward God, Rahner states that the experience is reciprocated by the “permanent offer of God’s self-communication in love.” He maintains that the only real “sin” is a definite ‘no’ to God not by individual acts offensive to God but by one’s life as a whole.<sup>133</sup> However, his view of the human being as whole, integral, not fallen or corrupted is

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<sup>131</sup> See Rahner, *Guilt and its Remission*, 277-281.

<sup>132</sup> Rahner, “Unity, Love, Mystery,” in *TI vol. 8*, 235-241.

<sup>133</sup> Rahner, *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1587.

lost, especially when we think of a crucified Christ as the Redeemer of mankind from original and personal sin and as the very foundation and beginning of the Catholic faith.

What is striking is that when we go more deeply into Rahner's Christology we discover that it is not only in accordance with his anthropological approach, but that he prefers the term "absolute bringer of salvation" to the concept of "incarnation." In addition, Rahner does not refer to Christ as the Redeemer. This is consistent with his basic theology of the wholeness, integrity, and uncorrupted nature of man, which would not require redemption from original sin. Weger comments that Rahner's anxiety to avoid completely the concept of redemption is based on his Christology, which he often calls 'Christology from below.' This is an approach made from the standpoint of man and his understanding of himself.<sup>134</sup> Rahner's view of Christ fully reflects the basic orientation of his theology as being "anthropocentric," (built upward from man) rather than "theocentric," (built from an understanding of God through Revelation). He presupposes, for example, that God is himself man and continues to be man in eternity. Similarly, if God is always a mystery, then man is also the mystery of God and will continue to be mystery in eternity. God's act of salvation is achieved by the absolute bringer of salvation and is irrevocable because God never ceases to be man.<sup>135</sup>

Cardinal Ratzinger remarks that Rahner's best view of Jesus Christ as the true Saviour of mankind can be deduced in terms of the incarnation of God as the highest instance of the ontological fulfilment of human reality, the successful and perfect transcendence. As the successful form of human self-transcendence, as the utterance of God in a finite subject, Christ is the expression and realization of the human universal.<sup>136</sup> Weger interprets Rahner's remarks as meaning that it is possible to believe in Jesus of Nazareth because everything that has been said about God and man's experience of God, about transcendental revelation and historical interpretation and about man's longing and fears is mysteriously embodied in the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>137</sup> To say it differently, Rahner shows that Jesus is seen to be with God in a unique way.

As for the idea of redemption, Weger comments that:

Rahner rejects the theology of satisfaction which has been current in Catholicism since the Middle Ages and according to which God forgives people's sins only by

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<sup>134</sup> Weger, Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Theology, 158.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>136</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco, Calif: Ignatius Press, 1987), 165.

<sup>137</sup> Weger, 141

means of the infinite satisfaction of the God-man on the cross, because sin is an infinite offence against God.<sup>138</sup>

Rahner concedes that the idea of God's reconciliation with humanity by means of a sacrifice was widely accepted as valid in Jewish society at that time. However, he maintains that the idea of sacrifice can be of very little help to a modern person who is trying to understand the salvific aspect of Jesus' crucifixion. According to Weger, Rahner does not see redemption as functioning mythologically, as though God had somehow to be made to change his mind by Jesus' crucifixion and so be led to save humanity in this way. Rahner insists that God's will to save is stronger than human sin and cannot be frustrated by it.<sup>139</sup>

Robert McCarthy notes that by doubting "the theology of satisfaction," Rahner implicitly questions the meaning of the sacrifice of the cross, the ultimate abandonment by Christ himself for our sake, our redemption from original sin, thus opening the possibility of reconciliation with God for the sins committed in this life.<sup>140</sup> However, the absolute meaning and power of the Cross is clarified in Christ as Redeemer – the means of God's salvation of humanity (1Cor. 1:17-18). In fact, the event of salvation is irreversible. It is in itself the fulfilment of the manifestation of the Supreme Being in the second Person of the Trinity, the Word and Son of God. Although it has been accomplished in an exemplary way in one man, the salvation of that one man is indeed the possibility of salvation itself for all humanity. The bringer of salvation must therefore be God's absolute promise of redemption to the spiritual creature, the human person. I think McCarthy sums it up so well: "Without belief in the salvation of the Son of God who took the flesh and nature of man and emptied himself on the cross, Christianity would collapse."<sup>141</sup>

## 2.7 An Evaluation of Rahner's Doctrine of Sin

It is not surprising that Rahner gives a comprehensive understanding of the reality of sin in world. Perhaps this is because he lived through the Nazi era, at a time when people were suffering from lack of freedom on many fronts. The Jews were targeted and made scapegoats and yet the Christian Churches were not taking a leading role in condemning Hitler's policies and the trampling on people's freedoms as perpetrated with impunity by German military might. Surprisingly these events are strangely absent from Rahner's

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 174-75.

<sup>140</sup> Robert McCarthy, *A Critical Examination of Theology of Karl Rahner*, 41-42.

<sup>141</sup> See Ibid., 37.

reflections on freedom, sin and guilt. Nevertheless, he discusses the various aspects of sin and the necessity of its remission.

Although the doctrine of original sin was declared as dogma by the Council of Trent, Rahner's concept of sin seems to deny it. Interestingly, there may be good cause to question the doctrine as there are other theologians who raise a similar query. For instance, in *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* by Cardinals Ratzinger and Schönborn we find the statement: "A particularly delicate subject is original sin."<sup>142</sup> Undoubtedly, Rahner's questioning of the authenticity of original sin is one of the criticisms that might be raised about his theology of sin. Nevertheless, it provides a critical assessment of the teachings of Christianity. He handles in a masterly way those tensions which emerge in the contentious discussion of theology with regard to faith and reason, tradition and novelty, authority and freedom.

In terms of concrete and specific moral guidance for Catholic Christians, Rahner's earlier writings suggest that the objects or matter for choice "must be indifferent or good in themselves and furthermore must remain in the teaching and practice of our holy mother the hierarchical Church."<sup>143</sup> This reflects a confidence that the Church's own teaching would provide unquestionable guidance about behaviour or choices which are conducive or destructive of human prospects for ultimate salvation. However, this absolute confidence in the teaching of the hierarchical Church breaks down after the papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which was issued in 1968 to reaffirm the prohibition against artificial birth control. Rahner's willingness to support a limited theological legitimacy for decisions of conscience contrary to official Church teaching in matters such as the use of birth control is perceived by some as weakening the usefulness of the teaching of the Church as a guide to authentic Christian life. It has been argued that this in turn leaves the Christian without adequate resources for a thorough formation of the conscience.

Concerns have been raised about Rahner's understanding of sin as the freedom to say "no" to God. For him, human freedom seems to be irrevocably defined in the "yes" and the "no" when either is posited. If so, how does one explain conversion to God after a "no" has been affirmed? Rahner claims that sin in the strict sense is the fully free and definite "no" to

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<sup>142</sup> Joseph Ratzinger and Christoph Schönborn, *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 71.

<sup>143</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola," in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 101.

God made by the total human being in a whole life act in an encounter with God mediated by the world of things and other people. Errol D’Lima remarks that this negative decision is simultaneously about God and the whole human person, and thus irrevocably brings the human being to completely say “no” to God.<sup>144</sup> It is not easy to see the “no” to God as irrevocable and consequently final, unless possibly at the end of one’s life. But would this mean that Rahner does not envisage the possibility of serious or mortal sin being committed in the course of a person’s life?

In Sacred Scripture and in the Tradition of the Church it is revealed that God permits sin and guilt to be present in the world of humans and constantly offers His faithful unconditional forgiving love to repentant sinners. Rahner has no difficulty as such with Divine Revelation and the official teaching of the Church. He accepts that a person can repent of his or her sins, can be forgiven, and can enter into communion with God again. However, it would seem that his theological anthropology disregards the fact of conversion as spelt out in Sacred Scripture and Church Tradition. D’Lima acknowledges that in trying to make the doctrines of sin and conversion relevant to our times, Rahner attempts to interpret dogma and doctrine anew.<sup>145</sup> It is therefore incumbent on Rahner’s students to ascertain whether his theological anthropology allows for true forgiveness, a change of heart and a grace-filled existence of persons.

Some commentators perceive that in his concept of the fundamental option (the possibility of saying "yes" or "no" to God), Rahner is equating human freedom to the freedom of God both in absoluteness and irrevocability. Because his approach focuses on discernment and the commitment of transcendental freedom, it has been argued that the theory of fundamental option does not offer a substantive account of the moral life. In other words, it does not provide adequate models of Christian living and behaviour. John Paul II has suggested that this understanding of fundamental option serves to undermine traditional notions of mortal sin.<sup>146</sup> In addition, the moral theologian Jean Porter maintains that it serves to detach theological and indeed salvific meaning from all of human behaviour.<sup>147</sup> Despite these and other criticisms, Fritz says that Rahner has been vindicated against such critiques

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<sup>144</sup> Errol D’Lima, “The Understanding of Sin and Its Function in the Theology of Karl Rahner,” 5.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 65.

<sup>147</sup> Jean Porter, “Moral Language and the Language of Grace: The Fundamental Option and the Virtue of Charity,” *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997): 170.

based on connections that may be drawn between his idea of the fundamental option and the penance studies. Radical sin is revealed by radical mercy, which sustains deep conversion.<sup>148</sup>

In Rahner's view the capacity for making a definitive choice of acceptance or rejection of God's will finds its systematic expression by means of guided prayer and reflection (Spiritual Exercises).<sup>149</sup> This is because the human person's encounter of transcendental experience is ultimately a spiritual experience, or, in Christian terms, an experience of grace. Such an understanding reflects Rahner's conception of the transcendental freedom encountered in transcendental experience when he states that only God has absolute freedom to the fullest degree.<sup>150</sup> The person as "hearer of the word" and so as "the subject of transcendental experience," is understood to be open to divine self-revelation; a divine self-revelation which always demands a response by means of categorical action. Transcendental freedom would be engaged in such a categorical choice but in a minor way. So human beings may be said to have absolute freedom insofar as they are united with God.<sup>151</sup> Brian Linnane remarks that the concept of fundamental option, involves the subject's definitive acceptance or rejection of God by way of a free, moral action.<sup>152</sup>

Commenting on the relationship between divine and human freedom, Ron Highfield states:

Since the concrete human being is thought of as a union of God (supernatural existential) and (pure) human nature, Rahner considers himself able to attribute to this human, by a sort of "communication of properties," the freedom which is characteristic of the divine life alone. Under the flag of grace, an attribute of God can be safely transferred to the human being, so that human beings are said to have the freedom to decide definitively about God and the totality of their own being; thus, they are free to realise themselves as a "yes" or "no" to God.<sup>153</sup>

We realise that in his understanding of the transcendental nature of humanity Rahner believes that we always have the capacity to push our boundaries of the "infinite horizon," a holy mystery which permeates every aspect our very being. Within this transcendent reality, "man experiences himself precisely as subject and person insofar as he becomes conscious of

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<sup>148</sup> Fritz, "Placing Sin in Rahner's Theology," 311.

<sup>149</sup> Rahner, "The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge," 95.

<sup>150</sup> Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 50.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. Thomas L. Knoebel, in his reading of *Hearers*, notices the same relationship between divine and human freedom which I have noted. He says, "Rahner's definition of freedom as it exists for absolute reality, therefore, is the definition which serves throughout all of his writings as the goal of human freedom as well." See, Thomas L. Knoebel, "Grace in the Theology of Karl Rahner: A Systematic Presentation," (PhD Thesis, Fordham University, 1980), 197.

<sup>152</sup> Brian Linnane, "Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, 158.

<sup>153</sup> Ron Highfield, "The Freedom to Say 'No'", 504-505.

himself as the product of what is radically foreign to him.”<sup>154</sup> It must be said that this transcendental awareness of God within us is often inconceivable to our “human” nature. Also, Rahner’s theory of transcendentalism or the mystery of the human being is often misinterpreted or criticised. However, within his anthropology, no being other than God can be thought to decide about God freely and definitively. God is only what God wills to be. Only where freedom is absolute are the conditions fulfilled for the possibility of such a decision. In analogy to divine absolute freedom, human beings have freedom insofar as their will coincides perfectly with that which God wills.

Consequently, a human absolute “no” to God would contradict the concept of freedom, since a “no” to God would also be a “no” to the human having “being.” For Rahner, freedom is intimately related to his view of the meaning of being. He regards being as meaning “being-with-self,” that is, being a fully self-possessed, self-determining subject. Only God has being (being-with-self) to the fullest degree, absolutely.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, for anyone to think that Rahner understands the human being as able to make absolute and irrevocable judgements or decisions about God would have serious implications. Highfield’s remark that Rahner’s doctrine of sin as a free and definitive “no” to God is attributing to the human a divine-like freedom is certainly an over-statement.<sup>156</sup>

Finally, even though the Rahnerian idea of the fundamental option has been criticised by some commentators for risking a fusion of Creator with creature or a transformation of the creature into the divine, it provokes and enables ethical deliberations for contemporary believers. Without doubt, his systematic theology of sin affirms its reality which in turn calls for a deep need for God’s mercy.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at Rahner’s doctrine of sin and its implications for the nature of humanity. He clearly maintains that sin is the deliberate use of human freedom to say “no” to God’s will. I don’t intend to solve the problem that might arise from Rahner’s notion of sin. However, there is a lot that we can learn from him, for instance:

1. That sin affects every person who commits it and those around him/her.
2. Also, that society can help the sinner to overcome his/her weaknesses and sins.

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<sup>154</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 29.

<sup>155</sup> Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, 50.

<sup>156</sup> See Ron Highfield, 505. This is not really the case as it overlooks the role of God’s grace.

Due to the need to reconcile with one another, with God and community, we need the sacrament of penance. Human beings are challenged to take a hard look at sin, to call it by its name and to take responsibility for it. The misuse of human freedom (or the lack of responsibility in the choices we make) has resulted in the loss of the sense of sin and consequently the loss of the sense of God. The only way to recover the sense of sin is to recover the sense of God. We ought to look evil in the eye and, without blinking, say no to it for the reality that it is. Putting evil in its place and naming sin for what it is, and confessing it, will help to restore the relationship we are meant to enjoy with God, our Creator. The need to enhance the divine-human relationship will be the subject of the next chapter. We shall focus on understanding the notion of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* which reflects the importance of the ecclesial celebration of the sacrament of penance as a way of humanity's saying "yes" to God's love and mercy.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RECONCILIATIO CUM ECCLESIA: RAHNER'S CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF PENANCE

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on Rahner's conceptualisation of the sacrament of penance as reconciliation with the Church. It also explores how the idea of reconciliation in and through the Church / community of believers can enrich both the understanding and appreciation of the sacrament. Rahner maintains that sacramental confession is saying "yes" to God's divine mercy. He again speaks of forgiveness as "God's free and forgiving self-communication to a guilty person who turns to God and surrenders himself in faith, trust and contrition, and it can be heard in the depths of conscience."<sup>1</sup> To enhance this "divine-human relationship" Rahner claims that such dialogue and response is the heart of Christian faith. In keeping with Rahner's commitment to bringing theology and spirituality together, we shall attempt to address the theological and pastoral implications of enhancing this relationship as far as the sacrament of penance is concerned.

For Rahner, human beings respond appropriately to God's self-communication by saying "yes" to God, which involves the acceptance of forgiveness and conversion of heart. This dialogue is contextualised within the sacramental rite of forgiveness whereby the sinner surrenders himself to God, allowing himself to be forgiven.<sup>2</sup> Taking into account the traditional scriptural and ecumenical belief that God forgives sins, we shall examine Rahner's theology of the forgiveness of sin which acknowledges humanity's saying "yes" to God through the Church. In order to consider Rahner's theology of penance, we shall discuss his perception of the concept "*reconciliatio cum ecclesia*." We aim to rediscover the fruits of the sacrament of penance in order to arrive at a richer theological understanding of the mystery of God's love and forgiveness. The overall purpose of re-visioning Rahner's theology of penance is to reclaim a renewed sense of this sacrament which is so essential in Christian life and yet no longer seems to be taken seriously by many Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 421.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rahner, *Allow Yourself to be Forgiven* (Denville: Dimension, Inc., 1974), 24.

### **3.2 Penance as Divine-Human Relationship: Reclaiming God’s Self-communication to Humankind**

Fostering the divine-human relationship is a central element in Rahner’s theology. He describes the notion of “divine-human relationship” as a dialogue between God and man communicating in love and freedom.<sup>3</sup> Rahner’s distinctive theological anthropology paints a picture of the human person as deeply connected to the mystery of God on an ontological level and within his everyday experiences of life.<sup>4</sup> He argues that if a human being is to have something to do with God, he or she should accept God’s self-communication; but this acceptance is borne by God himself though without reducing him to our finiteness.<sup>5</sup> Christianity traditionally talks about God’s self-communication to humanity as the communication of the Holy Spirit - the infinite horizon that is always present to us in our transcendence as a silent mystery.<sup>6</sup>

Rahner uses the term “supernatural existential” to explain how all human beings without exception in their concrete, historical existence are created for communion with God. God creates human creatures and their creation communicates Godself (uncreated grace) to them in love.<sup>7</sup> Humans are created for grace and God. They live always and everywhere in a creation in which grace is ever-present, and God is found in each and every detail of their concrete existence. Rahner stresses that this longing to be in union with God is strictly supernatural. It exists in us precisely because God freely planted it there. Hence, there is an emptiness in us which is there because God wants to fill it.

The divine-human dialogue begins with creation, in which the world is created as the addressee of the Word of God. Creation is the beginning of the offer of grace. God creates human creatures, offers Godself to them as uncreated grace, and invites them into a personal, loving, self-transcending and self-transforming relationship. This is a transcendental experience; an elevation or modification of humanity which is an aspect of our lived reality.<sup>8</sup> Human beings exist as hearers of the Word and are created with the potential to communicate with God. Rahner maintains that “God establishes creatures by his creative power insofar as he establishes them from out of nothing in their own non-divine reality as the grammar of

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<sup>3</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66. Rahner characterizes this loving self-communication of God to human creatures as being a supernatural elevation of human nature and, therefore, a supernatural existential.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

God's possible self-expression."<sup>9</sup> If we are hearers of the Word, and are also words of God, then, "we are ourselves ... the utterance and address of God which listens to itself."<sup>10</sup> This means prayer is not merely occasional, verbal conversation, but rather part of the structure of human life.<sup>11</sup>

For Rahner, the humanity of Jesus Christ is the expression of God, and

This is not contradicted by the fact there are also other men, namely, we ourselves, who are not this self-expression of God becoming other. For "what" he is as the self-expression of the Logos and "what" we are is the same. We call it "human nature." But the unbridgeable difference is constituted by the fact that this "what" in him is spoken as his self-expression, and this is not the case with us.<sup>12</sup>

We can now see the Christological centre of Rahner's theological anthropology. It shows a deep connection between the creation of humanity and its assumption in hypostatic union. The possibility of human nature having divine nature is grounded in the possibility of Jesus Christ. In the incarnation of the Son, God humiliates himself, accepting and adopting threatened and depraved human nature in its entirety, making it part of his eternal life.<sup>13</sup>

Incarnation, according to Rahner, is a divine response to human sin and a saving event for each individual. This is evident in the description of human self-transcendence as the human being's obedience to God for hypostatic union. Humanity is, consequently, the utterance in which God can empty himself and at the same time express himself.<sup>14</sup> If we wanted to deny this, we would be denying the freedom of Incarnation, the freedom of God's self-communication in grace to the world. Rahner perceives human nature as deeply and intrinsically connected to the nature of God, even in its difference and distinction. When God wants to be what is not God, man comes to be.<sup>15</sup> This implies that 'pure human nature' is an abstract possibility not a reality. There is no such thing as a natural human being, because every human being is called to share God's life.

Meanwhile, emphasizing the essence of the divine-human relationship, Larson-Miller says that liturgy is something that "we" do to portray the immanence of God and the priesthood of all believers.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the horizontal dimension of liturgy with its

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, trans. V. Green (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>12</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 224.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 218

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>16</sup> Lizette Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 37.

primary focus on community and the actions of the whole community, has more recently been balanced with a return to the recognition that there is the centrality of the divine-human relationship, not simply the human-human relationship. Thus, the primary “actor” is not the gathered community but the triune God to whom the community responds.<sup>17</sup> Sacramental celebration has to be seen as more than just a matter of strengthening the community for mission and service. David Brown insists that the heart of liturgy lies in the adoration of God, basking in his presence in and for its own sake.<sup>18</sup> This return to the centrality of God has influenced a number of second-generation liturgical renewals but it is still a poorly articulated theology at a popular level.<sup>19</sup>

Taking into account the scriptural and ecumenical confession by which God forgives sins, Rahner speaks of forgiveness as “God’s free and forgiving self-communication.”<sup>20</sup> He uses the image of Church to highlight penance as a way of reclaiming the divine-human relationship. To enrich our understanding of this ancient and contemporary practice of penance, we shall locate some “forgotten truths.”<sup>21</sup> Rahner says that the Church manifests the physical sign, the human dimension and the divine action. However, sin is most certainly in opposition to the holy will of the eternal God and in opposition to the love which he offers us. God wants to give and communicate Himself more and more so that we might participate, or participate more, in the divine nature.<sup>22</sup> In addition, sin is not only an offence against the nature of humanity and against the human being’s supernatural calling to grace, but it is also an offence against the holy communion of the redeemed, which is the Church.<sup>23</sup>

Stressing the perspective of penance as a means of enhancing the divine-human relationship, Rahner portrays reconciliation with the Church as the *sacramentum et res* of penance. There is the material sign which the eyes can see (for example, the water of Baptism, the bread of Eucharist, and in Penance seeing a Christian entering a confessional, hearing the words absolution, and seeing the priest extend his hand). Thomas Aquinas calls the penitent’s acts the material cause of grace and the priest’s acts the formal cause of grace

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 20.

<sup>19</sup> Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 117-118.

<sup>21</sup> The term “forgotten truths” is taken from Karl Rahner, “Forgotten Truths Concerning Penance,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2 (London: Longman & Todd, 1963), 135-174.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 137.

because matter and form act as a single cause. Rahner says that Aquinas, being a conservative and harmonizing genius, cannot simply discard either contrition or absolution as the sole cause of grace. The two notions of matter and form give him the possibility of combining both contrition and absolution (as material cause and formal cause) which lead to the totality of the sacramental sign of penance.<sup>24</sup> This union in meaning with regard to tangible penance is first of all experienced by penitents before the visible Church. Then the forgiving, authoritative discharge by the Church completes the unity of sign and signifies the divine forgiveness which in signifying it, effects it, i.e. allows it to become an actual happening. Rahner refers to this penitential process regulated by the Church as “the reconciliation with and by the Church.”<sup>25</sup>

Arguably, eyesight can see kneeling and absolution, but it requires spiritual sight to experience reconciliation. Only spiritual sight can perceive the *res* of penance, namely, that when the sinner is loosed by the Church on earth he is also loosed in heaven. As James Dallen explains:

A clear sign of the rediscovery of the ecclesial dimension of penance has been widespread acceptance among theologians that reconciliation with the Church is the *res et sacramentum* of penance – that the sacrament is, in other words, the taking back of the sinner into the Church as symbol of divine acceptance. In scholastic theological discussion, *sacramentum* referred to the liturgical action (viewed as matter and form). This visible activity led one into the invisible happening, which, though open to experience led one still further. The intermediate symbolic reality, *res et sacramentum*, was thus the means to encounter the transcendent reality, the *res sacramenti*, which was beyond direct experience.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to understand the theology behind the concept (*reconciliatio cum Ecclesia*) that set the agenda for the reforming of the current *Rite of Penance*. Similarly, the terms – reconciliation, penance and confession used to designate the sacrament are essential for an adequate understanding and practice of what St. Alphonsus Ligouri called this “great” sacrament.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>26</sup> James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 265.

### 3.3 The Theology of “*Reconciliatio cum Ecclesia*”

The Second Vatican Council has pointed out that sacramental penance provides remission of sins and brings reconciliation with the Church and with God.<sup>27</sup> Numerous theologians today recognize that reconciliation with the Church (hereafter to be designated as RWC) constitutes the first and immediate effect of the sacrament of penance. This in turn brings reconciliation with God – second and interior effect – to the Christian sinner.<sup>28</sup> Arguably, the growing disinterest in the sacrament of penance today derives from a lack of a solid understanding of the sacrament which has led to many Catholics failing to avail of it. To reverse this trend, we need to pay more attention to the ecclesial, Christological and personal dimensions of the sacrament. We need to see it as a vital part of the mission of the Church as a reconciled and reconciling community.<sup>29</sup>

Karl Rahner sees the expression “*reconciliatio cum ecclesia*” as highlighting the three dimensions of penance which theologians have neglected in the recent past. He insists that the concept of reconciliation of the sinner with the Church is key for a deeper understanding of the sacrament of penance and “penitential teaching” within the Church.<sup>30</sup> In 1922 Bartomeu M. Xiberta, a Spanish Carmelite, argued that “RWC is the *res et sacramentum* of penance (the proper and immediate effect of sacramental absolution).”<sup>31</sup> He maintains that this was an almost inevitable development from Scripture and Tradition since it had been by his own analysis confirmed by the Scholastic doctors. He references Thomas Aquinas’ view as well as other Scholastics (particularly Bonaventure) to support his thesis.

Drawing on historical and theological study of penance by the Scholastics, Xiberta stresses that RWC allows us to establish the sacramental dignity of the penance as practiced in the Church. Sacramental absolution enhances the relationship between the “divine

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<sup>27</sup> See *Lumen Gentium* - Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, no. 11; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* - The Ministry and Life of Priests, no. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Rahner was able to produce a substantial list of theologians: Henri de Lubac, Michael Schmaus, Edward Schillebeeckx, Parker Palmer, Joseph Ratzinger, Yves Congar, Herbert Vorgrimler and many more who accepted that the *pax cum Ecclesia* was an essential element in the penitential practice of the Church. See Rahner, “Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church,” in *Theological Investigations* vol.10, 128.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Dennis Cauchi, “Reclaiming the Sacrament of Reconciliation” (Licentiate diss., University of Toronto, 2012), 35-40.

<sup>30</sup> See Rahner, “Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church,” 125-149.

<sup>31</sup> Bartholomeus Xiberta, *Clavis Ecclesiae: De Ordine Absolutionis Sacramentalis ad Reconciliationem cum Ecclesia* (Rome: Gregorian Pontifical University, 1922), 241-341. The version we are using is the reproduction of the 1922 text by J. Perarnau in *Miscellanea Bartholomeus Xiberta*, “*Analecta sacra Tarraconensia 45/2*” (Barcelona: Biblioteca Balmes, 1972).

element” and the “human element” rather than being a merely an ecclesiastical institution. Rahner’s central idea of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* is to recover this ancient idea of penance. For him, the concept of sin can be best understood in terms of one’s break from and return to ecclesial communion. To express it more precisely, the forgiveness of guilt/sin and RWC are related to one another. Here the reconciliation of the sinner with the Church is taken to be the sacramental sign (*res et sacramentum*) of the forgiveness of sins which at the same time is considered as the effect of the sacrament (*res sacramenti*).<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, Vatican II teaches that all sins have an ecclesiological aspect, all ‘wound’ the Church. Every sin affects the holiness of the Church. But those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from the mercy of God for the offence committed against Him. At the same time, they are reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins, the Church which by charity, example, and prayer seeks their conversion.<sup>33</sup>

Some of the key adherents of RWC are enthusiastic in interpreting and defending the concept using various classic texts from Scripture (Jn 20:21-23; Mt 16:18-19; 18:17-18).<sup>34</sup> When our Lord said: “Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed also in heaven,” and, “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them,” he might have meant, as RWC holds, that two objects were to be forgiven or loosed. The one on earth is the offence against the Church, while the other in heaven is the offence against God, the latter being effected through the former. Also, Jesus may have meant that only one object was in question: “Whatever you, acting as my vicars on earth, loose, the same will be loosed by God.” This might mean that those acting as agents for the Holy Spirit (who receive the Holy Spirit), shall forgive the same sins which are forgiven them by the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, the same distinction may be made regarding the excerpt “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven.” Advocates of RWC hold that two objects are in question. The first is a binding on earth, an exclusion from living membership in the Church. This results in a second binding, a spiritual one made by God.<sup>35</sup> However, the excerpt might also mean “Whatever spiritual bond you impose as my agents, the same will be ratified by God.” So, proponents of RWC do not view “bind” and “loose” as mutually exclusive courses

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<sup>32</sup> Rahner, “Penance as Reconciliation with Church, 130.

<sup>33</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no.11.

<sup>34</sup> Rahner illustrates some contributions of a number of theologians right from St Paul. See Rahner, “Forgotten Truths Concerning Penance,” 148-61.

<sup>35</sup> Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 150.

of action. They consider the words to mean one unified process, which begins with banishment of the sinner from living communion with the Church in order to later re-establish the individual in it by “loosing” him or her.<sup>36</sup>

When the Church forgives the sinner’s guilt against the holy community, Christ pledges that the sinner’s guilt against the Holy One will be forgiven. When one is reconciled with the body of Christ on earth, one is also “recognised once more ‘in heaven’ as a free member of the Congregation of Christ, animated by his Spirit, with all the rights and graces of such a member.”<sup>37</sup> When the Church grants the sinner her peace, she grants the sinner God’s peace. This means, therefore, that the remission of guilt in heaven is not simply and solely a presupposition for the loosing on earth but is also, moreover, its effect. Hence, the Church grants the sinner peace with God in granting him the gift of her peace and the sinner is once more granted access to the agape of the Church.<sup>38</sup>

Stressing the Church’s role as mediator in the signification and granting of forgiveness, Rahner emphasizes the declaration of the Second Vatican Council that penance is an additional reconciliation of the sinner within the Church herself.<sup>39</sup> He thus points to a positive appraisal of the sacrament: that penance is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ who, through his Church, instils his own attitude within those who celebrate the sacrament. By expanding the understanding of the effects of the sacrament to include both its spiritual and reconciling dimensions, he holds that the sacrament acquires a more prominent role in the spiritual journey of every Christian and has significant implications for the life and mission of the Church. The Church, therefore, is not only the bearer of the effective word in which God pronounces his forgiveness and grace upon the repentant. By the same act, she also confers upon the individual that peace within her own self which was damaged or taken away by the penitent’s sins.<sup>40</sup>

Vatican II sanctioned the contemporary reflection on penance, the movement for the rediscovery of the ecclesial dimension of the sacraments. It may be expressed as: “reconciliation with God by means of reconciliation with the Church.”<sup>41</sup> For Rahner, the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Rahner, “Penance as Reconciliation with the Church,” 129; Also see *Lumen Gentium*, no.11.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard Rey, *Pour des célébrations pénitentielles dans l'esprit de Vatican II* (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 177. In particular, he endeavours to position the ecclesial community (“Church of sinners”) as the subject of the collective action of reconciliation. See especially pp. 163-65.



expression RWC replaces the “inner penance” which Thomas Aquinas and many medieval theologians constituted as the *res et sacramentum* of penance. In addition, on the theological level, as the immediate effect of penance, RWC is seen by Rahner as the sinner being reconciled with the Church, a distinction that allows the sacrament to preserve its full meaning. In essence, RWC not only signifies the immediate effect of the sacramental action but it is also the sign of reconciliation with God. It is worth reiterating at this point that this study is limited to an examination of RWC in the spirit of offering a theological framework for a better understanding and appreciation of penance with a view to enhancing its contemporary practice.

Rahner’s insistence that human beings can pronounce a definitive ‘no’ to God (as seen in the previous chapter) affirms the reality of sin and the need for ecclesial reconciliation. His theology of penance and his notion of the fundamental option comprise an agenda for articulating the radical mercy that the Church is called to but often does not enact. For him, the concept of RWC is intended to highlight the social aspect of sin and the Church’s role in redeeming the faithful. He writes that

The fact that the distance of the sinner from the Church’s fullness of life becomes perceptible as a result of the Church’s action and not merely by the action of the sinner, makes it quite legitimate to call this action of the Church a ‘binding’, analogous to the ‘binding’ by which the Church responds to the mortal sin of a Christian.<sup>42</sup>

Based on the ecclesiological character of every sacramental act, Rahner maintains that RWC restores the neglected social aspect of penance which includes both its reconciling and ascetic dimensions.<sup>43</sup> This “ecclesiological aspect” is rooted in the divine-human relationship, promoted by the Church for the lives of her members. Sacraments are for people, so it is the Church’s responsibility to assist, affirm and encourage her members to embrace sacramental forgiveness. Affirming their basic goodness is not to deny sin, but to indicate that God’s love is greater than the power of evil.

Drawing from the teaching of the second Vatican Council, Rahner declares that every sin on the part of a member of the Church contradicts the interior nature of the Church in the

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<sup>42</sup> Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 151. In the strict sense, the sacrament of penance is part of a judicial (binding and loosing or retaining and forgiving) power of the keys which Our Lord has given to the Church with regard to sinners. For the ‘binding,’ as such, retains its meaning and significance in the case of the sinner who remains impenitent. But it is not, of course, of a sacramental nature in this case at any rate. And this sacramental nature should not, therefore, be attributed to it either in the case when in accordance with what is properly and originally meant by it. The binding, in fact, resolves itself into ‘loosing’ (see 1Cor 5:5).

<sup>43</sup> Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 136-142.

sense that it affects the holiness of the Church.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the mystery of the Church through the sacrament of penance can help each member of the Mystical Body of Christ in their spiritual journey on earth towards union with God and with one another. In this sense, the sacrament helps Christians to grow in holiness and manifests to the world the holiness of the Mystical Body of Christ.

One of the disadvantages with the expression RWC is the impression it gives that every Catholic who commits a mortal sin is excommunicated or is viewed as not in union with the Church. Such an idea is heretical and the proponents of RWC have no such intention in mind. As Xiberta explains:

In the course of my work, when emphasizing the words of the Fathers, I have often said that mortal sin cuts off a sinner from the Church and so on. Lest such expressions should beget difficulty or confusion, it should be noted that they are not to be understood so strictly as to seem to make us say that sinners are not members of the Church; this would conflict with the teaching of the Church and the universal agreement of the Fathers....<sup>45</sup>

However, if the sinner still remains a member of the Church, in what sense does he have to be reconciled with her? One remains bound to the Church by the triple bond of creed, code and cult. The Holy Spirit does not abandon the sinner, since it is of faith that the latter can repent and can do so only with the help of actual grace, an operation of the Spirit.<sup>46</sup> A sinner retains his right to access the sacrament which unites him to the Blessed Trinity and gives him the various rights and duties of a Christian. For example, a sinner is obliged to attend Mass and, despite his sinful condition, may receive graces from the sacrifice which will foster genuine contrition and cancel even “enormous sins.”<sup>47</sup>

RWC requires additional clarification especially given that absolution is also bestowed on those who confess only venial sins. This is because such persons do not seem to be at odds with the Church as their sins have not lessened their sanctifying grace. By doing good works they can constantly grow in grace. In fact, they are holy people if they regularly confess such transgressions, even if they be deliberate ones. The Council of Trent declared that venial sins may be lawfully and usefully mentioned in confession even though they can

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<sup>44</sup> Rahner, “Penance as Reconciliation with the Church,” 130-131.

<sup>45</sup> Xiberta, *Clavis Ecclesiae*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Council of Trent (DB 911, 839, 807). The Council of Trent (1551) defined the sacrament of penance as a true and proper sacrament instituted by Christ for the purpose of reconciling the faithful to God as often as they fall into sin after baptism, having in its sacramental rite: the acts of the penitent –contrition, confession, and satisfaction as well as the absolving action of the priest.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, (DB 940).

be forgiven by receiving other sacraments besides penance or by diverse extra-sacramental means.<sup>48</sup> How, then, can they be in any true sense reconciled with the Church when they are absolved? Certainly, more elaboration is needed as to how RWC is applicable to confessions of pure devotion, i.e., those which consist of venial sins only or when a person confesses sins previously forgiven and nothing else. In such cases it seems that there is absolutely no damage to the Church necessitating reparation by the sacrament and so no reconciliation is possible or required.

### **3.4 RWC in relation to Mortal Sins Already Forgiven and Absolution for Venial Sins**

Advocates of RWC seem to be in substantial agreement that reconciliation and infusion of grace is mainly with regard to the confession of mortal sins. This is not particularly surprising since such sins constitute the only necessary matter of the sacrament. Arguments adduced in favour of RWC are based on the fact it precedes the infusion of grace which consists in the removal or the lifting of the ecclesiastical ban forbidding the receiving of Holy Communion until confession is made. In essence, RWC either constitutes the reconciliation or it is, at any rate, an effect and sign of it, though it may be intrinsically constituted by some other element.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, confessions of devotion (which consist of only venial sins or sins previously forgiven in an earlier confession) are regarded as the most formidable barrier to the acceptance of RWC. Consequently, sins repeated in these devotional confessions, whether mortal or venial or both together which have already been submitted to the power of the keys which Our Lord has given to the Church with regard to sinners, no longer exclude the penitent from the Eucharist. Nevertheless, these devotional confessions are approved by the Church.<sup>50</sup> They provide valid and licit matter so that the sacrament is actually received. However, for the absolution to produce its effects and its immediate effect, which according to the concept of RWC would be reconciliation with the Church, this meaning must be explained. Hence, this assumes that some damage affecting the Church must still remain from these forgiven sins, otherwise no reconciliation with the Church is possible.

If the confession of devotion contains only past forgiven mortal sins, the reconciliation with the Church cannot be considered to restore the right to Communion since

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., (DB 899).

<sup>49</sup> Clarence McAuliffe, S.J., "Penance and Reconciliation with the Church," *Theological Studies* 26 (1965): 14.

<sup>50</sup> Pope Benedict XI commended these confessions. See Council of Trent (DB 470).

the penitent may receive the Eucharist without sacramental penance.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, it cannot be an abolition of a debt to the Church since this debt was cancelled when the penitent confessed his sins the first time. Also, it cannot be a physical bond inasmuch as the sinner received this when he was absolved, and it is still present when sins are re-confessed. Nor can it be evaded by the affirmation that the alleged bond is intensified by the new absolution. The *res et sacramentum* is not accessible to intensification. It is identical in every recipient and, once received, remains the same both in nature and in degree in the individual possessing it. Consequently, it seems impossible for RWC to be the *res et sacramentum* of penance in devotional confessions of mortal sins. Nevertheless, the church encourages devotional confessions (even of sins already forgiven) as this increases the life of grace in the penitent and enhances one's relationship with God.

The *res et sacramentum* is not a variable. It is not a variable from the viewpoint of conferral, since it is always produced when a sacrament is valid. It is neither a variable even though each sacrament infuses its own distinctive *res et sacramentum* –considered in itself. For instance, the character of baptism is identical whether imprinted on the soul of a sinner or of a holy person. This means that the latter has no more power to share the divine public service than has the sinner. Moreover, the character of baptism, although it is endowed with life inasmuch as it dwells in the soul, is an exception to a basic law of life in the natural order. For it neither grows nor decreases but remains identical from its beginning in baptism until death, and even in the next life. What we infer from this is that if RWC is the *res et sacramentum* of penance, it should without exception result from the sacrament of penance whether mortal sins or only venial sins are confessed, and it should be essentially the same in both cases.

At this point it must be said that since the Church does not react against venial sins in any legislation as she is said to do in the case of mortal sins, a difficulty arises straightway. The fact that there is no possibility of a 'binding' in case of a 'confession of devotion, which is nevertheless a sacramental forgiveness of sin, shows that the 'binding' does not after all belong to the essence of the Church's penitential procedure. Venial sins cannot be properly spoken of as 'bound' or 'retained' in the strict sense, no matter how one may interpret these two words expressive of the full authority of Christ, which are the scriptural foundation for

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<sup>51</sup> Venial sins can be forgiven by nonsacramental actions such as prayer, fasting, almsgiving or during penitential act (*confiteor*) at the beginning of Mass.

the sacrament of penance.<sup>52</sup> The wiping out of venial sins is simply not dependent (not even by obligation) on the sacramental intervention of the Church in the same sense as is true in the case of mortal sin. This is because whatever reconciliation consists of, it cannot be anything in the external forum. The reason why the reception of the sacrament does nevertheless not become meaningless has to be sought in some slight internal damage inflicted upon the Mystical Body, a damage which, however, may have unidentifiable repercussions that impede her external salvific activity.

As seen earlier, a venial sin does not exclude the sinner from the inner life of the Church which is the 'vessel of the Spirit' (as Irenaeus says). But, it does hold him from the full unhindered exercise of the life issuing from this inner vital principle of the Church. In light of this, a venial sin places a distance between a sinner and the divine love which pours forth continuously in our direction from the Church.<sup>53</sup> Laurence Cantwell asserts that venial sin, in any theory, can only be called sin in an analogous sense. So, if it is truly (though analogously) an offence against God, it is also truly (though analogously) an offence against the Church. Hence, it impairs but without separating completely the Christian's participation in the Church's life; and yet it inflicts a wound on the whole body.<sup>54</sup>

Rahner says that there is no sin by which we do not also become guilty against our neighbour. This is only too obvious in the case of most sins, including venial sins. Even though there is an essential qualitative difference in certain respects as compared to that of mortal sins, venial sins represent an offence against the will of God. So, they too, in the same measure and with the same disparity, are an opposition to the Church. And, since such sins are a hindrance to the accomplishment of divine love in mankind, they thereby plainly lessen the depth and power of divine love which the Church as holy ought to have. They certainly contribute to a lowering of the Church's level.<sup>55</sup> The fact that the distance of the sinner from the Church's fullness of life becomes perceptible as a result of the Church's action, and not merely by the action of sinner, makes it quite legitimate to call this action of the Church a 'binding.' Thus, it is comparatively similar to the 'binding' by which the Church responds to the mortal sin of a Christian.

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<sup>52</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 150.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Laurence Cantwell, S.J., "Pax Ecclesiae: Pax Dei," *The Clergy Review* 48 (1963): 620.

<sup>55</sup> See Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 151

From these clarifications we can understand how venial sins offend God and also harm the Church. Venial sins induce a kind of tension, a state of embarrassment, and a strained relationship between the Church and the sinner. Of course, when a penitent confesses only venial sins, the first effect of the absolution according to RWC is to dissolve the created tension so as to repair the damage done to the Church. At the same time, though secondarily in order of dependence, it reconciles the sinner with God. It is, therefore, evident that venial sins, whether deliberate or semi-deliberate, are a valid matter for reconciliation.

### **3.5 Binding and Loosing in the Church**

Karl Rahner believes that binding is one of the “forgotten truths” of the Church. For him and others, the power to bind and to loose refers to the forgiving or not forgiving of sin. The main thing to realize at this point is that the baptised sinner becomes guilty in regard to God and the Church by his sin. Because of the ecclesiastical aspect of sin, the Church helps the sinner to get rid of his guilt against God and the injustice which has been done to the Church with her penitential discipline, which is the manifestation of the curative mercy of God.<sup>56</sup> This popular interpretation can be seen in the Scriptures. For instance, in Matthew 16:19 the words of Jesus “binding and loosing” refer to the rabbinical practice of forbidding and allowing. The original sense of this text was some sort of imposing banishment or lifting it. It was not intended, as many have thought, as a text proving the Church’s authority to forgive sin. Nevertheless, this interpretation has existed since Bartholomaeus Xiberta.<sup>57</sup>

Developing this concept, Rahner recognises that the power to bind and to loose is not another statement about the keys given to Peter. This power to bind and loose, spoken of in Matthew 16: 19, 18: 18, and John 20: 23, must be seen in the Jewish context at that time:

In the light of more precise exegesis based on this it turns out that the state of being bound by sin signifies subjection to demonic powers. Thus, applying this to the act of the Church, ‘to bind’ (‘on earth’) signifies ‘consigning the individual concerned to the power of Satan’ (1 Cor 5: 5; 1 Tim 1: 20) and so exclusion from the community of the saved, while ‘to loose’ (‘on earth’) signifies the dissolving of this state of demonic bondage and so being restored to the community of the saved, the covenant people with its power to ransom. The Church, therefore, has the power to forgive sins (in heaven’).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 137-138.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Schmaus, *The Church as Sacrament*, trans. Mary Lederer (Kansas: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1975), 203-204.

<sup>58</sup> Rahner, “Penance as Reconciliation with Church,” 135.

It is in this sense that being a part of God's redeemed community demands that the individual is saved from the power of Satan through the power given to the Church to forgive sins. St Paul considers the sinner who refuses to repent as being handed over to the power of Satan.<sup>59</sup> An act of this kind certainly excludes such a person from the Church. Thus, binding is for the sake of loosing since the sinner is condemned in order that he might be saved. It is important to note that the Church only binds a person in order to loose him or her.<sup>60</sup> The ultimate goal of binding is to lead a fellow Christian to conversion and back to the community. St Paul continually exhorted the early Church community to pray for the serious sinner and to accept the person back when he or she repented.<sup>61</sup> This practice of banishing members from the community was prefigured in the Old Testament when someone did not keep the covenant. However, even today exclusion of the sinner only applies to the person who refuses to repent. A sinner can return to the community at any time provided he or she repents. The Church cannot certainly refuse the sacrament of penance to any sinner who sincerely seeks to reform his or her life.

In addition, it is very significant that the sins that St. Paul and the early Church saw as excluding a member from the kingdom of God were exactly the same sins for which the Church community considered expelling the sinner.<sup>62</sup> Binding in the Church occurs as a necessity. By this I mean that the person must be bound to show that he or she is already outside the kingdom of God and the community's saving power. In essence, the binding notifies the member of where he or she is at. It is sinning that has put the person there. Thus, the act of binding can be an incentive for the Christian to work on returning to God's kingdom.

One can see a good analogy for this New Testament practice of binding and loosing in the Bantu community. As we saw in the first chapter, the Bantu concept of sin and reconciliation means that the evil done by an individual definitely produces tension and simultaneously damages the sense of harmony and solidarity in the community. So, the African reconciliatory paradigm calls for separating the offender or conflicting parties temporarily. The purpose of this exclusion is to lead the member or concerned persons (say a husband and wife with marital problems) to contrition and then to being reunited again. It

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<sup>59</sup> See 1Cor 5: 5; 1Tim 1: 20.

<sup>60</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 142.

<sup>61</sup> See Gal 6:1-2; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:14

<sup>62</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 143.

also helps to bring healing within the community. Expressing contrition means that the member is accepted back, while refusing to be contrite results in permanent separation.

Significantly, binding throughout the history of the Church in some form of banishment or exclusion has always been a way of encouraging repentance and forgiveness. During the post-apostolic period those who committed serious sin and would not repent were expelled.<sup>63</sup> Binding was also evident during the patristic days within the order of the penitents.<sup>64</sup> In those early centuries the person who was excommunicated due to mortal sin was still a member of the Church, but no longer had the fullness of membership. This excommunication was made explicit in the community by a ban from receiving the Eucharist. The sinner entered a special group and performed penances with the guidance of the Church. After sufficient penance, the person was reconciled with the Church (which had been praying for him or her).<sup>65</sup>

This form of binding continued into the fifth century to be the removal of the baptismal rights of attending Mass and receiving the Eucharist. Later, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, binding included the forms of imposed penances and juridical excommunication. The Church had the power either to exclude from, or admit the sinner to, full membership. The sinner was bound into making satisfaction to the Church because he or she had separated him or herself from the Church.<sup>66</sup> Towards the time of Trent, this practice of binding and loosing used satisfaction and considered it to be positive action. Rather than something negative, satisfaction was seen as something positive that the penitent did as the condition for his or her justification.<sup>67</sup> The person was bound by a certain penance and thus showing willingness to be loosed by performing the prescribed penance.

Given the fact that sacraments are effected as visible signs of grace, the practice of binding and loosing a Christian in mortal sin continues to be the dimension of the visible Church even today, especially by demanding certain penitential actions or specific satisfaction. We are inclined to overlook and ‘forget’ this aspect of binding, but this does not mean that it no longer exists. It is the understanding of the Church that one who commits a grave or mortal sin distances him or herself from the holy Church.<sup>68</sup> Subsequently, the sinner

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<sup>63</sup> Schmaus, *The Church as Sacrament*, 206.

<sup>64</sup> Zoltan Alszeghy, S.I., “Carita Ecclesiale nella Penitenza Cristiana,” *Gregorianum* 44 (1963): 23.

<sup>65</sup> Rahner, “Penance as Reconciliation with Church,” 136.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-143.

<sup>67</sup> Alszeghy, “Carita Ecclesiale nella Penitenza Cristiana,” 22.

<sup>68</sup> Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 167.



is excluded from receiving the Eucharist and required to avail of the sacrament of penance before returning to the Eucharistic table.<sup>69</sup> This means the ban is lifted when the Church reconciles the sinner to herself. Actually, the current rite of penance includes both this exclusion from the Church and a later reconciliation.<sup>70</sup>

Edward Schillebeeckx agrees with Rahner that it is the Church's lifting of this visible ban that brings about the forgiveness of sin. The ban is lifted through absolution after the satisfaction or penance is completed by sinner; this indicates that the sinner is loosed both on earth and in heaven.<sup>71</sup> In being restored to the community, the sinner is, at the same time, given divine forgiveness.

Catholics today must recognize that the Church continues to bind through penances because they are necessary in the healing process of the penitent. The consequential exclusion from the Eucharist due to mortal sin is not an arbitrary act of an authoritarian Church but a reaction that is demanded. The sinner cuts himself from the fullness of grace that comes with belonging to the Church. As already mentioned, mortal sin significantly cuts off the sinner from being in communion with God and his holy Church. Sharing Christ's body is a privilege reserved for those Christians who are in unity and in good relationship with God and his Church. For the sinner to return to that same love and communion with God and the Church, he or she must make a reconciliatory act. The Church facilitates the loosing (forgiving) of the sinner in the sacrament of penance. However, it has to be emphasised that it is not penance and satisfaction that bring about forgiveness of sins. Rather, forgiveness comes as a result of Jesus shedding his blood for the forgiveness of sins. It is actually Jesus' redemption that brings us the forgiveness of our sins.<sup>72</sup>

### **3.6 Problems evoked by RWC as a Physical Bond**

The problem with the concept of RWC derives from various theological truths and probable truths, but particularly from the theology of the *res et sacramentum* itself. This idea of RWC causes serious difficulties when the Church is seen to constitute the physical bond which

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>70</sup> See *Rite of Penance*, especially prayer of absolution (no. 19); the penitent's confession, repentance and contrition as well as the acceptance of an act of satisfaction proposed by the priest (no. 44). The rite requires a clear expression of contrition which could be offered in different forms (nos. 45, 85-92).

<sup>71</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward Ltd., 1963), 149.

<sup>72</sup> See John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia: On Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today* (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 1984), no. 7.

effects the ‘binding and loosing’ (‘retaining and forgiving’) of sins. However, God is the principal agent in the production of such an effect. As Adhemar D’Alès says:

From the point of view of the internal forum, ecclesiastical reconciliation is an operation of the supernatural order, an operation properly divine, although man can be associated with it as an instrument.<sup>73</sup>

For this study, it is not our purpose to discuss, evaluate or refute the formidable range of arguments. The proponents of RWC themselves do not consider them, even in their totality, as conclusive and admit that RWC is still a theory. With regard to the argument from the Fathers of the Church, Cantwell says that it would be bold at any time to try to prove our contention from the rather scanty evidence of early Church practice or from the picturesque but sometimes obscure teaching of the Fathers.<sup>74</sup> We shall not go into much detail about the problems of RWC here. As Clarence McAuliffe says, we cannot appeal to the magisterium because we find no solid evidence in this source either for or against RWC.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the advocates of RWC have made a contribution to sacramental theology. Their major focused attention is on the significance and meaning of *res et sacramentum* in general.<sup>76</sup> The *res et sacramentum* is an *ex opera operato* effect occurring from every sacramental rite when it is validly administered. It explains coherently why some sacraments can be repeated whereas others cannot, why some sacraments revive while others do not. It dedicates the recipient to God and the Church. Also, it has some relationship to the conferral of sanctifying grace.

Although far inferior to sanctifying grace in dignity, the *res et sacramentum* is a supernatural internal effect which requires the intervention of God’s omnipotence and the instrumental power of a sacrament. It cannot be obtained except by reception of a sacrament. However, it is not easy to determine precisely the *res et sacramentum* of each sacrament, and it is especially difficult in the case of penance and its complement, the sacrament of anointing of the sick. As regards penance, the issue is so unclear even though only a few theologians

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<sup>73</sup> Adhemar D’Alès, S.J., “Bulletin de Théologie Historique,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 12 (1922): 374.

<sup>74</sup> Cantwell, “Pax Ecclesiae: Pax Dei,” 617.

<sup>75</sup> Clarence McAuliffe, “Penance and Reconciliation with the Church,” 5. We would not consider the statement of Trent, “*Sane vero res et effectus hujus sacramenti, quantum ad ejus vim et efficaciam pertinent, reconciliatio est cum Deo...*” (DB, 896), a valid argument against RWC. Reconciliation with God is the final and principal objective of penance. This though does not seem to exclude the possibility that this divine reconciliation can be preceded by an ecclesiastical reconciliation which is directed at its attainment.

<sup>76</sup> The importance and purpose of the *res et sacramentum* are explained in the following section.

have denied that this sacrament confers a *res et sacramentum*.<sup>77</sup> While this opinion may be held, it reduces the sacrament of penance to a lower level of sacramentality by rejecting an *ex opera operato* effect common to the rest of the sacraments.

Some theologians who dispute that penance does bestow some kind of a *res et sacramentum* perceive it to be peace of conscience.<sup>78</sup> A good number favour interior penance or contrition, which is the view of St. Thomas Aquinas, despite it being complicated by divergent explanations.<sup>79</sup> Though there is this kind of disagreement, no one will reject RWC simply because it seems to beget serious difficulties when applied to penance. Rahner regards this controversy a very empty wrangle of words as theologians attempt to distinguish between matter and form even in the case of the sacrament of penance. It is unimportant in practice and for our spiritual life. Maintaining the Church's present-day teaching, he states that the external penitential acts of the penitent namely (contrition, confession and satisfaction as well as the absolution and penance given by the priest) are the totality of the sacramental sign of the sacrament of penance.<sup>80</sup>

Otherwise, if the readmission in the Christian community is the immediate disposition and a physical one for grace, how can we explain the fact that a sinner, even before being absolved, obtains grace by an act of perfect contrition inclusive of an intention to go to confession? But one cannot receive this physical disposition for grace by a mere desire to approach the sacrament. When, however, one does confess later on, grace will be received. I agree with Weisweiler that the only conclusion to be drawn from historical research is "that the Church is the internal collaborator of the pardoning grace-giving absolution."<sup>81</sup> Again we are faced with this indefensible conclusion that the disposition follows instead of preceding the grace for which it disposes.

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<sup>77</sup> See J. Mors, S.J., *Theologia Dogmatica* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Buenos Aires, Editorial Guadalupe, 1951), 46; Clarence McAuliffe, S.J., *De Sacramentis in Genere* (St. Louis: Herder, 1960), 89-100.

<sup>78</sup> Christian Pesch, S.J., *Praelectiones Dogmaticae*, 174, in Clarence McAuliffe, "Penance and Reconciliation with the Church," 6. However, Pesch in his *Compendium Theologiae Dogmaticae* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Freiburg, 1932), 259, he mentions three opinions, including *pax conscientiae*, but does not choose any opinion as his own. Even such an excellent theologian as Pesch failed to grasp the importance of the *res et sacramentum*. Referring to penance specifically, he says: "*tota quaestio non est magni momenti*" (p.259). He seems to have the same attitude towards the *res et sacramentum* of the other sacraments.

<sup>79</sup> See Emmanuel Doronzo, OMI., *De Poenitentia, II: De Contritione et Confessione* Milwaukee: Druce, 1951), 136-44.

<sup>80</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 153-155.

<sup>81</sup> H. Weisweiler, S.J., "Ein Umschwung in der Erforschung der Frühchristlichen Bussgeschichte," *Scholastik* 28 (1953): 243.

In addition, this physical disposition for grace seems inadequate to explain how different degrees of sanctifying grace are bestowed by the sacrament. The *res et sacramentum* is a constant as it does not allow of qualitative increase and decrease. Yet penance confers grace according to the subjective disposition of the penitent. This means that one with more intensified attrition will receive more grace *ex opera operato* than another with merely adequate attrition. Penitents who are perfectly contrite before they are absolved are gifted with an increase of grace, and this increase will vary according to the intensity of each one's contrition. These truths can hardly be explained by immediate physical disposition which results objectively and spontaneously from the sacrament and is not easily influenced gradually. In fact, the sole physical disposition, so far as we can ascertain, which determines the grace-giving productivity of sacraments is the subjective condition and virtuous activity of the recipients. However, since the *res et sacramentum* is a constant, it issues from a sacrament independently of this subjective condition and activity.

### **3.7 The Necessity and Benefit of Reconciliation with Church**

Obviously, we cannot understand the meaning of RWC unless we know the reason which would necessitate it. This reason is sin, not viewed merely in its primary aspect as an offence against God, but also as an offence against society and, particularly, against the Church. The sinner offends against the Church and she has a right to punish the sinner. It is because of the offence against God that He deprives the sinner of sanctifying grace, and this is why there is a defect to the Church. Actually, RWC reminds us of the social aspect of sin, a truth which is known but not sufficiently stressed enough. Robert Blomme says:

There is no sin that affects only the person who commits it. Even if I perpetrate my crime without a witness, in solitude, or within the depth of my heart, it has repercussions on everybody else.<sup>82</sup>

As for the sinner who is a Catholic, he maintains that

The sinner places himself in opposition to the sanctifying work of the Spirit by cutting off his avenues of communication. Instead of showing himself a good conductor, he halts the flow of grace.... Instead of co-operating in the establishment of God's kingdom, he renders nugatory the power of radiance which is his as a cell of the Church.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Robert Blomme, "Les Dimensions du Pêché," *Collectanea Mechliniensia* 30 (1960): 573.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 575.

It should be remembered that sacramental forgiveness is only required for those conscious of grave sins. Nonetheless, the celebration of (non-sacramental) penitential services as envisaged in the Rite of Penance (nos. 36-37) could be promoted more. Here the emphasis is on developing a spirit of penance and conversion in daily life rather than on the traditional focus on the words of absolution. Actually, there is no doubt that mortal sin offends God seriously. As a result, the sinner is deprived of sanctifying grace. But also, the loss of this divine life damages the Church because the sinner is thereby incapacitated from contributing duly to her salvific work, a function to which he is obligated by his baptismal character.

For Cantwell, sin seems to involve a simultaneous twofold guilt, one against God, the other against the Church, “contempt to God’s Church.”<sup>84</sup> The same notion is more plainly expressed by De la Taille:

The peace of the Church is not an incomplete peace limited to the lifting of censures which the Church could have imposed, but a peace extending to the oblivion of the inmost insult offered to this society of saints who live by the faith.<sup>85</sup>

Here we find that the peace of the Church, the absolution, pardons and lifts the censures as well as having acknowledged a personal insult to the Church. The two are even distinguished explicitly.

There are certainly many Catholics who have been alienated from the church and penance. For a good number, a communal penance service is their first step back. Charles Dumont notes that RWC provides a deeper perspective of the penitential teaching in the church. This concept alone offers an intrinsic reason why in ordinary circumstances a sinner must confess his mortal sins according to number and species.<sup>86</sup> It also promotes and develops a more fruitful understanding of the sacrament of mercy. George McCauley claims that because of RWC practices like the necessity of confession, even after perfect contrition; the examination of conscience and confession according to number and species; the penances imposed by the priest; and finally, prayers for sinners have a deeper and more satisfactory explanation.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Cantwell, “Pax Ecclesiae: Pax Dei,” 614.

<sup>85</sup> Maurice De la Taille, “Conspetus Biliographicus,” *Gregorianum* 4 (1923): 596.

<sup>86</sup> Charles Dumont, S.J., “La Réconciliation avec L’église et la Nécessité de L’aveu Sacramental,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 81 (1959): 580, 581.

<sup>87</sup> George McCauley, “The Ecclesial Nature of the Sacrament of Penance,” *Worship* 36 (1962): 212-13.

It is interesting to note that the sins of the baptised were regarded by Trent as worse than those of unbelievers though not solely because the former, “liberated once from the slavery of sin and the devil, do fear knowingly to violate the temple of God and to sadden the Holy Spirit.”<sup>88</sup> They were worse, too, because the unbeliever affronts God only, whereas the baptised affronts the Church as well. Since sin simultaneously offends God and the Church, several adherents of RWC seem to be satisfied with admitting that the sinner becomes subject to an ecclesiastical penalty of denial of Holy Communion as a kind of temporal punishment until confession is made and absolution granted. This view is inferred from statements of several proponents of RWC. For instance, Rahner writes:

The baptised sinner becomes guilty in regard to the Church by his sin. He offends against her Spirit, against her mission and the unquestioning obedience he owes to her.... Such a person contradicts his membership of the Church and the nature of the Church, which is the sanctified communion of the members of God’s household, the communion of saints.<sup>89</sup>

These declarations imply that mortal sin especially committed by the baptised would incur a twofold temporal punishment. The first is the one imposed by God and to be atoned either in this world or in purgatory. The other emanates from Church law, i.e., exclusion from the receiving the Eucharist until absolution is granted. The sinner, however, must obtain two forgivenesses for two personal offences, one from God, the other from the Church, and the latter will, in order of dependence, precede the former. This is because sin is a personal offence which destroys the dignity and holiness of the Church and at the same time strikes at her very essence or offends God.

Although our main purpose here has been to clarify the importance and benefit of the concept of RWC, it would seem that there is a difficulty in understanding how the sin of a baptised can be infused with any kind of a personal offense regarding with the Church. Perhaps it would be easier to comprehend if a purely ecclesiastical law, e.g., observing the holydays of obligation, is violated. In such a case there would seem to be an offence to the Church which deserves an ecclesiastical penalty. Nonetheless, much as most sins may seem as not infringing the ecclesiastical legislation, in essence they are. For Cantwell:

It would, of course, be incorrect to say that a Christian’s sin offends God only because it disfigures the Church; but it would be equally false to say that it disfigures the Church only because it offends God. There is simultaneity here. To persecute the Church is to persecute Christ (Acts 9:5); to cheat according to St Peter is to defraud the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). And

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<sup>88</sup> Council of Trent (DB, 904).

<sup>89</sup> Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 137-38.

conversely the misbehaviour of the Corinthians at the Eucharist shows “contempt to God’s Church” 1Cor 11:22).<sup>90</sup>

Therefore, inasmuch as a believer commits sin or contravenes God’s laws, the believer insults the Church and vice versa. As a result, it is reasonable to say that the Church is insulted by the violation of laws which have been enacted by God. To this extent, even today, the serious sinner is in a true sense cut off from full communion with the Church. To be reconciled to God, he must first be reconciled to the Church.<sup>91</sup> Hence, all adherents of RWC (regardless of the way in which they conceive of mortal sin) seem to agree that the Church must react against it. They also profess that RWC constitutes the removal of the ecclesiastical penalty. In light of this, Rahner says:

The Church must react against mortal sin. ... For that reason, the Church ‘binds’ this sinner ‘on earth,’ i.e., she draws away from him ‘on earth’ by some form of exclusion, not to be confused with excommunication as it is at present, but similar, for example, to the present-day exclusion from Holy Communion with obligation to confession. The consequence is that the sinner is no longer belonging in a full sense to that holy community...<sup>92</sup>

### **3.8 The Ecclesiological Character of the Sacrament of Penance**

At the heart of Rahner’s ecclesiology is the notion of the Church as a sacrament. Although Rahner was not the first to view the Church through the lens of sacramentality, his analysis (as underpinned by his understanding of revelation and grace) significantly reshaped Roman Catholic sacramental theology in the second half of the twentieth century. Rahner’s deliberations on grace delivered in a dynamic and personal way highlighted the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church as well as the relationship between Christ and the Church. For him, God’s self-communication in Jesus is the self-expression of God’s abundant mercy to humanity. In his analysis, he argues that if the humanity of Christ were to symbolize God’s definitive mercy, such a symbol would also need to be an “event” to effect what it signified. Hence, that symbol is the Church as the effective symbol of grace and as the sacrament of salvation for the world.<sup>93</sup> The Church exists because of God’s “eschatologically victorious” grace in Jesus Christ, through the Spirit.<sup>94</sup> However, the Church neither owns the Spirit nor functions as an exclusive community of “the saved.” Its very existence guarantees the

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<sup>90</sup> Cantwell, 614.

<sup>91</sup> Paul F. Palmer, *Sacraments of Healing and of Vocation* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 35.

<sup>92</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Burns and Oates, 191978), 93-94.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>94</sup> Karl Rahner, “What is a Sacrament?” *Theological Investigations* vol. 14, 143.

presence and efficacy of God's love in human history, even in the lives of those who might never be baptised into the Church.

In Rahner's analysis the Christian faith belongs within a community of believers rather than simply to individuals.<sup>95</sup> We believe that for the effective celebration of sacraments, and in this case penance, the importance of the ecclesial dimension is central. It integrates the sacramental sign, human aspect and the divine action. Undoubtedly, it has been historically difficult for the Church to maintain sacramental confession. Despite Rahner's enormous contribution during Vatican II about renewing the sacrament, it seems that his penance studies have not received much attention.<sup>96</sup> Peter Fritz reminds us that Dorothea Sattler states that at present the theology of penance leads a rather shadowy existence despite what Rahner taught. Actually, there is still an overwhelmingly heightened awareness of the depths of human sin."<sup>97</sup> We can say that the marginalization of the theology of penance does not make complete sense.

While acknowledging the importance of the ecclesiological aspect of penance, Rahner maintains that a Christian who sins offends not only against God but also against the Church – against that very community called to continue Christ's ministry of reconciliation in the world. So, the Church feels sin in one of her members and is responsible for his or her conversion, just as Rahner has elaborated:

When one states that in the sacrament of penance God forgives us our guilt by the grace of Christ and through the word of the Church, one has undoubtedly stated the most important facts that there are to be stated about this sacrament.<sup>98</sup>

Rahner queries why this might be the case when he says that in order to be fully conscious of the divine-human relationship, we must place penance within the life of the community. For him there is certainly no sin by which we do not also become guilty against

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<sup>95</sup> See Rahner, "I believe in the Church," *Theological Investigation*, vol.7, 109-10. Rahner privileged the communal faith of the Church and was unsympathetic to any claim that the grounding and content of the Church's faith resided only in the beliefs of its individual members.

<sup>96</sup> In English, for instance, there exists only two substantial treatments of Rahner on penance: David Fagerberg, "Rahner on the Importance of Reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance," *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996): 349-66; and Annemarie Kidder, *Making Confession, Hearing Confession: A History of the Care of Souls* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2010), especially 243-56, 318-19. Even though James Dallen's much-cited history of penance draws on some of Rahner's penance studies, Rahner is infrequently cited. See James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo, 1986).

<sup>97</sup> See Peter J. Fritz "Placing Sin in Karl Rahner's Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 80 (2015): 301. Fritz's quotation of Sattler is from his translation of Dorothea Sattler, "Editionsbericht" in *De Paenitentia II*, xxviii.

<sup>98</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 136.



our neighbour. To some extent, even in our most secret thoughts, the field of one's disloyalty or failure is spread over the whole Church (and beyond her).<sup>99</sup> This is obvious in the case of most sins, including venial sins. No one lives for him/herself alone. Hence, repentance, which always entails the conversion of the sinner, is not (or should not be) only enacted in one's own private sphere or in the hidden depths of one's conscience. The visible ecclesial and social character is an essential element in sacramental penance. This takes place effectively not merely through the priestly absolution but also through the communal collaboration of the Church. In other words, the whole Church participates in this exercise since she becomes the instrument of the conversion of the penitents especially by interceding for them and helping them acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins.<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, when the sinner comes for confession to the Church's official representatives, this is not 'merely' the expression of a sensitive soul or concern of a private individual. It is rather a confession of guilt through which the Church herself joins in suffering and reparation. This confession has its own weight since the penitent is cleansed of sins and receives sacramental forgiveness. This happens in the particular public sphere of the Church – no matter how discreetly it is nowadays constituted. By confessing to the priest in the place of God and by showing ourselves before the Church –God's holy congregation represented in those gathered at the communal celebration of penance (whom we offend with our faults) –we are placed back in full communion with God and the community. This is what is meant by being reconciled with the Church: gaining an existential realization of drawing graces from and by the Church, letting ourselves to be loosed from our sins by and before the Church.<sup>101</sup> It precisely constitutes the reunion with the communion of the Church and consequently with God.

We should always remember that the starting point for thinking about penance is baptism. That is that only a baptised person needs to do penance, and only a baptised person can do penance, in the sense that the rite of initiation is presupposed for celebrating any sacrament, including penance. The rite of initiation is precisely a life-long, daily process of repenting, turning, accepting and rising up to Jesus' call in view of the dawning of the Kingdom of God. David Fagerberg claims that if the beginning of life-long repentance is

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 151, 156; see also *RP* no.8 of the *praenotanda*.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 152.

baptism, then, whatever penance is, it is not repentance but the continuation of repentance or the resumption of repentance.<sup>102</sup> The life of the Christian is an unending *metanoia*. In that regard, post-baptismal sin is an interruption of that life, and penance is a call to conversion. *Metanoia* may be defined as “laying hold on the salvation which is already at hand, and to give up everything for it.”<sup>103</sup> Kallistos Ware insists that *metanoia* or conversion means a fundamental transformation of our outlook, a new way of looking at ourselves, at others and at God. “I am accepted by God; what is asked of me is to accept the fact that I am accepted. That is the essence of repentance.”<sup>104</sup>

More profoundly, Pope Paul VI says in *Paenitemini*:

Not only does the Christian receive in the bosom of the Church through baptism the fundamental gift of *metanoia*, but this gift is restored and reinvigorated through the sacrament of penance, in those members of the Body of Christ who have fallen into sin.<sup>105</sup>

The same point is clearly outlined in the rubrics of the *Rite of Penance*. Christ reconciled sinners with God, and since then the Church has never failed to call people from sin to conversation. So, there are three sacraments of reconciliation: this victory is brought to light first in baptism; then in the Eucharist Christ actualizes our eschatological peace with God; and more still Christ has instituted in his Church the sacrament of penance. Its purpose is that the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God through the restoration of grace.<sup>106</sup>

However, if repentance is constantly expressed through the sacramental life of the Church into which one was baptised, what is penance within the repentant community? It is possible that even one who has been initiated into the Eucharistic community in which sin is vanquished might sin mortally after baptism. If so, what else can be done for those whose very actions separated them from the place of true forgiveness except to lead them back to that place of forgiveness? The question of penance is not what to do about a sinful world – the question is, as Peter Fink puts it, “what to do about weeds amidst the wheat? – It’s

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<sup>102</sup> David W. Fagerberg, “Rahner on the Importance of Reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance,” *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996), 363.

<sup>103</sup> Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 82.

<sup>104</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The Orthodox Experience of Repentance,” *Sobornost* 2 (1980): 82.

<sup>105</sup> Paul VI, *Paenitemini*, Apostolic Constitution on Penance, in *Vatican Council II*, vol.2 ed. Austin Flannery, O.P (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1982), 1-12.

<sup>106</sup> See, “Rite of Penance,” in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1990), 526.

evangelism!”<sup>107</sup> This means that, whatever penance is, there is need to deepen the understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of God’s love and mercy.

It is good to emphasize the ecclesial and social dimension of penance. The Church did so in the sixteenth century, and indeed she should encourage this even today. Otherwise, the practice of penance will only exist by law as it did through Tridentine pronouncements or as it did following the conclusion of Martin Luther’s demeaning words: “So it is not necessary to tell sins to Church, that is, as these babblers interpret it, to the prelate or priest.”<sup>108</sup> Meaningful and regular celebration of penance can be encouraged by reclaiming the ecclesial and social dimension of the sacrament.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, after noting a variety of forms given in the *Rite of Penance*, insists that “regardless of its manner of celebration the sacrament of penance is always, by its very nature, a liturgical action, and therefore an ecclesial and public action.”<sup>109</sup> The second and third rites clearly have a liturgical structure. But, the first, even though it seems deceptively like the pre-reformed rite, also has a liturgical structure. Nonetheless, all of the three forms emphasize the personal call to conversion and forgiveness. In addition, it is stressed that the ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves to God and to the Church is by “individual integral confession and absolution.”<sup>110</sup> Therefore, the recovery of the sacrament requires maintenance of both the public-ecclesial aspect and individual confession and absolution. This calls for preserving what is essential to the sacrament, and what must always be maintained throughout the ongoing history of its celebration.

### **3.9 The Dilemma of Ecclesial Penance: Negotiating the Tensions**

It is quite evident that the lack of regular confession is a major concern for the contemporary Catholic Church. Actually, it is difficult to think of another major sacramental or ecclesial practice that has collapsed as worryingly and spectacularly as penance has in the past 50 years. Looking at this collapse and the difficulties posed by inadequate theology and

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<sup>107</sup> See Peter Fink, “History of the Sacrament of Reconciliation,” in *Alternative Futures for Worship: Reconciliation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 77. Fink highlights that the Eucharist is the premiere sacrament of reconciliation, but those who feast on this medicine of immortality in the state of mortal sin eat poison unless they celebrate first the sacrament of penance.

<sup>108</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Luther’s Works, vol. 36, Word and Sacrament II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 18.

<sup>109</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), no. 1482, citing *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that “Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church.” *SC* nos. 26.

<sup>110</sup> See *Rite of Penance*, no.31; CCC no.1484.

catechesis in relation to social sinfulness and ecclesial reconciliation, we might easily get the impression that these matters are relatively obscure and unimportant. However, I strongly believe, as many scholars would argue, that Christians (individually and communally) who are not responding to the reality of sinfulness and reconciliation are failing in part of their mission as Church. Brian Flanagan maintains that, “if the Church is called to be a community of sinners reconciled with one another and with God, then the absence of a shared form of reconciliation and conversion is a danger to the Church’s continued fidelity to the gospel.”<sup>111</sup>

The harshness of the patristic era of penance (i.e., the process of exomologesis - “canonical penance” - which exaggerated the distinction between sinners and saints as well as the one-in-a-lifetime character of repentance) is the principal contributing factor to the sacrament’s historical demise.<sup>112</sup> With regard to the more contemporary demise, some have blamed: the Roman Catholic teaching on birth control, both in *Casti conubii* and *Humanae vitae*;<sup>113</sup> a lack of meaning or relevance in contemporary experiences of confession; and the changing notions of sin shown by clergy and laity.<sup>114</sup> People’s perceptions of sin have become subjective if not indifferent. For some, habits or tendencies such as homosexuality, corruption, alcoholism, contraception, abortion, and pornography seem not to register at all. From a theological perspective particularly with regard to the communal celebration of penance, one might add the reluctance of Christians to admit to ourselves, our friends, our clergy (confessors), and so forth, that we are sinful. These represent an ongoing challenge to ecclesial reconciliation and penance.

A lacuna has existed in current research, namely that more studies have been done about why Catholics no longer go to confession than about why those who do go continue to do so.<sup>115</sup> There continues to be a small number of Catholics for whom individual confession or the rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents remains a consistent part of their spiritual life. This first form of penance is certainly the ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church. However, the emphasis on individual confession is interacting with other forces beyond the Church’s control resulting in something

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<sup>111</sup> Brian P. Flanagan, “Reconciliation and the Church: A Response to Bruce Morill,” *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 632.

<sup>112</sup> See Monika K. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982), 41-43.

<sup>113</sup> See Leslie Woodcock Tentler, “Souls and Bodies: The Birth Control Controversy and the Collapse of Confession,” in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 297-310.

<sup>114</sup> See Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*, 105-119.

<sup>115</sup> Flanagan, “Reconciliation and the Church,” 633.

very different from what was intended. Flanagan suggests that the celebration of the sacrament of penance has simply become a consumer preference, and therefore a preference which fewer and fewer Catholics, including the clergy, are choosing.<sup>116</sup>

Hellwig had already pointed out in 1982 that the practice had fallen among the majority of Roman Catholics. Her constructive response was to examine from history how Church communities have repeatedly developed rites according to the needs of the times. She describes some of the attitudes and responses of those who continued to use the first form of penance, including those who confessed regularly, but concludes that sacramental penance did not make any difference, making it a “sign of something that it does not effect.”<sup>117</sup> Rites of a more communal nature, coupled with lay people seeking and sharing spiritual direction “at the kitchen table” (at which women are particularly skilful), are more promising patterns. She comments that, even twenty years after the second Vatican council, pre-Vatican II habits continued among many Catholics. However, she describes the laity’s responses to the first rite of penance as ranging from the majority’s outright abandonment of it to a troubled small minority’s unwillingness to drop the practice while simultaneously being unable to make any sense of it.<sup>118</sup> It is now evident that those patterns have changed and that, if anything, there is a greater need to re-strategize on what might be the most successful practices of reconciliation and penance.

While the Popes used encyclicals and other documents to highlight the importance of penance, as is appropriate, I believe that in order to revitalize the sacrament, emphasis should be put on the second form of reconciliation in order to focus on offering groups of penitents individual confession and absolution.<sup>119</sup> This would encourage repentance and conversion within and by the Church, thus enabling divine and ecclesial communion. Perhaps another approach would be to discuss whether retrieving the common meaning of sin and communal reconciliation could help in promoting a transformed understanding of the sacrament of penance.

John Paul II’s post-synodal exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, develops the notion of reconciliation and conversion as being part of the communal life of Church and world. However, the document sharply differs from Hellwig’s trusting discernment of

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*, 106.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> For the details of the second rite of penance, see *Rite of Penance*, no. 22-30.

historical communal patterns. In response to some bishops, who during the 1983 Synod of Bishops expressed a mild criticism of the restrictive use of general absolution, John Paul II comments:

The first form – reconciliation of individual penitents – is the only normal and ordinary way of celebrating the sacrament, and it cannot and must not be allowed to fall into disuse or to be neglected. The second form – reconciliation of a number of penitents with individual confession and absolution – even though in the preparatory acts it helps give greater emphasis to the community aspects of the sacrament, is the same as the first form in the culminating sacramental act, namely individual confession and individual absolution of sins. It can thus be regarded as equal to the first form as regards the normality of the rite. The third form however –reconciliation of a number of penitents with general confession and absolution – is exceptional in character. It is therefore not left to free choice but is regulated by a special discipline.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, he did not shy away from acknowledging the crisis in the Rite of Penance. His historical concerns were with the errors of liberal theologies in South America and Africa and with the notion of ‘fundamental option’ in North American and European theology which he regarded as diminishing people’s personal sense of guilt.

A comprehensive regulatory review of the instructions and restrictions within the current *Rite of Penance* and encouraging exhortations for both laity and clergy might promote regular auricular confession as the sole means of salvation for not only individuals but also the Church and the world. That this regulation had not found much positive response in the global Church is evident in John Paul II’s acknowledging in a 2002 *motu proprio* the persistent “crisis” of confession. It also highlights the strict limits for communal penance rites as well as mandating the installation of a “fixed grille” of the confessional for anonymous confession in all churches.<sup>121</sup> In the case of the two norms for extraordinary administration of sacrament (or general absolution), the pope emphasizes that such absolution is in fact exceptional in character and cannot be imparted in a general manner unless it is correctly understood and administered as envisaged by c. 961 of the Code of Canon Law.<sup>122</sup>

Such hierarchical intervention to keep the role of the community to a minimum indicates serious challenges for the ecclesial dimension of penance. The reconciliation

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<sup>120</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 1984), no. 32

<sup>121</sup> See John Paul II, *Misericordia Dei*, Apostolic Letter on Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (May 2002), nos. 4 & 9.

<sup>122</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, c. 961, § 1, 2. The two exceptional situations include: i) Imminent danger of death and when there is not time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents. ii) In a grave objective necessity, that is, when in light of the number of penitents a supply of confessors is not readily available to hear the confessions of individuals in an appropriate way within an appropriate time, so that the penitents would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time through no fault of their own. But it is not considered sufficient necessity as on the occasion of some great feast or pilgrimage.

paradigm of individual penitents has been kept as the normative expression of the sacrament at the expense of pastoral effectiveness. Arguably the change of perception in contemporary society continues to call for a more radically transformed practice. Given the challenges highlighted earlier, I firmly believe that the concept of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia* offers a deeper awareness that the ecclesial aspect has more than a peripheral role in the ministry of reconciliation. Joseph Favazza maintains that the involvement of the community in the ministry of reconciliation demonstrates a practical pastoral expression of an intrinsic human desire to connect with the other beyond the place where our flesh ends. He continues that the communal paradigm of reconciliation defines personhood in the sense that we simultaneously invite others into the messiness of our own lives and that we are all called into theirs. Once we allow ourselves to sink into the mystery of our interconnectedness, we are restored and renewed to go forward to new integration marked by amended relationships.<sup>123</sup>

Drawing from the above reflections, we must realise that it is not simply the crisis of liturgical expressions of communal conversion and reconciliation that are responsible for the collapse of sacramental confession, but also the continuing vacuum of the recognition of sin as a social reality. The lack of regular practices of communal reconciliation has sadly contributed to the recurring reality of sin in society and arguably the loss of the sense of sin. Of course, there are a few penitential services conducted especially towards Easter and Christmas as a way of dealing with the need for mutual repentance, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation. This has led to an absence of practical reconciliation, leading to services of healing liturgies and other innovative liturgies that are developed in response to particular experiences, even if these creative rituals are often isolated and not long remembered.<sup>124</sup> Sometimes this has resulted in administering the third form of reconciliation of a number of penitents with general confession and absolution where there is no grave necessity as laid down in canon law.<sup>125</sup>

Bruce Morrill and Monika Hellwig have suggested some concrete ways in which the *Rite of Penance*, especially the individual and ecclesial forms of penance, can assist the Church in clearly manifesting its need for repentance.<sup>126</sup> Even if Hellwig places much hope

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<sup>123</sup> Joseph A. Favazza, "Forum: The Fragile Future of Reconciliation," *Worship* 71 (1997): 241.

<sup>124</sup> For more detail on the use of "healing" liturgies in such contexts, see Morrill, *Divine Worship*, 25-30.

<sup>125</sup> For the proper administering of general absolution see especially c. 961, § 1 & 2.

<sup>126</sup> See Bruce T. Morrill, "Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power –Ecclesial, Sacramental, Anthropological –among Hierarchy and Laity," *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 598; and Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation*, 111-112.

and optimism in the third form, with its communal celebration of Word, prayer, and general sacramental absolution, she acknowledges that it is being “hemmed about with many restrictions.”<sup>127</sup> If this is so, any alternate forms of penitential practice, including the carefully circumscribed third form of the *Rite of Penance*, as well as the unofficial ministries of reconciliation that Hellwig lauded,<sup>128</sup> cannot be seen as anything other than faded imitations of the “real thing.” I maintain that paying greater attention to the second form of reconciliation of a number of penitents with individual confession and absolution might help the Church ‘to be Church,’ that is, a gathered community of the reconciled and reconciling.

Rahner’s penance studies address precisely the question of existential reconciliation in an ecclesial realm, even if they meet it obliquely through historical investigation. Even more importantly for our purpose of finding a practical and effective form of the sacrament, the penance studies reframe theological thinking on sin and reconciliation.<sup>129</sup> He emphasizes that, rather than seeing sin and penance primarily in terms of individual indiscretion, we must see them as part of the Church’s proper, twofold task: rejecting sin yet welcoming back sinners. His penance studies aim to recall the Catholic Church to its mission of mercy rather than the tendency, in the words of Pope Francis, to use the confessional as a torture chamber.”<sup>130</sup> The added value of penance through ecclesial activity should spur us to do our best to encounter God’s boundless mercy. This approach will help us view the current decline in auricular confession less as a tragedy or a crisis, and more as a challenge to revitalise the sacrament especially in an ecclesial context.

### 3.10 Saying “Yes” to God: Acceptance of the Mystery of God’s Love and Mercy

In chapter two we saw the doctrine of fundamental option whereby human beings have the possibility of saying “yes” or “no” to God’s offer of Godself. Drawing on a variety of his writings we shall now focus on two major moments in human freedom that Rahner repeatedly points to in describing how we say “yes” to God: silence and love. In his theology of salvation, he explains that God offers salvation to every human being and, in so doing, empowers each of us to say “yes” to his love and mercy. By saying “yes” to God’s abundant

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<sup>127</sup> Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation*, 82.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-115. Hellwig reports that people are turning to like-minded fellow laity, whether individually or through group processes, religious or otherwise (e.g., prayer or bible study and charismatic groups, and other support groups, tai chi, and yoga and similar meditative practices, etc.), to work out their conversions which continues to put confession in crisis.

<sup>129</sup> See Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 135-74; “Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation,” 125-49.

<sup>130</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 2013), no. 44.



love and mercy, human beings are empowered to reclaim their vocation to holiness.<sup>131</sup> This divine-human dialogue of offer and response is at the heart of Rahner's understanding of Christian faith. Calling on his existentialist's influences and his deep roots in the mystical traditions of Christianity, he believes that human life is held within a reality that demands our "yes" to God.

For Rahner, a created human being is given an identity by God and is called into communion with Him. However, he is also burdened with the freedom to participate in his own creation by accepting his ordination to a future with God or by rejecting this vocation. If God is the horizon of being, the source and term of human transcendence, then we cannot exist, know and exercise freedom without affirming a "yes" of some sort to God. In saying "yes" a person freely chooses to accept the identity granted him or her by God.<sup>132</sup>

Rahner maintains that humanity's inner awareness of the experience of God is announced more vividly in the events of silence and love. He uses the image of silence to describe the relationship between God and humanity so as to capture the character of the infinite horizon – the horizon of our knowledge and love, calling it "the silent immensity."<sup>133</sup> He teaches that silence is the faithful response of the human being's saying "yes" to God. His everyday theology emphasizes that spiritual encounter with God happens always and everywhere. "Everyday reality then becomes itself a pointer to this transcendental experience of the Spirit, which is always present silently and apparently facelessly."<sup>134</sup>

Explaining the term transcendence, Rahner states that it is an experience when he whom we call 'God' encounters man in silence. It is an occasion of mystery as silently present and silencing its presence.<sup>135</sup> This is typical of his theology, in which our experience of God is given as grace and is fitting to our created nature. In transcendence, humanity does not grasp and comprehend God in accordance with our ways of knowing, but rather our spiritual nature opens up to the infinity that disposes of us – that which creates, sustains and ultimately shatters all of our knowing. Human transcendence appears as what it is only in the self-disclosure of that towards which the movement of transcendence tends. It exists by means of that which gives itself in this

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<sup>131</sup> See Rahner, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 764-52.

<sup>132</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 99.

<sup>133</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Comfort of Time" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, trans. Karl-H & Boniface Kruger (London: Longman & Todd, 1967), 33.

<sup>134</sup> Karl Rahner, "Experience of the Holy Spirit" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Longman & Todd, 1983), 199.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 196. See also Rahner, *Foundations*, 126. Rahner calls God "the silent and all-sheltering mystery."

transcendence as the other, the other which distinguishes this transcendence from itself and enables it to be experienced as mystery by the subject who is constituted as such by this transcendence. By its very nature subjectivity is always a transcendence which listens, which does not control, which is overwhelmed by mystery and opened up by mystery.<sup>136</sup>

Rahner gives two basic insights to describe how love is a situation of encountering God. First, any act of love is an implicit affirmation of faith in God. Second, it is in the act of loving that we know God most fully. However, he adds that we can most fully access our own God-given knowledge of God when we love other people.<sup>137</sup> These two insights form the basis of Rahner's reinterpretation of mysticism and become resources for his proposal about the existence of anonymous Christians. For Rahner, our knowledge of God is grounded in mystery and realised in love. It is, therefore, not an achievement of reason but the radical and definite act of human freedom in which a person says "yes" to God's offer of Godself to each of us, gracing us with a vocation to be in communion with God.<sup>138</sup> The God who is loved in this radical act remains incomprehensible mystery, even to the lover. We cannot fully grasp and measure God and then make a rational decision that it is in our best interest to love this intelligible deity. Rather, the love of God calls us out of ourselves, away from our calculations for our own self-promotion and into the self-forgetful position of casting our lot with an elusive and uncontrollable other. Rahner describes our loving, affirmative answer to God in terms of self-abandonment and self-surrender.<sup>139</sup>

When writing about the love of neighbour, Rahner uses words and phrases that resonate with his descriptions of the love of God, even before he begins to explain the relationship between the two. Love of neighbour is described, like love of God, as the self-defining act of human freedom, our "free self-disposal."<sup>140</sup> In each act of loving the neighbour, people love God. Actually, one cannot love God without loving one's neighbour. Rahner understands love not as a sentiment or emotion, but rather as the free act of risking

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<sup>136</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 58.

<sup>137</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology" in *Theological Investigations*, vol.4, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Longman & Todd, 1966), 42. See also Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Doncell, with Introduction, Index and Glossary by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: Crossroad, 2005). He states that "knowledge ultimately terminates in bodily action" (93) and that "we cannot access this knowledge directly, we can only be aware of this knowledge in and through our interactions in the world." (96).

<sup>138</sup> Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," 43.

<sup>139</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love Neighbour*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 70.

<sup>140</sup> Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love Neighbour and the Love of God" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Karl-H Kruger and Boniface Kruger (London: Longman & Todd, 1969), 241.

one's own benefit or sense of safety for the sake of the other. In every moment that a person is loyal, kind, honest and refuses to use the other for his own self-advantage, that person is saying yes to God.

Rahner uses the images of silence and love to describe God and at the same time to emphasize the proper human response to God. Silence and love portray human transcendence (i.e. our spiritual nature) and give evidence of the existence of human freedom. In silent disposition a person encounters the mystery of God, and yet love is the act of freedom that most explicitly connects us to accepting God's offer of salvation.<sup>141</sup> This analysis provides another insight into Rahner's view of the human person, the spiritual possibilities of human relationships, and the fundamental character of Christian faith. Karen Kilby comments that Rahner presents Christian claims as an interpretation of human experiences. In other words, he uses the foundations of the Christian faith to make sense of Christianity as something which is reflected in everyday human experiences.<sup>142</sup>

The affirmation that we experience God in our everyday lives, especially when we say "yes" to God's offer of self-communication, is Rahner's primary understanding of Christian mysticism. Declan Marmion states: "In Rahner's view, every Christian is called to a mysticism of everyday faith, hope and love that differs only in degree, and not in kind, from the extraordinary experiences of recognized mystics."<sup>143</sup> Rahner acknowledges the possibility that some extraordinary persons (whom we usually refer to as "mystics") might experience this more explicitly, perhaps in a way not accompanied by the mediating concepts of normal existence. He asserts that such mysticism differs from the experience of God in everyday life because of the psychological inclinations or contemplative practices of the mystics, but not because it is a different kind of experience altogether.<sup>144</sup>

Part of the questioning that defines the human person is the quest to understand the self in its totality in relation to mystery. This creates a sense of longing, joy, emptiness and love. The human person, therefore, chooses either to embrace the offer of a loving God or not. This choice is what Rahner means by freedom because mystery has drawn near to us in

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<sup>141</sup> While I argue that Rahner employs the images of silence and love with considerable consistency and identifiable meaning, I do not claim he uses them the same way every time, or that my analysis is exhaustive. There are times when he uses silence differently. For example, he uses "silent" to mean merely unspoken. See Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," 47.

<sup>142</sup> Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 81.

<sup>143</sup> Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith: A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1998), 62.

<sup>144</sup> See Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 75.

the supernatural existence. In that regard, human freedom is the decision to accept or reject God's offer of God's own self to humanity, a choice which is enabled by the offer itself. And since God's self-communication is the fulfilment of humanity, it is also a "yes" or "no" to human actualization.

God's willingness to offer forgiveness is unconditional. It was done regardless of whether man believes it or not. It became an objective and historical fact initiated by God when Christ died on the cross. The initiative of God in offering forgiveness is always accompanied by the anticipation that repentance will be provoked. Repentance is important because of the difference between God's willingness to offer forgiveness and God's application of forgiveness (absolution of sin). Without this differentiation the confusion between unconditional and conditional forgiveness is created. The unconditional act of God's willingness to offer forgiveness in Christ as expressed in his love for mankind is realised by God's conditional application of forgiveness in the offender's life. The denial of this assertion inevitably leads to a soteriology of universalism.<sup>145</sup> In contrast, Bash does not distinguish between repentant and unrepentant wrongdoers in the act of forgiveness. He claims that if love is unconditional, then forgiveness should also be unconditional.<sup>146</sup> David Augsburger rightfully declares: "God's gracious love is unconditional, but the consequent forgiveness is conditional. It requires the repentant response which receives love, re-appropriates relationship, and experiences reconciliation."<sup>147</sup> This is also underscored by Geisler:

God understands our weaknesses and forgives our sins upon our confession. He knew that we would not always be able to keep his commandments. And while God never lowers his demands to our level, he does provide forgiveness for us.<sup>148</sup>

Drawing from Rahner's explications of saying "yes" to God's salvation under the themes of silence and love, I maintain that he acknowledges humanity's need to respond to God's abundant love and mercy as attained in the sacrament of penance. This approach offers us a Christian interpretation of human freedom in the sense that all our many temporal choices are part of humanity's fundamental calling to be in communion with God as we embrace his offer of salvation. The posture of silence and the divine gift of love empower us to reflect and generate an understanding that sin destroys the divine-human relationship. This

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<sup>145</sup> Thomas Talbott, "Universalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, Jerry Walls, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 446-461.

<sup>146</sup> Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>147</sup> David W. Augsburger, "Forgiveness," in *New dictionary of Christian ethics and pastoral theology*, David J. Atkinson & David Field, eds. (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1995), 389.

<sup>148</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2010), 312.

perception draws us to say “yes” to the mystery of God’s forgiveness. By saying “yes” to this holy vocation, we shape who we are meant to be for all eternity.

Shannon Craigo-Snell’s view of saying “yes” to God in Rahner’s theology is that, if we say “yes” to God’s offer of salvation, we craft our own identities in community over time. This is precisely because by accepting the identity that God has granted us, we accept who we are called to be.<sup>149</sup> The choice of saying “yes” bears the shape of the human person, as that person who is created and called by God to open him/herself to the unknown and mysterious other. It is the shape of self-possession and openness to God’s grace and love.

Marian Maskulak agrees with Rahner that reconciliation and forgiveness rely primarily on God’s grace. However, she points out that the prime element that opens the impetus towards forgiveness is the individual’s recognition of his sinful acts and need for forgiveness – our God is a God of no blame and no wrath.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, Robert Schreiter asserts that forgiveness is both a process and a decision for a new future founded on a relationship with God.<sup>151</sup> It must be noted that human freedom is vital in terms of making a choice to accept the relation between God and humanity and opening oneself to the otherness of God. Nonetheless, Rahner believes that, if the human being were to have complete freedom to open or close himself to God’s self-communication, then this would be reducing God to the level of man.<sup>152</sup>

### 3.11 Critique of Rahner’s Theology of Penance

The tensions in Rahner’s theology of penance are derived from his theology of symbol and in his understanding of sacramentality. It is not surprising that he was criticized from both the right and from the left for being either too radical or not radical enough. Catholic traditionalists complained that Rahner, especially since Vatican II, had relativised the radical demands of Christianity.<sup>153</sup> It is, however, preferable to tackle these issues with Rahner rather than against him, in other words to draw from within his own writings a response to the

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<sup>149</sup> Shannon Craigo-Snell, *Silence, Love, and Death: Saying "Yes" to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 37.

<sup>150</sup> Marian Maskulak, “A Spirituality of Reconciliation: Lessons from Rwanda,” *New Blackfriars* 97 (2016): 1073.

<sup>151</sup> Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 58.

<sup>152</sup> See Rahner, *Foundations*, 128.

<sup>153</sup> Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to his life and Thought*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1986), 121-30.

various criticisms made of him. In fact, he too acknowledges the limitations of his theology as well as the need for other thinkers to develop his ideas in new directions.<sup>154</sup>

Primarily his notion of symbol is a key concept in explaining the central truths of the Roman Catholic faith: the Trinity, the incarnation, the Church and the sacraments.<sup>155</sup> Rahner makes a strong claim that a symbol should be thought of as making actual, real and present that which it symbolizes. In his essay, "On the Theology of Symbol," he distinguishes arbitrary signs from real symbols, although he uses the terms "sign" and "symbol" interchangeably in many places.<sup>156</sup> An arbitrary sign such as a flag or a road sign does not constitute what it signifies and is separate from what it signifies. It is chosen at random to express a reality in time and space. A real symbol expresses intrinsically the reality it signifies.

Louis-Marie Chauvet agrees with Rahner when he says that the function of a symbol is not like that of a sign which refers to a 'something else' that always stands on the plane of value, measure, calculation or a cognitive representation with regard to the real. The primary function of the symbol is not just to give information about the real but makes the real speak or present.<sup>157</sup>

For Rahner, the notion of symbol provides a profound insight into the mystery of the Church as symbol inseparable from Jesus Christ whom it symbolises, and the mystery of the sacraments as symbols inseparable from the grace they signify and cause precisely by signifying.<sup>158</sup> He insists that humans are created for grace and God. He perceives human nature as deeply and intrinsically connected to the nature of God simply because there is a longing in us which God freely planted in all humans to be in union with Him.<sup>159</sup> However, sin is in opposition to the holy will of the eternal God and works in opposition to the love which he offers us.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> According to Metz, a fair evaluation of Rahner's theology cannot be obtained solely on the basis of a limited and random selection of his works. See Johann B. Metz, "Foreword," in Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (New York: Continuum, 1968), xvi.

<sup>155</sup> See Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Symbol," *TI vol.4*, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Longman & Todd, 1966), 221-252. See also C. Annice Callahan, "Karl Rahner's Theology of Symbol: Basis for his Theology of the Church and the Sacraments," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 49 (1982): 195-205.

<sup>156</sup> See Rahner, "On the Theology of Symbol," 221-252.

<sup>157</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. & Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 120-21.

<sup>158</sup> Rahner, "On the Theology of Symbol," 241.

<sup>159</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 65-66.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-118.

Rahner emphasises the importance of a believer's personal decision to accept grace in a particular shape: "A sacrament is present when an essential self-actualisation of the Church becomes effective in a concrete and decisive situation in some person's life."<sup>161</sup> In re-thinking sacramental causality, he regards the sacraments as symbols of grace historically tangible in the world. As such, his notion of symbol applies well to the way sacraments cause grace. Within this context, sacramental penance symbolizes the divine action of strengthening and reclaiming the divine-human relationship. So, it is up to us to participate in this profound mystery by engaging in the invitation to renew our call to be the Church or symbol of God's presence in the world today.

Rahner's concept of Church is derived from his view that the humanity of Christ is a symbol of the Logos of God. This view is based, in turn, on his notion of symbol as causing what it signifies by signifying it. However, to say that the humanity of Christ is a symbol of God, what Rahner suggests, is simply to offer a commentary on the biblical text: 'The one who sees me, sees the Father' (John 14:9).<sup>162</sup> This is quite a powerful idea. It must be said, however, that Rahner is using his own notion of symbol a little bit loosely here, as Karen Kilby explains:

Calling the humanity of Christ the symbol of God, therefore, might mean to imply that God needs to take on this humanity, that the second person of the Trinity only becomes fully real in this humanity. But this Rahner cannot say. He is committed to the traditional notion that God is complete in Himself, sufficient unto Himself, and not in any way dependent for His wellbeing on the world. The incarnation is something that God freely chooses to do, but it cannot be a necessary element in God's self-realization. If Christ's humanity is a symbol of God, then, it is only in a slightly weakened sense of the word.<sup>163</sup>

There has also been a development that seeing the Church as symbol and sacrament of God's grace and presence among us in the world has some limitations. Avery Dulles calls this notion of the Church as sacrament a "model" of the Church and lists its assets and liabilities.<sup>164</sup> In particular, he notes that the sacramental type of ecclesiology does not seem to contribute to ecumenical dialogue between Roman Catholics and Protestants. One reason for this may be its tendency to emphasise the passive aspect, effecting what it signifies. Richard McBrien claims that Rahner himself does not explain the change in his understanding of sacramentality from viewing the Church as a passive symbol of what God is doing for all

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>162</sup> Rahner, "On the Theology of Symbol," 237.

<sup>163</sup> Karen Kilby, *Fount Christian Thinkers*, 44-45.

<sup>164</sup> See Avery Dulles, S.J., *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1974), 58-70.

people, to viewing the Church as an “active and aggressive instrument” which will bring about human unity in history.<sup>165</sup> However, Declan Marmion holds that

If we view Rahner’s ecclesiology in connection with the renewal inaugurated by Vatican II and its openness to the world, it is clear that he did not want the particularity of Christian identity to be purchased at the price of the public character of theology. Rahner did not recommend Christians to isolate themselves from their cultural environment. But he often presented the dividing line between Christians and non-Christians in a rather fluid manner.<sup>166</sup> As a matter of fact, Rahner took seriously the pluralistic, contextual and interdisciplinary dimensions of Christian identity. This was his life-long project and it is still worthy of our continued attention.

Another tension is based on the notion of the Church as symbol of grace which is present always and everywhere, as reflected in Rahner’s controversial theory of the anonymous Christian that attempts to reconcile the universality of salvation with the particularity of the Christ event.<sup>167</sup> Theologians like Johannes B. Metz and Richard McBrien have pointed out that this theory seems to imply a sense of superiority rather than the universality of grace.<sup>168</sup> In the face of it, one could conclude from this emphasis on reality as graced that Rahner’s ecclesiology overlooks the mystery of sin. Nevertheless, he was one of the first ecclesiologists to insist that we are the Church of sinners. He acknowledges that we struggle with sin not only as individuals but also challenges institutionalised sin in society and in Church structures.<sup>169</sup> So, it is simplistic to categorize Rahner as belonging to a ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive camp. His understanding of Christianity and salvation is more nuanced than this.

In addition, the notion of Church as symbol of grace he can also be faulted as denying a concern for social and political change and perpetuating a false and naïve optimism. However, Rahner is keenly aware that the Church which is precisely a symbol of grace must be open, ecumenical from below, democratised and socio-critical. In fact, he has written in

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<sup>165</sup> Richard P. McBrien, *Church: The Continuing Quest* (Paramus, NJ: Newman Press, 1970), 63.

<sup>166</sup> Declan Marmion, “Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age: A Perspective from Rahner,” in Declan Marmion, ed., *Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age: Celebrating the Legacies of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan* (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), 172.

<sup>167</sup> See K. Rahner, “Anonymous Christian,” *T.I. vol. 6*, 390-99; “Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church,” *T.I. vol.12*, 161-178.

<sup>168</sup> See Johann B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 158-161; Richard P. McBrien, *Church: The Continuing Quest*, 63.

<sup>169</sup> See K. Rahner, “The Church of Sinners,” in *TI vol. 6*, 253-269; “The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II,” *T.I vol. 6*, 270-294; *The Shape of the Church to Come*,” trans. Edward Quinn (London: SPCK, 1974), 124-125.



his later volumes on the Church as social critic and as the mediatrix of corporate salvation.<sup>170</sup> He warns against the danger of an individualistic soteriology and declares political theology as its corrective.<sup>171</sup> He is careful to point out that the task of political theology for him is not to practice politics.<sup>172</sup> He believes that the Church is mandated to engage in social work not only because it receives and witnesses to the world the truth in faith and the future in hope, but also because it is “the basic sacrament of unity in the ministry of love.”<sup>173</sup>

Rahner offers a balanced perspective which guards against both the tendency to a marked clericalism and a sacralism which interprets Christian teaching and its way of life solely in terms of love of neighbour. While Rahner defends the need for authoritative structures in the Church, he insists that only a genuinely Catholic Church, one that is neither authoritarian nor individualistic, could express the Spirit. His conviction is that faith and religion must come from a person’s proper and free conviction and be capable of being experienced; and may not be reduced to mere obedience to the formal teaching authority of the Church.<sup>174</sup> By addressing himself in these ways with regard to political theology, Rahner acknowledges the critique of his former student, Johann B. Metz, which Rahner himself admits is the only criticism which he takes very seriously.<sup>175</sup>

Although Rahner’s ecclesiology was not openly political, its emphasis on the sacramental identity of the Church, which included the Church’s mission to be a symbol of humanity’s reconciliation to God in Jesus Christ, was not devoid of political implications. According to Richard Lennan, Rahner stresses that the Church could not live quietly with injustice, either in the wider world or within the Church itself, as such injustice was alien to the Spirit.<sup>176</sup> In that regard, if sacramental penance is to be a symbol of hope for the world, it needs to be more than a pious practice of believers. It needs to be an ecclesial celebration that relies on conviction and contrition while focusing on embodying Christ’s ministry of forgiveness to humanity.

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<sup>170</sup> See K. Rahner, “The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society,” *TI* vol.12, 229-249.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>172</sup> See K. Rahner, “The New Claims which Pastoral Theology Makes upon Theology as a Whole,” in *TI* vol. 11, 120-121.

<sup>173</sup> K. Rahner, “Practical Theology and Social Work in the Church,” in *TI* vol.10, 358.

<sup>174</sup> K. Rahner, “Authority in *TI* vol. 23, 84.

<sup>175</sup> See K. Rahner, “Introduction,” to James J. Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy According to Karl Rahner* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), ix.

<sup>176</sup> Richard Lennan, “Ecclesiology and Ecumenism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 141.

### 3.12 Conclusion: Sacramental Forgiveness and Human Freedom

We have seen that Rahner's understanding of sacramental penance is deeply rooted in his anthropological theology, enabling him to be increasingly aware of the sacrament's social and ecclesial character. The sin of an individual affects other Christians and the Church as a whole.<sup>177</sup> In this sense, sin is not seen as something private but as harming and scandalising the Christian community. The Christian offends against God but as a member of the Church. In committing sin, the sinner offends against the holiness of the Church (her Spirit), against her mission and against the obedience he owes to her. The Christian who sins offends, therefore, against his own attachment to the Church (which is essential to him as a Christian) and against the Church herself.<sup>178</sup> So there is need to confess to the Church, since ecclesial penance involves reconciliation with those who have been harmed by our sins. On the level of human relationships, this is a true sign of repentance, atonement and forgiveness which offers a sense of new life and a fresh start.

The reunion of a sinner with God and the Church as a result of sacramental forgiveness is an act embraced in freedom. A person's freedom is an autonomous self-possession of man before or even against God, but not in the sense that God's grace and superiority and the responsible exercise of freedom are realities encroaching on each other. Divine salvation and superiority are experienced from the outset as the reason for the possibility of the person's responsibility and freedom. They both grow in equal and not in inverse proportion. This is why Christian theology argues that human actions are virtuous or sinful in so far as they are seen to accept or reject God's self-communication.<sup>179</sup>

The power of binding and loosing given by Jesus to the Apostles and then undertaken by the Church has to do with the ban imposed on the penitent who is kept away from the Lord's Supper until the ban is lifted. This is to make the person more intent on feeling his or her exclusion from the Eucharist in order to help him or her towards the process of conversion.<sup>180</sup> The question of conversion in the sacrament of penance is something that arises from the fact that it must come from the penitent out of one's freedom and responsibility. The Church facilitates this process and officially pronounces or effects it

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<sup>177</sup> Rahner, "Penance as Reconciliation with the Church," 131.

<sup>178</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 137.

<sup>179</sup> See Rahner, "Guilt - Responsibility - Punishment within the view of Catholic Theology," 199.

<sup>180</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 148.

rather than merely declaring her absolution so that the penitent can take his/her place back in the Eucharistic assembly.<sup>181</sup>

The Church helps the penitent to overcome the guilt of sin and to experience grace in his/her heart because the Church has already prayed and continues praying for him/her. The prayers recited before the absolution proper signify the Church's prayer.<sup>182</sup> The final point of the arrival of the penitent derives from an awareness that God has forgiven him/her through the ministry of the Church. The sacramental aspect of Christ's saving grace and mission is thus fulfilled.<sup>183</sup> The absolution, along with the sign of the peace, marks the point of being again in God's favour. The practice of the handshake between a confessor and a penitent after confession (particularly in Western culture) tends to symbolise or communicate gratitude and peace attained. However, the bigger picture reflected is the reunion between God and a reconciled sinner. There is no reason why this practice should not continue and be adopted by other cultures, especially if it is judged to be pastorally valuable and meaningful.

Arguably, Christians seem to experience sacramental confession as a real safety-valve for their accumulated burden of guilt; and the words of absolution are a healing balm for mind and heart. When the forgiveness comes through the sacramental action of the Church backed by the authority and power of Jesus himself, it can bring a peace not of this world. Our experience of God's forgiveness in the sacrament of penance shows that Christ's promise of being with the Church until the end of time is a guarantee. Christ comes to us as individual members of his body, visibly united with each other but also in the visibility of his body the Church. This does not mean that the Church is only a community of sinners needing constant reform and continual conversion. It is also a human family full of God's goodness and where the Spirit too is at work, under the guidance of the ordinary laws of human growth and God's grace. This enables humanity to attain not only successes, but also to come to terms with its less happy experiences and even its mistakes.

In short, sacramental confession is a matter of personal freedom and responsibility. The Church is a community of persons who make decisions and assume responsibilities. The communal celebration of penance is not a magic mass of good will and conversion. It is individual men and women making the decision to come together in unselfishness and love to embrace God's abundant mercy. Everything depends on what each individual decides and

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 166-169.

does, body and soul. The reality of communal penance can never mean that someone else – especially a group – can take my place or make my personal confession to God for me. I must face God and respond personally. However, since I am a truly social being and Christian, I respond within the community, and as part of the community, the Church. Penance celebrations return my whole life again and again to God, and also strengthen the ties I have with the Christian community.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### AN EVALUATION OF THE RENEWAL OF PENANCE SINCE THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

#### 4.1 Introduction

The reform of penance grows out of a prophetic sense of responding to the pastoral needs of the times in order to ensure more effective ways of administering the sacrament to the people of God. Vatican II's pastoral renewal of the sacrament of penance, to which Karl Rahner contributed significantly, aimed at not only calling for liturgical reform but also situating the reform within the Church's pastoral mission of salvation of souls. Nevertheless, other concerns entered in of course and sometimes interfered with the pastoral dimension. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* called for the reform of the rites and formulas of penance so as to express the sacrament's nature and effect more clearly, though it gave no specific guidelines for reform.<sup>1</sup> Also, the Council provided the foundation for the liturgy, law and pastoral practice that have come after it. It seems that the Council documents say little on penance but affirm the sacrament's social and ecclesial nature by linking reconciliation with God and reconciliation with the Church. This aspect of renewal was basically a response to the challenges presented by the modern world and liturgical studies, including those on the history of penance.

In this fourth chapter, we will look at the ecclesiastical history and theological foundations of the sacrament of penance. We shall then outline the basic guidelines on the renewal of penance mandated by Vatican II, as well as Rahner's later reflections in this regard. We shall conclude with a brief analysis of some of the main points of *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, a pivotal document of the twentieth century written by Pope John Paul II, delivered on 2 December 1984 in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, but which grew out of the Sixth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in 1983. In presenting an evaluation of the important developments of the renewal of penance, we shall show how these insights have offered provocative inspirations towards the future of the sacrament, especially in modern society.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (S.C.), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 72 in Vatican Council II vol. 1, 21.

#### 4.2 A Historical Sketch of the Sacrament of Penance from the Early Church to Vatican II

In the early Church the Christian community was conscious of the sayings of Jesus which referred to the forgiveness of sins within the Church. One of these was Christ's explicit statement to the Apostles: "whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained (John 20:23)." Another was when he conferred on Peter 'the keys of the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 16:19), and later promised Peter and the twelve that 'whatever they bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever they loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Mt 18:18). However, the recognition of this discipline of penance and its scope proved to be an extremely contentious issue in the Church of the early centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Ecclesiastical history confirms that it took almost two centuries for a specific rite of penance to emerge within the developing Church. During this time there was an on-going doctrinal debate about how and why such a sacrament should exist. From Christ's death until 150AD, all of the sacramental emphasis was placed on the Eucharist and Baptism as initiation rituals, as represented in and through the extensive catechumenate process.<sup>3</sup> For the early convert living in an era of religious persecution Christianity demanded a rigorous commitment to a comprehensive lifestyle of study, prayer, and fasting, culminating in one's baptism and first reception of Eucharist, typically at the celebration of Easter. Kenan Osborne states that baptism was "a process radically moving a person from sin to grace, which is precisely a description of reconciliation."<sup>4</sup> The earliest ecclesial viewpoint held baptism to be the sacrament in which human sin was forgiven by God.

As far as conversion was concerned, baptism was perceived as a process of healing that came from God's divine love, which was bestowed on those who believed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Adults proclaimed their acceptance of Christianity and were freshly anointed, freed from past sin, and declared to be cleansed and pure for their new life in Christ. This early practice emphasized that the essential elements of baptism were a striving for conversion on the part of the Christian approaching the Church and the fact that through the community's reception of the candidate at baptism God's forgiveness is both

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<sup>2</sup> John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Since the beginning of Christianity, the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist have always been prominent and central. As such, both of these rituals are intimately linked to the process and experience of forgiveness, practically and theologically.

<sup>4</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 19.

revealed and received.<sup>5</sup> Thus, baptism was a once-in-a-lifetime sacrament for those who wished to participate in the Church and effected a reconciliation in the new Christian which was expected to be the final act of forgiveness in his or her life.

As can be appreciated, it was unfortunately but understandably the case that some of the weaker members of the community betrayed others or the Church in various ways out of fear for themselves.<sup>6</sup> However, if someone committed a grave sin after baptism and yet wanted to return to the Church, how could the Church forgive and welcome that person back? To address such a dilemma the question of a second baptism or second admission was raised. This led to a theological debate among Church leaders.<sup>7</sup> As leaders and theologians during the early Patristic Church tried to grapple with this development, they were challenged to determine the role, if any, to be played by the ecclesial community. Historically, we can see that the issue was hotly contested. There is contemporary evidence of a public ritual for post-baptismal sin and the presence of strong hesitation in some churches to consent to ecclesial involvement in reconciliation.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, from the fourth to sixth centuries, the Church experienced an ecclesial development whereby the post-baptismal conversion of those whose sinfulness particularly endangered the community's holiness was allowed.<sup>9</sup> The sacrament of penance was born, grounded in the mystery of Jesus as the divine gift of God's love, for the purpose of allowing grave sinners to be reconciled with the community of the Church.

In response to this need for continuing conversion, the penitential institution developed in most urban centres and became an organised process of reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> What emerged was an 'order of penitents' paralleling the catechumenate which provided for the reformation of those whose pre-baptismal formation had been insufficient to prevent serious sin following baptism. Penance was seen as purely social at this point as Osborne has observed:

In the early Church there is no indication of either private confession or confessions of devotion. The ritual of reconciliation was meant only for those who had seriously

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<sup>5</sup> Jose Ramos-Regidor, "Reconciliation in the Primitive Church and its Lessons for Theology and Pastoral Practice Today" in *Sacramental Reconciliation*, ed. Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 85.

<sup>6</sup> Monica Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for our Times* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier Inc., 1982), 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> James Dallen, "Sacrament of Reconciliation" in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press – A Michael Glazier Book, 1990), 1054.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

and substantially separated themselves from God and from the Christian community.<sup>11</sup>

The principle behind the practice seems to have been directed at grave public offences, such as apostasy, murder, arson and adultery. Each bishop had his own detailed list of transgressions for which public reparation was warranted. This ritual was the Church's attempt to address the needs of its members by allowing a rigorous and lengthy process of reunification for those whose dishonourable actions had seriously distanced them from their faith. The purpose was to provide the penitents with the opportunity to regain a righteous life through their reunion with the larger community against which personal sinning had done great harm.

As the years progressed "legal regulation through synodal canons led to regional consistency of practice and understanding."<sup>12</sup> The rite of penance began to be known as 'canonical penance.' It was structured around deliberate and specific communal regulations which provided ecclesial order throughout the Christian world. As the rules spread the practice of penance grew extremely rigid, motivating most to regard penance more as a "coercive penalty and punishment than as a voluntary means of healing and rehabilitation."<sup>13</sup> Very often Christians considered penance as their last sacramental act, waiting until the hour of death for an official forgiveness ritual that would allow them at the moment of passing from this world to enter God's heavenly kingdom. Consequently, the very grave and lengthy 'order of penitents' (with its expressions of public sorrow, dramatic acts of fasting, contrition and public prayer) went into decline and the practice was abandoned by the fifth century. This opened the ecclesial door to the eventual emergence of other sacramental practices including that of the Celtic-influenced, individual and monastic confession.

Christianity reached the Celtic lands of Ireland around 432AD, when the monastic movement was spreading from Egypt, Palestine and Asia Minor to all parts of Western Europe.<sup>14</sup> Inspired by the monastic culture of the desert fathers of Egypt, Irish monasteries became the community's focal point for prayer and catechesis. So, whatever religious practices were embraced by the monks, these would readily influence the practice of lay people in nearby communities. It was within the walls of the Irish monasteries that the

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<sup>11</sup> Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>13</sup> Dallen, "Sacrament of Reconciliation," 1056.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials and Their Significance for the Sacrament of Penance Today* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 8.



practice of personal confession of sins was established. As a new approach to healing, it impacted on everyone in the Irish Christian community. Eventually, it became the principal way for all Catholics in the world to practice the sacrament of reconciliation.

Following St Patrick's evangelization in Ireland, personal confession became quite popular. Confessors (both lay and ordained men and women) came to seek guidance in determining what was appropriate in the rite of the sacrament as well as in the "satisfaction" for those who confessed their sins. Soon there developed the Celtic Penitentials, books providing a pastoral guideline for the care of sinful souls, written in either Latin or Gaelic.<sup>15</sup> It was the third strand in the tradition popularly known as "tariffed" (or measured) penance. It was tariffed because every sin had its proportional punishment – carefully and thoroughly worked out. It allowed for any penitent to confess any sin to any confessor and to obtain absolution after completing the appropriate penance.

In many ways these manuals replaced what had previously been 'the order of penitents,' by providing clear ecclesial instructions to the confessor as to what the sinner must do to achieve full forgiveness from God. The acts of satisfaction suggested by the penitentials were typically private, since the experience of penance was of a personal nature and the assembled Church played no part in the process at the time.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the Celtic penance experience the primary goal was to build up the individual's own spiritual life. In fact, the model for such a spiritual life was the Celtic monk and, in the case of lay people, these moments of penance made them 'little monks,' abstaining from food and drink, even sex.<sup>17</sup> Instead of participating in an extreme process of penance, as in the Patristic era, Christians could experience 'devotional penance' at any point in their life and for as many times as they felt it necessary throughout their spiritual journey. For Christians confession grew to be a normal part of one's spiritual life, differing greatly from the Roman or public form that had originated in the early centuries of the Church. This Celtic-style penance, focusing on individual sacramental reunion with God, had a great impact on Catholicism over the generations. When missionary monks brought the practice to mainland Europe, it initially met with intense rejection, but by the twelfth century it had become recognised by bishops as legitimate and one of the principal ways of obtaining forgiveness.

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<sup>15</sup> Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

I believe that tracing the roots of penance and understanding its development can provide us with insights and inspiration for consideration of a healthy reconciliation practice at present. Modern Catholics are quite familiar with the ritual of private confession as this has been the main avenue by which we have received ecclesial forgiveness over our lifetimes. Surprisingly, the Catholic Church did not officially institute private confession as the mode of ecclesial reconciliation until 1215. The Fourth Lateran Council was the first papal council to discuss the ritual of penance in any detail. The council required “all the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment to individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest (no one else) at least once a year.”<sup>18</sup> By this point the practice of lay people as confessors had vanished. This Church directive recommended confession during the Lenten season as an “Easter duty” each year and set into motion a stronger role for the priest within the sacrament itself. The Lateran Council did not go into theological detail with regard to the meaning, purpose and rite of penance. However, it did place an official seal of approval on a practice that had been popular but not yet appropriately sanctioned. Over time, the Church came to realize the importance of explaining the sacrament’s theological relevance as well as setting out its pastoral practices.

To appreciate the ecclesial dimension of sacramental theology, and in particular of the sacrament of penance, we need to consider the theological concerns instigated by Martin Luther which were addressed by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). During the Reformation, Luther revisited St Paul’s references in Romans as to how believers “are justified by faith” (Romans 5:1). He preferred to adopt a mystical understanding of Christ’s sacrificial action. He emphasized scriptural references that highlight “the merciful God... and the representative atonement gained through Christ in his suffering and dying.”<sup>19</sup> Luther began to stress a renewed concept of a unifying faith in Jesus Christ, rooted in “the suffering Christ ... as revealing the love and mercy of God.”<sup>20</sup> This welcome shift of focus from a vindictive God to the life-sacrificing/giving Christ was at the heart of Luther’s challenge to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Church.

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<sup>18</sup> See chapter 21 of Lateran IV (DS 812).

<sup>19</sup> Markus Wriedt, “Luther’s Theology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 89.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Article twelve of *Augsburg Confession* indicates that “true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ), and this faith will comfort the heart and again set it at rest.” See, Martin Luther, “Augsburg Confession,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 11.

In this theological point of view, Luther articulated a renewed sense of reconciliation, an attitude that encourages the reception of divine love rather than a hardened focus on penance. He wanted to remind Christians of their historical roots within scripture and of the immense forgiveness of their loving God. His theology was basically a revival of the patristic understanding of Christ's divinity as God's most gracious gift of love. For Luther, God did not become human in Jesus Christ only to provide payback for humanity's immense sin. No, God as Jesus Christ became human as a sign and a self-gift of love and mercy for all who faithfully believe. In the *Large Catechism* Luther wrote: "When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian."<sup>21</sup> What he implied is that contrition, of itself, forgives sin. When one confesses to a priest and receives absolution, the person must believe that the Lord truly has overcome sin and has bestowed on us the grace of reconciliation. Without this realization of sin and this faith in Jesus' salvific action, the sacrament of penance, or any sacrament for that matter, is meaningless.

The starting point was, for Luther, his Christology. For instance, in his *Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Jesus is presented as the "sacrament and example" of justification:

The death of Christ is the death of sin, and his resurrection is the life of justice, for through his death he satisfied for sin and through his resurrection he has given us his justice. Accordingly, his death not only signified, but also brings about remission of sin as the most sufficient satisfaction. Moreover, his resurrection is not only a sacrament of our justice, but it also effects it in us and is its cause, if we believe in the resurrection.<sup>22</sup>

This Christological starting point remains a constant throughout Luther's life. Jesus has saved us in a complete way. Jesus has justified us totally. No explanation of the church or of any of its sacraments and rituals can compromise this foundation.

In Luther's view, God came into humanity through the grace that is Christ himself, crucified and risen. There is nothing more one can do but to embrace this holy gift of love through faith. When one believes, Luther says, one receives forgiveness. However, during the medieval period, the dominant Christian perspective maintained that the primary responsibility for believers was to labour towards forgiveness within the Church's rigid structure of satisfaction. Through the action of penance, the sinner strives to achieve repayment of this immense debt to God in Christ Jesus. Humans can and must earn God's

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, "Large Catechism," in *Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 460-61.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, *Commentary on the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications 1982), 25.

pardon. In the midst of this theological debate Luther proposed a change in the focus of the sacraments, suggesting that the Church view them more as mystical, grace-filled moments than as juridical laws to which the faithful were bound. To the dismay of the Church, Luther had challenged the very nature of ecclesial sacramental power.

In response to Luther's challenges, the Council of Trent introduced the most formal, theological consideration of the sacrament of penance in history of the Church. The Catholic Church formulated much of what would frame the ecclesial nature of the sacrament of penance for the next 500 years. It insisted on integral confession (all mortal sins of which the penitent was conscious, according to number and kind ...) to the priest.<sup>23</sup> The priest's role was to be that of a judge who effectively assured forgiveness through his ordained power of absolution.

From the close of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sacraments were not experienced as communal or ecclesial celebrations proclaiming and effecting God's presence and activities. Rather they were predominantly understood as rituals administered by those 'empowered' through ordination to confer grace on individuals. In the spirit of addressing the challenges facing the Church in the modern world, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council during the turbulent years of the 1960's with a view to bringing renewal in the Church which would make it a 'people's Church, hierarchically structured.' One of the major themes or principles proclaimed at the Council was of the Church as mystery or sacrament. This illuminated a new path for Catholic theology pointing to reforming liturgical worship and sacramental understanding. It was emphasized that sacraments are liturgical acts, the action of prayer of the Church gathered in assembly.<sup>24</sup> This is true not only of the Eucharist, where its application is somewhat easy to grasp, but also of the other sacraments in which the role of the gathered assembly as integral to their enactment had been much less directly evident.

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<sup>23</sup> Dallen, "Sacrament of Reconciliation," 1061. See also, "Canon VII" in *Concilium Tridentinum*, ed. Görresgesellschaft (Freiburg: Herder, 1938), 251-53. However, there were theoretical questions: not without good reason did Luther, for instance, emphasize that every person is justified by faith as Karl Rahner has pointed out: "If the confession of sin depended on an accurate confession of each and every sin, where, Luther asked, is the mercy of God? Where is God's grace? If the confession of sin is so explained, either as part of the quasi-matter or as the condition for the sacrament of penance, so that without it God cannot forgive sin, then grace ceases to be grace. It is no longer a gift, but something earned. No matter how hard one tries to recall and confess all sins, a Christian is truly unable to account for each and every sin. Therefore, it is not the ability to recount all sins which causes the forgiveness of sin, but rather the grace of God which one, in faith, sees as the only source of forgiveness. See, K. Rahner, "Gerecht und Sünder zugleich," *Geist und Leben* 36 (1963): 434-43.

<sup>24</sup> *SC*, no. 2.

### 4.3 Vatican II and the Reform of Penance

On 25<sup>th</sup> January 1959, in the Basilica of St Peter, Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The full commission consisted of sixty-five members and consultants, about thirty advisors, and the personnel of the secretariat. The appointed members included some bishops, and some acknowledged scholars and experts in pastoral liturgy. The consultants and advisors, on the other hand, included both men of action and scholars as well as directors of diocesan liturgical centres and commissions. The element of renewal was considered in that every part of world in which the liturgical movement was active, and prospering had to be represented on the commission. All these were profession workers who could make an effective contribution when there was need of research and information for the work to be truly ecclesial in character.

After several meetings of the preparatory commission, Vatican II convened on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1962 with a determined approach to transform the Church and theology. The renewal was not simply achieved by targeting the sacrament of penance, but it brought a revolutionary perspective that focused on the broader restoration of sacramental theology within the Catholic Church. In Vatican II the Church reclaimed its ecclesiastical and sacramental roots. It led to a transformed theology – one that reminds the faithful that Christ is the centre of Catholicism as the primordial sacrament, the very first sign and gift through which all other sacraments have their significance.<sup>25</sup> Karl Rahner, through his many writings, had been absolutely instrumental in this return to Jesus as the primordial sacrament and the Church as our most essential, earthly sacrament. Rahner writes:

... the Church is the basic sacrament. This means that the Church is a sign of salvation... But insofar as the Church is a continuation of God's self-offer in Jesus Christ in whom he has the final, victorious and salvific word in the dialogue between God and the world, the Church is an efficacious sign. In Jesus Christ and in his presence, that is, in the Church, God offers himself to man in such a way that by God's act of grace this offer continues to be definitively bound up with the acceptance of this offer by the history of the world's freedom. From this perspective the Church is the sign and the historical manifestation of the victorious success of God's self-communication.<sup>26</sup>

This broader understanding of sacrament grounded in the reality of Christ and Church changed people's perspective of Church. The spirit of the Church now focused anew on the

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<sup>25</sup> Ray R. Noll, *Sacraments: A New Understanding for a New Generation* (London: CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 412.

glorious gift of grace as witnessed in and through all sacraments. Vatican II had the effect of breathing fresh air on the Catholic faithful all over the world, vibrantly inspiring new ways of considering the role of sacraments within their own lives. It is this holistic vision of sacramental theology that has the power to renew fully the spirit and practice of reconciliation today. Once Vatican II understood sacrament within the framework of Christ's human witness, Catholics began to see the purpose of such rituals in their own life. Bernard Cooke agrees, writing that sacraments are

...moments of reflection, shared with one another in celebration, that bring together and deepen all our other reflections about life. They are key experiences that provide new insight into our other experiences and so deepen them.<sup>27</sup>

Vatican II discussed several theological questions and stimulated much creativity within the Church including altering the paradigm of each of the seven sacraments. It is no surprise then that penance experienced its own official renewal during the decade immediately following the closing of this historical council. The call for the revision of the rite of the sacrament of penance by the second Vatican Council resulted from a general pastoral and liturgical reform which the council saw as one dimension of responding to the pastoral challenges of the modern world. At the outset came a structural rebirth of the 1973 renewed *Rite of Penance*. Although the Council did not say much about the sacrament of penance, it affirmed the effect as well as the social and ecclesial nature of the sacrament:

Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example and by prayer labours for their conversion.<sup>28</sup>

In this significant teaching on the social and ecclesial nature of the sacrament of penance, the Council "links reconciliation with God and reconciliation with the Church and hints at the place of penance in the Church's wider pastoral mission."<sup>29</sup> The Council also underlines the need for the entire Church to pray for the conversion and reconciliation of members who have sinned.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (London: CT: Twenty-third Publications, 1994), 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no.11. This teaching is reiterated in the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no.5: "By the sacrament of penance they (priests) reconcile sinners with God and with the Church."

<sup>29</sup> James Dallen, "Church Authority and Sacrament of Penance: The Synod of Bishops," *Worship* 58 (1984): 198. See also Dallen, *Reconciling Community*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> *SC*, no. 109.

The reform of the rites of penance took a rather long and winding road. On 2nd December 1966, a separate committee was established to study the problems inherent in the sacrament of penance.<sup>31</sup> This first committee held twelve meetings in Rome in period of three years (1966-1969) discussing several aspects of the renewal of penance. However, the rite of general absolution and the question of the possibility of plurality of formulas of absolution proved to be controversial. The discussion at times grew hot or dragged on with no consensus reached and this caused a certain weariness with the whole business. Those not in favour of the possibility of plurality of formulas regarded it as a threat to unity and a source of confusion for the faithful in that it would allow the possibility of a belittling formula, that is, one in which the direct statement “I absolve you” did not appear. The fathers by and large, accepted the rite of general absolution and eventually three formulas of absolution were also approved.<sup>32</sup> This action ended the work of the first committee at a stage where the rite was substantially in place. In the second phase, a completely new committee was established who worked between 1972-1973 with the relevant Congregations of the Roman Curia to complete and publish the 1973 *Rite of Penance*.<sup>33</sup> It must be noted that the rites and formularies for the sacrament of penance were revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament.

#### 4.4 The 1973 Revised Rite of Penance

##### 4.4.1 Characteristic Perspectives of the Revised Rite of Penance

Liturgical reform was one of Vatican II’s primary means for accomplishing John XXIII’s pastoral renewal of the Church.<sup>34</sup> The goal of this effort was to formulate rituals and their texts that would express more clearly the holy things which they signify so that their

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<sup>31</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Committee included: Relator: J. Jecuyer; secretary: F. Heggen and, from 1967 on, F. Nickolasch; members: Z. Alszeghy, P. Anciaux, C. Floristan, A. Kirchgassner, L. Ligier, K. Rahner, and C. Vogel.

<sup>32</sup> Here are the texts: i. “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit I absolve you from your sins and restore you fully to the peace of the Church.”

ii. “Our Lord Jesus Christ sacrificed himself to the Father for us and gave his Church the power to forgive sins. May he, through my ministry, absolve you from your sins by the grace of the Holy Spirit and restore you to the perfect peace of the Church.”

iii. “Our Lord Jesus Christ reconciled the world to his Father by his passion and resurrection. By the grace of the Holy Spirit he forgives your sins through my ministry and restores you fully to the life of the Church.”

<sup>33</sup> Relator: P. Jounel; secretary: F. Sottocornola; members: A. Gracia, P. Visentin, H. Meyer, K. Donovan, and G. Pasqualetti. For further details about the controversy surrounding the committees appointed to prepare the *RP* see James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 205-249; Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 664-677.

<sup>34</sup> See James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 208ff.

participants might be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively and as befits a community. With respect to the revision of the rite of penance, Vatican II's mandate was to express more clearly both the nature and effect of the sacrament. Interestingly, the purpose of the revised *Rite of Penance* is described by the Canadian Catholic conference as follows:

- a) To show its relationship with Jesus' paschal mystery.
- b) To point out its ecclesial dimensions.
- c) To give proper place to God's word.
- d) To make the rite more expressive, understandable, and to increase participation.
- e) To be a celebration of faith.
- f) To leave room for adaptation to various cultures and situations.
- g) To bring out the nature and effect of this sacrament.<sup>35</sup>

In effect, this reformed ritual of penance replaced the single rite instituted by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) with three discrete rites that together make up the new *Rite of Penance*. In addition to a reformed rite of individual confession, the possibility of a communal celebration with individual confession and absolution was introduced as well as a third rite with general confession and absolution. Each of the rites was designed to highlight certain aspects of the theology of penance underlying it and to respond to distinct pastoral situations.

The first, the Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents, served as a revision of the standard practice of the sacrament since the Council of Trent. The second, the Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents, responded to the Council's more general liturgical move to "emphasize the relation of the sacrament to the community" by placing "individual confession and absolution in the context of the celebration of the Word of God."<sup>36</sup> Finally, the Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution was designed to address special occasions where individual confessions were not pastorally feasible. Declan Marmion notes that these rites should be seen as complementary, each with distinct values for penitents and communities in different situations.<sup>37</sup>

Ideally, the first rite offers the possibility of personal dialogue between penitent and priest, something that does not come to the fore as much in communal celebrations. Most commentators regard communal rites as more appropriate because they emphasize the social

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<sup>35</sup> Canadian Catholic Conference, "Training Readers," *National Bulletin on Liturgy* 9 (1976): 13.

<sup>36</sup> Rite of Penance, Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, in *Rite of the Catholic Church: Volume One* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1990), 523.

<sup>37</sup> Declan Marmion, "The Unloved Sacrament: The Demise of the *Sacramentum Paenitentiae*," *Milltown Studies* 43 (1999): 53.



and ecclesial nature of the sacrament.<sup>38</sup> Central to the Council's vision for the renewal of penance is an awareness of the penitent nature of the Church. This theme of the penitent Church is crucial for awakening the need for renewing the sacrament so that it can reach out to all alienated members. It must be said that this understanding of Church as holy, and yet always in need of purification, is deeply rooted in patristic tradition but had been practically forgotten until retrieved at the Council.<sup>39</sup>

Retrieving the practice of the ancient penance liturgy (when the Church did penance as much as for the community as for penitents) is very much at the forefront of Vatican II's renewal of the sacrament. The emphasis is to sensitize the gathered community as to how sin and division affect the health of the whole body of believers. This helps to highlight the social character of sin and forgiveness, along with the responsibility of mutual correction and acceptance. This formal and wider perspective of sin and confession reminds the faithful that reconciliation is not an individual's isolated act but has a social and communal aspect. It is in the communal form of the celebration of penance that the pattern of sacramental reform is clearest, as it emphasizes the role of the church community. Communal penitential celebrations can be helpful in making the sacrament more attractive than the private ritual. It enables penitents to value the sacrament more, to be less afraid of it, and at the same time to derive more joy and peace from it.

The 1973 *Rite of Penance* is not about emphasizing communal celebrations more than private forms or recommending that general absolution should replace individual confession. In this regard, a few interventions, especially from bishops in missionary lands, called for greater flexibility in the use of the third form of the Rite (the Rite with general absolution).<sup>40</sup> The *Rite of Penance* as a whole stresses that conversion is a process rather than a state to be

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<sup>38</sup> See for example, Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 230, James D. Crichton, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: A Commentary on the Order of Penance 1974* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974), 11-12, and Clement Tierney, *The Sacrament of Repentance and Reconciliation* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1983), 163-68. These and other commentators draw their understanding from Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 27, which stressed that preference was to be given to communal celebrations over more individual or private celebrations.

<sup>39</sup> See Karl Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," and "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," in *Theological Investigations vol. 6* (London: Longman & Todd, 1969), 253-94.

<sup>40</sup> See for example, "Is General Absolution Underutilized?" *Origins* 13 (1983), 343-44. In this written intervention, Archbishop Samuel Carter of Kingston, Jamaica argues that while it would be a serious error to think general absolution should normally replace individual confession, it would also be a serious error to exaggerate the 'grave necessity' justifying its use to such an extent as almost to suppress the rite entirely in practice. For a similar intervention from the Ghana Bishops' Conference, see "Reconciliation and African Realities," *Origins* 13 (1983), 349-50.

achieved and that this is effectively attained when incorporated into an ecclesial dimension of reconciliation.

Interestingly, Pope John Paul II's closing address to the Synod clearly underlines the profoundly personal character of the sacrament.<sup>41</sup> However, as there is now a massive reduction in the numbers celebrating the sacrament, the question of how best to provide for a greater spiritual experience for the faithful is still with us. It is far from being satisfactorily resolved. It might be more accurate to say that it is not so much that "confessions" have diminished; but that the mode through which "confessions" now occur has changed. For example, people nowadays knowingly or unknowingly make "confessions" on radio and TV talk shows, phone-ins, during popular crusades, etc. Though the traditional locus of confession before the priest is on the wane, it is obvious that the psychological necessity of confession remains. Not surprisingly, Vatican II's vision for penance to speak to those for whom Christianity has become alien is far from being realised and certainly this is a continuing agenda.

#### 4.4.2 The Name of the Sacrament: Clarifying the Terms

The sacrament is referred to in various ways: confession, penance or reconciliation. Identification of the appropriate or authentic name of the sacrament is important for understanding it as well as serving to identify it and helping us to appreciate its usefulness. Historically, the official and most popular names of the sacrament were "penance" and "confession."<sup>42</sup> However, each of these terms "is only one aspect of the sacrament."<sup>43</sup> Godfrey Diekmann refers to them as being "partial ones which describe only a part of the total process of reconciliation."<sup>44</sup> They do not express entirely the true nature and meaning of the sacrament. The obvious implication is that people's perception of the sacrament over the centuries was partial and unclear.

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<sup>41</sup> For the concluding statement of the Pope to the Synod, see, *Origins* 13 (1983): 376-79.

<sup>42</sup> The sacrament was called penance or confession at an historical period when each element was emphasized as the most important. However, the sacrament was officially called "penance" by the Council of Florence, "The fourth sacrament is penance ..." D.S. 1323.

<sup>43</sup> See Joseph L. Cunningham, "Confession" in *Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 245-46.

<sup>44</sup> Godfrey Diekmann, "The New Rite of Penance: A Theological Evaluation," in *The Rite of Penance: Commentaries Background and Directions Vol. 1*, ed. Nathan Mitchell (Washington D.C.: Liturgical Conference, 1978), 82.

It is the *RP* that proposes a shift in terminology – from “penance” or “confession” to “reconciliation.” This is because the new name embodies a broader and more comprehensive implication for the meaning and nature of the sacrament.<sup>45</sup> James Dallen explains:

Reconciliation is the broader reality because it includes both God’s initiative and the human being’s response, while penance generally seems to accent the human effort needed to receive God’s gift. Reconciliation is also broader because it puts greater emphasis on the social and ecclesial character of the sacrament as well as on the reciprocal encounter that takes place between God and people and among men.<sup>46</sup>

The same perspective is also expressed by Kenan Osbourne:

Rather than penance, a word which stresses, at least in the contemporary mind, some work to be done, or confession, which highlights only one aspect of the process, the term “reconciliation” seemed to represent the entire process by its focus on the culminating moment.<sup>47</sup>

From the perspective of the *RP*, reconciliation is the primary and authentic term that expresses the entire picture of what God does in our lives through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit and how we cooperate and accept His love in and through the Church. In addition, it indicates that reconciliation is a process – a gift of love initiated by the Father, which is actualised in Christ through his life, death, and resurrection and continues in time through the Church. This means that reconciliation goes beyond what takes place at the moment of sacramental celebration and is also an ongoing reality towards full union with the Father through Christ and in the power of the Spirit active in the Church.

Understood in this way, the traditional terms – confession, penance or forgiveness of sin cannot adequately express the reality of the sacrament. Nevertheless, these terms portray some stages or moments in the penitent’s experience of the whole process of reconciliation. Even though the official name of the sacrament is “reconciliation,” the terms “penance” or “confession” have been popular especially among traditional Christians. It must be noted that Pope John Paul II prefers the term “confession” as the normal name of the sacrament:

... from the earliest Christian times, in line with the apostles and with Christ, the church has included in the sacramental sign of penance the confession of sins. This latter takes on such importance that for centuries the usual name of the sacrament has been and still is that of confession.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The rite uses the term reconciliation in the titles of the diverse rites. See especially *RP* nos. 1-40. Although “Penance” appears as the title of the document, reconciliation is employed to refer to the sacrament throughout the document.

<sup>46</sup> James Dallen, “Theological Foundations,” in *Reconciliation: Continuing Agenda*, ed. Robert J. Kennedy (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>47</sup> Osbourne, *Reconciliation & Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology*, 205.

However, if the traditional names – penance and confession – portray a partial meaning of the sacrament, why do the *RP* and official Church documents continue to use these terms interchangeably? Does this not reflect a single element of the sacramental process with the wider term “reconciliation as the name of the sacrament?”<sup>49</sup> This can be confusing and may make it difficult for the faithful to understand the true nature and meaning of the sacrament. Arguably, the lack of a sufficiently precise name for the sacrament may not be ruled out as part of the cause of its crisis today.

Commenting on these confusing terminologies, Robert Kennedy writes

Even words like “reconciliation” and “penance” are used without clear agreement on their meaning. Is one the name of the sacrament and the other the mystery celebrated? Is one a virtue and the other a liturgy? Or are they just two ways of saying the same thing – one just a little more old-fashioned than the other? When even the basic vocabulary finds no consistent meaning, it is clear that answers and solutions for the pastoral practice of reconciliation in the Church and world still elude us.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, Dallen claims that

The confusion that surrounds this sacrament – confession, penance, or reconciliation – has probably been a first-hand experience for most of us: in the first or second grade we made our first confession, later we learnt about the sacrament of penance; now we hear about the sacrament of reconciliation.<sup>51</sup>

It looks like there is a theological problem with regard to specifying a particular name for the sacrament. To call it penance or confession is not adequate as each of these terms expresses only a single aspect in the sacramental process. What is clear, however, is that to use the terms confession, penance and reconciliation interchangeably is confusing and inconsistent because each of them does not convey a constant meaning. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives the different names: conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation by which the sacrament is called and a brief explanation of each name. However, each of these names conveys a different dimension of the sacrament.<sup>52</sup> In his

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<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Penitentia*, no. 31, III, 51.

<sup>49</sup> For interchanging the terms of the sacrament see, for example, John Paul II, *Reconciliation et Paenitentia*, nos. 4 & 31; *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 2. Osborne observed that “When the revised Code of Canon Law appeared in 1983, it was clear that the framers of the new code had no liking for the term ‘reconciliation.’ Almost invariably the code uses the term ‘penance.’ Only twice in all the thirty-nine canons devoted to this sacrament is the term ‘reconciliation’ used. We see here one official document of the Vatican, the new *Rite of Penance*, going in one direction, and another official document of the Vatican going in another.” See Osborne, *Reconciliation & Justification*, 205.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Kennedy, *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda*, xv-xvi.

<sup>51</sup> James Dallen, “Reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance,” *Worship* 64 (1990): 386.

<sup>52</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), nos. 1423-24.

analysis of the meaning of penance and reconciliation, John Paul II points out that penance means “asceticism” while reconciliation is the “overcoming that radical break which is sin.”<sup>53</sup> Actually, he is saying that these two realities are distinct and do not seem to have the same meaning. Reconciliation embodies penance. In other words, the term “reconciliation” seems to demonstrate better the original meaning and purpose of the sacrament rather than “penance” or “confession.”

Furthermore, the name of the sacrament influences people’s attitude towards the sacrament. From the layperson’s understanding, calling the sacrament “confession” evokes the notion of the sacrament as a mere listing of sins. To refer to it as “penance”<sup>54</sup> means the sacrament is perceived as a penalty or punishment for the sins committed - the penalty or punishment received from God through a priest to cleanse the sins committed. To call it the sacrament of “forgiveness” produces a perception that the sacrament is a means through which God washes away our sins. It seems that each of these terms alone can obscure other theological, liturgical and pastoral dimensions of the sacrament.

Francis Mannion attempts to differentiate the terms “reconciliation” and “penance.”<sup>55</sup> He suggests that the various forms of the 1973 *Rite of Penance* have the reconciliation of serious sinners as their primary purpose, although they are used for two quite distinct purposes - penance and reconciliation. In his desire to find a way out of the confusion of terms, Mannion defines reconciliation as the process of return of serious sinners to communion of the Church. Penance is the system of those actions and processes that facilitate the sanctification, moral transformation, and ongoing conversion of the Church and its members at every level of corporate and individual Christian life.<sup>56</sup>

It is the term “reconciliation” that seems to be the most suitable name for the sacrament, since it is an embracive term and “better emphasizes the essential content of the sacrament.”<sup>57</sup> In light of this, Diekmann writes:

This term (reconciliation) is a comprehensive one; its primary emphasis is the mystery of God’s love for humanity manifested in the converting of heart of a sinner, forgiving sins. In fact, reconciliation can be said to describe the total happening of

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<sup>53</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Although the theological meaning of the term “penance” is *metanoia* or confession, the ordinary Christians do not understand it as such. It is simply understood as what people do as a remedy for the sins committed. See RP, no.6c.

<sup>55</sup> Francis Mannion, “Penance and Reconciliation: A Systemic Analysis,” *Worship* 60 (1986): 98- 118.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>57</sup> Franco Sottocornola, *A Look at the New Rite of Penance*, trans. Thomas A. Kronsci (Washington D. C.: USCC, 1978), 4.

God's covenant in relation to mankind. ... Reconciliation is a total ongoing process which cannot be limited exclusively to what we traditionally call "seven sacraments."<sup>58</sup>

To reflect this wider understanding of the meaning of reconciliation, the *RP* "situates the renewed sacrament of reconciliation precisely in the Christ-event as a reconciling event. It also situates the renewed rite of reconciliation within the Church-event as a reconciling event."<sup>59</sup> The beauty and power of the Church's sacramental system is that these three levels of meaning (confession, penance, reconciliation) are not mutually exclusive, but intersect and enrich one another at newer and deeper levels of grace.

It is, however, a fact that the crisis facing the sacrament today in terms of appreciating its meaning and practice arises partly as result of the inconsistency of a precise name. Perhaps if the Church were to stick to a single name, for example, "Sacrament of Reconciliation" as proposed by the *RP*, this would promote a rediscovery of the value of the sacrament both in understanding it and at the practical level of its celebration. It is surprising that the *RP* does not interchange "penance" for "reconciliation" throughout the document, but still retains "penance" as the generic title of the ritual. Even though reconciliation is the term which seems to reflect the entire process of the sacrament (as in conversion, confession, penance, forgiveness and healing), for this study we shall call it "**the sacrament of penance,**" simply because it is the popular term used by Christians.

#### 4.4.3 Forms of the Rite of Penance and their Implications

##### i) Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents

The rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents is quite familiar to many Catholics since it is a ritual that has been the main avenue by which penitents have received ecclesial forgiveness in Roman Catholic parishes. This rite entails the meeting of a confessor and a penitent, normally in a confessional with an optional of a fixed screen for penitents who wish to remain anonymous. However, celebration of this rite may take place outside the confessional for "a legitimate reason," and with no further elaboration.<sup>60</sup> The penitent can provide any relevant information that might "help the confessor in the exercise of his

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<sup>58</sup> Diekmann, "The New Rite of Penance: A Theological Evaluation," 84.

<sup>59</sup> Osborne, *Reconciliation & Justification*, 212.

<sup>60</sup> *Rite of Penance*, no. 12.

ministry.”<sup>61</sup> Also the text urges the confessor to aid the penitent in making a complete confession as well as inspiring sorrow and hope in him or her.

Most churches have regular designated times for celebrating the sacrament which obviates Christians having to make private appointments as this might be difficult for them, particularly with regard to remaining anonymous. It must be noted that in most parishes the number of those who go to confession has significantly reduced. Presumably, the focus on individual sacramental reunion with God has had a great impact on Catholicism over the years. It may not be surprising, however, that the rite of individual confession (as it has been practiced in recent centuries and to a large extent is still practiced) has lost its ecclesial connection. It has become a highly individualized, private practice. There may have been some reasons for this. The individual form itself has its roots in the private practices of the examination of conscience and spiritual direction.<sup>62</sup> The understanding of sin, of the requirements for forgiveness and reconciliation, and of the ministry of reconciliation has focused progressively more on the individual acts of the penitent and the priest. Also, the emphasis on the juridical side of penance over the last four centuries has continually diminished the liturgical, and consequently the social, dimensions.<sup>63</sup> We seem to have drifted into a system that is overly individualistic. We must ask ourselves whether the rite is a liturgy at all. In the Christian context, liturgy is an act of the Church where the community of believers which forms the Body of Christ praises God for the wonderful works done for us using ritual gestures, symbols and stories of faith. Does contemporary practice of penance comply with this working definition?

Undoubtedly, the encounter of penitent and priest in individual penance constitutes a worshipping community in which Christ is present, because where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20). The introduction and the texts of the *RP* affirm that the celebration of this rite is “always” a liturgical act of the Church.<sup>64</sup> The ministries of reconciliation are concretely manifested in their relation to the action of the Church, especially in the ecclesial context of penance.<sup>65</sup> It is also declared that the goal of

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> For the sake of clarity between the sacrament of penance and spiritual direction see pages 186-87 of this thesis.

<sup>63</sup> For a recent detailed treatment of the history of penance, with a fine and helpful emphasis on its ecclesial dimension, see James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 1-201.

<sup>64</sup> *Rite of Penance*, nos. 7, 8 & 11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-8.

reconciliation ensures a renewed community at the Eucharist.<sup>66</sup> The absolution formula asks God to grant pardon and peace “through the ministry of the Church.”<sup>67</sup> Theologically, private confession and absolution provides us with a great insight into the meaning and purpose of the first rite of penance. So, individual penance is liturgical as the ecclesial connection is symbolised by the priest acting in the Church’s name. The reconciliation celebrated in individual penance is always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith and gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ makes us free from sin by offering forgiveness as well as new spiritual healing and life.<sup>68</sup> The pastoral aspect is further enhanced by placing the sacrament in the context of the death and resurrection of the individual Christian, which is the clear link with the paschal mystery.<sup>69</sup> However, it is also true that the work of reconciling sinners is clearly a community effort.

For individual sacramental penance to have an impact there must be a direct connection with one’s life in the community. This is because the process of conversion and reconciliation in the life of an individual Christian is presumed to happen by way of comparing one’s life with the gospel values, recognizing and acknowledging how one’s sins affect others as well as the need to embrace God’s mercy through the agency of the Church. This presumes a continuation of conversion and a renewed lifestyle after the celebration of the sacrament. A thorough change of heart described as “a profound change of the whole person” would strengthen penitents to gain full freedom of the children of God. The content of this rite seems geared to the reconciliation of grave sinners, yet the form also favours those who confess venial sins – the weaker members seeking ongoing conversion, thereby fostering deeper growth in their path to holiness. Nevertheless, frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is not only very useful as a remedy for venial sins, but also “a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us more clearly.”<sup>70</sup>

On many occasions during the sacramental encounter of the individual rite of reconciliation there is often some spiritual direction involved. Obviously, there are also elements of pastoral counselling and psychological therapy. It is true that all these overlap

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<sup>66</sup> *RP*, no. 6d.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 46.

<sup>68</sup> The ministry of penance is described as a penitent’s sharing in actions of the sacrament and celebrating it with the priest. See, *RP*, no. 7 & 11.

<sup>69</sup> *RP*, no. 44.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, no.7b.



with the same concerns as the sacramental encounter but do not fall within the bounds or purposes of the sacramental ritual per se. They are support ministries in the sacramental process in the same way that the Rite of Pastoral Care and Anointing of the Sick describes doctors, nurses, therapists, social workers and carers as ministers of that sacrament.<sup>71</sup>

The *Rite of Penance* has little to say about the penitent's verbal confession of sins, but it does urge the confessor to aid the penitent in making an "integral" confession and to inspire sorrow and hope in the penitent. Actually, the priest confessor may give "suitable counsel" or words of advice to the penitent. But this should apply to the penitent's particular circumstances before proposing an act of penance that may take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service to neighbour and works of mercy which reflect the meaning of fidelity to the Christian life, at the same time emphasizing the social aspect of sin and forgiveness.<sup>72</sup> It is appropriate even if this sounds like a homily or catechetical instruction, though in an informal manner and with the heart of the Father's mercy. Otherwise, formal or professional counselling should not be confused with sacramental confession as this should be done outside the bounds of the sacrament and by qualified personnel who may not necessarily be ordained ministers.

#### ii) **Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution**

As its name indicates, this second rite envisions a gathering of more than one penitent together with at least one but possibly several priests, one of whom serves as the chief celebrant of the rite. A suitable hymn precedes the celebrant's greeting, introduction and opening prayer. A Liturgy of the Word follows in which one or more readings pertaining to conversion are proclaimed. If there is only one reading, it is preferable that it be from the gospel and it should be followed by a homily designed to lead the penitents to examine their conscience and to turn away from sin towards God. It should also remind the assembly of the individual and social consequences of sin. This part of the rite concludes with an examination of conscience undertaken either in silence individually (or in unison by all present) in

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<sup>71</sup> See "The Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick," no. 33 in *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1976), 571-642.

<sup>72</sup> *RP*, nos. 18, 44.

preparation for personal verbal confession of sins.<sup>73</sup> This might be accompanied by a song expressing sorrow for sins.

The exchange between the confessor and individual penitents follows exactly the rite of the first form. After penitents make their individual confessions, they return to their places and join together in expression of thanksgiving either by reciting or singing the Lord's Prayer. Thereafter the celebrant concludes the service with a prayer praising God's love and dismisses the assembly with a blessing.<sup>74</sup> However, for pastoral reasons, the final expression of thanksgiving can either be done privately or omitted. Some confessors and penitents seem to be uncomfortable with remaining in the church for the duration of the individual confessions. In that regard, David Coffey, in his careful overview of the ritual, remarks:

People will stay to make their confession and pray their penance, but then they leave. They cannot face the prospect of remaining in the church with nothing to do (but pray!) for an indeterminate period until all the confessions have been heard. No matter how much the pastor may implore them, they will not stay. The result is that by now the unequal struggle has largely been given up and victory ceded to the people.<sup>75</sup>

Mindful of the significance of the final act of communal thanksgiving, it is recommended that a limited time be allotted to individual confessions so that the chief celebrant can officially conclude the ritual. In case there are still some penitents, their confessions could be heard after the final blessing. While some confessors try to minimise the time spent on individual confessions by instructing penitents to confess only one sin, this strategy is unhelpful and might give a distorted impression of the sacrament. It would be preferable for confessors to limit their advice, assign a penance, and pronounce absolution as soon as the penitent has finished speaking.

In many parishes this second rite (commonly referred to as a penitential service) is traditionally celebrated twice a year, once during the season of Advent and once during the season of Lent. Attendance at these celebrations varies depending on the parish's culture and life. There is generally a sense of encouragement that many Catholics derive from taking part in communal penance services. These religious exercises, which must always include private, individual confession and absolution, can help the sinner to recognize and renounce personal offences, and respond to the loving mercy of God in company with other members of the

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<sup>73</sup> *RP*, nos. 24-26.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 28-30.

<sup>75</sup> David Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001), 149.

church. It can be a strong witness to see others who also come to the church seeking forgiveness, and in a more public way admitting by their very presence that they, as are all people, are sinners. In other words, one might argue that only two kinds of people go to confession, those who are conscious of sin and want to get rid of it as well as those who do confessions of devotion as something that can help prevent future sins (where they confess only venial sins, since they have no mortal sins to confess).

### iii) **Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution**

Before describing the rite, it is important to point out that the ritual text carefully determines the limits or circumstances under which it may be used.<sup>76</sup> Like the previous or second rite, the third rite for the reconciliation of penitents with general confession and absolution envisions a gathering of more than one penitent together with at least one, but possibly, several priests. It follows the structure of second rite from the beginning of the ritual rite through the examination of conscience.<sup>77</sup> However, it is specified in the rite that a distinction must be made between those participating in the rite who wish to receive general absolution and those who do not. The penitents intending to receive absolution show their intention by bowing their heads, kneeling or standing. Together they pray a form of general confession (for example, that in the penitential rite of the Eucharistic celebration) and the Lord's Prayer, as in the second rite. The celebrant proposes an act of penance and reminds them that they must resolve to confess in due time each one of the grave sins that they cannot confess at present. He then invokes sacramental absolution on the penitents with reference to divine mercy, healing, and forgiveness. Thereafter, all join in a recited or sung expression of thanksgiving followed by a blessing and dismissal.<sup>78</sup>

While this third rite is one of the options for celebrating the sacrament of penance, it should be noted that the ritual guidelines must be followed to the letter.<sup>79</sup> In the 1970s and early 1980s this rite enjoyed widespread popularity in Roman Catholic parishes and dioceses especially in Europe and America, and in most cases it was done to the letter of the ritual text. There was an expectation among many liturgical theologians and writers of Roman Catholic spiritual literature that it would become the dominant form of the sacrament of penance for

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<sup>76</sup> See *RP*, nos. 31-34.

<sup>77</sup> *RP*, 35.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 35a-d.

<sup>79</sup> For the circumstances which render lawful reconciliation with general confession and absolution see *RP*, nos. 31-34.

the foreseeable future. Sacramental theologians like Monika Hellwig and James Dallen have documented the truly huge turnouts that occurred wherever the rite was celebrated. Commenting on the newly reformed Rite of Penance, Francis Sottocornola, a member of the committee which was responsible for drafting it, expressed his anticipation that the promulgation of the rite of penance would lead to an ‘era of reconciliation’ marked by the regular practice of the third form in parish life.<sup>80</sup>

Despite predictions of its success, the third form was never encouraged by the African bishops in their dioceses or in Catholic parishes. This hesitation derived from a fear that there would be an abuse of general absolution which would diminish the dignity of penance. In fact, the rite stipulates that any penitents who take part in it must have the intention to make an integral confession through the rite of individual confession and absolution as soon as possible. Anxiety about the potential failure of penitents to follow through on this intention prompted the Holy See to restrict definitely general absolution in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. The conditions of “grave necessity” under which the third form may be celebrated were made clearer so as to make it almost impossible to celebrate it in a parish context.<sup>81</sup> Grave necessity and pastoral need could be health emergencies like during the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic whereby it is not physically or morally possible for the faithful to celebrate the sacrament through the ordinary way of individual, integral confession and absolution.

#### **iv) A Comparative Analysis of the Three Forms of the Rite of Penance**

The rite of reconciliation of individual penitents raises a concern that the social and ecclesial character of sin and penance is present but not noticeable. Social effects are indicated, but the overall stress on the personal nature of sin and conversion creates an impression that diminishes its social character and responsibility. This gives a sense that the sacrament is more in line with Counter-Reformation perspectives than with the spirit and teaching of Vatican II and the reformed *Rite of Penance*. While Vatican II and the *Rite of Penance* try to highlight with admirable creativity the social and ecclesial dimension of sin and penance so as to avoid the dangers of an individualistic understanding, I don’t think that this has been

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<sup>80</sup> Franco Sottocornola, “Les nouveaux rites de la penitence,” *Questions liturgiques* 55 (1974): 89-136, quoted in Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation*, 168.

<sup>81</sup> See *RP*, nos. 31-33; *The Code of Canon Law*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. (London: Collins, 1983), cc. 960-964.

successful.<sup>82</sup> As a consequence, personal conversion is the path to reconciliation and catechesis on the sacrament (especially individual confession) is the Church's preferred means of promoting penance and reconciliation. Basically, this first form does not stress changing society and its sinful structures.

In the first form, everything seems to take place between the individual and God, both in life and in the sacrament. The individual just needs to be with God and yet reconciliation with God in the individual's heart does lead to other reconciliation, but this has no vivid impact per se with the "reconciled world." Looking at it this way raises some pastoral concerns and calls for catechetical redress. However, fidelity to Christ and obedience to Church law requires that individual confession and absolution be the ordinary way to be reconciled because the nature and function of the sacrament is judicial and medicinal.<sup>83</sup> I am also aware of the limitations of using confessional boxes. In the wake of the scandals involving priests this has been abandoned in some churches. The intention after Vatican II was that this rite would be taken out of the confession box and held in a more congenial setting. However, I have seen it work very well in churches where these 'open' celebrations of the sacrament can be held behind clear glass, in this way diminishing the legitimate fears that can come with the use of the confession box.

The second form of communal celebration with individual confession and absolution is described as equally normal. This is not only because it is a ceremonial enhancement of individual confession and absolution but more importantly because it concretely manifests the social and ecclesial aspect of sin and penance. The only restriction to its practical value and use is the need to have sufficient number of confessors. In principle, the same reasons (i.e. doctrinal, disciplinary and pastoral) which order the celebration of penance in one of the first two forms also permit the use of the third form.<sup>84</sup> However, the third form of communal celebration with general confession and absolution can only be celebrated with the restrictions on its use.<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, values of the third form and reasons permitting its use are not given, only restrictions on its use. The impression is that something from a source document has been omitted.

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<sup>82</sup> This aspect has been analysed in detail by Norbert Rigali, "Human Solidarity and Sin in the Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliation and Penance," *Living Light* 21 (1985): 337-44. Rigali sees a notable advance over a previous privatized understanding of sin.

<sup>83</sup> See *RP*, nos. 31, 33.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 32-33.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

The *Praenotanda* of the revised ritual, as is evident in the *RP*, no. 32 opened the door further that even priests, but even those in the parish ministry, might judge a situation serious enough to warrant general sacramental absolution. However, the new Code of Canon Law, promulgated after the *Rite of Penance*, omitted this paragraph regarding priests making a judgment on the administering of general absolution.<sup>86</sup> What the ritual had allowed, the new code removed. The code is perceived as being more restrictive in this matter than the original ritual itself. Today, therefore, only bishops, either nationally, regionally or individually, are legally allowed to determine the instances, in accordance with the 1973 norms, for the celebration of general sacramental absolution.

Ultimately, the teaching of the Church affirms that individual and integral confession as well as individual absolution is the only ordinary manner of reconciliation with God and the Church.<sup>87</sup> This is simply because confession to the priest is an essential part of the sacrament of penance. Only physical and moral impossibility excuse penitents from this manner of confession. According to the *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, physical impossibility is understood as referring to those situations that materially impede individual confession or occur when this is not possible without recourse to extraordinary means. Such cases include: extreme infirmity, lack of time before imminent danger of death, speech impediment, inability to speak, lack of knowledge of the language or failure to understand it or being able to do so only through an interpreter or in writing, inculpable omission or not enough confessors available to hear the confessions of individual confessions within an appropriate time.<sup>88</sup> In this regard, grave necessity applies when penitents without fault of their own would be deprived of sacramental grace or of holy communion for a lengthy period of time. But, this is not considered to exist when confessors cannot be available because of a great gathering of penitents, such as can occur on some major feast day or pilgrimage.<sup>89</sup> In addition, moral impossibility refers to situations when there is the danger of breaking the sacramental seal, danger of scandal or sin for the penitent or a confessor, kinship or a special relationship that binds the penitent to the confessor who must hear the

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<sup>86</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, c. 961, § 2. Ordinarily the diocesan Bishop is to judge or determine the cases of necessity. Otherwise, if the priest finds himself in position that he has to administer general absolution due to a grave necessity, he must notify the bishop about it at the nearest opportunity.

<sup>87</sup> See *RP*, no.31; *CCC* no.1456.

<sup>88</sup> Angel Marzoa, Jorge Miras & Rafael Rodriguez-Ocana, eds., *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, vol. 3, trans. Ernest Caparros (Montreal: Wilson & Lafleur, 2004), 756.

<sup>89</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, c. 961, § 2.

confession, great scruples of conscience, danger of a real threat of grave harm, and danger of infamy completely extrinsic to the confession.<sup>90</sup>

Interestingly, the regulations of the ritual tell us that general sacramental absolution should be used only in ‘cases of necessity.’ This is certainly true, but Osborne rightly points out that such a statement cannot allow us to say that only a general absolution situation involves a case of necessity.<sup>91</sup> We cannot understand the *RP* as if either form I or form II is to be used when there are no cases of necessity. Actually, it is theologically more correct to say that all the three forms apply to cases of necessity. Otherwise, if there were no ‘case of necessity,’ we would have no sacrament of penance. Every time the rite of penance is celebrated, it is in one way or another a case of necessity!

The reforms mandated at the Second Vatican Council preserved the first form as the primary way of celebrating the sacrament with only a few significant modifications of the form of penance established at the Council of Trent. The second and third forms, however, reflected theological insights gained from historical considerations of the penitential practices and traditions that preceded late medieval Catholicism. In other words, in keeping with disciplinary and pastoral restrictions on the use of other rites, the predominance of individual confession in Catholic culture and imaginations represents, in Dallen’s words, a thin decorative covering of Vatican II and a barely modified Counter-Reformation outlook in Catholic penitential practice.<sup>92</sup>

Theologically, the social nature of the sacrament is identified with the official character of the priestly minister, who is the witness and representative of the ecclesial nature, as well as judge and healer, because of the transmitted power to forgive sins. Arguably, the spirit of the reform initiated by Vatican II which emphasizes communal liturgical celebrations of sacraments is hardly present in the first form. Yes, the priest witnesses and represents the ecclesial dimension, but obscuring the community presence in the sacramental celebration also has consequences. Indeed, the ecclesial role of the penitents

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<sup>90</sup> Angel Marzoa, et al., eds., *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, 756.

<sup>91</sup> Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 223. According the *RP*, individual confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church. Hence, valid administering of general absolution is allowed if there is grave need (‘case of necessity’). When, for example, there is physical or moral impossibility of individual confession i.e.; danger of death or when sufficient confessors are not available to hear individual confessions of penitents in good time and yet through no fault of their own, have to go without sacramental grace or holy communion for a long time. See *RP*, no. 31.

<sup>92</sup> Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 224.

is not mentioned at all. The document simply mentions the social aspect<sup>93</sup> while the dangers of exaggerating it are repeatedly warned against.

Due to the preference for the personal character of penance, as articulated in the revised Rite, the social and ecclesial dimension is barely encouraged. The document gives little attention to the sacrament as ecclesial worship and thus communal celebrations are tolerated more than encouraged. The features of the community's presence as in the second rite are meaningful, but their values, especially of the third form of the Rite, go unmentioned. Only the individual confession of sins is described as a liturgical act and the ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church.<sup>94</sup> The non-essential preparatory ceremonies and nonsacramental penitential celebrations are ignored. There is a natural correlation between the social character of penance and the community character of ecclesial worship. However, Dallen observes that due to the popularity of sacramental individualism, clericalism and liturgical minimalism, it is evident that the social and ecclesial dimension of penance is basically portrayed as being in the presence of the priest while community worship receives little attention.<sup>95</sup> The other reconciliations follow from the reconciliation with God – often expressed and interpreted in terms of divine forgiveness evidenced by an inner conversion of heart and interior repentance. Reconciliation with the Church is thus a simultaneous effect of divine forgiveness. It is the *res et sacramentum* of penance. Traditionally the belief is that through being reconciled with the Church we are reconciled with Christ. *Lumen Gentium* makes explicit that reconciliation with the Church and with Christ is a simultaneous act; it uses the adverb *simul* in the Latin original.<sup>96</sup>

While the 1973 *Rite of Penance* in its worship character seems to show little interest in the social and ecclesial dimension, there is a strong emphasis on penance as conversion and as a basic orientation of the Christian life. However, this is always an interior individual conversion and reconciliation which influence social effects. The acts of the penitent which include contrition, confession and satisfaction inculcate morally correct behaviour and clarity of conscience. Penance is linked with scriptural *metanoia*, described as an inner change of heart. This leads to changing one's life to be in harmony with the interior change and makes a person's life penitential as well as a continuous striving for what is better expressed in deeds

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<sup>93</sup> *RP*, no. 18.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. See also James Dallen, "Recent Documents on Penance and Reconciliation," in *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda*, ed. Robert J. Kennedy (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 105.

<sup>95</sup> Dallen, "Recent Documents on Penance and Reconciliation," 105.

<sup>96</sup> See *LG* no.11.



and acts of penance. Interior transformation is certainly the basis for reconciliation with God, self and others.<sup>97</sup> This conversion heavily depends on forgiveness of sins in sacramental confession and it is frequent celebration of the sacrament of penance that enhances a growing in likeness to Christ. More importantly, the ecclesial dimension of sin and penance can be a motive for devotional confession, although it is not mentioned as a value of individual form.<sup>98</sup>

In summary, the sole emphasis on the personal character of penance does not effectively present the Church's mission of reconciliation especially in terms of calling and assisting individuals to reconcile with God, self, neighbour and creation. The Church's mission is to be a reconciling community shown by its being itself a reconciled community. Although this applies to the whole Church as a community of believers, only the pastoral ministry of the hierarchy is given specific mention. The laity are not mentioned, not even in connection with catechesis. Their ecclesial role is minimal – perhaps their sacramental role is merely the confession of sins and reception of absolution. The link between the sacrament and the Church's social mission appears to be not essential or at least not manifested vividly.

Undoubtedly, the Rite of Penance emphasizes the social and ecclesial dimension of penance, but the worship character of the sacrament does not effectively demonstrate the Church's reconciliatory mission. The mission of the Church as sacrament of reconciliation needs to go beyond the ministry of the priestly exercise of the power of the keys. In other words, there is need for a ritual or external means of forgiveness and reconciliation. I think that integrating for example the sign of peace or other appropriate cultural ways of reflecting the Church's mission of reconciliation would enrich the sacrament. It is vital for the social and ecclesial dimension of the Church to be pastorally visible and effective, especially in highlighting the social consequences of sin and the community's responsibility towards structural reform. As Dallen argues:

Integrating sacramental piety and social mission means that it is no longer enough for the sinner to feel forgiven by God: penitents must experience and strive for reconciliation with their brothers and sisters as sign of reconciliation with God because the sacramental symbol only then provides an experience of the reality that it proposes as ultimate goal.<sup>99</sup>

Despite the 1973 *Rite of Penance* recognizing the ecclesiological dimension and social consciousness of the sacrament, there is little attention to the pastoral practice of

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<sup>97</sup> *RP*, no. 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>99</sup> Dallen, "Recent Documents on Penance and Reconciliation," 109.

ecclesial life. Nevertheless, pastoral dedication to community worship should not de-emphasize individual confession.<sup>100</sup> In fact, a critical issue in relation to the sacraments is faith. In their recent document, *The Reciprocity between Faith and Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy*, the International Theological Commission (ITC) states: ‘Confession of faith precedes sacramental celebration, while sacramental celebration secures, seals, strengthens and enriches faith.’<sup>101</sup> In other words, faith is necessary if the sacrament is to be fruitful and the sacrament nourishes faith. For this reason, upon receiving absolution from the minister, who represents Christ and the Church, not only does reconciliation with God take place, but also with the ecclesial body which proclaims the goodness of God in Jesus Christ as a community of the forgiven. Thus, thanks to penance, the Christian straightens out again his journey of faith.

#### 4.4.4 The Office of the Confessor

The priest is entrusted with the office of hearing the confessions of his flock. Many priests testify that hearing confessions brings one into the presence of God. Several times throughout his pontificate, John Paul II urged 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” and where “the very purpose of the Incarnation [is fulfilled]: ‘He will save the people from their sins.’”<sup>102</sup> However, at times, the sacrament suffers from “a certain dwindling of our [the priests] own enthusiasm and availability.”<sup>103</sup> Every priest is called to remain faithful to this sublime ministry which belongs uniquely to him, despite all the sacrifices it may entail. According to John Paul II, “the asceticism of the confessional” deserves precedence over the other tasks of the priest.<sup>104</sup> The love of Christ (*Caritas Christi*) fortifies the priest for this demanding ministry.

What is required of the priest is, first of all, a sense of welcome. Then, a sense of being a fellow sinner with the penitent. Finally, a sense of being so vulnerable to the Word of God that he has no other word to offer than Christ’s own love and mercy. The priest finds God at work in the souls of penitents, giving them humility, sorrow for sins, a desire to serve

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<sup>100</sup> See *RP*, no.31. See also John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 31(I).

<sup>101</sup> The International Theological Commission, *The Reciprocity between Faith and Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy* (03 March 2020), no.61.

<sup>102</sup> John Paul II, “Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary” (20 March 1989); “May Priests Give the Ministry of Confession a Privileged Place Among Their Duties,” (3 April 1989), nos. 3 & 5.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, “Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday,” (25 March 2001), no. 12.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, “Letter of Holy Father to All Priests of the Church for Holy Thursday,” (24 March 1986), no. 7.

God more worthily, a longing to receive Holy Communion once again, and a resolve to live in harmony with others. The priest must of course know the teaching of the Church. But even more he must know how the faith journey of the penitent might be invited more deeply into that teaching. Solid formation is, therefore, required for the one who is called to serve as a confessor. To this end, the future minister of the sacrament is to receive solid spiritual, theological and pedagogical training.<sup>105</sup> The decree on priestly training recommends that the seminarian is to adopt the “sentiments of Christ”<sup>106</sup> that are to fashion his future encounters with penitents. Every priest is duty-bound to continue his formation in order to be better equipped to understand and serve his penitents in their needs.<sup>107</sup>

In addition, the sacrament of penance can serve as a source of joy and sanctification for the confessor.<sup>108</sup> Although the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend on the worthiness of the minister, the confessor is nonetheless urged to celebrate the sacrament in the worthiest way possible. 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).’<sup>109</sup>

An intense and sincere spiritual life is therefore imperative for the priest especially for his deeper conversion. 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.

The priest is also responsible for catechising his flock about the need for the sacrament of penance by teaching the Word of God in all its truth, helping to form consciences, leading every Christian to an awareness of one’s sinfulness and the importance of conversion and growth in holiness.<sup>110</sup> The Curé of Ars is an outstanding exemplar for the contemporary confessor. The focus of such catechesis should not be so much on the gravity of the fault as on generous correspondence to the limitless love of the divine Friend. The service the priests must offer their brothers and sisters, explains John Paul II to the French

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<sup>105</sup> *Optatam Totius*, nos. 14-16.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 9.

<sup>107</sup> John Paul II, “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,” (5 May 1986), no. 4.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, “Address to the German Episcopal Conference” (22 June 1996), no. 7.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, “Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday 2001,” (25 March 2001), no. 11.

<sup>110</sup> *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 26. See also, “Letter of Holy Father Pope John Paul II to All Priests of the Church for Holy Thursday 1986,” (24 March 1986), no. 9.

bishops, is to persevere in making them reflect seriously in the light of the Gospel on the love of a 'God who is rich in mercy.'<sup>111</sup>

In addressing the crisis facing the sacrament, Pope Francis believes that there are several reasons for hope. Without being naïve, the Church must face this crisis with more confidence, creativity and perseverance and a pastoral plan that incorporates a renewed effort at catechesis. Hope, the Holy Father says, does not disappoint. This is because Our Lord is always ready to forgive our sins, not through an impersonal theory of atonement, but through His tangible healing in the sacrament of penance.<sup>112</sup> This requires frequent penitential celebrations including the individual confession and absolution of sins and the availability of confessors, which should be emphasised and publicized in different ways. Recent initiatives such as the Pope's decision to proclaim a jubilee year of mercy,<sup>113</sup> and his emphasis that the Church is the instrument of mercy, through which the priest by means of his ministry bestows on us the boundless love of God the Father, seems to be a step in the right direction.

To be more effective in his ministry as an instrument of mercy, it is important that the priest himself confesses. He too is a man, who like others, is in need of mercy.<sup>114</sup> It is important to realize that the priest is called to be a man of mercy. He is ordained not only for himself but for service to the people of God. In the tradition of the Church we say that the priest is "*alter Christus*" (another Christ). And in light of Rahner's notion of penance as *reconciliatio cum ecclesia*, the priest does not only act as in *persona Christi* but also in *persona ecclesia*. As such, the priest acts as the representative of the Church who reconciles the penitent to the Church as well as to God. Thus, he must be a man of mercy like Christ himself.

Although the priest is always assisted by the grace of his office, Von Speyr reminds him to remain vigilant, particularly against the traps of activism and overconfidence.<sup>115</sup> The confessions entrusted to him can help him become a better penitent. In fact, the priest's confession is intimately connected to the community in which he serves.<sup>116</sup> To be honest, a

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<sup>111</sup> John Paul II, "*Ad Limina Apostolorum: Bishops' Conference of France*," (February 1997), no. 6. The Holy Father urges the bishops to guide the priests and faithful to deeper participation in the sacramental celebrations.

<sup>112</sup> Pope Francis, "A meditation for the Christmas season," 13 March 2015 in St. Peter's Basilica.

<sup>113</sup> The Holy Father frequently emphasized the healing power of the sacrament of penance during the course of 'the extraordinary holy year' which commenced on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception 8 December 2015 and concluded on the feast of Christ the King, 20 November 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Pope Francis, *Meeting Jesus in the Sacraments* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice, 2015), 23.

<sup>115</sup> Adrienne Von Speyr, *Confession*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, trans. Douglas W. Stott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 130-31.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-34.

priest who witnesses the sacred moment of a person's *metanoia*, is truly humbled and may even be moved to approach the sacrament himself, conscious that his own sins may be as bad or worse than those he hears confessed by his good people. The priest's acceptance of all penitents as sinners like himself is essential in reconciling alienated Catholics. While hearing confessions, the priest can neither remain unaffected by the sins he hears nor be caught up in them. 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 his submission.<sup>117</sup>

In the confessional the confessor acts in *persona Christi* to manifest the incomprehensible personal love that Jesus Christ has for the penitent. John Paul II, as part of his meditation on the encounter of Jesus Christ with Zacchaeus, reminds the confessor not to lose heart, even when the penitent seems to approach the sacrament of penance unconcernedly or indifferently.<sup>118</sup> The same gaze that penetrated the heart of Zacchaeus still penetrates 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.<sup>119</sup> It is also imperative that the confessor avoids the extremes of severity and laxity. Laxity fails to take into account the fact that the fullness of salvation is not just offered but accepted. The salvation which truly heals and restores involves a genuine conversion to the demands of God's love. "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."<sup>120</sup>

Since the Lord gave the Church power to forgive or to retain sins, the priest must make a judgment as whether to give or refuse absolution. It is rarely necessary to refuse absolution, but it can happen; for example, in a case when a penitent clearly lacks any intention of giving up a habit of mortal sin. It is the confessor's duty to foster 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 because it forgives the sinner and leads to personal configuration to Christ. Yet the process remains fully ecclesial as it unfolds in and through

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 134-36.

<sup>118</sup> John Paul II, "Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday 2002," (17 March 2002), par 4, 6-8.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, par. 5-6.

<sup>120</sup> John Paul II, "Letter of the Holy Father to Priests for Holy Thursday 2001," (25 March 2001), no. 13.

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 given 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.<sup>121</sup>

In 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. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarises well all these tasks of the confessor:

When he celebrates the sacrament of penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep; of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds; of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return; and of the just and impartial judge whose judgement is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner.<sup>122</sup>

The confessor must become the expression and the human means of this love which through him is poured out upon the penitent and leads him/her once again to life, to hope, to joy.

#### **4.5 Vatican II and the Present Practice of Penance**

Even before the Second Vatican Council mandated a reform of the *Rite of Penance*, historical scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had provided liturgical theologians with enough new data from late antique Christian sources to warrant the exploration of new theological models of penance and the creation of several experimental forms of penance in monastic and parish contexts. One of the most influential discoveries involved a newfound appreciation of the role of the Church in the reconciliation of sinners to God. For Rahner, the Second Vatican Council was a "process of the collective finding of the truth."<sup>123</sup> This entailed not only dialogue and collaboration among theologians but also between theologians and bishops in the various commissions and through formal and informal contacts inside and outside the Council. He notes that the business of the Council was conducted in an atmosphere of freedom and openness:

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<sup>121</sup> John Paul II, "Concluding Address to the Synod of bishops" (29 October 1983).

<sup>122</sup> CCC, no. 1465.

<sup>123</sup> Karl Rahner, "A Small Fragment 'On the Collective Finding of Truth,'" in *Theological Investigations, vol. 6, Concerning Vatican II*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Longman & Todd, 1969), 82-88.

“It was a Council in freedom and love. The Council ... explored the growing understanding in faith of the dogmas of the Church while remaining equally loyal to the already accepted faith of the Church. ... The truly miraculous and astonishing thing about this Council was that genuine unanimity was reached in freedom. Common declarations and common agreements were achieved. It is not just to be assumed that this sort of unanimity can be expected in the present day. One can easily get the impression nowadays that freedom has caused, at least in the field of theology, discord, and that only by the show of authority can one make any appreciable advances in thought or activity. But the Council demonstrated that with the grace of God this was not necessarily so.”<sup>124</sup>

#### 4.5.1 Penance and Everyday Life: Penitent’s Obligations

There are some ‘forgotten truths’ about the sacrament of reconciliation that we need to be reminded about. These include the different forms of penance (ordinary; everyday ones; liturgical ones; sacramental and non-sacramental private confession; and general absolution). The obligation of private confession does not apply only to those who are conscious of sin which is objectively serious. Grace and spiritual benefit are not increased in mathematical proportion to the frequency of confession. Confession of necessity and confession of devotion must be clearly distinguished. In addition, the Eucharist itself has a spiritual benefit so that for those properly disposed, it can bring the grace of forgiveness.

If these points are properly understood, a reduction in the numbers approaching the sacrament or a falling frequency of individual confession need not cause alarm. There may be a danger that some will look to communal penance celebrations or general absolution for a kind of cheap grace, a too-easy forgiveness. Perhaps a current situation that might raise questions is that a large number of those who faithfully attend Sunday Mass receive Holy Communion but hardly ever receive the sacrament of penance. Is this because of a lack of proper catechesis, a fear of confession, lack of sense of sin, or a lack of appreciation of the full meaning and efficacy of confession?

It is believed that confessions made in early childhood are, perhaps, the best because the young person is conscious of his/her faults and, at the same time, has a sense of being initiated into something sublime and elevated. Later in life this sense is somehow blunted for most people. Confessions, when they follow at fairly regular intervals, gradually lose their mysterious character, both with regard to sin and to participation in the life of the Church.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Church after the Council* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 13-14. See also Marmion, Declan. “Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church,” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 25-48.

<sup>125</sup> Adrienne Von Speyr, *Confession: The Encounter with Christ in Penance* (Edinburgh: Herder, 1964), 101.

However, adults must make use of their existing knowledge and perhaps their greater immunity from self-deception to recover a deeper sense of the mystery and magnitude of this incredible gift. Making a good confession necessitates putting one's life into proper perspective as well as appreciating the sacrament as a precious gift which is active and living rather than something remembered from the past. It is an ever-present reality. The experience of confession should remain effective for a long time afterwards, a feeling which encourages the penitent to be duty-bound to protect and preserve it.

There are certainly many who regard confession as an unpleasant but necessary duty to be performed only at prescribed times. For example, the second precept of the Church urges the faithful to confess their sins at least once year in preparation for the reception of the Eucharist.<sup>126</sup> A mediocre Christian may think that he or she has no further duty other than this. A good number of Christians celebrate the sacrament of penance during Lent and Advent. However, a devout Christian, conscious of the weaknesses and sinfulness of humanity, ought to make an effort to repent the apparently unpleasant action and to accept some degree of humiliation, provided it is not demanded of him or her too often.

Confession is a way of enhancing a relationship with the Lord, as His grace prompts us to live a life pleasing to Him. The more one celebrates the sacrament of God's love and mercy, the closer the relationship with God becomes. This means that if one decides on only annual confession it will have very insignificant effects. Confession may seem an unpleasant duty, but it is always a redeeming act. This kind of understanding should motivate us to get over the fear of confession and to remain receptive and faithful to the life-giving and grace-filled sacrament.

Making a good confession may well be difficult, especially if a penitent has not already experienced such a situation. A penitent could be assisted by an examination of conscience or instruction given by the priest beforehand. A penitent should make a proper confession but not be probed too closely. Since the instruction or examination of conscience does not constitute the essence of the sacrament, it might well be omitted. However, the priest's guidance may be helpful to a penitent who is afraid or unsure of what to say during confession. It is important, however, that penitents make their confession tranquilly in the way they want to and as they have arranged beforehand.

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<sup>126</sup> CCC, no. 2042.



#### 4.5.2 Penance and Conversion of Heart

Frank O’Loughlin claims that given the practical consequence of the sacrament of penance, it is not quite necessary to describe penance as the sacrament of forgiveness but rather more accurate to describe it as the sacrament of conversion.<sup>127</sup> This is because it requires us to go beyond our present way of seeing things and to take up the way proposed by the gospel of Christ. This sacrament is the sacrament of conversion, of turning to God, of making that shift involved in ‘going beyond our minds,’ as the biblical notion of conversion implies in the Greek word, *metanoia*, used in the gospels.

As we saw in section 4.2, the history of the sacrament in its first two traditions makes clear that penance is a sacrament of conversion. The first tradition, originating from a Jewish practice, was that of canonical penance which involved exclusion from the community, an exercise of the power of ‘binding and loosing’ mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel (16:19; 18:18).<sup>128</sup> The second tradition which developed in Ireland proposed reconciliation of an individual through private confession and absolution based on the imposition of particular penances for particular sins, though it did not have ecclesial and liturgical structures.<sup>129</sup> Ultimately, the substance of the sacrament in both these traditions centred on prayer, penance and fasting as means of conversion of heart as ways through which the sinful heart was re-attuned to God. The Council of Trent listed four acts of penitence. Three acts of the penitent (contrition, confession, satisfaction) as well as the absolution given by the minister, the last of which Trent considers the most important part of the sacrament.<sup>130</sup> The *Rite of Penance* takes up the doctrine of Trent, highlighting particularly contrition or “inner conversion of heart” as the primary and most important features.<sup>131</sup> The *Rite of Penance* is not meaningful without a contrite and repentant heart as it is conversion that leads to communion with God and with each other.

According to the comprehensive and concrete anthropology of the Bible the human heart is the very source of an individual’s personality that is conscious, intelligent and free. It is the centre of one’s decisive choices and of the mysterious action of God. The just walk with “integrity of heart (Ps 101: 2); but out of the heart of man come evil thoughts” (Mk 7:

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<sup>127</sup> Frank O’Loughlin, *The Future of the Sacrament of Penance* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2007), 186.

<sup>128</sup> See Joseph A. Favazza, *The Order of Penitents: Historical roots and Pastoral Future* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 71-2, 76-7, 81-2; Also see James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 7-12, 19-21.

<sup>129</sup> Dallen, 102-03.

<sup>130</sup> See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance*, ch. IV-VI: The Christian Faith (Alba House, New York 1982), 460-463.

<sup>131</sup> *RP*, no. 6a.

21). Consequently, the heart is a person's inner and unrepeatable self, the centre of human existence, the meeting place of reason, will, spirit and feeling. It is the place where the person finds his/her unity and the inner direction of mind and heart, of will and affectivity. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, "the spiritual tradition of the Church also emphasises the heart, in the biblical sense of the depths of one's being, where the person decides for or against God."<sup>132</sup> The heart is an undivided self with which we love God and our neighbour.

In this context, conversion of heart is not only the principal element, but also the one which unifies all the acts of the penitent which constitute the sacrament, of which every single element is defined as leading to conversion of heart. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, a lack of sincerity – such as lack of true repentance, or lack of faith, or lack of intention to receive and live the unique grace of the sacrament – blocks the fruitfulness of a validly received sacrament.<sup>133</sup> This inner conversion of heart embraces sorrow for sin and the intent to lead a new life. It is expressed through confession made to the Church, due satisfaction, and amendment of life.<sup>134</sup> So, conversion of heart is not to be understood as a single, stand-alone act accomplished once and for all, but rather as a resolute detachment from sin in order to make a progressive and continuous journey of adherence to Christ and of friendship with him. The sequence of the *Rite of Penance* is, so to speak, the expression of the various moments or stages of a journey that does not end with the celebration of the sacrament but shapes the whole life of the penitent.

The sacrament is shown to be in direct continuity with the work of Christ, given that he proclaimed that *metanoia* is the condition of entering the Kingdom. In the absence of *metanoia* the fruits of the sacrament are diminished for the penitent because "the genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition."<sup>135</sup> The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments insists that, since conversion of heart is at the core of the sacrament of penance, it is necessary to regard non-sacramental penitential celebrations as being of great importance.<sup>136</sup> We read in the *Praenotanda*,  
Penitential celebrations are gatherings of the people of God to hear the proclamation

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<sup>132</sup> CCC, no. 368.

<sup>133</sup> See Aquinas, ST III, q. 69, a. 10.

<sup>134</sup> RP, no. 6.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup>The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Rediscovering the Rite of Penance," *Notitiae* 51 (2015): 365.

of God's Word. This invites them to conversion and renewal of life and announces our freedom from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>137</sup>

These non-sacramental elements are placed before and after the celebration of the sacrament of penance because conversion of heart presupposes an awareness of what sin is and therefore bring about heartfelt sorrow. Certainly, more creative uses of non-sacramental rites such as song, listening to the word of God, homily and reflection, examination of conscience, periods of silence, praying together in a litany or in some other way suited to general participation could assist the baptised in their continuing journey of metanoia.

#### 4.5.3 Penance and the Role of the Assembly

Individualism is considered to be one of the chief characteristics that is seeping into modern society. We live in a cultural matrix within which self-identity and value are most often measured by an ethos of self-determination. This ethos has not only affected our day to day life, but also the quality of religious life and consequently our sacramental practice. The trend toward individualisation of sin and forgiveness has given rise to a mindset whereby people who once sought forgiveness through the mediation of the Church now seek it directly from God. In the words of Barry Harvey,

Forgiveness and reconciliation have been reconfigured as an individual transaction between God and a particular person, largely devoid of its eschatological context and with virtually no consequences for either Christian community or social and political life.<sup>138</sup>

The word "reconfigure" is important here. Originally, during the era of canonical penance, forgiveness and reconciliation for sinners was a public affair especially for sinners who had committed grave sins such as adultery, murder, or apostasy. Besides being excluded from the eucharistic assembly, repentant Christians had to engage in practices such as fasting and almsgiving as a sign of their sorrow for sin and of their desire to re-join the assembly. Attaining ecclesial pardon was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. At times the process took a long time, depending on the seriousness of the sin. The rigorous process of canonical penance enabled the penitents to express their contrition, while the community could pray for sinners. However, this practice caused penitents public humiliation and shame.

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<sup>137</sup> *RP*, no. 36.

<sup>138</sup> Barry Harvey, "The Eucharistic Idiom of the Gospel," *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no.3 (2000): 309. Harvey is quoting L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 38.

The introduction of a repeatable and private form of ecclesial pardon in the fifth century in Ireland, and later validated in 1215 by the Lateran Council, enabled Christians to seek reconciliation more often. This form of confessing to a priest thereby receiving an assigned penance became more acceptable than that of undergoing the strict and rigorous process of canonical penance. However, private and confidential confession and reconciliation also undermines the properly ecclesial and communal nature of penance. Much as the priest represents both God and the Church community, the visible ecclesial matrix is vital. The social and ecclesial character of sin, and conversion is present in the sacrament of penance but not prominent. If the ecclesial and communal nature of penance is emphasized and practiced regularly, believers will better appreciate the profound meaning of the sacrament.

In communal reconciliation services, the Church realizes that it must not simply focus on the forgiveness of the individual's sins or leave the impression that sin is something that occurs just between individuals and God. The tradition involves personal responsibility and communal accountability. This is clearly why the Magisterium provides liturgical alternatives for communal expressions of penance, consequently inspiring theological development towards a fuller integration of personal and social reconciliation. In fact, for the Catholic community "the goal of reconciliation is not simply forgiveness of sins, but reconciliation with the Church so as to take part in its mission."<sup>139</sup> Reconciliation is a sign of one's conversion, a movement towards Christ's love. But it is also an essential symbol of union with the Church community and its function within the world at large. Here, we see the interconnectedness between reconciliation and the very essence of the Church's mission. These two aspects (individual and communal, personal and ecclesial) have a social role whose ultimate goal is "the formation of a reconciling community as the memorial of Jesus until he comes again."<sup>140</sup>

To appreciate the ecclesial and communal dimension of sacramental penance, we should be careful to remember the relationship between the physical sign, the human dimension and the divine action. The Second Vatican Council recognises the need to place sacramental penance within a community setting so that the profound touch of a forgiving Christ becomes a new tangibility of a reconciling community and not merely of a

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<sup>139</sup> James Dallen, "Theological Foundations," in *Reconciliation: Continuing Agenda*, ed. Robert J. Kennedy (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 30.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

compassionate confessor. The penitent encounters a profound experience of God's love through the ministry of the Church.<sup>141</sup> The ritual of forgiveness and reconciliation becomes a communal structural reality. David Fagerberg claims that if one does not know why one should be reconciled to the Church, since it is God who forgives, then penance as a sacramental ritual will wither on the vine.<sup>142</sup> It did so in the sixteenth century, and it could do so again if the existential sense of the importance of community reconciliation is not recovered.

We now come to the crucial point of the Church's wider mission. What is the Church's reaction to sin in one of her members? It is the reaction learned implicitly from the Spirit, and told explicitly by Jesus:

If another member of the Church sins against you, first go point out the fault by yourself; if he or she doesn't listen, tell it to the Church. But if the offender refuses to listen even to the Church, regard such a person as a pagan, or a tax collector. I say to you: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.<sup>143</sup>

Belonging to the Church should be a sign of possessing the Spirit of God. If one belongs to the Church, one should walk as a witness to the holy life the Father desires, and which Jesus and the Spirit make possible. But all this is a lie in the case of sin. A baptised person in mortal sin still belongs to the Church just as the weeds among the wheat still belong to the field. The very fact of continuing to belong to the Church is however robbed of its meaning by one's guilt, as Rahner explains:

By establishing the true facts even in the historical tangible sphere: you are precisely as a member of the Church not at all the person you appear to be by your visible membership; you have the appearance of being alive (simply because you belong to the communion of the living Body of Christ which is filled with the life-giving Spirit), but in reality you are dead.<sup>144</sup>

The Church's reaction, to save the sinner, is to expose the guilt and unmask the outward appearances. Exposing the guilt, making visible the lie, establishing the true facts even in the historical sphere is what "binding the sinner" means. The sinner appears by visible membership to belong to the Church, but sin has made that a lie; so, the Church adjusts the visible fact to fit the invisible state of affairs. She will not allow the lie to continue

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<sup>141</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, art. 11.

<sup>142</sup> David W. Fagerberg, "Rahner on the Importance of Reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance," *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996): 351-52.

<sup>143</sup> Matthew 18:15-18.

<sup>144</sup> Rahner, "Forgotten Truths," 142.

either on the visible or invisible level. If sin is not only an offence against God but an offence against the Church, then not only must God respond to one's sin, but the living Church must respond as well. Rahner insists that binding and loosing

Are not two sides of an alternative, but two phases of the one reaction whereby the Holy Church answers the sin of one of her members.... The binding already aims at the loosing, and the latter presupposes the former.<sup>145</sup>

The authority to bind and loose (or the 'power of the keys') has been vested in the visible Church, but in addition sacramental forgiveness presupposes the penitent's contrition which takes place in the depth of conscience. At the same time, the priest represents God as well as the whole community, which sees itself in the weakness of each of its members who accompany each other on the path of conversion towards human and Christian growth. However, this wider lens for finding the embodiment of Christ's ministry of forgiveness must be seen as being within an ecclesial community and thus drawn into the embrace of God's living mercy. As James Dallen correctly observes,

It is not simply the priest who is the agent of reconciliation and minister of the sacrament. The worshipping community's gracious acceptance of sinners and the sinner's gracious acceptance of the worshipping community is reconciliation.<sup>146</sup>

It is possible that some penitents may feel that celebrating the sacrament of penance within a community setting brings about shame. Pope Francis argues that "shame is good, it is healthy to feel a little shame, because being ashamed is salutary."<sup>147</sup> The shame and guilt felt as one is in the queue to go to confession makes us even more humble. Interestingly, thereafter, the beauty of confession leaves one free, grand, beautiful, forgiven and free. The Church offers courage and hope to the penitent of following the path of holiness, that is the path of the Christian. The Church is ideally where the love of God dwells, where each cares for the other, and where one prays for the other. Moreover, the Church is the place where the Spirit is made present, the Spirit who renews hearts in the love of God and makes all of the brethren one in Christ Jesus. Communal penance celebrations are necessary as they enable the community to acknowledge responsibility for the general sinfulness of society. The faithful also appreciate the fact that we are a Church of sinners in need of God's healing and pardon. To approach God for forgiveness is also to approach the living Church to ask for forgiveness, while each member of the parish community learns to forgive.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 142-43.

<sup>146</sup> James Dallen, "Reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance," *Worship* 64 (1990): 402.

<sup>147</sup> Pope Francis, *Meeting Jesus in the Sacraments* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice, 2015), 81.

#### 4.5.4 The Fate of Penance Post Vatican II: Some Critical Questions

Numerous liturgical theologians, historians and commentators such as Dallen, Hellwig, Coffey and Morrill have noted that Forms B and C of the *Rite of Penance* became exceedingly popular in parishes in the late 70's and early 80's, whereas Form A continued to show steady decline.<sup>148</sup> However, the popularity of Form C worldwide, especially in North America and Europe, quickly drew criticism from some of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, including Pope John Paul II (as we shall soon see in the next sub-section in our discussion of *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*).

One of the overambitious undertakings was by Bishop Carroll Dozier who organised a campaign of implementing Form C in his diocese of Memphis, Tennessee. Two massive communal reconciliation services were held as reported by James O'Toole.<sup>149</sup> On both occasions, Dozier celebrated the rite for reconciliation of penitents with general confession and absolution according to the letter, including the provision that those who received general absolution should find the soonest possible opportunity for individual confession. Reports from participants seemed to confirm the success of Dozier's aim which was to "appeal to Catholics who over the years had stopped attending church for reasons of apathy, cultural changes or change in the Church itself."<sup>150</sup>

While Vatican did not officially censure Dozier, Church officials did express their severe displeasure through a letter circulated to the United States bishops. This was followed by a prompt suppression of the third form of general confession and absolution.<sup>151</sup> The motive behind the censure was the concern that widespread use of Form C might imply that the faithful need not have a personal encounter with a confessor for individual confession and absolution, which had been stipulated as essential in the rite itself. As a result, widespread and regular celebrations of Form C were discouraged by the 1983 World Synod of Bishops on Reconciliation and Penance.<sup>152</sup> The Synod's deliberations focused on the relationship

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<sup>148</sup> For reports on the steady decline of individual confession, see Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*; Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*; Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation*; Bruce T. Morrill, S.J. "Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power – Ecclesial, Sacramental, Anthropological – Among Hierarchy and Laity," *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 585-612.

<sup>149</sup> James O'Toole, *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 185. 12,000 people attended the celebration in Memphis, while 2000 people attended in Jackson.

<sup>150</sup> See article published in Times-News (Hendersonville, N.C.) on December 13, 1976, "Bishop Carroll Dozier Again Performs Reconciliation Rite Despite Criticism."

<sup>151</sup> O'Toole, *Habits of Devotion*, 185.

<sup>152</sup> Catherine Dooley, "The 1983 Synod of Bishops and the 'Crisis of Confession,'" in *The Fate of Confession*, eds. Mary Collins, David Noel Power and Marcus Lefébure (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 15.

between social and individual sin, the sacrament's effectiveness in liberating people from evil, and the notion of personal friendship with God as a significant penitential metaphor. The final document of the Synod of Bishops on reconciliation and penance, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, was prepared not by the bishops but by John Paul II alone. Dooley says that the Pope's Apostolic Exhortation published more than a year after end of the synod "seems as removed in tone as it is in time" from the work of the synod.<sup>153</sup>

There seems to be a misunderstanding of general absolution. In fact, there is a misconception that general absolution is forbidden by Church law except it in some very rare cases. It should be realised that right from the beginning the Code sets up two categories of reconciliation: the "ordinary" and "extraordinary" way. Individual absolution falls into the former, general absolution into the latter. An eminent canon lawyer, Ladislav Orsy SJ, has pointed out that

The Code explicitly states that individual confession and absolution is the only ordinary means of forgiveness for those who know themselves to be guilty of mortal sin. It follows that if there is a group of penitents among whom, for all intents and purposes, no mortal sin can be assumed, there is no prohibition against the general absolution as the ordinary form of the sacrament.<sup>154</sup>

Consequently, the requirement of individual confession applies only to a penitent who is 'conscious of being guilty of mortal sin.' That being the case, for penitents approaching the sacrament of reconciliation as a kind of 'growth sacrament' e.g. for deepening lifelong ongoing conversion at times like Lent and Advent, the law does not forbid the use of general absolution, especially for penitents who are not aware of being in mortal sin. Otherwise, the laws prohibiting general absolution would be interpreted as applying to such penitents.<sup>155</sup> Sessions of penitential services are popular with many Catholics as part of preparations for Easter and Christmas. These celebrations are meaningful because of the way they foster an awareness of God's gracious and forgiving love which lies at the heart of these two feasts. However, if only general confession and absolution is used, then they are 'growth experiences' rather than occasions of radical conversion from serious sin. They certainly do qualify as devotional celebrations of the sacrament.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>154</sup> Ladislav Orsy SJ, "General Absolution: New Law, Old Traditions, Some Questions," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 685. See also *Code of Canon Law*, no. 960.

<sup>155</sup> For the conditions for validity of general absolution see canons 961-962; *RP* nos. 31-33.



Another challenge lies with Canon 962 §1 which requires the penitent to have the intention of confessing all mortal sins at the nearest opportunity for the very validity of the general absolution. It is one thing to say on solid theological grounds that to be truly contrite means to be willing to do what the Church requires from a penitent; it is another thing to make a law and condition the basis for the validity of the absolution. Orsy insists that “the law will introduce hair-splitting distinctions and unnecessary scruples and hesitations in both priest and the penitent.”<sup>156</sup> Besides, we must admit that there is no agreement among theologians as to why someone absolved from his or her sins through a sacramental act should bring those sins into another sacramental act. Once forgiven, they cannot constitute any valid matter for absolution. Be that as it may, it is worth noting that the *Rite of Penance* contains no explanation for such a contradictory wording.<sup>157</sup>

My intention in critiquing the modes of granting forgiveness is not so as to make strong affirmations or to offer a ‘magic’ solution but merely to point out some avenues of reflection and research. I shall try to identify them by simply raising a number of questions. The elements of rigorism present in the three forms of sacramental penance seem to have discouraged many Catholics from using the sacrament. Forms A and B are considered to be ‘hard’ while form C appears to be ‘easy.’ Hardship is perceived with regards to individual confessions, especially in the shame and humility entailed in the mentioning of one’s sins to another person (priest). I think we have a long way to go in understanding the mystery of forgiveness through the ministry of the Church, and even longer to appreciate the conditions and laws guiding the authentic celebration of the sacrament.

In determining the ‘perfect’ model of granting forgiveness, should the Church pay more attention to the pattern that seems to be more practical and effective or to the off-putting aspects present in several of our models? Have we found the right balance? Should we look for a better balance? In the evangelical model (as in the parable of the prodigal son or the story of the adulterous woman) all emphasis is on the contrite heart; once proven by whatever means, no more is asked for. How far is such procedure relevant for the future renewal of the sacrament? I am not in any way advocating a simplistic point of view, but simply asking why aspects of scriptural doctrine that describe reconciliation as a life-style characterized by hope, humility, regret, repentance, conversion, forgiveness and hospitality (Luke 15: 11-31, John 8:

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<sup>156</sup> Orsy, “General Absolution,” 685.

<sup>157</sup>The *Rite of Penance* is less restrictive in its approach to general absolution than the new Code of Canon Law. More precisely, in its wording, it left room for broader interpretations than we find in the Code.

1-11) are not taken into account together with the later traditions. The search for the appropriate answers could lead to ways of revitalising the sacrament.

#### 4.6 *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*: What was its impact?

Twenty years after Vatican II it was evident that doctrinal and pastoral struggles were beginning to emerge. Significant questions were once again being asked about penance and reconciliation. In October 1983 the 6<sup>th</sup> Synod of Bishops was convened in Rome with the primary role of exploring the Church's role in working for social reconciliation and its commitment to the sacramental reconciliation of individuals. On December 2, 1984, Pope John Paul II published his own exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, a document that remains the most comprehensive papal explanation of the theological truths and pastoral intentions for the sacrament of penance.<sup>158</sup> This document reflected the bishops' deliberations on penance and reconciliation in light of contemporary social evils (nuclear war, extreme poverty, secularisation, environmental change) while keeping in mind the tradition of Catholic doctrine with its emphasis on individual sacramental confession.

John Paul II's exhortation begins with a clear emphasis whereby he gladly accepted the task of drawing from the enormous abundance of the synod in order to offer the people of God, as the fruit of the same synod, a doctrinal and pastoral message on the subject of penance and reconciliation.<sup>159</sup> As a persuasive document, the apostolic exhortation is indeed very enthusiastic, aiming to bring about enrichment and deepening in personal faith for all men and women of upright conscience. With broad strokes the Pope provides an engaging theological analysis, touching on essential issues that form the foundation for reconciliation's sacramentality. He reaffirms the meaning of the sacrament of penance as a "tribunal of mercy" but explains that it is at the same time a "place of spiritual healing" between the individual and God.<sup>160</sup>

Of the three forms sacramental penance, John Paul II emphasises deliberately and candidly the primary importance of individual confession and absolution, highlighting it as "the only normal and ordinary way of celebrating the sacrament."<sup>161</sup> This statement includes Form B as well, since it entails the essentials of Form A, with the proviso that there are

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<sup>158</sup> John Paul II, "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*," (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 1984).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 4.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 31.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 32.

enough priests to hear individual confessions. He stresses that the use of Form C should not be the free choice of priests (whose obligation is to individual confession) or of the faithful. This must be strictly regulated by each bishop “with a grave obligation on his own conscience” in order to abide by the law and guidelines of the church.<sup>162</sup>

These deliberations regarding penance are clearly influenced by historical precedence, in particular the Council of Trent and Vatican II. Dallen comments that despite historical data which support alternative and even complementary understandings of sin, penance and forgiveness, the church’s hierarchy regards it as proper to remain committed to the teachings of the Council of Trent: “Verbal confession of all known mortal sins and priestly absolution constitute the primary and intended means by which God forgives our sins in Christ.”<sup>163</sup> He adds that the overall emphasis on the personal nature of the sacrament is more in line with counter-reformation perspectives than with twentieth-century trends that shape the teaching of Vatican II and the reformed *Rite of Penance*.<sup>164</sup>

The thoroughness of John Paul’s exploration of the roots of contemporary struggles is astonishing. He is straight-forward in addressing a great variety of concerns that need Christian insight and illumination. Using contemporary terminology, he expresses our current call to Christian life. For John Paul this is a way of life that requires sacrifice in the form of penance, as Christians must change their hearts in order to give others the same love that Jesus himself shares with the world. In fact, he emphasises that humans have forgotten their own definitive sense of sin. The pontiff believes that:

The restoration of a proper sense of sin is the first way of facing the grave spiritual crisis looming over man today. But the sense of sin can only be restored through a clear reminder of the unchangeable principles of reason and faith which the moral teaching of the Church has always upheld.<sup>165</sup>

Addressing the critical challenge of the diminished sense of sin, John Paul clarifies many of the distinctions intrinsic to the complex nature of forgiveness and provides a rich theological foundation for continuing dialogue. His vision of penance is obviously geared towards a pastoral approach which encourages full reconciliation between and among God

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 231. For a literal or fundamentalist interpretation of Trent, see Angelo Amato, “Il concilio di Trento e il nuovo ‘ordo paenitentiae’: Alcune considerazioni a proposito della legittimazione dogmatica dei nuovi riti di riconciliazione,” *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 89 (1975), 282-293.

<sup>164</sup> James Dallen, “Recent Documents on Penance and Reconciliation” in *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda*, ed. Robert J. Kennedy (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 103.

<sup>165</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 18.

and people, a guide towards a deeper understanding of the sacrament. The Pope aims to strengthen the Church's mission of reconciliation as a personal endeavour, one that penitents can undertake in order to be reunited with their loving God and the Church. The focus here is to stir up in each of us a new impulse towards a deeper appreciation of the rules and structures as well as a more frequent celebration of the sacrament marked by less anxiety, trusting faithfully in the Lord's merciful love.

Generally, the exhortation resonates with the theological underpinnings of Vatican II on the sacrament of penance. However, there is also a regression to more Tridentine pastoral orientations. While most of the topics covered by John Paul II were discussed in the 1983 Synod of Bishops, the exhortation "does not clearly present the positions taken or the relative importance given to various themes."<sup>166</sup> The document gives the Pope's personal pastoral views on the subject and, as such, the text "breaks no new ground in doctrine or legislation."<sup>167</sup> It does, however, provide valuable theological analysis in and of itself, particularly since it is written by a 20<sup>th</sup> century Pontiff.

As an exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* aims at encouraging members of the Catholic Church, especially the clergy, to accept and follow previous instructions (such as the 1973 *Rite of Penance* and the 1983 *New Code of Canon Law*). With regard to its source, nature and contents, the exhortation "lays no claim to a binding doctrinal or legislative character except insofar as it repeats existing teaching and canonical regulations."<sup>168</sup> The impact of the document is to emphasise and offer guidance on the theological and canonical concepts upon which the reflections are drawn. It is important to observe what the Pope highlights, for instance, individual confession, sense of sin, etc. However, other components (such as communal attributes within the practice of the penance that are barely mentioned) should not be disregarded as we consider John Paul's theology. Overall, the exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, is indeed a crucial document as we continue to assess the needs and challenges of penance in our modern world.

#### 4.7 Concluding Remarks

Obsorne notes that it is difficult to harmonize the notion of reconciliation as an on-going, progressive movement with the apparently instant and still so juridical 'I absolve you ....' On

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<sup>166</sup> Dallen, "Recent Documents on Penance and Reconciliation," 101.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

the one hand the rite envisions reconciliation as part of the life-process of a Christian; on the other hand, the rite does not seem to reflect the meaning of absolution as having a similar life-process. The ecclesial moment is not seen as a 'celebration' but as a juridical act.<sup>169</sup> This certainly becomes problematic as Catholics move away from juridical notions of God and Church and gravitate toward healing and liberating images. The consequence of this, as Joseph Favazza explains, is that Catholics have grown "to resist magical, secretive, and adolescent encounters in dark rooms while consenting to meaningful personal relationships and communities that blur the distinction between the wounded and the healed, the bound and the liberated."<sup>170</sup>

A similar approach is taken by Pope Francis when he calls on priests to offer pastoral care to those in "complex situations" that reflect the reality of postmodern society. For example, we have cases of a considerable number of Catholics who find themselves in "irregular unions," that is, situations of divorce and remarriage, cohabitation or same-sex unions, which affect their sacramental life. In such situations of human weakness, Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* calls for more attentive pastoral care characterized by good understanding, compassion, correction and respectful accompaniment so that those caught up in complex situations don't feel as if they are being judged or excommunicated. The Holy Father stresses that this should not be considered as a weakening of the faith or doctrines of the Church in sacramental practice.<sup>171</sup> In addition, he believes that practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities can help those living in situation of sin to grow in the life of grace and charity while receiving the Church's help to do so.<sup>172</sup> However, the Holy Father clarifies that "integrating into the life of the Church doesn't mean receiving Communion." He adds that to do so "would be an injury also to marriage, to the couple, because it wouldn't allow them to proceed on this path of integration."<sup>173</sup> As Christians we know that there is no sin or weakness which is outside the realm of God's forgiveness. Nonetheless, the general direction is that no grave sin should go unconfessed and it is important for Catholics not to become complacent, self-centred or to rely on some kind of cheap grace.

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<sup>169</sup> Kenan Osborne, "A Commentary on *Ordo Paenitentiae*" in *The Catholic Theological Society of America, Committee Report: The Renewal of the Sacrament of Penance* (1975), 43.

<sup>170</sup> Joseph Favazza, "The Efficacy of Ritual Resistance: The Case of Catholic Sacramental Reconciliation," *Worship* 72 (1998): 218.

<sup>171</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*. (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, 2016), 115-20

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>173</sup> See *L'Osservatore Romano* 13 March 2015.

Speaking about the difficult and sensitive areas of the human person and of human sexuality, Robert Cardinal Sarah, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, calls on bishops and priests in his foreword to the book, *'Why I Don't Call Myself Gay: How I Reclaimed My Sexual Reality and Found Peace'* to express genuine love and compassion but without compromising the truth.<sup>174</sup> He points out the fact that the Church teaches in the catechism that under no circumstances can homosexual acts be approved (CCC 2357). This, however, though does not give us permission to deprive men and women who experience same-sex attraction the fullness of the Gospel. To omit the 'hard sayings' of Christ and his Church is not charity. In that regard, Cardinal Sarah emphasises that we cannot be more compassionate or merciful than Jesus. He explains that only Christ can heal the wounds of sin and division. And only the commandments mark the path to friendship with Christ, and with one another, for God's "commandments are not burdensome" (1 Jn 5:3).<sup>175</sup>

Through Mary Douglas and Catherine Bell's interpretative lens, the sacrament of penance can never be effectively appreciated without stressing a ritual strategy that offers a sense of cohesion with regard to reconciliation. Following Douglas, if one interprets ritual as a strategy of control by the social body, the decline of ritual is a sign of the loss of control by the social body; this in turn signals a decreased efficaciousness of ritual action.<sup>176</sup> However, Bell's interpretation is that ritual actions are efficacious signs of a negotiated play of power between ritual specialists and ritual participants so that ritual itself becomes the focus of interpretation. The social body is constantly being constructed and reconstructed through different ritual strategies that either accommodate history or deny it.<sup>177</sup> Such a perspective suggests that reducing penance to simply a penitent-priest encounter is hardly enough. Having good confessors is a good and noble start but this alone cannot solve the crisis that the sacrament of penance is facing to today.

In trying to reform the Church, the Second Vatican Council restored sacramental confession as a liturgical act. In this sacrament, as is true of all the church's liturgy, the

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<sup>174</sup> Daniel Mattson, *Why I Don't Call Myself Gay: How I Reclaimed My Sexual Reality and Found Peace* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), iii.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

<sup>176</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 8-14

<sup>177</sup> Catherine Bell, "Ritual, Change, and Changing Rituals," *Worship* 63 (1989): 41.

mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church is both manifest and accomplished.<sup>178</sup> Both the 1973 *Rite of Penance* and Pope John Paul II's exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, emphasise the importance of ecclesiological reconciliation since this shows that reconciliation is not a private, personal affair.<sup>179</sup> Reconciliation of penitents in the Church's life and liturgy is inherently communal because it lays a claim not only on our hearts and inner spirits but also on the exterior structures and relationships of our lives. Nonetheless, individual confession to the priest as the Church's continuous tradition remains the only ordinary way of celebrating the sacrament.<sup>180</sup>

With regard to the reconciliation of penitents, present sacramental practice is limited fundamentally to the ritual action of individual confession and absolution. In light of changing historical circumstances, this ritual strategy which has been in place since the Council of Trent seems no longer appealing to ritual participants since other ritual strategies are being preferred. Favazza argues that the perceived crisis in the present practice of Catholic sacramental penance is not a crisis as such, but it should be seen as efficacious resistance to one ritual strategy and the efficacious consent to others.<sup>181</sup> For example, Catholics have grown to resist sacramental reconciliation which entails mystical and secretive encounters in the confessional while embracing alternative personal healing services and counselling. However, questions remain to be faced. Will efficacious resistance bring about the embrace of new ritual strategies by the hierarchy/ritual specialists? Or will this sacrament continue to languish on the margins of Catholic ritual life?

If the forgiveness of Christ which brings people into reconciliation with God and one another is not the core element of people's experience of the sacrament of penance, then the difficulty cannot be explained as an inadequate understanding of sin on the part of penitents. It also has been due to an inadequacy on the part of the Church in embodying effectively the power of Christ's forgiveness in its current ritual practices. One might argue that an ecclesial form of celebrating sacramental penance (as in the rite for reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution) would be the most practical and relevant paradigm. This rite manifests the sacrament not only as a celebration of the Church, but also it impacts both the individual penitent and community.

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<sup>178</sup> *SC* no. 2.

<sup>179</sup> See *RP*, nos. 3-5, 36-37; *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no 8-9.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 31.

<sup>181</sup> Favazza, "The Efficacy of Ritual Resistance," 220.

There is a need for what Scott Detisch calls a “second naiveté,” an illustrative approach to revitalise the fullness of the ritual by way of a sacramental resource-ment.<sup>182</sup> Such a resource-ment maintains the sacrament’s ability to embody the person of Christ as the symbol of God’s reconciliation. At the same time, however, the second naiveté must recognise how the present tradition maintains that the person of Christ is incarnated as a reconciling Church. In this process, good ministers of reconciliation also need to transform their parish as a reconciling community. Hence, the tangible benefits should be expressed in a different way, in and through the Church, which the Second Vatican Council called the sacrament of reconciliation.<sup>183</sup> The new tangibility of a reconciling community manifested in a communal structural reality draws the penitent into a profound experience of God’s love and mercy more than merely offering a compassionate confessor. Thus, forgiveness becomes something more than reconciliation.

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<sup>182</sup> Scott P. Detisch, “The Sacrament of Reconciliation: In Need of a Second Naiveté,” *Worship* 77 (2003): 194-210.

<sup>183</sup> *LG*, no. 11.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### TOWARDS A NEW VISION OF PENANCE: SOME CRITICAL MOVES

#### 5.1 Introduction

It is fact that the Church is in constant need of renewal especially if it is to be relevant and effective in its ministry. This final chapter looks at some theological and pastoral grounds that would help in shaping the renewal of penance so as to provide a deeper understanding of the sacrament. We shall especially explore how the African reconciliatory theological paradigm of *Ubuntu* can be a resource for enriching the sacrament of penance. However, we shall treat the notion of cultural appropriation or inculturation not in isolation but in dialogue with the perspectives of contemporary scholars. Finally, we shall try to identify some contemporary considerations and strategies which might offer elements of hope for the sacrament going forward.

#### 5.2 Renewed Understanding of Penance: A New Evangelisation

To appreciate the sacrament of penance it is crucial to understand its theological enrichment along with the insights of Christology and ecclesiology so as to influence its meaningful celebration. In this task we shall look at that which stands at the heart of the entire Christian mystery and at the heart of the Church's sacramental celebration: Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour. So, in looking to the future of effective celebration of sacramental penance, we shall analyse the Church's role in as far as taking account of a far-reaching pastoral ministry in the contemporary and challenging world.

##### 5.2.1 Meeting Christ Personally in Penance: The Heart of the Sacrament

It is evident that we cannot "solve" the problems of confession by a single intervention. It is not just individual confession, or reviving the sense of sin, or conversion of heart, or ecclesial reconciliation. It is all these things, and more. In the end there is one constituent part of the sacrament that is infinitely above the rest: the personal Christ.<sup>1</sup> Whatever else the sacrament of penance is, it is a personal meeting in faith with the forgiving Christ. If we are aware of this, all problems are relatively unimportant. Otherwise, we are in the danger of playing with the mystery of God's love and mercy.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Foley, O.F.M. *What is Happening to Confession?* (Ohio: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1970), 49.

Edward Schillebeeckx in his book *Christ, the Sacrament of Encounter with God* emphasises the simple fact that Christ is God made flesh.<sup>2</sup> God became visible so that we could see Him. Christ is the way God wants to encounter mankind. So, Christ is the sacrament of God, His visible sign; the Church is the sacrament of Christ.<sup>3</sup> God loves us, God approaches us, and God reconciles us to Himself through Christ. The love and mercy of God become visible and real for us in Christ. Consequently, the continuous forgiving act of God is linked to the human activity of Christ through the ministry of the Church.

What happens in the sacrament of penance is an actualisation of the saving presence of God's love and mercy. This sacramental meeting with Christ can be compared to the meeting of Christ and Peter after the resurrection. Earlier, Peter had disowned Jesus three times (Matt. 26:69-75). While Christ was being led by the soldiers, he looked at Peter. Since Peter had not kept faith, he felt sorry at the core of his person. But he knew that he was forgiven by God's gift. God's constant love flowed into him to replace what sin had destroyed. Even if there was no sacrament of penance, this was an instance of it. Perhaps the other moment we might see that the second half of the sacrament became a visible and personal encounter is when Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Peter thrice renounced his betrayal and confessed the goodness of God in Christ (Jn 21: 14-17). This is the heart of the sacrament of penance: God offering us reconciliation and healing and our accepting it in Christ.

Christ is personally and visibly present to us in the Church. Jesus reveals God the Father; the Church reveals Jesus (not just by his words, but by his actions) especially in the sacraments. Pope Francis emphasises that

The Church offers all the possibility of following a path of holiness, that is the path of the Christian: she brings us to encounter Jesus Christ in the sacraments, especially in confession and in the Eucharist; she communicates the Word of God to us; she lets us live in charity, in the love of God for all.<sup>4</sup>

Christ is visible in the world through the faith-actions of his body the Church. Therefore, Catholics confess to a priest because they believe that they encounter Christ in and through the actions in faith of the Church.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward Ltd., 1987).

<sup>3</sup> See Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1986), 9-19.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, "General Audience," October 2, 2013.

The *Rite of Penance* emphasises that individual confession to the priest is the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church.<sup>5</sup> The priest acts in *persona Christi* through whom the whole Church embraces the penitent. This, however, does not entail losing the ecclesial matrix that constitutes the sacrament's vital context. Pope Francis stresses that the Christian community is the place where the Spirit is made present, the Spirit who renews hearts in the love of God and makes all of the brethren one thing in Christ Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Celebrating the sacrament of penance in the context of the Christian community is more expressive of the reality of reconciliation with God, through Christ, in his visible body the Church. If Christ acts through the actions of the Church, and if the Church is the community of those visibly joined in the love of Christ, these greatest acts of the Church should be community acts as much as possible.

Rahner insists that given the social impact of sin, the concept which best expresses the three dimensions of the sacrament of penance (ecclesial, Christological and personal) is *reconciliatio cum ecclesia*.<sup>7</sup> This notion simply highlights that forgiveness comes through the Church (the community of believers) because the Church is the sacrament of Christ. It was at the Second Vatican Council that the Church, for the first time at an official doctrinal level, was referred to as a "sacrament": "The Church is in Christ as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity."<sup>8</sup> Rahner maintains that reconciliation of the sinner with the Church is the sacramental sign (*res et sacramentum*) of the forgiveness of sins while at the same time it is also the effect of the sacrament (*res sacramenti*).<sup>9</sup> What is important about Rahner's approach is his insistence that the two should not be thought of separately. For Karen Kilby, Rahner claims that it is not just that the sacraments symbolize grace and cause it. Rather they cause grace precisely in symbolizing it.<sup>10</sup> When the Church forgives the sinner's faults against the community, his or her guilt against God is also forgiven. When the Church grants the sinner its peace, it grants the sinner God's peace.

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<sup>5</sup> *Rite of Penance*, no. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Meeting Jesus in the Sacraments* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice, 2015), 80.

<sup>7</sup> See Karl Rahner, "Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church," in *TI*, vol. 10, 125-149.

<sup>8</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no.1. For Rahner, this statement represented a significant change from a pessimistic and exclusive pre-conciliar understanding of the church as "the small barque on which alone people are saved ... from the *massa damnata*." Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the Future* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Rahner, "Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church," 130. See also Rahner, "Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance," in *TI*, vol. 2, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Kilby, *Fount Christian Thinkers - Karl Rahner* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1997), 41.

It is no mistake that it is God who forgives and not the human community. But God is encountered within the human experience of reconciliation. What is done on the level of sacramental reality typifies what God does on the level of transcendental reality. It symbolizes the divine act. Human-to-human reconciliation mirrors the divine promise to reconcile human-to-divine. It is a promise from God, not control by God; it is a divine promise, not an untrustworthy one. Visible liturgical activity represents the invisible event. All this depends, of course, on the person's faith that Christ has given Himself to the Church and has given the Church His power to forgive sins. Therefore, when a person is reconciled with his brothers and sisters who form the Church, he/she is in fact reconciled with God.

When we encounter Christ during sacramental penance, with His saving presence, He says to us, "Peace be to you, my peace I give to you." This belief reveals to us the most profound dynamic contained in this sacrament. Christ comes to transform our hearts so that our attitude becomes His attitude. He continues creating a new beginning in us or even brings us back to life altogether. Christ joins us to this mystery of God's forgiveness so that through visible signs of reconciliation and love we may be truly those who have "passed over" with Him to God's own life and loving mercy. This is the positive glorious salvation that He came to give to all who want to accept it. So, this broader and richer understanding of conversion and new beginning is a passover into communion with Christ and out of the sinfulness which impedes that communion.

The Church does in fact visibly and effectively continue in space and time Jesus' mission of saving the world. The Church is a community, but it seems we have lost some of the sense of this communality. Perhaps this partly explains the fall-off in confessions. One of the ways of reviving the celebration of the sacrament of penance, I believe, is that it should be as "communal" as possible, as far as circumstances permit. Communal penitential services with individual confessions might be an effective way of encouraging Christians to work together as a community of faith to enhance Jesus' mission of saving souls. We are a Church within which the love of God dwells, where one cares for the other, where one prays for the others. This, however, does not necessarily mean that public confession or general absolution of sins will be required. Its essence is to show the world visible communal love, a unity of love which shows who Christ is and what He wants to give the world: the gift of His salvation.

### 5.2.2 Penance as Deepening and Furthering Baptismal Commitment to Conversion

Looking at penance in relationship to baptism enables us to see that penance is precisely a way of renewing our baptism. To be baptised is to begin a process whereby we are turned away from sin and toward God by Christ. Francis Mannion describes baptism as “the first and original sacrament of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins, not only in the temporal sense, but in a fundamental and traditional one.”<sup>11</sup> That is, it is the first such ritual in the Church’s history and in each believer’s life and the foundation and model of all other forms and concepts of reconciliation.

Baptism does not simply immerse us in a font of holy water until judgement day but initiates a life-long and continuous process of repentance. This means that the life of the Christian is an unending *metanoia*. So, postbaptismal sin is an interruption of that life, and penance is being called back to conversion. Pope Paul VI emphasises in *Paenitemini*, “Not only does the Christian receive (in the bosom of the church through baptism) the fundamental gift of *metanoia*, but this gift is restored and reinvigorated through the sacrament of penance in those members of the Body of Christ who have fallen into sin.”<sup>12</sup> Baptism can certainly facilitate a penitential lifestyle, something that the Desert Fathers readily admitted.<sup>13</sup>

What connects baptism with penance is a faith which recognises and acknowledges God active and present in the world, the constant love and offer of life God gives to all creatures. In that recognition and acknowledgement, we enter through faith into Christ’s reconciling death and resurrection, and Christ’s victory over sin and death becomes our victory. In other words, we are born into reconciled life, and commit ourselves to a lifestyle of solidarity with God and all our brothers and sisters. We commit ourselves to continuing Christ’s reconciling ministry in the world.

Baptism is a key sacrament due to the fact that it is the starting point of thinking about celebrating any other sacrament, including penance. We are Christians because we have been baptised and for that reason, we are allowed to take part in the Church’s sacramental actions. It may be difficult to say so, but I must be a member of the Church by baptism before I can

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<sup>11</sup> Francis Mannion, “Penance and Reconciliation: A Systemic Analysis,” *Worship* 60 (1986): 104.

<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, “*Paenitemini*, Apostolic Constitution on Penance,” in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, vol. 2, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1982), 1-12.

<sup>13</sup> “It was said of Abba Sisoës that when he was at the point of death, while the Fathers were sitting beside him, his face shone like the sun.... Then the old men asked him, ‘With whom are you speaking, Father?’ ‘Look, the angels are coming to fetch me, and I am begging them to let me do a little penance.’ The old man said to him, ‘You have no need to do penance, Father.’ But the old man said to them, Truly, I do not think I have even made a beginning yet.” *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward, SLG (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publishers, 1975), 215.

‘save my soul’ through participating in the salvific mystery of the sacrament of penance. With baptism the door to an effectively new life is opened, one that is not burdened by the weight of a negative past. This saving intervention does not take away our human nature and our weakness and it does not take from us our responsibility to ask for forgiveness every time we err. Pope Francis explains that the door that baptism opens to us in order to enter the Church is a little closed because of our weaknesses and sins. However, confession reopens it, precisely because it is a second baptism that forgives us everything and allows us to go forward with the light of the Lord.<sup>14</sup>

Christ has instituted in His Church the sacrament of penance and “its purpose is that the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God through the restoration of grace.”<sup>15</sup> What makes Jesus’ call to repentance distinctive is that it is heard at the dawning of the kingdom of God. The call speaks of a decision and an action on God’s part first, and then *metanoia* is to accept the invitation to rise up to a life-long daily process of repenting. Similarly, the rubrics of the reformed *Rite of Penance* show us that Christ reconciled sinners with God, and since then the Church has never failed to call people from sin to conversion.<sup>16</sup>

The sacrament of penance takes hold of the sinner in his/her estrangement from God. In doing so, sacramental confession reveals the Church as a means of bringing about humanity’s conversion. It gives a visible form to the fact that the Church exists for all sinners. While making confession, one may feel quite solitary, but this is so only in appearance. In reality, the sinner is there in the community of penitents, and, whatever the differences in the various sacramental communities, they have one thing in common: they form part of the community of the Church.

The nature of sacramental confession is an important insight into the life of the Church. The penitent is readmitted as an individual, but, through confession, is restored to the community of the Church. As each penitent returns from the confessional, he realises that he was always a child of the Christian community, even when his sins prevented him feeling it and weakened that bond. He sees that the Church had a claim on him by virtue of baptism. This highlights the significance of the Church in confession. Adrienne Von Speyr states that confession means being brought back to the centre by the firm hand of the Church so that the

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Meeting Jesus in the Sacraments*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> “Rite of Penance,” *The Rite of the Catholic Church, vol.1* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1990), 526.

<sup>16</sup> See *RP*, no.1.

believer may not fall into the abyss.<sup>17</sup> In that regard, the sacrament of penance seems like a life-belt thrown out by the Church to bring a sinner home.

### 5.2.3 Penance and the Contemporary Church

In an interview with William Dych, Rahner mentions several pastoral implications of believing that the Church is really a symbol of God's grace and presence among us in the world. He stresses that "we need the formation of communities within the Church that are really living and vital communities that lead a truly charismatic Christian life that is more than just Pentecostal enthusiasm."<sup>18</sup> Describing what he believes to be the mission of the Church in the contemporary world, Rahner states that the Church is the sacrament of the world's salvation even where the world is not yet, and perhaps never will be, the Church. As such, the Church historically manifests and celebrates grace which is present always and everywhere, a grace that excludes no one from its embrace. So, since the Church is to effect the salvation it signifies, Rahner perceives that church leaders should have the courage to make concrete demands of believers to serve today's world and its urgent needs, not just to preach abstract ideals.<sup>19</sup> In the spirit of conversion and renewal, the Church has the mission of showing its members the right way to use earthly goods and to collaborate in the consecration of the world. This conversion must be internal and individual, but also external and social.<sup>20</sup> This means that we as Christians, aware that we are the Church, should constantly ask ourselves what we must do so that the spirit of Christ can overcome egotism, hatred and a false secularism.

Scott Detisch observes that when believers are stuck in a situation of suspicion that leads to either lack of the desire for sacramental experience or a rejection of its significance, then their life is closed off to the revelatory power of the sacrament. However, when believers bring the fruits of their critical perspective to the sacrament – honestly asking: "What is this sacrament really about?" and "who is really encountered and what is the true nature of this encounter?" they can then be drawn into a rich and intimate experience of "Christ for them" in the here and now of their lives.<sup>21</sup> We cannot be with Christ in first-century Palestine, but Christ can be with us in the very real circumstances and interiority of

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<sup>17</sup> Adrienne Von Speyer, *Confession: The Encounter with Christ in Penance* (Edinburgh: Herder, 1964), 93.

<sup>18</sup> William V. Dych, S. J., "Karl Rahner – An Interview," *America*, 123 (1970): 358.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Vatican II, "Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," no. 48.

<sup>21</sup> Scott P. Detisch, "The Sacrament of Reconciliation: In Need of a Second Naivete." *Worship* 77 (2003): 203.

our lives in the twenty-first century through sacramental symbols. For example, in the sacrament of penance, believers are called to be truly open to the forgiveness and healing of God as revealed in the public ministry of Christ in and through the Church.

A renewed and restorative attitude towards sacramental celebration of God's forgiveness enables believers to experience and appreciate that what Christ revealed and offered in his ministry, death and resurrection comes to us in a different way. Detisch believes that the presentation, celebration and the experiencing of sacramental penance needs "a second naivete" (a more profound theological analysis and catechesis of the sacrament).<sup>22</sup> This, however, calls for an effective language for the symbol.

Paul Ricoeur emphasises the important role of religious symbol in bringing meaning to one's religious experience; the symbol constitutes the givenness of the divine to the believer.<sup>23</sup> The richness of symbolism happens when we allow symbolic language to become precise, meaningful and most bound by the presence of the sacred to the human beings.<sup>24</sup> In this process, ritual language becomes more clearly expressive of its origins within the symbol of reconciliation that is Christ's public ministry while respecting the revelatory nature of the history of the sacrament within the Catholic tradition. Such a "ressourcement" maintains the sacrament's ability to embody the person of Christ as the symbol of God's reconciliation. It also allows believers to be receptive to the gift of Christ within their own individuality.

Whoever views the sacrament of penance as a completely uninteresting and unimportant matter, or as somewhat comparable to counselling or pastoral care, does not understand its fruits. However, if a Catholic Christian has arrived at the conviction that sacramental penance in itself has an importance for spiritual, moral and personal development, then it is a lot easier for that person to appreciate the sacrament and to consider its celebration as meaningful and essential. It goes without saying that we are living now in challenging times when everything is questioned. Ideologies such as liberalism and secularism have an inclination to reduce Christianity to something that may appear old-fashioned. Despite the challenges facing the Church today, Rahner believes that Church must overcome the indifference of modern society in which the God question is suppressed. He argues that it would be an inappropriate solution if the Church were to sink to the level of a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 194-210.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 348-49.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 349.



worldwide association whereby human beings could do whatever they wanted, no matter what they thought.<sup>25</sup> Hence, theologians and church leaders must try much harder than ever to see to it that the teaching, beliefs and values of the Church are up-to-date. Whoever wants to live a convinced and genuine Christian life in today's secularised world must want to be involved with God in the deepest experience of his or her person.

What is important here is to remember that for a person for whom the Church constitutes an inner moment of faith it will take sacramental celebrations like penance to inspire one's spiritual nourishment and growth. For such a person, saying yes to God's absolute love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ will be perceived as a way of enhancing the divine-human relationship. Rahner remarks, "whoever has not, or has not yet, been able to realise how profoundly the Church belongs to the event itself of salvation, naturally has a quite different relationship to it."<sup>26</sup> As a believer I would argue that in the last analysis it is meaningless not to be part of the sacramental life of the Church since sacraments are meant to bring one closer to Christ. The point is that Christians and sacramental penance should be inseparable despite all the fears we might have about it.

### **5.3 Some Critical Moves towards the Renewal of the Sacrament of Penance**

If and to the degree that the Church understands itself as *ecclesia reformanda* (a Church always in need of reform), it must constantly address the problem of change. The question is: What could be done to improve and sustain the future of penance? The attempt to visualise a future for sacramental penance is preoccupied with one issue: how can this sacrament be celebrated in a way that will attract present-day Catholic Christians to repent of their sins and be converted? Given that sacramental penance is in decline, we must ask two questions: Has the institution of the sacrament of penance become incapable of providing meaning for people? Is an otherwise meaningful institution losing its ability to communicate salvation because of the language and structures surrounding it? If the Church is a community of reconciliation and salvation it is important in the light of the above questions to reflect on the future of this 'great sacrament.' Much needs to be done to help people not only to understand its importance but to have the confidence to experience the mystery and gift of God's forgiveness.

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Rahner, *Faith in the A Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 115.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-43.

### 5.3.1 The Immediate Future: Retrieving the Fundamental Meaning and Purpose of the Sacrament

We shall now address the future of penance with regard to the fundamental meaning and purpose of the sacrament. In the immediate future, we must start with the forms given us in the 1973 *Rite of Penance*. By this I am referring to the three rites of penance along with the suggestion of penitential celebrations. We shall interpret the present evolution of the sacrament in terms of the demise of one form of penance and the expected rise of another form. The *Rite of Penance* could be seen as the occasion of new forms though there has not been much progress in either the practice or the mentality of the Church. We must ask, for example, whether the understanding and celebration of the sacrament must continue to be modelled on the individual/private form of confession or on the ecclesial/communal form of confession. The current problem of understanding and appreciating the sacrament must take into account the nature and impact of each of the three forms. However, it is imperative not to deviate from the guidelines of the *Rite of Penance* and the *Code of Canon Law*. We must emphasise that individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful who is conscious of having committed grave sin is reconciled with God and the Church. Nevertheless, reconciliation may be attained by other means when physical or moral impossibility alone prevents this kind of confession.<sup>27</sup>

The experience of confession is not easy for many believers. James Dallen argues: “Whether celebrated frequently or rarely, the sacrament of penance has always been particularly sensitive and vulnerable, a critical and controversial point in Christian life and worship.”<sup>28</sup> However, as a liturgical expression, the sacrament has the attraction for the faithful of being a mystery of God’s love and conversion. These two perceptions are manifested in the intersection of a number of some basic elements of Christian experience: the awareness of sin, God’s call to conversion, and the interior and exterior response to God. The Church teaches in the *Rite of Penance* that the true meaning of this sacrament of penance and reconciliation may only be understood through the concept of the ancient Greek word used by the first Christians, *metanoia* (the inmost change of heart under the influence of the Word of God in the perspective of the kingdom).<sup>29</sup> This profound change of the whole person

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<sup>27</sup> See *RP*, no. 31; *CCL*, c. 960.

<sup>28</sup> James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance*, 351.

<sup>29</sup> *RP*, no. 6a.

invites the penitent to harmonize his or her life through a radical reorientation towards God with *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).<sup>30</sup> Pope John Paul II underlines this concept in his exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*:

Penance means, in the Christian theological and spiritual vocabulary, asceticism, that is to say, the concrete daily effort of a person, supported by God losing his or her own life for Christ as the only means of gaining it; an effort to put off the old man and put on the new; an effort to overcome in oneself what is of the flesh in order that what is spiritual may prevail; a continual effort to rise from the things of here below to the things of above, where Christ is.<sup>31</sup>

However, this *metanoia* has been reduced to an almost individual ritual, whereby celebration of the sacrament has been restricted to the single symbol of individual confession and absolution and regarded as purification from sins rather than an experience of reconciliation with God and the Church. This reduction of a life process to a mere ritual, and the privatising of the ritual, are at “the heart of the contemporary crisis regarding the ministry and procedures of ecclesial forgiveness and reconciliation.”<sup>32</sup> It seems that if the sacrament of penance is to have any future in the life of the Church, the practice of penance must express our experience of the mysterious character of a forgiving God. The mission for the Church must be to evoke conversion and penance in people’s hearts and to offer them the gift of reconciliation with a loving God and with their brothers and sisters in the most effective way. This study suggests that revitalising the sacrament calls for a far-reaching pastoral and liturgical shift to the second form of the rite for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution.

As a way of developing this, there is need for support from Church leaders. Apart from the occasional Lenten and Advent penitential services, these communal experiences of reconciliation should be celebrated more frequently. The importance of this paradigm of reconciliation is that it gives greater emphasis to the ecclesial and community aspects of the sacrament and seems to appeal to many more Christians. It also recognises both the social impact of sin and reconciliation, and, more importantly, reclaims the sense that conversion is the work of God in us. Frank O’Loughlin maintains that

the forms we use for the sacrament need to embody this spirit. It is harder to change the spirit of things or the mentality behind them than it is to change forms, but good forms are also crucial in bringing about and re-enforcing a renewed spirit, precisely

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<sup>30</sup> CCC, no. 1431.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no.4.

<sup>32</sup> Dallen, *The Reconciling Community*, 366.

because they embody it and practice has its inner, habituating effects in us.<sup>33</sup>

For sacramental confession to be attractive and realistic in our daily life situations (such as in families, communities, workplaces, among friends and so forth), it needs to be modelled effectively in the church community. We know that a parish community is made of people who disagree, annoy, and argue with each other. Through communal celebration of penance, Christians learn and are encouraged to forgive and move on both as individuals and as a community. In this way, Christians can admit their mistakes while trusting in the support of a forgiving community. This is showing in practice, not merely in theory, how God's abundant love and mercy heals sin as well as the division deriving from human imperfections. The underlying goal of the sacrament of penance is to implement this spirit of reconciliation in our lives. "What you have received as a gift, give as a gift" (Matt 10:8). Having been forgiven sacramentally through penance, we are called to be ambassadors for Christ's ministry of reconciliation in our families, neighbourhoods, workplaces and in all the situations of our lives.

It seems to me that the task before us in the renewal of penance cannot be provided by a more general use of the third form, namely the rite for the reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution. In the past when this practice was widely used it led to considerable controversy and tension among the hierarchy and the laity. Since it is not usually possible to celebrate the third rite except in extraordinary situations of emergency, it seems to me that the increased use of penitential services would be of great value. Their communal character is more clearly ecclesial and provides opportunities to reflect on the Word of God and to bring about a deeper understanding of sin, conversion and forgiveness.

The Scriptures provide many illustrations of the mystery of reconciliation. We find in 2 Cor 5:17-21, Rom 5:10-11, Eph 2:13-16 and Col 1:19-22 that the act of reconciliation is attributed to God alone. These texts clearly and consistently suggest that reconciliation is not earned. It is a gift; and God, who has loved us first, is the agent of this reconciliation. Secondly, Christ is the means, the instrument of God's reconciling action. His whole ministry (the healing, teaching, caring outreach, miracles) is the medium for that reconciliation. Furthermore, his death and resurrection is the central reconciling act. The overwhelming element in all of this is that we are led to celebrate the sacrament of penance in the spirit of

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<sup>33</sup> Frank O'Loughlin, *The Future of the Sacrament of Penance* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2007), 207.

the paschal mystery. This is what Edward Schillebeeckx refers to as “the mystery of saving worship.”<sup>34</sup> We are reminded that we can overcome our sinfulness by entrusting ourselves into the hands of a loving and forgiving God who has already forgiven us in Christ. This is the essence of the sacrament of penance, an opportunity to embrace the abundant mercy of God won for us through the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### 5.3.2 Penance and Eucharist

The sacraments of penance and Eucharist are closely interrelated. Reconciliation is merely one dimension of meaning in the Eucharist. This is precisely because the Eucharist centres on the action of the “past salvific event.” The theological principle of the Eucharist as the sacrament of reconciliation makes present the redeeming sacrifice of the cross and naturally gives rise to a continuous need for conversion. Peace with God and the community must reign before gifts can be offered. As such the Eucharist echoes Jesus’ table fellowship of mercy, his meals (including the Last Supper) with sinners. It is a model of the redemptive reconstruction of our society and the world, a turning to God in gratitude, acknowledging the gifts of creation and redemption and the price that Jesus has paid to restore those gifts to us. Again, it is a turning to one another to share those gifts of creation and redemption symbolically in token of our commitment to do so extensively and more fully in our lives.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the Eucharist sacramentally inspires a personal response to the appeal made by St. Paul to the Christians of Corinth: “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the vast majority of people rarely received communion. In 506 the Council of Agdes imposed the obligation of communion three times a year (Christmas, Easter and Pentecost), but in 1215 the universal law for the Church decreed that it should be simply at least at Easter. There are two traditions regarding the need for confession before receiving the Eucharist. According to one, the Eucharist itself includes forgiveness. The penitential rite at the beginning of the Mass enables the participants to receive general confession of sinfulness and a form of absolution. But after the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council, more and more theologians insisted on private confession of grave or mortal sins as a requirement for the reception of communion.

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<sup>34</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1987), 37.

<sup>35</sup> Monika Hellwig, “The Spirit of Jesus and the Task of Reconciliation,” *New Catholic World* 27 (1984): 5.

The second tradition regards confession as a preparation for Communion. Accordingly, when Pope Pius X in 1905 recommended frequent and daily communion, the practice of weekly or monthly confession quickly followed. This was certainly the tradition of the Church practiced by many Catholics for many decades. However, there has been a declining sense of belonging to what was once a core part of their life experience. It is, therefore, important that the faithful are reminded and encouraged to frequent the celebration of the sacrament of penance as it is part of the preparation of receiving the Eucharist. So, Catholics must make an effort to go to confession as often as possible.

The aim in celebrating the sacrament of penance is to revive one's relationship with Christ, especially as it enables a believer to receive holy communion in state of grace. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 'those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ.'<sup>36</sup> The Church is the living embodiment of Christ. Christ is today personally present in his Body of Christians all over the world. They become his Body and are sustained by one of his actions, the Eucharist. And they are healed of sin and reconciled by one of his actions, penance. This means that, if a Christian's conscience is burdened by serious sin, the path of forgiveness through the sacrament of penance becomes necessary for full participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Penance and Eucharist have both a theological and a psychological task. Theologically, forgiveness can only come from God, who sees and loves in us what he sees and loves in his Son.<sup>37</sup> Psychologically, forgiveness involves peace in one's heart, a freedom from what would otherwise hold us back, and a commission to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven. It is entering the world of forgiveness that is the heart of the paschal mystery. Theologically, reconciliation with God and with the Church is proclaimed by the gospel and offered in the absolution of the priest. It is also provided in the communion of the Eucharistic table. Psychologically, reconciliation asks not **only of God**, do **you** love me, but also of **the local assembly**, "can **you** forgive me as well?" In other words, asking forgiveness of God and forgiveness of the local assembly are tasks which must be constantly exercised. Both lead to forgiveness of oneself, which is essential if we are to hear the love of God and embrace the men and women who form the Church with us. Reconciliation between God and

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<sup>36</sup> CCC., no.1396.

<sup>37</sup> This theological concept of forgiveness and reconciliation is found in preface 7 of the Sundays in Ordinary Time.

the Church is also established as men and women break bread together in the Eucharistic celebration.

With regard to the reception of the Blessed Sacrament, the traditional and immemorial custom of the Church has always been unmistakably clear: let a person wishing to receive holy communion truly examine his conscience and, if he is in the state of mortal sin, let him not receive holy communion (no matter how contrite he may consider himself to be) without first availing himself of sacramental confession.<sup>38</sup> Otherwise, instead of benefiting from holy communion, a person commits a sacrilege. And, in St. Paul's words, such a person draws condemnation on himself (1 Cor. 11:28). Similarly, Pope John Paul II (in his encyclical on Holy Thursday 2003 entitled *the Eucharist and the Church*) stresses that anyone conscious of a "grave sin" must go to confession before receiving Communion.<sup>39</sup> The Eucharist is too great a gift to be treated with abuse and disparagement.

Peter Fink maintains that the Eucharist is the premier sacrament of reconciliation. But what is to be done for those who again eat poison even after feasting on the medicine of immortality? What else can be done for those whose very actions separated them from the place of true forgiveness except to lead them back to that place of forgiveness?"<sup>40</sup> The question of penance is not what to do about a sinful world - the question is, as Peter Fink puts it, what to do about weeds amid the wheat? That's evangelism!<sup>41</sup>

### 5.3.3 The Sequence of the Reception of the Sacraments of Initiation and Penance

The sacraments of Christian initiation (also called the "mysteries of initiation") - baptism, Eucharist and confirmation constitute a unity because they establish the foundations of the Christian life. It is essential to clarify that the relationship of the sacraments of baptism and confirmation to the Eucharist should not be simply seen from the perspective of the sequencing of sacraments. The faithful born anew by baptism are strengthened by confirmation and are then nourished by the Eucharist.<sup>42</sup> It must be reiterated, in fact, that our reception of baptism and confirmation is ordered to the Eucharist. Accordingly, our pastoral

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<sup>38</sup> *Council of Trent*, Sess. XIII, chap. VII, c. 7.

<sup>39</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*: On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church, (Vatican: Vatican Publishing House, April 17, 2003), nos. 36-7. The necessity of celebrating sacramental penance before receiving the Eucharist is also emphasized in the *CCC.*, no.1385 and *CCL*, c. 916.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Fink, "History of the Sacrament of Reconciliation," in *Alternative Futures of Worship: Reconciliation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 77.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 251.

practice should reflect a more unitary understanding of the process of Christian initiation.<sup>43</sup> This is also necessary in relation to penance because the mysteries of initiation have an intrinsic relationship with sacramental penance.

The current pastoral practice in the Roman Catholic Church is that these four sacraments are received in this order: baptism, penance, Eucharist and confirmation. At the same time, it should be recalled that taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life.<sup>44</sup> This means that the other sacraments are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented towards it.<sup>45</sup> Even if confirmation does not follow baptism, the relation of these two sacraments to the Eucharist, as with the other four sacraments (penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders and marriage), is not in doubt.

Interestingly, in the Eastern Church the sacraments of initiation are usually administered at the same time, even in the case of infants.<sup>46</sup> But in the Latin rite, adults are normally baptized after enrolment in the catechumenate and it is only then that the sacraments of initiation can be administered concurrently. As a matter of fact, in the Latin Church and other Western denominations, the rite of infant baptism was developed for use with babies. In these traditions, the Eucharist and confirmation are postponed until the child achieves the age of self-awareness. According to Roman Catholic theology, receiving the sacrament of penance before receiving first Holy Communion and confirmation is not optional, but rather normative.

Remember that until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reception of the sacraments of penance and Holy Eucharist occurred when a person was usually a teenager. However, on August 8, 1910, Pope St. Pius X issued the decree *Quam singulari* which permitted a child, who has attained the age of reason (at about the seventh year), to receive both the sacraments of penance and Holy Communion.<sup>47</sup> Pope St. Pius X understood that a child's moral conscience begins to develop with his/her ability to reason. Children can know right from wrong, the meaning of the commandments, and the nature of sin, mortal and venial. Frankly, if children can in the

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<sup>43</sup> Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation: *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22nd February 2007), 17.

<sup>44</sup> *LG*, no. 11.

<sup>45</sup> *CCC*, 1324.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Fitzgerald, "Understanding the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church" *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America*, 11 June 1985, [www.goarch.org/-/the-sacraments](http://www.goarch.org/-/the-sacraments). Accessed July 17, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Pope Pius X, Papal Encyclical: *Quam singulari*: Decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments on First Communion, 15 August 1910.



simplest way understand the profound mystery of the Holy Eucharist, they probably can understand the notion of sin and repentance. It is upon this understanding that Pope Pius X underscored the need for the sacrament of penance. The custom of not admitting to confession children who have attained the use of reason, or of never giving them absolution, is condemned in *Quam singulari*.<sup>48</sup>

In traditional practice, first penance before first Communion is prudent from a catechetical perspective. Children are taught the great love of God for each of us, especially in the fundamental belief that Jesus, true God who became true man like us in all things but sin, suffered, died, and rose to forgive our sins and grant us salvation. Through baptism, we enter into this saving mystery, and we struggle to live our baptism through prayer, worship, good works, and obedience to God's commandments. Yet, at times we freely choose to sin. Just as a child understands that "breaking" his parents' rules offends them and incurs punishment, so a child can understand the consequences of "breaking" God's rules. We trust, however, in the infinite love and mercy of God which is shown to each of us in the sacrament of penance. In this sacrament, we repent of our sins with sincere contrition, confess them, and receive absolution. Through regular confession, we are safeguarding the presence of our Lord in our souls in sanctifying grace and are preparing for our ultimate union with the Lord.

Since the Holy Eucharist enables us now to have an intimate union with our Lord, each person should receive Him in Holy Communion in a state of grace and with purity of soul. Such a spiritual attitude is intrinsically linked to the sacrament of penance. For this reason, first penance always precedes first Communion.<sup>49</sup> However, one does not need to go to confession each time he receives Holy Communion. Nevertheless, a person should appreciate the intrinsic relationship between penance and Holy Eucharist and have the spiritual discipline of regular confession along with the frequent reception of Holy Communion.

Taking everything into account, it would seem that one could not in principle abrogate a common and general practice except with the consent of the Holy See. Having consulted episcopal conferences, the Holy See believes that it is proper to continue the Church's custom

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> The traditional sequence of receiving first penance before first Communion was affirmed in the norms of the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy (April 11, 1971).

of placing first confession before first Communion.<sup>50</sup> However, the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) recognised that in some dioceses, an “experiment” was allowed to postpone first penance until after first Holy Communion, but noted that such experiments were to be re-examined, and only continued after consultation with the Holy See and in a spirit of communion with it. Nevertheless, on May 23, 1973, the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy and the Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments with the approval of Pope Paul VI declared that “these experiments should cease and the everybody everywhere should conform to the decree *Quam singulari*.”

Conversely, currently there is a decline in the understanding and appreciation of the sacraments of initiation and especially penance and yet these establish the foundations of Christian life. It is therefore appropriate to evaluate and consider the theological and pastoral order of the sacraments of initiation and penance in order to see which practice better enables the faithful to put the sacrament of the Eucharist at the centre, as the goal of the whole process of initiation. According to the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation it is desirable that where experiments are carried out, these be not isolated cases but the fruit of a reflection of the whole episcopal conference that confirms the practical decision for the entire territory under its supervision.<sup>51</sup> This undertaking is essential because the catechesis of Christian initiation is a basic, integral and systematic formation in the faith.

As a priest, I have seen the challenge in relation to the sequence of sacraments. I have witnessed children at the age 6 or 7 making their first confession but who really have no clear concept of what exactly they are celebrating. The children can memorise the prayers but even with good instruction some concepts such as mortal sin, venial sin, contrition, conversion and penance seem to be too much for their age to comprehend. I would suggest that an attempt to renew the sacrament of penance would be done within the overall sacramental structure of the Church’s life. One of the most fruitful things that such a re-orientation might lead to would be a repositioning of penance in the sequence of sacraments of initiation. So, in the light of its origin, I would suggest that for persons baptised as infants, penance should be received after the first reception of Communion. Given that sacramental penance is primarily to forgive mortal sin committed after baptism, might it be possible that children of seven years or below

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<sup>50</sup> See, GDC, Appendix, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2020), 62-3.

are unlikely to consciously offend God and neighbour in such a grave way? If so, in their case the Eucharist becomes the ordinary sacrament of reconciliation as well as a sign of *reconciliatio cum ecclesia*. In my view, therefore, first confession would be celebrated after first Holy Communion, that is, at about 8 years or above when children have attained more moral and cognitive development. This would enable the intended effects of this sacrament to be actually realized in the lives of the children who receive it. Then perhaps confirmation would follow say after about two or three years.

The suggestion that the sacrament of penance needs to be celebrated after first Holy Communion is made on theological grounds, but it would also be pastorally more effective. In the present sequence we often seek to use confirmation in later childhood or adolescence as a form of renewal of faith or, if you like, as renewal of baptismal commitment. However, looking at penance in relation to baptism and Eucharist enables us to appreciate that penance is precisely a way of renewing our baptism. Confirmation as sacrament cannot do it because it is not about the renewal of baptism but a stage of the sealing of Christianity created in baptism especially with the reception of the fullness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Sacraments are supposed to do what they say; they are not subject to our desire to make of them what we want them to be. Confirmation renders the bond with the Church more perfect because while a baptized person is already a member, reception of the sacrament of confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace. So, is penance not the best means at our disposal to use as baptismal renewal, as renewal, that is, in the Christian life? This is quite appropriate because penance is about conversion whereas confirmation affirms a baptized person's Christian belief, especially one baptized as an infant.

To see the legitimacy of this proposal would require us to appreciate the different meanings which the words conversion, repentance and penance have taken on in the course of the reform of the Rite of Penance. Even though these words were very close in their original meanings, they have taken on different shades of meaning over time. Conversion particularly as understood in terms of the New Testament Greek word, *metanoia*, has greater breadth and depth to it. The new sequence of the sacrament of penance that I am suggesting here would take in this broader and richer understanding of conversion as a passover into communion with Christ and out of the sinfulness which impedes that communion. Considering the relationship of penance to baptism and the Eucharist and given an understanding of penance as conversion, sacramental penance would offer a renewal of the

whole of the Christian life. The pastoral advantage of this perspective is that it provides an opportunity to look at Christian life and conversion at an age at which it would be more appropriate to consider the real issues of Christian conversion than is at present where quite young children are introduced to the sacrament of penance.

Perhaps the other vital aspect to think about in relation to revitalising sacramental penance is the importance of frequent confession. I have known individuals who made their first penance followed by first Holy Communion, and then never went to confession again, except maybe before Confirmation. Here a rule is followed, but its spirit is not lived. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that subsequent repentance and recourse to the sacrament of penance can release, or increase, the fruitfulness of the sacrament.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, good catechesis not only requires that we keep the sequence of these sacraments in order, but also that we show their intrinsic relationship to each other. If parents and religious educators provide sound and positive catechesis to prepare children for the reception of these sacraments, they will be providing a strong spiritual foundation for the rest of the child's life.

#### **5.3.4 The Need for a Renewed Catechesis**

At the time when the sacrament of penance is continually declining, there is a deep need for a more comprehensive articulation of the Roman Catholic tradition of reconciliation. This concern has become obvious through my own experience as a priest and my study of sacramental theology. I am certainly not alone in my concern. Many theologians and religious scholars agree that Catholics are not thoroughly instructed in the dynamics of this wonderful sacrament. This deficit among Catholic Christians might be because our catechetical instruction has traditionally been directed at children of 6 to 7 years of age preparing for their first confession. If the sacrament of penance is as dynamic and complex as our Catholic history reveals, our current practice of elementary-level instruction does not provide enough depth to convey it. Intriguing questions indeed, but what would be the best response?

Fink insists that one should not talk about the future of the sacrament without raising the question of catechesis.<sup>53</sup> Both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II call for a new

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<sup>52</sup> See ST III, q. 69, a. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Fink, "A Catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance," *Liturgical Ministry* 14 (2005): 38.

evangelisation as a fundamental response in the new age in which we live.<sup>54</sup> All Catholics are called to a deep renewal with regard to the sacramental life of the Church. We must enrich our vocation to holiness of life by developing a courageous and bold sacramental catechesis. Confession might then be part of their pastoral role. It seems to me that a meticulous catechesis would be helpful. It would enhance good Christian living according to God's commandments as well as promoting ongoing catechesis directed at both young and old Catholics.

It is true that our catechetical system has been a straightforward method which focused on the tangible actions of reconciliation: listing sins, memorising the act of contrition, doing one's penance and reciting the prayers once absolved. This was a useful approach, but if we confine ourselves to this catechesis, we ignore the immense richness of our living sacramental theology. The renewed *Rite of Penance* promulgated over 40 years ago has improved catechesis to some extent, although many would say the effect has been minimal and patchy. I agree with Julia Upton that "the perceived meaninglessness of our old patterns of confession has been addressed in the revised ritual, but full implementation still awaits solid catechesis on reconciliation and its place in our lives today."<sup>55</sup> Now is the time for a continuing and radical transformation of religious education. In order to achieve a better understanding of the sacrament of penance, we must develop a meaningful catechesis that is directly applicable to our changing culture and contemporary life. This strategy must be realistic, integrating and balancing a contemporary appreciation for the vast complexities in the areas of sin and forgiveness, and those of the past.

The catechism must no longer be about a personal checklist for confession, but about interpersonal relationships and social interchange. It should incorporate the Catholic social teaching so as to be an effective way of articulating the importance of believers living responsible and faithful lives. Our modern culture is often driven by excessive individualism whereas Catholic tradition should proclaim that the person is not only sacred but also social. Since Catholic social teaching is intimately linked to our common humanity and to the joyous celebrations that unify us in faith, it certainly should address aspects such as social sin, solidarity with others, forgiveness within the web of community relationships and our

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<sup>54</sup> See Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: On Evangelization in the Modern World (8 December 1975); John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*: On the Missionary activity of the Church (7 December 1990).

<sup>55</sup> Julia Upton, *A Time for Embracing* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 15.

personal responsibility to act justly. If this emphasis is clear, Catholic social teaching and the sacrament of penance will be empowering, and indeed will lead to an enhanced lived-out experience of reconciliation, justice and forgiveness in the world. I believe that communal reconciliation services that engage believers with each other will help the development of an improved appreciation for sacramental confession as well as a growth of the Catholic tradition which teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfilment in community.

In preparing young people to face the challenges that modern living throws at us, we can no longer assume and presume that the old traditional catechetical and pastoral principles prevail. We must accept the need for a new evangelisation with regard to modern culture in which, and according to which, we live out our lives. A thorough catechesis is necessary in order to keep the Church alive, especially given the challenges of maintaining the integrity of Catholic faith and values. My hope is that this will help to revive the theological meaning and understanding of the sacrament as an encounter with God's love, mercy and forgiveness. A life-long catechesis will enable us to engage with the Catholic faithful in a way which will make the three rituals of penance a genuine expression of the Church's sacramental life.

The reality is that evangelisation is never complete. Believers are in constant need of evangelisation if freshness, vigour and strength are to be maintained. There are two levels to this new evangelisation: the realisation that we must continue to be evangelised; and the need for a renewed catechesis in the face of cultural change. We need good preaching and catechesis on sin, rather than worrying that it might drive the people from the pews and reduce the Sunday collection! We must remember that the two principal religious books that made it to the bestseller lists in recent years have been Karl Menninger's *Whatever Became of Sin?* and M. Scott Peck's *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. The churches may not be talking enough about sin. However, people obviously want to hear about it and are paying good money to read about it. Even though the sacrament of penance appears to be on the wane on the theological, pastoral, liturgical, and personal levels, we believe that rethinking a new approach to catechesis in an age of globalisation might help promote effective and fruitful celebrations of this great sacrament.

Catechetical initiatives need to look at the current church/world relationship. Firstly, how does the Church see its purpose and relevance in and for the modern, intercultural world? Secondly, how does the Church understand its catholicity vis-à-vis secularism? I maintain that what we currently need in order to revive the sacrament of penance is a renewed awareness and appreciation for communal reconciliation (as in the second rite for

the reconciliation of multiple penitents with individual confession and absolution). This form is more expressive of the need for personal conversion and for reconciliation with God and with the Church (others). There is, of course, already a catechesis that particularly stresses individual confession and absolution – the form which is the only ordinary way of celebrating the sacrament highlighted by the reformed *Rite of Penance*.<sup>56</sup> However, in the last thirty years, people's attitudes towards the sacrament of penance have greatly changed. Many Christians have begun to wonder why the sacrament exists, and what forms it ought to take. To address this shift of behaviour and attitude, there must be a fresh catechesis. Theological issues such as the understanding of sin, the mercy of God, salvation of humanity through Christ, reconciliation, and forgiveness need to be re-explored. These issues must become part of the everyday life of Christians if the revitalization of the sacrament of penance is to occur.

Catechesis is a task for the priests, penitents and the liturgical assembly. This requires homilies, workshops, lectures, catechism classes and discussion. With a more energetic approach and a bit more detailed explanation of the effects of sin and forgiveness, there will be better results. Ours is a journey of hope and faith whereby, through prayer and by changing our way of life, we will move to become like Christ. We need to appreciate the depth of sin if we are to understand the sacrament of penance as a way to heal its effects. Priests are called to be genuine healers. Penitents need to be genuine penitents. The community of believers needs to become genuine forgivers as they adapt to the idea of having been forgiven. Actually, the catechesis I suggest needs to become part of the Catholic way of believing and praying which will allow the sacrament to become effective in Catholic life.

The fundamental issue in all of this is to help people know how they can relate to God in their everyday lives. The notion of God has to have a real significance in life. This involves an ongoing journey of learning to give over our lives to God, and all that might happen within them, including avoiding whatever we call sin. It is difficult to understand and appreciate sin as an offence against God if the reality of God doesn't register as a genuine part of one's life journey. There is no point in celebrating what has been called a "medicinal" sacrament if we have little sense of what the sacrament is supposed to address. Christians must appreciate that God is loving, merciful, faithful, not distant from them but as revealed

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<sup>56</sup> See *RP*, no. 31. See also *CCL*, no. 960.

by Jesus Christ ('whoever sees me sees the Father,' John 14:9). This means that our relationship to Jesus is paramount. Jesus emphasizes, "If you love me, you must keep my commandments (John 14:15). It is our hardness of heart that makes us commit sin or refuse to do what Jesus asks of us.

Discovering in a more profound way what is sinful in one's life will require unveiling not only what others have named as sin, but also what each person inwardly knows to be sin within his or her heart. And with that inner knowledge, the mystery of sin, reconciliation and forgiveness will be appreciated. Good catechesis on sin, reconciliation and forgiveness is nothing less than a presentation of the paschal mystery of Christ and its invitation to enter the journey that mystery presents. John's first letter reminds us that we are all sinners: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). But to all who are sinners, reconciliation and forgiveness are likewise offered. "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sin and purify us (1 John 1:9). "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we are in fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, the son God, purifies us from all sin (1 Jn 1:7).

Thomas Groome argues that an effective catechetical approach should be based on five pedagogical movements: present action, critical reflection, the Christian story and vision, appropriating the Christian story, and choosing a faith response.<sup>57</sup> He believes that the awakening of religious education should be based on a shared Christian praxis approach: "a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian story and its vision towards the end of lived Christian faith."<sup>58</sup> However, religious education in all cases must go beyond attempts to teach objective facts but also try to engage and affect lives lived and to build character. This requires a model of dialogue rather than transmission.<sup>59</sup> Christian education must invite participants to "come and see" as Philip invited Nathaniel (Jn 1:46) or as the Samaritan woman invited the people of her city (Jn 4:29), so that they can draw their own conclusions. This might enable Catholic Christians to have a deeper conviction in their Christian traditions and practices, including sacramental penance.

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1980), 184.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas H. Groome, "Total Catechesis/ Religious Education: A Vision for Now and Always," in *Horizons and Hopes: The Future of Religious Education*, ed. Thomas H. Groome and Harold Daly Horrell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 1.



It is also necessary that parishes organise scripture study programmes on penance and reconciliation ministry. Educating Christians about the biblical foundation of the sacrament of penance and its importance in the life of believers will strengthen their conviction and commitment to it. More importantly, catechists and other lay ministers who help in preparing the children and adults for sacraments need to have sufficient knowledge of scripture and sacramental theology. This will enable them to give substantial instruction to their catechumens so that they might realise the need for God's forgiveness and the importance of celebrating the sacrament of penance regularly in their own lives as well as responding to the gospel call to forgive others. In light of this, Jeffrey Odell Korgen makes an important observation that "a wealth of conversion leads up to the moment of seeking of God's forgiveness and, to be lasting, the forgiveness must be ongoing," such as in small acts of sharing ordinary life.<sup>60</sup> The realization of the personal need for God's forgiveness facilitates a person's recognition that even those who wrong him/her deserve forgiveness.

#### **5.3.5 Penance and the Institutional Church**

For many the sacrament of penance is seen as part of the institutional Church. Theologically, it is clear that the Church is primarily a community that mediates God's forgiveness offered freely to us in Christ, Christ being the sacrament of God and the Church being the sacrament of Christ. In this regard, we can talk of the Church as an institution. It is an instrument that mediates forgiveness between God and an individual as well as between Christians themselves. The *Rite of Penance* was welcomed enthusiastically because of: its emphasis on reconciliation and not confession; communal expressions and not the old individual self-purification; and the ministry of all the baptised and not the ordained. One senses the emphasis on the role of the community when the rite articulates: "the whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation that has been entrusted to it by the Lord."<sup>61</sup> So, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.

While it is not currently fashionable to talk of the Church as an institution, it may be an interesting topic for reflection in relation to the question of the decline of sacramental confession. Raphael Gallagher argues that for the sacrament of penance to be meaningful to

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<sup>60</sup> Jeffrey Odell Korgen, "Forgiveness Unbound: Reconciliation Education is Helping Rwanda to Heal," *America* (September 2007), 17-18.

<sup>61</sup> *RP*, no. 8. See also Matthew 18:18, John 20:23.

Christians, the Church as an institution must be a reconciling community.<sup>62</sup> He maintains that “the institutional language surrounding the sacrament is lacking a vital element: the need for the Church, publicly as an institution, to acknowledge its own sinfulness.”<sup>63</sup> My own belief is that if the Church’s role in the ministry of reconciliation is to be an instrument of salvation, the apparent decline in sacramental confession signals that the Church has been remiss in providing a meaningful celebration of the sacrament. What type of institution are we becoming?

Civil society can be harsh in excluding people who are not considered acceptable for social, economic or sexual reasons. It is important that the institution of the Church does not practise the same policy of exclusion. However, for some categories of people the Church appears to be an unforgiving institution despite the friendly words we use about the mercy and forgiveness of a loving God. People in second unions or same sex relationships, to take obvious examples, are staying away from the institutional Church because they feel it has no place for them and that they have to be ‘converted’ before they can be accepted back. People in “irregular” situations may wonder whether “a friendly” priest whom they find helpful is working on his own initiative and without proper authorization. Paradoxically, these Catholic Christians may not experience a sense of healing and reconciliation within the institution of the Church. Is it not scandalous that they cannot experience a sense of welcome, healing and forgiveness within the Church? Admittedly, we must remember that it is absolutely necessary for the penitents to be sorry for their sins and to resolve to avoid committing them again in order to profit from sacramental forgiveness.<sup>64</sup> How to combine both elements is indeed a huge dilemma.

One of the ways in which the Church has responded to the many crises in the history of the sacrament of penance is to see each major development or renewal of the ‘great sacrament’ as a response to a theological question. In other words, any crisis is theological because when the sacrament is no longer widely celebrated, the possibility of the Church being a sacrament of salvation is reduced. So, the response to each crisis must be pastoral in the sense that the Church’s answer must always offer new ways of enabling people to have the possibility of sacramental forgiveness. For example, when public canonical penance

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<sup>62</sup> Raphael Gallagher, “New Life for a ‘Great Sacrament’,” *The Furrow* 47 (1996): 201-203; See also James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986).

<sup>63</sup> Gallagher, “New Life for a ‘Great Sacrament’,” 200.

<sup>64</sup> See *RP*, no. 33.

proved impractical, because of the intervention of the Celtic monks, the Church developed a private celebration of penance using the ministry of the priest rather than through public celebration and the ministry of the bishop. I suggest that one of the ways for reviving the sacrament of penance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be for the Church to acknowledge its need of repentance. However, the Church must experience God's forgiveness in a real way and not just on the personal level; it should also apply to the entire institution.

Gallagher insists that the credibility of the institutional Church is a necessary component of its sacramental credibility, since sacraments are celebrated within the Church and the reality to which they point should be visibly lived within the Church.<sup>65</sup> To say that the sign would be visible brings us back to the aspect of the Church as an institution. We must acknowledge that the Church as an institution has committed terrible errors or "sins" such as the child sexual abuse scandals. This is highly regrettable and shameful. The Church itself needs to ask for forgiveness. Acknowledging its sinfulness at institutional level is a sign that the Church is both sinful and holy. This is not only to say that there are sinners in the Church, but that my sins are, in some way, making the Church sinful.

We must acknowledge that some of the current lifestyles such as second unions, gay relationships or arranging abortions will, undoubtedly, remain irreconcilable with gospel values. However, it is important that the Church does not treat harshly, or appear to be excluding, some of its members who are struggling with these complex situations. The Church as an institution must support them so that they do not feel as if they are being condemned or excommunicated. The scandal of the institutional Church is not that we welcome sinners, but that we appear to be rejecting them. No one in the Christian community can be excluded from the gift and grace of the sacrament of penance. Ours must be a Church ready to welcome broken people. This reminds us that we are a Church of sinners called to live a life of holiness. What is important is that the Church is an institution which mediates with individuals in the world, or we will lose all credibility as God's ambassadors of reconciliation. The good news of the salvation of humanity is that God loves us with an everlasting love. However, we cannot repent and be converted unless we take sin seriously. Total conversion and reconciliation with God and with the Church is to be gained through acknowledging human weakness and God's abundant mercy - a goal to be reached through serious reflection and conviction.

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<sup>65</sup> Gallagher, "New Life for a 'Great Sacrament,'" 202.

The pastoral response ought to have institutionalised public rites of reconciliation in which the Church, as an institution, asks the forgiveness of God for its sins. I believe such an acknowledgement, publicly and ritually, would restore some of the lost credibility of this wonderful sacrament. This proposal should not be confused with a rite of penance that has communal elements during which people come to celebrate the sacrament in one of the approved forms. It calls for a separate celebration where the local Christian community can pray together for forgiveness for the sins which darken the credibility of the Church. The perfect example is that of Pope Francis during the closing Mass at the World Meeting of Families in Dublin's Phoenix Park on August 26 2018 when he asked for forgiveness from God for the "sins" and "betrayal" of the Church's sexual abuse scandals.<sup>66</sup> It was a touching moment as the Holy Father led the carefully worded Penitential Rite that named those specific examples of hurt and betrayal. What a testimony that was to the world! His time in Ireland was remarkable in that it highlighted not only an honest recognition for the need of institutional reconciliation, but it also placed forgiveness at the forefront of our faith once again. This is the only way for the Church to regain its moral authority. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. Seeing the Church as an institution asking public pardon for its sins could be a useful step in the recovery of the sacramental aspect of reconciliation. If the Church manages to show that it is itself both a centre of healing and reconciliation and also in need of forgiveness, I think that there will be a greater possibility that individual Christians might see the relevance of celebrating the sacrament of penance in their own lives.

On a practical level it would be helpful if this communal ceremony of the Church's asking forgiveness for its sins were to stand on its own, not in the context of a Eucharistic celebration. Very significantly this would leave more liturgical possibilities for creative lay involvement. Every Eucharistic celebration is essentially a reconciling moment whereby members of the Church are reconciled with God. So, it would be better not to confuse two issues: the institutional Church publicly asking forgiveness for its sins (a Church in need of reconciliation), and the Church as a community celebrating the Eucharist where God's forgiveness is received (a Eucharistic assembly reconciled). I suggest that having a paraliturgy where laypeople can also participate in asking for forgiveness for the sins of the institutional Church might be a clearer and more powerful way of not only highlighting a

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<sup>66</sup> See Pope Francis, Apostolic Journey to Ireland, *Vatican News*, August 26, 2018.

Church in need of forgiveness but also of restoring the trust among Christians that has been broken. It would be a public gesture in which the faithful could repent for their own sins too. By making plural the words of Psalm 41, “Lord, be merciful to us, heal us, for we have sinned against you,” the Church becomes a clear sacramental sign.

### 5.3.6 **Inculturation: The Basis for Enhancing a Christian Spirituality of Reconciliation**

The notion of inculturation underlines the importance and power of culture. As a process of human activity, culture expresses what humanity can create and simultaneously be created by. Man/woman the author of culture is capable of transforming this world and bringing about a new and better future. *Gaudium et Spes* has a very strong and optimistic sense of this capacity. This is because culture is the basic context of all human creative activity and simultaneously the product of this activity. Cultural systems shape people by means of processes that result in support, maintenance, communication and social control. All this indicates the relevance of culture to the Church’s own mission of evangelisation. According to Thomas Clarke what makes the evangelisation of culture and cultures crucial to the Church’s mission of bringing Christ’s love, peace and justice to world is the power and energy that reside there. All the greater for being hidden – as the wellspring of the most powerful resources of persons, groups and peoples.<sup>67</sup> So, there is an urgency on the part of the Church to be concerned with culture, for culture and Church mutually require one another. Culture can only find fulfilment when it is open to becoming Church, and Church needs culture as a point of insertion.<sup>68</sup> This means that for the sacrament of penance to be revitalised, the question of inculturation is crucial.

Gallagher asserts that the decline of the sacrament of penance is a cultural phenomenon. For him it is not that people no longer feel the need for confession: they are simply going elsewhere for it. Counselling, therapy and spiritual direction, used in their broad senses, have replaced the sacrament for many Catholics.<sup>69</sup> The sense of guilt and hurt which characterise most of our lives needs some resolution, and it is providential that there are the above means to deal with it. In one respect this has been a natural replacement of one private means of reconciliation (as in confession) with another private means (as in counselling). What this means is that the experience of reconciliation has shifted outside the formal

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Clarke, “To Make Peace, Evangelize Culture,” *America* 150/21 (1984): 415.

<sup>68</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No.57.

<sup>69</sup> Gallagher, “New Life for a Great Sacrament,” 204.

sacramental structure. Actually, this is no problem for people who are not Catholic. However, for Catholics this is not a welcome development. If reconciliation becomes not just private but non-sacramental as well, Catholicism runs the risk of becoming a pragmatic means of survival in life rather than being at the service of the intervention of God in our lives. The logical consequence of this type of perception would be a growing neglect of the celebration of the sacrament of penance.

There has been much talk of inculturation as a new principle in theology, especially in the development of African theology, for enhancing Catholicism. The term may be new, but the concept is not. In the Roman Catholic Church, the terminology of ‘inculturation’ dates back more than six decades.<sup>70</sup> Raymond Aina maintains that the term inculturation arose in the 1960s through further reflections on traditional religion, culture and with African voices objecting to the patronising attitude fostered by the colonialists.<sup>71</sup> The North American theologian, Jay Carney is not exaggerating when he says that inculturation theology embodied hopes that Africa could indigenise a Western religion by forging a new way of religious living independently from the former dominant European powers.<sup>72</sup> The Biblical writers, the Church Fathers, the medieval theologians, the Reformers, down to our own day, the efforts of all theologians have been to ‘inculturate’ theology, namely to express Christian faith in culturally comprehensible terms. In this regard, Vatican II was a major breakthrough in the Church and was characterised by its optimism and openness to the world especially as exemplified in *Gaudium et Spes*. While deliberating on the mission of the Church in the modern world, respect for non-western cultures and liberation from social injustice were identified as important theological themes. Any talk about inculturation has necessarily to take into account the multi-cultural context in which people live. Also, different cultures need to ‘speak’ to each other to achieve mutual enrichment.

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<sup>70</sup> Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (London: Wipf & Stock, 1988), 10. Shorter thinks that this term goes back to the Jesuits, especially to Joseph Mason, professor at the Gregorian University during the time of Vatican II. Masson wrote: “Today there is a more urgent need for a Catholicism that is inculturated.” See J. Masson, “L’Eglise ouverte sur le monde,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 84 (1962): 1032-43. But according to Roest Crolius, the term was first used by D. Segura P.B (M. Afr.) See Roest Crolius, “Inculturation” in *Following Christ in Mission* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1995), 110. He adds: “However, it was after the Internal Scientific Congress of Missiology, held at the Pontifical Urban University from 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> October 1975 and the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of Society of Jesus 1974/5 that the term gained wider acceptance.

<sup>71</sup> Raymond A. Aina, “The Mission of the Church Today: Reconciliation?” *African Ecclesial Review* 5 (2008): 221.

<sup>72</sup> Jay J. Carney, “Roads to Reconciliation: An Emerging Paradigm of African Theology.” *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 550.

One cannot dispute that we live in a society where people encounter various rituals and cultural experiences either individually, with those around them, or as communities. In many cultures, for instance in Africa, rituals of reconciliation are used to bring about peace and harmony between individuals and communities. Among the Bantu peoples, as we saw in chapter one of this dissertation, sin and disruptive behaviours in society are dealt with using reconciliatory ceremonies and ritual elements. The primary symbol of reconciliation for many African cultures is that of community. It emphasized that sin and evil have a social impact, and thus need communal rituals of healing and transformation.<sup>73</sup>

In a society where there are a lot of broken relationships (hatred, anger, indifference, misunderstanding, violence), the concept of inculturation is one of the dimensions in theology which can be drawn upon to enhance the Christian spirituality of reconciliation. Robert Schreiter believes that cultural expressions and values may point to an important aspect of the Christian message so that it is well received and assimilated. This is because at the heart of the Christian message lies a narrative and not a proposition. The Christ event thrives on a certain understanding that allows the story to be retold.<sup>74</sup> Inculturation needs to be taken seriously as it is important in renewing the way the Catholic faith is received in different cultures and contexts. This means that, contrary to what earlier missionaries in Africa thought, people's cultures should not be condemned but can themselves adopt whatever is relevant and appropriate to the Christian message.

If a Catholic spirituality of reconciliation is to be revived, this will require a renewed sense of Catholicity that has a point of intersection between culture and religion. The remedy for sin and evil is to have a society or a Church which has rituals or ways that can bring about conversion and healing. In examining cultural and Christian perspectives of reconciliation, Kathleen Hughes argues that effective reconciliation can only happen in a community where the majority of the people believe that they need it and also that the minority deserve it.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, sacramental confession will be meaningful if someone feels that he or she needs it.

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<sup>73</sup> For further reading in the area of healing rituals and rituals of transformation from an anthropological perspective, see Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976); Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997); Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1998).

<sup>74</sup> Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 131.

<sup>75</sup> Kathleen Hughes "Reconciliation: Cultural and Christian Perspective," in *Reconciliation: The Continuing Agenda*, ed. Robert Kennedy (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 114-28.

Reconciliation unbinds and frees people. Forgiveness brings healing and has a liberating power, while sin and evil have a debilitating effect on the mind.

The reality of sin and evil, reconciliation and forgiveness is an intrinsic part of human life. So, we need to rediscover that just as we are given life daily, so we need to forgive and be forgiven. By way of analogy, the ordinary experiences of reconciliation and forgiveness among individuals and communities suggest that the sacrament of penance is essential. Unfortunately, in the changing context of today's society, the celebration of sacramental penance has seriously stagnated. Perhaps the key question is: What could make this great sacrament a living and meaningful experience for Catholic Christians today? It may be that the theology of inculturation might provide a new framework for influencing the revitalisation of penance. I believe that the interconnectedness between the cultural and Christian perspectives of reconciliation can enrich the meaning and our understanding of the Catholic tradition of penance.

The African cultural ritual of reconciliation, for example, involves a community which comes and sits down together in a large circle. The elder speaks about the issues that need to be resolved and why it is important to iron out differences or the community's concept of evil and sin. He stresses that proper dispositions are required and that the unity of the community is vital. A short time is given for the people to reflect and speak until harmony is reached. This brings joy and peace not only to the community but also to each individual present. As a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness each person goes to everyone else and asks for pardon and gives pardon. Each talks individually to everyone present and embraces each other or shakes hands. Then they share a meal together before returning to their homes. I think now it is time for theologians and spiritual shepherds to adopt some of these African practices of reconciliation which blend daring imagination with grace-filled experiences of the Catholic tradition of penance. Perhaps having a wonderful participative celebration of penance will make the sacrament full of joy and contentment. This kind of new way of celebrating the sacrament will make the faithful receptive to God's mercy. Once the ceremony is concluded they may go home with happiness and peace of mind as described in the gospels. The best example is how Jesus handled the trial of the woman caught in adultery. When he was left alone with the woman, he asked her: "Has no one condemned you? She replied: No one, sir." And Jesus said to her: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again (Jn 8: 10-11).



We know that reconciliation does not happen easily or quickly but is a long and mediated process. Usually it is an awareness of personal weakness and need which opens us to the needs of those around us. As noted in the African reconciliatory paradigm, people are sometimes able to reach out and heal one another because they have “been there” themselves. They are, in effect, being “absorbers” of violence, to say the liberating word.<sup>76</sup> According to the African concept of *Ubuntu*, a person is a person through other persons. Desmond Tutu maintains that the essence of being human is that we are made for togetherness. I would not know how to walk, talk, think, behave except by learning from other human beings.<sup>77</sup> This pattern of interdependence explains the role of the community in the reconciliatory process described in the story of Lazarus (Jn 11:39-44). Jesus calls Lazarus forth from death to life, but it is the community which rolls away the stone and the community who are charged with unbinding him. Surely these participants never thought of themselves as channels of grace. But in offering themselves they were instrumental in mediating God’s gracious presence to others. First and foremost, Lazarus is raised to life and then the other people are graced, in the sense that the smell of death is banished. The perspective in all of this is how people’s shared cultural experiences can influence a liturgical action of the Church.

Rituals are a complex interplay of many elements. They take root in a culture so that they can express the life and religious experience of those for whom they are celebrated. The process of integrating a particular culture into a Christian practice needs to develop over time if its meaning is not to be lost. Relating social and Christian aspects of reconciliation, Schreiter stresses that forgiveness is a gradual process and a decision for a new future that is founded in a relationship with God.<sup>78</sup> The social aspect of reconciliation involves providing structures and processes whereby a fractured society can be reconstructed as truthful and just. This enables it to come to terms with its past, punish wrongdoers, provide some degree of reparation to victims, and promote an atmosphere of trust.<sup>79</sup> He rightly points out that while governments can set up commissions, offer amnesty, and administer punishment, they cannot

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<sup>76</sup> For further reading on the African sense of community and reconciliation see Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*; Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*; Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>77</sup> Desmond Tutu, “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” Longford Lecture in *The Independent*, 16 February 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 15, 58.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

legislate the healing of memories or guarantee forgiveness.<sup>80</sup> Schreiter maintains that the complex task of reconciliation requires more than human effort. Reconciliation between human beings also needs to be recognized as coming from God, but with an invitation to the human being to take part in the process. Rather than trying to find a way to forgive within oneself, the individual needs to discover God's mercy welling up in his own life.<sup>81</sup> It seems to me that Schreiter's most significant contribution centres around his recognition that Christian reconciliation reverses the commonly held perception that reconciliation first requires the perpetrator to repent and seek forgiveness and reparation, as is found in theories of social reconciliation. In Schreiter's view, the victim becomes aware of God's forgiveness and is brought to forgive the oppressor. Guided by God's grace, the victim becomes the agent of reconciliation.

A nurtured relationship with God is what makes reconciliation possible. Schreiter perceives reconciliation to be more of a spirituality – a way of life – rather than a strategy.<sup>82</sup> A spirituality that recognizes and responds to God's reconciling action in the world secures a successful reconciliatory process and involves a way of life, not a series of distinct tasks to be performed. However, spirituality does not lead to action. Strategies are necessary. While reconciliation may be more of a spirituality than a strategy, Schreiter recognizes that strategies are also needed. A balance is required between the two, with spirituality guiding strategy.

Noting the strong communal aspect of Christianity, Schreiter feels that a spirituality of reconciliation requires the building of communities of reconciliation in which people can safely examine their weaknesses and learn again to speak the truth. Communities of reconciliation are communities of hope that work to build a common future built on justice and truth.<sup>83</sup> I believe that in our own time when the sacrament of penance has greatly declined, our major focus should not only be on the frequency with which people approach the sacrament, but also on the depth of their experience once they partake.

To enrich the experience and meaning of the Catholic spirituality of reconciliation, there needs to be a theological and pastoral re-contextualizing of the sacrament. This calls for

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 12, 14. See also Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 42-43, 59.

<sup>82</sup> Schreiter, *Reconciliation and Ministry*, 60; Schreiter, *The ministry of Reconciliation*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, vi, 16-17, 94-95.

a renewed focus on dynamic spiritual experiences that will bring a lasting impression for penitents. Parishes must reconsider developing celebratory practices that will attract people and encourage sacramental participation. Bishops, priests and local church leaders should become aware of the disintegration of the traditional faith community. They should promote helpful cultural practices so that contemporary Catholics will form communities which actually lead to fulfilment and reconciliation.

Focussing on the pastoral practices of penance that highlight its communal dimension is key to providing meaningful penitential experiences that connect parishioners with one another. To encourage Catholic Christians to go to confession, local parishes or dioceses must provide pastoral approaches that facilitate joyful and memorable celebrations of reconciliation. These could include integrating sessions of sacramental confession into annual events such as parish/diocesan days, youth days, and so on. Developing consistent pastoral engagements which also include the theme of reconciliation creates more opportunities for communal celebration of penance outside the traditional penitential services associated with Lent and Advent. This is critically important as it encourages the celebration of penance and thus creates an opportunity to engage with those who might not ordinarily avail of it. In addition to the weekly designated confession times, parishes should consider arranging a combination of private and communal confession sessions (held on weeknight evenings to facilitate working people) with a whole range of devotional prayer experiences. Such an extended pastoral approach could help diversify sacramental and prayer experiences, thereby leading to a new sense of hopefulness within the Church.

### **5.3.7 Why the African Reconciliatory Theology and Paradigm is a Resource for Enriching the Sacrament of Penance?**

I suggest that an African theology of reconciliation (which involves truth-telling, accepting responsibility, repentance, asking for forgiveness and compensation) can enhance the understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of penance. Sin has social consequences and similarly quitting sin or realizing reconciliation requires a sociological shift or a community-based approach. A spirit of togetherness, especially in terms of bringing about healing and reconciliation, needs to be embraced. Once the whole community realises the value of a unified and reconciled web of interdependent existence, they will appreciate the power and joy of celebrating God's love and forgiveness through the ecclesiological celebration of the sacrament.

Desmond Tutu argues that the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs and beliefs as reflected in the Bantu ethos can help Africans realise the reality and necessity of reconciliation for all of humanity.<sup>84</sup> The concept of *ubuntu* can make this a significant contribution simply because its tradition focusses on social relationships, promoting the values of interdependence and togetherness as well as the healing of broken relationships. Nolte-Schamm comments:

This ‘human-centred approach to life’ may help to overcome feelings of disappointment and frustration about people; it may counteract feelings of resentment, antipathy or anger; but also feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame. It may even foster a willingness to forgive and to give someone a ‘second chance.’ Essentially, it has the potential to restore lost hope in humanity and [the latter’s] ability to do and be good.<sup>85</sup> This optimistic worldview is one of the treasures which Africans use as an appropriate way of restoring confidence in our human ability to confront and overcome social problems.

In the African reconciliatory paradigm hurtful sentiments are settled between persons or parties who have offended each other – as is often the case in everyday life – by rituals like hand shaking, patting the back, embracing each other and then having a reunion meal or drink. I suppose that adopting some of these practical sociological embodiments of contrition, reconciliation and forgiveness could enrich sacramental celebration. As a way of showing our turning away from sin and reconciling with God and the Church; penitents may shake hands with the confessor soon after confession and perhaps also embrace or shake hands with one another particularly after the Lord’s prayer during the penitential service. And where possible after the penitential service the Christian community may share together refreshments as a sign of thanksgiving for God’s love and mercy. This tangible embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness between God and humanity serves not only to express the gesture of humility and forgiveness in a human way, but also has the purpose of promoting that inner attitude of conversion of life and purification of heart. And even from the purely human point of view, independently of the Church’s teaching on sacramental activity, such an expression of a human attitude rooted in our bodily nature not only expresses inner attitude, but reciprocally

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<sup>84</sup> See Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 127. Also see. Michael Battle, *The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 35, 57, 64. Many African theologians agree: “We are convinced that the Bantu principle of vital participation can become the basis of a specifically African theological structure of reconciliation.... Communion as participation in the same life and the same means of life will be we believe the centre of this ecclesiological theology.” See Vincent Mulago, “Vital Participation,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 157.

<sup>85</sup> Claudia Nolte-Schamm, “African Anthropology as a Resource for Reconciliation: Ubuntu/Botho as a Reconciliatory Paradigm in South Africa,” *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 379-80.

it strengthens and deepens it. This is the remarkable thing in human beings that the body shapes the soul and the soul shapes the body.

African reconciliatory paradigm is a worldview which does not exist in an individual sense but always within the context of the community. There is agreement among researchers that *ubuntu* theology perceives reconciliation as a reunion of the community. If humans mistreat one another, it displeases God. When they reconcile, they are by the same token also reconciled with God. Tutu ultimately sees *ubuntu* theology as promoting communal reconciliation between God and neighbour.<sup>86</sup> Besides emphasizing human beings' likeness to God, the fullness of humanity only becomes manifest in community. He claims that God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.<sup>87</sup> *Ubuntu* theology can restore humanity and dignity to both perpetrators and victims of violence and create a sense of mutuality among humans who are alienated from one another.<sup>88</sup> This theological vision is able to bridge the terrible rifts created by the injustices and inhumanities of the past. It has the capacity, Tutu stresses, to 'overthrow apartheid' through humanising the oppressor and establishing a sense of South Africans belonging to one another.<sup>89</sup> I believe that this paradigm of reconciliation based on appreciating the sense of community might enrich the Catholic spirituality of reconciliation not only for Africans but for all humanity.

The African paradigm of peace-building and communal reconciliation helps human beings realise that they share a common history and future. They are dependent on each other for their collective well-being. So, it is possible that the sacrament of penance can be more appreciated and enthusiastically embraced if celebrated communally. However, the communal dimension of reconciliation has not been fully adopted by the Africans themselves, and less so by other peoples. Where it has been effectively applied, it has transformed antagonistic people, families, clans, communities and tribes into healed, reconciled and vibrant communities.<sup>90</sup> It has encouraged its enthusiasts to hope for the best and to try to bring out the best in others. This is because it does not give up on people, and it does not despair at their failures and inadequacies. Its five key pillars are dialogue, truth-

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<sup>86</sup> Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

telling, reconciliation, forgiveness and reparation. It is upon these vibrant characteristics that I consider the African theology and reconciliatory paradigm a vital resource for revitalising sacramental confession in Africa and elsewhere.

There is actually a broad consensus among theologians that traditional Western Christianity may benefit from the African focus on the community.<sup>91</sup> Setiloane states that Christianity could be enriched immensely if it were to learn from African tradition about community, that is, of the very sense of being.<sup>92</sup> I believe that the African emphasis on community is quite refreshing and exciting especially if the communal dimension does not prevent the individual from taking personal responsibility and accountability. Just as Western individualism can be both destructive and creative, the all-embracing emphasis of the communal reconciliatory approach can also become harmful if Christians ignore their personal responsibility of making an effort to celebrate the sacrament of penance. Hence, the rite of for reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution seems to be the most appropriate in revitalising the sacrament of penance. This is basically because it fosters the spirit of penance within the Christian community whereby the faithful can have the possibility of individual confession and yet communal penitential celebrations help to sensitise about the social impact of sin and reconciliation. In addition, the faithful especially children are helped to gradually form their conscience about sin in human life as well as enhancing that freedom of making a personal choice to attain God's grace through the sacrament of penance.

#### **5.3.8 Feminists' Contribution**

The historical development of the sacrament of penance has always emphasised the priest's ultimate function, while the laity, - especially women - often feel uninvolved in the sacrament's innate vitality and potential inspiration. My goal in this section is not to disrespect the Catholic Church's institutionalisation of penance but to examine the role which women might play to rekindle it. Although history is vital in order to understand the development of the sacrament, we need to approach the tradition with a hermeneutic of suspicion as well as appreciation. It is important to acknowledge the strengths and

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<sup>91</sup> See M. L. Daneel, *Fambidzano: Ecumenical Movement of Zimbabwean Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989), 272; D Crafford, "The Church in Africa and the Struggle for an African Identity," *Skrif en Kerk* 14 (1993): 163-75.

<sup>92</sup> Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2000), 57.

weaknesses in our history as well as the lessons that will move the Church forward in transformation and in hope. This is what this section of my research aims to touch.

The decline of confession today is what I would call the continuing adherence to a juridical legacy within the celebration of penance as a result of the historical consequences of the Council of Trent and the Celtic penitential manuals. From generation to generation, Catholics, both ordained and lay, have created a legalised culture of celebrating the sacrament of penance that continues to foster a heritage of rigidity. In the words of Julia Upton, “our fixation on the confession of sins in the recent past has actually blinded us to the larger process of reconciliation.”<sup>93</sup> It is time to revisit this historical, theologically complex situation that seems to narrow the worship quality of penance in the way that provides little room for creative sacramental celebration. This critique is similar to the earlier suggestion regarding the need for ecclesial and communal reconciliation. However, the focus here is broader and is about the very character of the sacrament of penance, particularly an active engagement with women in the ministry of reconciliation. I realise that this is not an easy proposal, but it is vital to broaden the ways of enriching the understanding of the sacrament. How we perceive the sacrament of penance is key to how we involve ourselves in celebrating it. This is a challenge that calls for empowerment and leadership because it is an area where the laity, and women in particular, can greatly impact our Catholic practice for the better.

It is a fact that everyone of us has masculine and feminine traits. In women, however, the female characteristics are usually predominant, and the contrary is true for men. Kaye Ashe claims that any experience, including religious experience, is gendered.<sup>94</sup> In fact, I agree with Jenny Girard Malley that the sacrament of penance is an authentic feminine expression of God’s grace within a Church that has, for the most part, been exceptionally masculine and patriarchal.<sup>95</sup> The essence of the sacrament exists in the relationship that it creates with God, with the community and with the penitent – a characteristic which is deemed to be feminine. Monika Hellwig maintains that many women who are quiet centres and anchors in their own homes have special gifts of healing, discernment, calling to

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<sup>93</sup> Julia Upton, *A Time for Embracing*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Kaye Ashe, *The Feminization of the Church?* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 2.

<sup>95</sup> Jenny Girard Malley, “The Relevance of Reconciliation: A Communal Sign to Heal Our Modern World,” (M.A Dissertation, 2008), 34.

repentance and reconciliation.<sup>96</sup> This explains why it is easier for women to ask for forgiveness and subsequently why more Catholic women avail of the sacrament of penance than men. So, I wonder why women cannot be welcome in the renewal of such a “feminine sacrament” within our Church. I certainly agree with the women theologians who suggest that the influence of women’s voices should be integral to a modern expression of reconciliation. Women, I would argue, can play a vital role in the sacramental transformation of the sacrament of penance because it is clear to me that the relational and communal character of forgiveness holds a very feminine charism. In sharing this perspective, I do not in any way aim to diminish the role of men nor do I see this trait as something that separates genders. My intention is to call for the support of a feminine quality that must be encouraged and that is critically needed within the sacramental life of the Church.

In the last thirty years, some work has been done to reinvigorate the overall spirit of reconciliation. This effort has taken place because theologians and Church leaders have wanted to extend and broaden the Church’s understanding of the community’s role within the sacrament. In the 1980’s, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin was an early advocate for an ecclesial renewal of reconciliation that would more fully embrace the historic, communal nature of the sacrament. Basing his proposal upon the successful Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), Cardinal Bernadin outlined a four-stage process with appropriate liturgical rites: the confession of sins, doing penance, the celebration of the sacrament and the prolongation of the sacramental experience.<sup>97</sup> The intention was to model a sacramentology that emphasises not only the sacramental event but the process preceding it and the reflection following it.<sup>98</sup> By adapting the marvellous innovation of RCIA, a renovation of this type would aspire to engage the entire church community in its implementation, resulting in a creative exploration of the process and beauty of a richly communal sacrament. Joseph Favazza elaborates on this proposal and highlights lay empowerment as an integral component of success:

A restored order of penitents would confirm that the historical moment has arrived to rediscover the reconciling ministry of all Christians, carried out in conjunction with, rather than subordination to, the ministry of bishops and priests. The present

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<sup>96</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times, Message of the Sacraments 4* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1982), 112.

<sup>97</sup> See Joseph Favazza, *The Order of Penitents: Historical Roots and Pastoral Future* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 253.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.



model of the sacrament of reconciliation would gradually be informed and transformed by a new, truly communal model of all members of the Church sharing in the one ministry of sacramental reconciliation.<sup>99</sup>

Communal reconciliation services are a great source of hope for elevating the sacrament as a living sign that resonates with and for a diverse and dynamic Church community. It also offers an opportunity for enhancing the role of the laity, most especially women who, so often in this day and age, are the local parish leaders who intimately guide the practice of our Catholic sacraments. I think the point here is not about feminism but to articulate the role of the laity and perhaps the need for a stronger feminine presence within our contemporary Church. Kaye Ashe, a Catholic theologian and advocate for women's voices within the church, claims that:

The Church becomes feminised when women exercise their right and ability to join in the human and religious activities of symbol-making, becoming not only consumers but creators of religious culture. It becomes feminised when women add their voices to the discourse on Christian ethics and claim their authority as moral agents. Church language becomes feminised when it recognises women's existence, experience, history and value; and ministry undergoes a feminisation when every form of it is open to women.<sup>100</sup>

Again, I would argue that the point is not to promote a one-sided message of feminisation only or to encourage male defensiveness. The key aspect is to encourage the feminine quality in our Church, particularly as it exists within reconciliation and forgiveness. I believe that Vatican II's exhorting of the laity to participate in ministry as expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, is a manifestation that the Church values equality, inclusiveness, participation and flexibility.<sup>101</sup> It is in this spirit, therefore, that women's strong sense of reconciliation and forgiveness could be helpful in reviving the sacrament of penance. We must remember that it is only a priest (with faculties) who is the minister of the sacrament of penance. However, in collaboration with priests, the laity can be involved in penitential services especially with taking readings and giving reflections or testimonies on the importance of forgiveness, but not allowing any public confession of sins even when someone may easily do so. They could also lead the congregation in the examination of conscience. Integrating all the various qualities of reconciliation within our Church is a necessary task, one that needs to occur in many ways and in partnership with all the faithful.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>100</sup> Kaye Ashe, *The Feminization of the Church?*, Xiii.

<sup>101</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no 43

Maximizing the gifts and qualities of the laity, especially women, could indeed make this sacrament even more vibrant in the years to come.

#### **5.4 Concluding Reflections and Recommendations: Looking to the Future**

We have looked at attempts of revitalising sacramental confession, but we know that the guidelines given are not going to work wonders. We need only take a frank look at the facts to see that the sacrament of penance is in crisis. What this study hopes to achieve is to evoke in each faithful a more open disposition towards God's love and mercy. Hope would have us to recognise that there is a way out, that we can always do something to revive this important sacrament. When our hearts are opened then it is possible to deepen our understanding and appreciation of penance. This perhaps would make some difference with regards the large numbers who have real difficulty with sacramental confession or be a means to making it more meaningfully celebrated.

Looking to the future, I recommend communal celebrations of penance as in the second rite for reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution. This is a perspective drawn from widespread acceptance among theologians that reconciliation happens best in the midst of the community, all of whom are sinners in need of forgiveness as well as being called to be ambassadors of Christ's healing and peace.<sup>102</sup> Priests are the special ministers of the sacrament of penance and are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation because of the grace of their ordination and the mandate given to them by Christ (John 20:22-23), and because they acknowledge their own sinfulness and are able to welcome other sinners. However, as a worshipping community we must recognise our contribution in Christ's reconciling ministry and his healing presence celebrated as a Church.

Christians need to appreciate the meaning and purpose of reconciliation and penance as a process and a way of life. In this regard, the sacrament of penance should be understood as a journey of ongoing conversion. This means that the various phases of this process, the various moments of the journey (contrition, confession, reconciliation, conversion, penance, forgiveness) all contribute to the reality of the sacrament and must be imbedded within the cultural and daily experiences of the people if it is to be effective. The renewal of penance is

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<sup>102</sup> Karl Rahner gives a list of theologians (Henri de Lubac, Michael Schmaus, Edward Schillebeeckx, Parker Palmer, Joseph Ratzinger, Yves Congar, Herbert Vorgrimler) who subscribe to the notion that reconciliation with the Church is an essential element in the penitential practice of the Church. See Rahner, "Penance as an Additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church," in *Theological Investigations vol.10*, 1 128. See also James Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance*, 265.

indeed a complex interplay of many elements which take root in a culture, not by decree from on high, but because they can express the life and religious experience of those for whom the sacrament is celebrated. I believe that shaping the future of penance is an ongoing task. Hence, it is a wonderful new focus that could promote the celebration of this great sacrament in helping the Catholic faithful understand that the sacrament of penance is an encounter with a God who loves, forgives and grants us new life. Sincere internal contrition and conversion lead to fruitful celebration of God's love and mercy, not mere confession of one's past sins. This positive change in the manner of living is attained by the help of God and with the prayers and support of the community.

The most difficult task we have as Church is to restore a sense of confidence. Confidence that there is a God who cares and who summons us to our own true humanity; confidence that there is a Christ who stands with us as friend and companion; confidence that there are priests who know what it is like to invite people into the friendship of Christ; and confidence that the people of the Church share a common journey and are willing to help each other on that journey. These are, of course, all human confidences. It is important that we strive to achieve them. But as we do, and to the extent that we do, they require at the same time a more important confidence, that which comes from God alone. It invites us to stand humbly before God who is merciful, and who reveals to us in Christ the infinite love that He has for us.

Notions that we can be forgiven our sins by directly asking forgiveness from God instead of confessing to a priest or simply seeking general absolution have led to laxity in repentance as well as to a magical interpretation of the rite. Perhaps the current crisis facing sacramental penance is a challenge that calls for us to explore the theology of the sacrament. It must be emphasised that there are no quick fixes or cheap grace. God's grace is there *ex opere operato*, provided we place no blocks in its path. God is not forced into forgiving my sins, so to speak, but it is important to allow myself to be forgiven, especially by having genuine sorrow and the willingness to change for the better. If Karl Rahner's theory of grace is correct in saying that grace is intrinsic to us, then a person cannot be graced without the effects of the indwelling Trinity becoming accessible to experience.<sup>103</sup> One cannot be graced without being transformed. One cannot be graced without the manifestation of faith, hope and

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<sup>103</sup> See Karl Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," in *T.I.*, vol.1, 297-317.

love. The act of absolution produces an infusion of the unseen and unfelt grace. What we require in the future is a conscious and meaningful celebration of the sacrament of penance in the way that can bear witness to the grace enshrined in ministry of God's love and forgiveness. There are experiences or practices of reconciliation in society (such as *ubuntu* reconciliatory paradigm) that the Church can learn from and even develop so as to revitalise the sacrament of penance. I propose that by drawing out such a holistic understanding of the practice of penance as a moment of experiencing wholeness (that is, peace, joy and love that emanate from a divine-human encounter) the sacrament of penance may perhaps be given new life in our time.

### **Key Pastoral Question for further research**

In the current pastoral practice, those who find themselves in complicated lifestyles that are not in accordance to the teaching of the Catholic Church seem to be left on the peripheral. This is really challenging because salvation is for all as scripture says that Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1Timothy 1:15). So, it is important that all children of God should be satisfactorily ministered to. Since the Church is mother and symbol of God's love, mercy and justice; how can the Church today effectively minister to those in complicated and sensitive situations such as the divorced and remarried as well as those in second unions or gay relationships?

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