***Four Steps in Celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation Individually***

The Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents gives many options to both priest and penitent, but it is helpful to see the rite in light of the same four movements as the Eucharist: gathering, storytelling, reconciling, commissioning.

***1) GATHERING***

We enter the reconciliation chapel and we exchange a greeting with the priest. We can sit face-to-face with the priest or remain anonymous behind a screen. Many people worry about what the priest thinks of them when they tell him their sins. They imagine that in confessing their sins the priest sees them at their worst. Actually the very opposite is true. Everybody sins; however, only some sinners are moved to do penance. When you tell your sins to the priest and express your desire to repent, the priest sees you at your best. The priest sees you, not in your sinning, but in your repentance. As a priest I have found that many Catholics, once they have tried the face-to-face option, prefer it.

After saying hello we move to prayer. Even though there are only two people present, we are about to celebrate a sacrament of the Church, an act of worship. The whole Church is made present through the priest who is ordained to speak in the name of the Church and through the promise of Christ to be present where two or three are gathered in his name. We begin "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The priest will say a prayer and may invite us to pray.

***2) STORYTELLING (LITURGY OF THE WORD)***

While in this atmosphere of prayer, we turn to Scripture (perhaps the Sunday Gospel) and hear again of God's faithful love. While the reading of Scripture is optional from a legal viewpoint, the rite recommends it, because it is very important for the meaning of the sacrament. Although some priests will have legitimate reasons not to do so, ideally the priest will invite you to read a passage from the Bible (or he himself will read a passage). Every sacramental action is a response to the Word of God.

One of the blessings of the Second Vatican Council is the increasing importance that the sacred Scriptures play in my life and in the lives of most Catholics. "When the Scriptures are read in the church, it is Christ himself who speaks" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 7). When I first started going to confession I was taught to examine my conscience in the light of the Ten Commandments. The whole moral life was divided and categorized under these 10 headings. Today I form my conscience not only from the Ten Commandments, but from all of Scripture, particularly the Gospels. I find this gives a rich variety to my "confessions" as I reflect on the Scriptures in the various seasons of my life and the life of the Church.

As a child, I understood sin to be breaking the law. I learned about laws and obedience from my parents. When I went to school, I learned that sin was breaking God's law. As an adult, I realize that sin must be understood in relation to God's love. In the Scriptures and in the experiences of our daily lives, we see how much God has loved us and continues to care for us.

When we examine our lives in the light of God's love, we come to realize that our love for God, our neighbor and ourselves falls far short of God's love for us. When we consider the difference between these two loves—how much God has loved us and how we have loved in return—we become aware of our sinfulness. Sin, in a sense, is basically ingratitude: our lack of response to the generosity of the loving creator. The creator calls us to life, growth and wholeness.

Sin is the refusal of that gift of life and call to growth. To be aware of sin, we must first be aware of God's love. Those who do not see the constant role that God plays in their lives are not aware of sin. They can recognize that they do bad things or that they break the law, but sin—in this religious meaning of the word—requires a holy person or at least one who is seeking holiness. That's why Scripture is important for reconciliation: It helps us to understand better how God loves us. Even if your priest does not include a reading during the sacrament, you might consider reading the parable of the prodigal son or some other Scripture in preparation for the sacrament.

Following the reading from Scripture (or the opening prayer, if the Scripture is omitted) the priest invites you to say whatever is in your heart: sins, fears, joys, questions, doubts. The priest responds by applying the sacred Scripture to the situation of the penitent and suggests a penance—something that you might do or a prayer you might say to show or express your conversion.

***3) RECONCILING*** After the exchange with the priest, you turn once again to prayer. You will tell God that you are sorry for your sins—this may be a prayer that you know by heart or you may pray in your own words. Or you may find the Our Father an appropriate act of contrition. The priest then prays the prayer of absolution. If you are not separated by a screen, he may place his hands on your head in the biblical gesture of healing and invocation.

The words of absolution are not merely a legal formula. They are the very heart of the sacrament. While our sins disrupt and rupture the beauty and harmony of creation, God our merciful Father has restored this harmony by the paschal victory of Christ. This restoration and reconciliation give name to the sacrament: Reconciliation. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation the Holy Spirit is sent among us "for the forgiveness of sins." The fruits of forgiveness and reconciliation are "pardon and peace." We receive these gifts of the Holy Spirit "through the ministry of the Church" and the ministry of the priest who is ordained to speak in the name of the Spirit-filled Church:

 "God, the Father of mercies,/ through the death and resurrection of his Son/ has reconciled the world to himself/ and sent the Holy Spirit among us/ for the forgiveness of sins;/ through the ministry of the Church/ may God give you pardon and peace,/ and I absolve you from your sins/ in the name of the Father, and of the Son,/ and of the Holy Spirit./

 (And the penitent answers) Amen."

***4) COMMISSIONING***

The individual rite closes very simply. The priest says: "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace," or: "Go in peace and God bless you" or some similar words of dismissal. You respond: "Amen," or "Thank you, Father."

When you compare this way of celebrating the sacrament with the way Catholics "went to confession" decades ago, not much seems to have changed, at least externally. We do now basically what we did then. But the primary focus of the rite has changed. As in all acts of worship, the focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is on God and what God does. The focus of confession was often on me and my sinfulness. Even in naming the sacrament we have moved from "confession" (what we do) to "reconciliation" (what God does).

Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M.