

AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO LOOK AFRESH AT THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION, by Irish Kiltegan Father, Donal Dorr

Donal Dorr

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

I'm sure I am not the only one who can remember the difficulty of 'going to Confession' when I was a teenager. We had been instructed in painful detail that it was essential to list all the sins that were considered to be 'mortal'. And we had been told repeatedly that 'any act or thought against holy purity' was a mortal sin which would send us straight to hell. To make matters worse we had been given very vivid images of the endless burning pains of hell. Perhaps worst of all was the fact that most confessors had been trained to question the penitent closely to ensure that we had spelled out all the details of our sins. Furthermore, we were told that even going into 'occasions of serious sin' was itself a mortal sin; and the list of such 'occasions of sin' was a very long one! No wonder, then, that 'going to confession' could often be a real ordeal for us.

Looking back we can see that, when I was young, the Church authorities in our part of the world were putting too much emphasis on the evil of certain sins and the need to confess them in great detail. The result was that many of us were left with a heavy burden of guilt rather than a sense of the astonishing mercy of God.

THE MERCY OF JESUS

It is hard to square all this with the actions and teaching of Jesus. We remember the quite radical parable Jesus told about the almost unbelievable mercy of the father of the 'prodigal son'. The boy's elder brother was shocked and angry at what seemed to be a quite unfair level of generosity shown by his father to this wastrel child. But the father made no apology for being so lavishly forgiving and merciful: *'We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'* (Luke 15:28-32). Furthermore, even some of the early Christians were so astonished and shocked at the account in St John's Gospel of the mercy shown by Jesus to *'the woman taken in adultery'* (John 8:7) that they omitted that story from their manuscript of St John's Gospel.

The strong emphasis Pope Francis puts on mercy in his teaching and his comments and his actions is fully

in line with the teaching and actions of Jesus. What a relief it is for us to read the words of the Pope in the beautiful document he wrote for the opening of the *Year of Mercy* in 2015:

It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people. (Misericordiae Vultus, Section 12).

And a little later he goes on to spell out how it should be put into practice by priests who are hearing confessions: *'Every confessor must accept those who come to confession as the father in the parable of the prodigal son: a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance.'* (Section 17).

A NEW APPROACH

During and after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) our Church authorities came to an understanding of the central importance of the mercy of God. This was given expression in the change of title from 'The Sacrament of Penance' or 'Confession' to 'The Sacrament of Reconciliation'. Another important change was the recognition that the sacrament is not just something that is relevant for each individual but also has a strong communal dimension. For some years after the Council this communal aspect was acknowledged by the encouragement of local pastors to organize services of reconciliation for whole congregations, during which general absolution was given. However, before too long this practice was forbidden, presumably because the Church authorities were afraid that too many people would no longer make individual confessions.

Nevertheless, some other changes are still permitted: confessionals are now generally more open, and on special occasions several priests come to sit on the Church benches and penitents come up openly to whisper their confession and be absolved. I have a fond memory of being one of about twenty priests who were all spread out along the altar rails in the large church on the pilgrimage site of the island in Lough Derg;

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Return of the Prodigal Son, Bartolome Esteban Murillo (1617-1682) Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

hundreds of pilgrims could then choose to come up and make a brief confession to any one of the confessors. What really sticks in my mind is the briefing we priests were given in the sacristy by the rector of the church before we went out to take our places. He warned us that this was not a situation where we should quiz the penitents and make them uncomfortable; our role was simply to listen and then give each of them a sense of the loving mercy of God, reconciling them with God and the community.

FAR FEWER CONFESSIONS

It is such a pity that the beautiful words of Pope Francis about mercy were not written fifty years ago by one of his predecessors. If this had happened it might have gone a long way towards preventing the recent great drop, in the Western world, in the number of people who come to receive the sacrament. There seems to be a widespread assumption that this drop in numbers is due almost entirely to a loss or weakening of faith in today's Christians. But I am inclined to think that this over-simplifies the issue. In my opinion it may be that a very frequent Confession makes it difficult for a person to have on each occasion a deep experience of the overflowing mercy of Jesus. Perhaps we should instead hope that people would have a truly fervent encounter with Jesus at times when they are deeply troubled in conscience.

There is another reason why the number of Confessions has greatly diminished. It is that many committed Catholics are looking for something deeper than the kind of Confession that was customary in the past. They sense that a very short listing of their sins is not the most effective way to evoke in them an experience of the mercy of God. They feel the need for a more profound and heartfelt sharing of their spiritual questions and struggles. And they have discovered that a few conventional or ready-made words from the confessor does not meet their needs.

It is in response to this quite widespread sense of dissatisfaction with the older style of Confession that more and more people have come to look for what is called 'spiritual direction'. Up till relatively recently it was always seminarians or priests or members of religious orders that went to a spiritual director. But now, an increasing number of lay people are finding it very helpful to go regularly (or irregularly) to a particular director for spiritual guidance, perhaps instead of going to Confession. This is a topic which I hope to write about in a future edition of *Africa*. ■

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