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RECONCILIATION AS EXPERIENCE AND SACRAMENT

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'The church is changing an historical condition of hatred and violence into a civilization of love' when 'she proclaims the good news of reconciliation, or proposes achieving it through the sacraments'.[1]

This prophetic task, which Pope John Paul II recalled to our attention after the 1984 Synod of Bishops, invites us to some reflection on the nature of the sacrament most centrally concerned.

Twenty-one years earlier the bishops of Vatican II had decreed that the rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance were to be revised so that they would 'give more luminous expression to both the nature and effect of the sacrament'.[2] And within ten years we had been presented with a rich answer to this modest request.[3]

What is this sacrament all about? What does it do? The answer to both these questions seems to be summed up in the one word 'reconciliation' which came into prominence with that new rite and has come to be seen as central to our understanding, even though it gave way to the old term 'penance' in the title of the book as a whole.

Reconciliation is nothing if not a relationship between persons. It is an encounter and dialogue between a human being and Jesus Christ who is his God. In the new rite we found a sacramental sign which was beautifully adapted to signify this by becoming itself more obviously a personal human dialogue. As personal, reconciliation has also an experiential aspect; it has an ecclesial aspect since it involves not only myself and God, but also and essentially God's other friends — the church; and finally it is a celebration — like all the other sacraments — a moment of joy that calls for something in the way of public rejoicing.

But it is not all a matter of positive insights. There have been misunderstandings and a massive lack of interest that mysteriously affected the practice of frequent confession. Not long after the Council, when unrest among the American clergy was reaching its peak, I was struck by one point of solid agreement in their answers to a questionnaire in which many were opposed to celibacy and ritual and church schools and bishops and popes and the like: a sizeable majority answered the question — 'What has been your most consoling experience as a priest?' with the simple statement 'the hearing of confessions'. Perhaps it is still as consoling today, but can we be sure that the 'big fish' that we used to meet have held up their absolute numbers now that the total number of confessions is so much lower?

In trying to identify problems connected with the sacrament of penance itself that contributed to this change I came up some time ago with the following, which seem, despite the results of the Synod of Bishops, to retain much of their significance still:

1) A general feeling that a sacrament is rather too solemn a thing to be concerned with such trivial matters as venial sins. This may be coupled with a view that venial sins themselves are perhaps not quite so important as we once thought they were.
2) A puzzle as to why we should bother going to confession when our sins can be forgiven long beforehand by a simple act of contrition.
3) An uneasiness that can be found in other sacraments — but comes out more strongly in one that comes up for repetition — about submitting to words of absolution that can be dismissed as a mere magical formula.
4) A displacement in moral values, connected with rule-of-thumb treatment of invincible ignorance.
5) A surprising self-righteousness that was once extremely rare among Catholics, but is now creeping in as a result of the victories of secularism in this post-Protestant world: I am not a sinner; I have no guilt; because everything that I do, I have chosen deliberately, and whatever I choose is right and acceptable.
6) A fairly recent 'discovery', said to fit in with early tradition, that the principal sacrament for the forgiveness of sins is the Eucharist, so that Penance becomes far less significant than it has been thought in the Tridentine period.

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But let us leave these problems for the present and return to the positive insights.

Because reconciliation concerns us as persons we should expect it to affect our consciousness to some extent (indeed English is one of the few European languages that has different words for *conscience* and *consciousness*). It is an element of our awareness, and thus we can truly experience reconciliation. Modern theologians like the late Bernard Lonergan have shown us how we can begin to explore such experience. He has indicated how internal experience differs from external experience with its sounds and colours and tastes, so that the experience of being a spectator is different from the experience of a spectacle, even though both occur together in the one event. Hence a seeing, a seer, a hearing and a hearer are just as much the data of our experience as a shape, a colour or a sound. He has also shown how internal experience, while leading on towards truth and certainty has no immediate or infallible connection with these characteristics of a more complete knowledge.

My experience of myself as seeing, for instance, is prior to all understanding or what seeing may be, and to all assertions about seeing, though it is not dissipated in any way should such understanding or such assertions occur. This is parallel to the fact that my experience of a rainbow can be prior to all understanding of the nature of a rainbow and to all definitions or even descriptions of it, while it is an experience that can remain just as strongly when I do understand what a rainbow is and can give a full account of it.

Of course, our insights into the nature of rainbows help us to come to terms with them, to fit them into an objective and reliable picture of the world, to manufacture them artificially, and to avoid being misled by them. Similarly, insights into our mental activities, and accurate accounts of them, help us to recognize them, to distinguish their various features, to avoid some serious errors that can stem from confusing one with another — such as thinking that a bright idea must also be a correct one.

The lengthy and detailed exploration of our mental experience conducted by Lonergan has shown that the most basic distinct elements in our mental life are our acts of sensation (such as seeing, hearing, touching), our insights (such as grasping the point in a joke or a detective story, or our understanding of how an aeroplane works or what inflation is), our judgments and affirmations (whenever we back up a statement with a serious 'yes' and 'no'), and our decisions to do something good (which is in accord with reality) or bad (which fails to harmonize with genuine reality). If we allow for many rich nuances and varied specifications, we can say that these four types of activity — sensations, insights, judgements and decisions — are the basic stuff of our whole conscious life. They are the threads of which our experience is woven.

These facts about experience throw a new light on what we should mean by an examination of conscience. It is an investigation into consciousness, not just an act of memory. Just as I can investigate a cliff face to identify the different strata and give them names, so I can investigate the conscious experience given with my decisions, to identify those occasions when my doing was not in accord with my knowing,[4] and to distinguish the different ways in which this occurred, even though I had never thought of naming the sins before. Businessmen in the fourteenth century knew there was something wrong with their financial system. Economists examining it even today can identify this as inflation and suggest what should have been done to cure it. In the same way, I can look back over the past week to events where I was consciously, though without any attention to myself or my action, being offensive or petty, and now identify spite or envy or greed or recklessness, though right up to the present I had never thought of myself as subject to these sins.[5]

This lengthy analysis puts us in a position to see some of the implications of a reconciliation between men or women after some division has arisen between them. Their resulting unity can be fully human if it reaches each level of their consciousness, or it will involve some serious tensions if it neglects one or other of those levels.

The experience of a fully human union is one where the two persons see and hear and touch each other and the same general environment, where they share the same insights, so that they are not in the position of expert and blind follower, where they agree in a series of important basic affirmations and denials, and where they esteem the same values.

In so far as one or other of these is missing, the union will be less full. Without the common field of sense data they will be out of touch; without sharing the same insights there will be misunderstandings between them that can be ironed out only by a patient series of explorations and explanations; where one denies what the other affirms there will be dissent; and finally, when they have different aims, seeking divergent values, they will be at cross-purposes if these differences are not apparent, and in open opposition if they are.[6]

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It is in this last case — of conflict of aims — that offence occurs. If I want something to which another has a legitimate right, then I offend him, and we are in need of reconciliation. Two people who contradict each other may perhaps live in co-existence, but this is much harder if they have divergent aims, since one is in effect working to destroy what the other is aiming to do. The lack of union of wills is a sign of a refusal to love the other person.

> *Reconciliation is nothing if not a relationship between persons. It is an encounter and dialogue between a human being and Jesus Christ who is his God. As personal, reconciliation has also an experiential aspect; it has an ecclesial aspect since it involves not only myself and God, but also and essentially God's other friends — the church; and finally it is a celebration — like all the other sacraments — a moment of joy that calls for something in the way of public rejoicing.*

Reconciliation is a move back towards union. It will involve an attempt to overcome misunderstandings and contradictions, but it must above all overcome the offence due to incompatible choices. There may be a rebuff, a defence of rights and a punishment by which the offending party learns to keep within his bounds, but the personal offence is not easily overcome. The exaction of compensation is not enough. For a full reconciliation of persons, one must apologize to the other for what he has done (or both, of course, if both have offended), he must promise not to offend in the future and must ask forgiveness. The other remains free to concede forgiveness or not. If he does concede it then there can be peace on a truly personal level. In many cases we would expect the offended to make his first approach with a gift. Not that the gift is a form of compensation, but it is a definite concrete sign of the sincerity of his love. Before, he refused love, now he wants to show some act of love.

It will be noticed that an analysis of the experience of reconciliation has led us into the personal aspects of it as well. At this level it is not just a question of a material or measurable or prescribable relationship such as restitution or punishment. Genuine sorrow for having neglected the dignity of another person, a promise of amendment, the asking and conceding of pardon, are actions that we can experience, but only at our highest human level — the level at which we are persons. And these actions are communicable in words and through understanding. One might need great courage and humility before one can take them on, but there is no hint of any hidden physical force, such as one might attempt to master by means of magic.

The transition to cases where the offence has been against God is not nearly as great in its analysis as it is in its actual reality. I experience my will making choices that are not compatible with what I know of God's will for me, and thus I offer him an insult. It is a big insult, offered by an insignificant person. The whole burden of the new Testament is that Christ Our Lord redeemed us by suffering on our behalf.

On an interpersonal level, this suffering of Christ need not be looked on as taking on some punishment due to be measured out to our infidelity. It is like the gift we considered previously, a concrete sign of great love — an attempt to express firmness of purpose in loving God in spite of the difficulties that others who lack the wider view of the plans of providence maliciously make for one who thus sets his mind on God. My reconciliation with God, then, after sin, will involve sorrow for the offence I have already committed, an intention of acting in a more ordered way in the future, the asking of pardon, and a new element that was not needed in the human case, a definite, concrete, personal link with Jesus Christ whose loving action is an essential element in my own reconciliation.

It is this absolute need for a link with Christ through whose merits alone we are saved that brings us, I think, to the third of the new insights into the sacrament of reconciliation — its ecclesial aspect. It is through the sacraments that the merits of Christ are applied to us in particular and concrete instances, since the sacraments are a means of encounter with Christ. Now the Church is at the same time the Basic Sacrament and the Mystical Body of Christ. When we see that it is, there is no room for two reconciliations, but only one reconciliation on a personal level with Christ the head of the Mystical Body, and with the Church, his Mystical Body, of which he is head.

A second source of the confusion is a common misinterpretation of the teaching of the Council of Trent on Contrition. Those who (wrongly, as I will attempt to show) assume that for those with perfect contrition sins can be forgiven (and reconciliation with God achieved) without the

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sacrament, suggest that the sacrament must have a different function, that of reconciling the sinner with the Church.

But such a distinction is not valid, since any genuine reconciliation with Christ must involve reconciliation with the Church, and vice versa.[7] We are in need of reconciliation with the Church the Body of Christ (a) because in sin we have offended Christ its head, and (b) because it was precisely our love for Christ that bound us into that body, through baptism, and our sin has been a repudiation of that covenant.

Vatican II speaks of 'pardon from the mercy of God for offences committed against Him' and goes on to say:

> They are at the same time reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins, and which by charity, example, and prayer seeks their conversion.[8]

This passage fits in well with the communal celebrations and the penitential rites in the new *Rite of Penance*, as does the other passage that mentions the Church (when speaking of Lent):

> The real essence of the virtue of penance is hatred for sin as an offence against God: the role of the Church in penitential practices is not to be passed over, and the people must be exhorted to pray for sinners.[9]

Large scale gatherings in the second rite are very useful for prayer, for celebration, for example, and as a reminder of unity, but those who speak of private auricular confession sometimes forget how public and ecclesial it is to walk into a church and go into a confessional. Even for those who seek out the priest in his room the reconciliation is always a public act, since it goes beyond the penitent to the priest who is a public representative of the Mystical Body of Christ. The priest and the penitent form a genuine community, since three persons are not required here, any more than three are required in the community sacramentalised in matrimony. The Order of Penance indicates this when commenting on the formula of absolution:

> The form of absolution . . . finally . . . underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church.[10]

There has clearly been great fruit from the larger celebrations, but I think that those who downplay our ordinary traditional way of celebrating the sacrament in the confessional on the grounds that this somehow lacks an important communitarian aspect, miss at least half of what Christ was trying to convey to us when he said, 'Where *two* or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them'. (Matt. 18.20)

As for those who are said to have had their sins forgiven by perfect contrition, the need to approach the sacrament is *not* to be sought in some need for a special reconciliation with the people, but in the need for an *external* apology to *both* God and the Church. Those who exclude the intention to come to God's representative (in the Church) haven't yet got the full repentance for their offence against God, who sends this representative, nor the full desire to live in the future as God desires, with the right attitude towards his Mystical Body.

Perhaps one of the most valuable benefits of the large gatherings in the second rite of Reconciliation is in the opportunity for celebration. When the rite was being renewed people pointed out that although we use the term 'celebration' for each of the sacraments and the documents speak of the 'celebration of the sacrament of penance', these words had been taken as mere technical terms and we had forgotten to make this sacrament into a real celebration. The new Rite of Penance saw what was required: 'The Church has never failed to call all from sin to conversion and by the celebration of penance to show Christ's victory over sin' (n.1), and Pope John Paul II explains this rather more fully and more bluntly:

> Contrition and conversion are . . . a drawing near to the holiness of God, a rediscovery of one's true identity which has been upset and disturbed by sin, a liberation in the very depth of self and thus a regaining of lost joy, the joy of being saved, which the majority of people on our time are no longer capable of experiencing.[11]

Such joy is an instance of the law that celebration is more meaningful in connection with a joy that has been achieved, or is to be achieved, at some cost — as in the celebration of a victory, or success in examinations, of the revival of a treaty or covenant, or of a dedication — as in the dedications of baptism, or matrimony, or orders or of vows — to which we now return with a celebration of re-dedication.

Before looking in detail at the Rite of Penance it is worth re-reading the decree on Penance in the Council of Trent, which was hammered out after much discussion and debate and re-drafting even after the related topic of Justification had been fully elucidated. It is humbling to note that its third

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chapter contains two of our modern contributions — the notion of reconciliation and the value of the experiential aspect:

> The complete effect of this sacrament, so far as its full efficaciousness is concerned, is reconciliation with God, which, in devout people who receive the sacrament of devotion, is sometimes followed by peace and serenity of conscience joined to a great consolation of soul.[12]

It is time to look at the six problems that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

1. With regard to venial sins, of course it is clear that no-one is *required* to bring them to the sacrament. But there are many means of grace that we are not required to use, but which can be of great help. If Christ is ready to offer us his forgiveness in a personal act, then it is good for us to respond by going to him to make a personal and definite act of apology.[13]

Without some such external action and sign it is so easy for us forgetful and negligent human beings to omit any attempt even at a genuine act of sorrow and subsequent attempt to bring more order into our lives. However hard we find it to change, we should look forward to a regular saving encounter with Christ. It would be unfair for us to refer to those who lived easily with the minimalistic form of legalism before the Council, because they had not been offered the riches of a personalistic and experiential theology that are available to us in the renewed rite.

Just as in the field of human reconciliation, there are lots of occasions when we offend some friend in a slight way. These can build up coldness if no attempt is made to show our friendship again. Hence the value of frequent brief encounters in which, without great drama or heavy-handedness we gently acknowledge our offences and renew our love and intention to be more courteous.

On the other hand we must avoid any suggestion that this sacrament is concerned only with venial sins. The early Church had to struggle hard to free itself from the view that some sins are so absolute that they cannot be forgiven. It is reasonable to interpret the sin against the Holy Ghost as applying to any sin in which a full option has been made for evil and there is a positive intention to exclude any repentance.[14] There will, however, be many serious mortal sins without such exclusion, and the infinite merits of Christ are ready to be applied to all of these if the sinner co-operates with the inspiration of grace in admitting that he has done wrong and wants to apologise.

2. A falling off from confession does seem to be associated often nowadays with an appeal to perfect contrition and the view that with this our sins can be forgiven apart from the sacrament. This seems to me to be based on a complete, though widespread, misinterpretation of a passage in the council of Trent that goes diametrically against its clear meaning and the intention of those who formulated its text. And I do not think there is much theological evidence of any other kind that would support this misunderstanding.

Let us look at the sentence which has been misinterpreted in the chapter on contrition in the Council of Trent's decree on the Sacrament of Penance.

After defining contrition as a sorrow of soul and a hatred of sin with a resolution of not sinning in the future, and adding that it must be joined with a trust in the divine mercy and the desire of performing the other things which are required for rightly receiving this sacrament, the decree insists more fully that genuine amendment is not enough without sorrow for the sins we have actually committed. It then continues, referring back to the notion of contrition just given:

> The Council teaches, moreover, that although it sometimes happens that this contrition is crowned by charity, that is, reconciles the sinner to God, nevertheless this reconciliation is not to be ascribed to the contrition itself apart from the desire of receiving the sacrament that is included in it.[15]

The main intent of this sentence is clearly to insist that the desire for the sacrament is an essential condition for the reconciliation. The point made is exactly the same as in the case of baptism. Just as there can be baptism of desire, so also there can be reconciliation of desire, and the essential element in this is the desire itself, not the psychological motive that induced the penitent to turn resolutely away from sin.[16]

Yet theologians[17] who have twisted 'charity' into an explicit motive rather than a gift of grace have gone on to talk calmly about forgiveness without the sacrament, or to conclude that the sacrament is a mere formality that has to be fitted in because of some petty regulations of the Church.

The view of the bishops was that the sacrament is the main sign of the mediatorship of Christ in redeeming each individual and the going to the priest in confession is a sign that the desire for the sacrament, the desire to be joined with Christ in his Mystical Body was a genuine desire and not some pious fiction or gnostic pelagianism. The desire of the sacrament is the beginning of this sign and so is a part of the sacrament, even if it is a part that of itself and essentially calls for completion.

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Hence it seems to me seriously misleading to say that a properly disposed person can be reconciled to God outside the sacrament. He is reconciled within the sacrament, though before the giving of absolution, since the sacrament extends over a long period of time.

Even if one wishes to reserve the term 'sacrament' to the empirically observable aspects of the total sign, namely, the confession and absolution (though this would exclude the more usual types of satisfaction and all contrition, which are traditionally and dogmatically held to be part of the sacrament, as well as the intention of confessing, which is contained in the appropriate contrition and is the element here at issue), the formulation remains a misleading one since the phrase 'outside the sacrament' can so easily be taken as 'without essential reference to the sacrament (so defined)' and it is precisely this opinion that the Council of Trent was directly condemning.

3. Slogans have a big influence on present day thought, and the suggestion that the sacraments are something like magic has all the power of a slogan. It might be different, perhaps, if we were in Africa or in New Guinea. But here the word 'magic' has a nasty, and somewhat comical, ring. We need a Chesterton to deal with it. We could ask about the magic of electricity or of petrol or the nucleus, or of slogans themselves, or of Cabinet leaks or of Sir Joh. But it should suffice at present to recall that sin is not literally a grease stain, but an offence against a person and that reconciliation is an act of benevolence on the part of the person offended, who wants to meet the offender provided he is in a suitable frame of mind and will come to a properly appointed representative and wait for his clearly formulated statement of forgiveness. There is nothing of magic about any of this. The sacraments are for people, and we can take this formula as implying the rationality of the 'people' and their involvement in intelligent communication as well as the more common benevolence of the 'for'.

4. The next point concerns the question of invincible ignorance. During the last few decades there has been an insistent and even unrestrained questioning of traditional moral values. Many types of activity that everyone before the council accepted as seriously sinful have been urged as indifferent or even virtuous.

In this regard I think it is quite important to take seriously the distinction between subjective and objective morality. A number of notable theologians who allow for this distinction in their teaching do not seem to see its implications, and frequently ignore them when discussing some question of objective morality — when they ask whether contraception or homosexual activity or remarriage after divorce is really objectively wrong, as we were always taught in the past.

If someone's action is clearly free of subjective sinfulness because he lacked full knowledge or full consent there is no need of any further excuse. The action could still be quite seriously wrong for someone who correctly understood what it really was and chose freely to do it.[18]

But there is another side to this coin. We have also to realize that there is no possibility of arguing from the virtue or holiness of a person to the objective goodness of what he is doing, unless we can show that he clearly understood that action thoroughly and in its full context. Yet some writers have seemed to argue in this way. If a divorced person who has remarried is one of my best parish helpers, honest and regularly at Mass, this does not mean that remarriage after divorce is a Christian thing. If the president of our college sodality fights a duel with open swords on Saturday night and comes to communion on Sunday as though nothing had happened, I cannot infer that duelling must be moral. If an officer who has signed 100 Jews to the death chamber and comes to confession and discusses only his mental prayer, I cannot immediately be sure that it is allowable to kill Jews.

At this time especially, when our people are assailed through the media by many confused and misleading self-appointed teachers as well as the money-making advertisers and the more subtle public-relations experts, it would be irresponsible of us to allow our judgments on moral truths to be swayed by the example of well-meaning but misinformed Christians.

5. My fifth problem is that of a new self-righteousness, a sort of moral 'I'm all right Jack'. Jean Guitton noted it in an atheist who shared imprisonment with him, and then found it in a novel which contrasted the moral sensitivity of Catholic school girls with the inability of their cousins at a secular school to consider they might in any way be blameworthy.[19] Pius XII summed it up in his phrase, 'The sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin',[20] and our present Pope has expanded the point in both his exhortation on penance and his encyclical on the Holy Spirit.[21]

There are signs, I think, that even Catholics[22] today are finding it harder to recognize that they might have done wrong. This could be a by-product of the legalism that was connected with confession. We taught that you do not strictly have to confess a sin at all if you have some doubt that it is seriously sinful, but how many of us went on to urge this as a practical and regular course

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of action? Such urging cut off confession as a source of advice and a gentle instrument of teaching and growth in moral maturity. But more importantly it may have lessened the opportunities for learning the practice of humility, which should be one of the results of our open dialogue with Christ our saviour.

At any rate, it may be that our efforts to help people to identify in their own consciousness experiences of human offence and forgiveness may help us to overcome a trend towards blindness to sin and to humility.

6. My final problem is with a thesis, which has been argued with surprising confidence, to the effect that the sacrament of Penance is not, as we had been led to believe, the main sacrament of forgiveness at all, since the main sacrament of forgiveness is the Eucharist itself. It has been said that our views on this sacrament and in particular on the need for integral confession of mortal sins, were distorted by the Council of Trent in the emphasis it gave to Penance. This view has been supported by an historical argument and an interpretation of what was being done at Trent.

I cannot here go into the mass of historical writing on this and similar issues.[23] But the other argument has been put even more strongly, based on the teaching of Trent itself. The decree on the Eucharist as a sacrifice teaches very definitely that the Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice and that it forgives sins. Why should we worry then about confession, especially a detailed confession of all our sins?[24]

At first sight this seems a remarkably plausible argument, even though it goes against a strong tradition of the Church over many centuries, both before this decree was written and even afterwards, when it was not taken in the sense suggested.[25]

But what then did the passage in Trent mean? The answer is fairly simple. It was explicitly concerned with the Mass as a sacrifice, not with the Mass as a sacrament (which had been treated at length earlier — in the session immediately preceding the one on Penance). The sacrifice wins forgiveness, but it is for sacraments to apply the graces so won to individual persons. The point of the passage is that the Mass is the same sacrifice as that of the Cross and so has the same effects. And, of course, the reconciling power of the Cross itself is what is applied through the sacrament of penance.[26] There is no question at all of the Eucharist as sacrament ever taking its place, just as there is no question of calling baptism pointless on the grounds that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was redemptive.

I have tried to show how the experiential approach can, if carried right through, throw light on much of our philosophy and theology, while avoiding the emotionalism and neo-romanticism that easily infect a superficial use of it. I have shown how it helps us analyse some of the elements of truly human reconciliation and extend this analysis to the reconciliation of people with God. I have shown the implications of recognizing the personal nature of this encounter, and probed the meaning of involving the Church in this sacrament. Then I have suggested solutions to six problems that seem to be obstructing a full appreciation of the sacrament by Christ's faithful.

Nor am I prepared to admit that what I have written is a mere academic exercise. I would hope that many others would find, as I do, that these reflections leave me free to marvel at God's wonders, as the Pope did after the Synod of Bishops:[27]

> Now this power to 'forgive sins' Jesus confers, through the Holy Spirit, upon ordinary men, themselves subject to the snare of sin, namely his apostles; 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained'. This is one of the most awe-inspiring innovations of the Gospel!

It is an innovation that we can hope to observe changing the world, provided we help our people to a new understanding and appreciation of this sacrament.

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1. John Paul II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, (henceforth REP) §4.
2. SC 72.
3. *Rite of Penance*, Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1975.
4. See Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight*, London: DLT, 1957, p 599–600, 602–4, 613–16, 627–30. Also his *Method in Theology*, London: DLT, 1971, p. 35, 40.
5. Lonergan is sometimes criticized as though he ruled out or undermined metaphysical theology because of his experiential approach. But in fact his 'generalized empirical method' is an attractive introduction to metaphysics, which helps us to make sense of it and strengthens its basis. Older priests who were brought up on concepts like matter, form, and act, can find life in these as what are presented to our consciousness when we are observing, understanding and assenting, respectively. And the mysterious 'intellectus agens'

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that we held in such awe, is not some extraordinary hidden mechanism, but my power of inquiry, which I experience every time I ask a question. (See T.V. Daly, 'How Lonergan Illuminates Aristotle', in John Heesh and Neil Ormerod (ed.) *Lonergan and You: Riverview Reflections*, Sydney: Lonergan Workshop Committee, 1987.)

6. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, London: DLT, 1971, pp. 79, 178, 356–7.
7. The International Theological Commission Report, 'Penance and Reconciliation', speaks of 'the inseparable connection between reconciliation with God and reconciliation with the church and with one's fellowmen', *Origins*, 13 (January 12, 1984) p. 513–524, at p. 524.
8. LG 11.
9. SC 109.
10. *Rite of Penance*, n. 19.
11. REP. 31, III.
12. Trent, Session XIV, Chapter 3, (DS 1674).
13. 'Great importance must continue to be given to teaching the faithful also to make use of the sacrament of Penance for venial sins alone, as is borne out by a centuries-old doctrinal tradition and practice . . . The frequent use of the Sacrament — to which some categories of the faithful are in fact held — strengthens the awareness that even minor sins offend God and harm the Church, the Body of Christ. Its celebration then becomes for the faithful the occasion and the incentive 'to conform themselves more closely to Christ and to follow the voice of the Spirit more attentively' (Rite of Penance 7 b). Above all it should be emphasised that the grace proper to the sacramental celebration has a great remedial power and helps to remove the very roots of sin.' (REP 32)
14. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, on the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World, 1986, (DEV) §46.
15. Trent, in Session XIV, Chapter 4, DS 1677, my translation. Denzinger, in one of his rare slips, contributed to the mistranslation by dividing Chapter 4 into two paragraphs, which were not in the original. If any division of the text is made, it should be into three parts.
16. This point is made very clearly by St Thomas when he is dealing with contrition in the fourth book of the 'Summa Contra Gentiles' (Chapter 72, n. 11, 13, Marietti edition n. 4076, 4078), as translated by Charles J. O'Neil, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975:

    'Of course, keys of this kind have their effectiveness from the suffering of Christ by which, we know, Christ opened for us the door of the kingdom of heaven. Accordingly, just as without baptism, in which the suffering of Christ works, there cannot be salvation for men — whether the baptism be really received, or desired to the purpose 'when necessity, but not contempt, excludes the sacrament' (Augustine, PL 43 p. 173) — so for those sinning after baptism there can be no salvation unless they submit themselves to the keys of the Church, whether it be by actually confessing and undergoing the judgment of the ministers of the Church, or at least having this as a purpose to be fulfilled at the opportune time; because, as Peter says: 'There is no other name given to men whereby we must be saved except by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 4:10–12)'.

    'Baptism has some effectiveness for the remission of sins even before it is actually received, while one has the purpose of receiving it . . . And thus the keys of the Church have effectiveness in one before he actually submits himself to them, provided that he has the purpose of submitting himself to them.'

    Note that St Thomas does not enter at all into the question of motives here. Motives are important, but mainly for the preacher, as means to induce the sinner to repent of his sins. They do not affect the nature of the contrition at all. Between his time and the Council of Trent a long and fruitless dispute had arisen between the contritionists and the attritionists, fruitless except in our present confusion. Not long after the Council, Canisius in his Catechism gave a list of the motives that can lead to repentance, and he made no distinction between them, including love of God on the same level as fear of hell, hope of heaven and recognition of the evil of sin. This would have been strange if the Council, with which he had had so much to do, had introduced an important teaching based on an essential distinction between them.
17. What of those at the Council itself, who prepared its decrees? There were both attritionists and contritionists there and their dispute came to a head in the discussion on Canon 7 of the fourth preparatory draft. Some held that the priest truly absolves the sins in the confessional, while others said that sometimes the penitent is forgiven beforehand, and in such cases the priest really only declares him absolved. The whole dispute was resolved by the Dominican Ambrose Pelargus, who said:

    'No one is absolved by contrition alone, but by those three acts that are required in the matter of penance *in desire* when the opportunity is not present, and when the opportunity comes this act is completed. Therefore, the person is truly absolved by the priestly absolution.'

    The secretary of the council, Massarelli, expanded this explanation and then summed up:

    'Therefore even those contrite people who have a desire for confession are absolved by confession; and all agreed on this reply.' (*Concilium Tridentinum Diariorum, Actuum, etc.*, ed. Societas Goerresiana, Vol. VI, 1950, p. 264).

    Unfortunately, De Lugo and De Augustinis seem to have had no knowledge of these debates.

    Perhaps I should sum up this point myself! It is through Christ that our sins are forgiven, and we meet Christ in the sacrament. Any repentance prior to the sacrament has no effect except in virtue of a genuine desire to go to Christ's representative in the sacrament when the opportunity offers. Differences in motive are not relevant. The charity that the decree of Trent speaks of is the fruit of the forgiveness.

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18. It may be that the theologians in question have a naive view of what knowing is — and have forgotten how difficult understanding often is — to say nothing of getting an understanding that correctly applies to the object considered and in its actual context. Such views can be discerned in people who glibly say that logical conclusions follow inexorably from their premises, or that geometrical theorems impose themselves on the mind. Anyone who has made a serious effort to teach logic or geometry will have learnt the hard way how wrong such statements are. He will know that even an intelligent person can be baffled by the most obvious theorem in geometry and can test the ingenuity the poor teacher who is striving by all the means in his power to help him to understand. Sometimes indeed understanding comes easily, but sometimes it fails to come, our mind is left confused or misled and we have to wait and to 'ponder these things in our hearts'.

    Some people find geometry particularly difficult to understand, while others have difficulty with poetry or economics or science. Similarly, one person may fail to understand what is wrong with homosexual activity while another may have a similar difficulty with regard to duelling or paying subsistence wages or to exterminating Jews. The whole point about invincible ignorance is that there are genuine and valid insights that, for reasons that are not easy to appreciate, some people have quite failed to master. These people are blameless because 'they do not know what they are doing', (Luke 23:24), *not* because what they are doing is not wrong for those who *do* know what it involves.

    Hence it is that if we really hold to the doctrine of invincible ignorance and the distinction of subjective guilt from the objective evil of an act, we have to admit that there are some people doing what for others would be seriously sinful, who are blameless, morally good and even holy.
19. Jean Guitton, *Osservatore Romano*, July 11, 1974, p. 5.
20. Pius XII to a Catechetical Congress at Boston, 26 Oct. 1946.
21. REP §18; DEV §47.
22. It is interesting to note that some post-Conciliar studies of Luther have discovered a focus of his divergence from Catholic teaching, not so much in his views on faith or on indulgences as in his inability to conceive of the very notion of guilt and especially of personal offence. (See Jared Wicks S.J., reviewing Paul Hacker, *Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther*, in *Theological Studies*, 28 (1967) p. 374–6.) This explains his objection to the idea of sorrow for past sins, since he considered only their material and their legal effects, which cannot easily be changed, omitting the personal element, which can still be changed so greatly with the words 'I am sorry'.

    Indeed it might be argued that Luther's insistence on the punishment due to sin, and the substitution of Christ for the sinner, the Christ's merits shielding the sinner from God's justice, without any interior renewal by grace, are not really a theology of sin at all but an extension of the Catholic doctrine of the punishment due after the offence has been forgiven, and the remission of this punishment by the merits of Christ and the saints, and its application to us through indulgences. Scholars have shown that at one stage of his life Luther understood very well the Catholic doctrine on indulgences. They have not, as far as I know, found that he ever understood offence and reconciliation. In other words, far from rejecting our views on indulgences, on this view he accepted them wholeheartedly, but applied them to the more important matter of sin itself, and failed to identify what we really call sin, with results that distorted much of the rest of his theology.
23. I am grateful to Fr Peter Cross, of Catholic Theological College, Clayton, Victoria, for giving me a bibliography which has helped me to follow up recent writings on this sacrament.
24. The words of the decree seem plain enough: 'If we draw near to God with an upright heart and true faith, with fear and reverence, with sorrow and repentance, through the Mass we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (see Heb. 4:16). For by this oblation the Lord is appeased, he grants grace and the gift of repentance, and he pardons wrong-doings and sins, even grave ones . . . Therefore, the Mass may properly be offered according to apostolic tradition for the sins, punishments, satisfaction, and other necessities of the faithful on earth, as well as for those who have died in Christ and are not yet wholly cleansed.' (Trent, Session 22, Chapter 2, DS 1743.)
25. The interpretation also goes very strongly against the context of the passage within the Council itself, which, eleven years earlier, had voted for the decrees of Session 14, on the Sacrament of Penance, and for those of Session 13 on the Eucharist as a Sacrament, which in Chapter 7 taught that 'no one who has a mortal sin on his conscience shall dare receive the Holy Eucharist before making a sacramental confession, regardless of how contrite he may think he is' (DS 1647). And in the final canon of the same session we find these words: 'This holy Council has determined and decreed that those who have mortal sin on their conscience, no matter how contrite they may think they are, must necessarily make a sacramental confession before receiving, provided they have access to a confessor' (DS 1661). It would certainly have been an awful inconsistency to have stated later, without any reference to this passage at all, that the sins could be fully forgiven without anything more than attendance at the Mass.
26. Both this centrality of the Cross and this notion of application are taught in the first chapter of the decree on Penance itself:

    Since God is rich in mercy . . . he has also prepared a remedy of life . . . This remedy is the sacrament of penance, and through it the benefit of Christ's death is applied to those who have fallen after baptism.' (Trent, Session XIV, Chapter 1, DS 1668)

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The earlier decree on justification had put this distinction more strongly in its third chapter:

'But even though Christ did die for all (See II Cor. 5:15) still all do not receive the benefit of his death, but only those with whom the merit of his Passion is shared.' (Trent, Session VI, Chapter 3, DS 1623.)

Our conclusion can only be that while it is reasonable for those who recall that the Mass is the same sacrifice as that of the Cross to assert that the 'Eucharist is the primary liturgical celebration of reconciliation', there is no case for swinging from this to the suggestion that the Eucharist can in some way replace the sacrament of Penance, as was done by a writer who went on to say that 'in the Eucharist we are reconciled from our serious sins', and that 'it is the Eucharist which is the ordinary way 'for the faithful to be reconciled to God and the Church' ' (John Gallen S.J., 'General Sacramental Absolution: Pastoral Remarks on Pastoral Norms', *Theological Studies*, 34 (1973), p. 114, 117. This line of argument is still with us. A conference I attended in 1986 had a paper with the same thesis and no inkling of any of the arguments against it).

Such a swing seems based on a simple oversight of the distinction between Christ's redeeming action and the assumption of individual sinners (or non-believers!) into the resulting fellowship of love.

27. REP §29.

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