

The presumption that underlies that question is that the priest's role in the sacrament is primarily to be a representative of God. And that presumption is based on the notion that sin is a breach between God and the individual. There lies the problem, for such an understanding of sin is inadequate. Sin alienates me from God and from everyone else. All sin is sin against the Church, the community of believers. The mission of the Church is to continue the work of the Risen Lord and so to make Christ present in the world. That mission is given to all of us in Baptism. Each of us is uniquely placed to further that mission because each of us is related to those around us in ways that no one else ever has been or will be. And therefore each of us can frustrate that mission by our failure to make Christ present in the place, time, and way that only he/she can. Thus, my sin impedes all the other members of the Church in their fulfillment of our common work. As a result, I need to be reconciled with them. The priest, himself a member of the Church, acts as the representative of all my brothers and sisters in the Church whom I have injured by my sin. The Absolution which the priest extends to me reconciles me with them.

The real difficulty which the question, "Why do I need the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?" brings to light is a misunderstanding of sin as being a "God-and-me" matter, when in fact it is also about me and the community. Reconciliation with God is given through reconciliation with one another.

LENT 1988 - 7 DAYS LEFT

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### LET US LISTEN TO JOHN PAUL AS HE CLOSES HIS 1988 LENTEN LETTER:

"I strongly urge you, in this liturgical period of Lent, to allow the Spirit of God to take hold of you, to break the chains of selfishness and sin. In a spirit of solidarity, share with those who have fewer resources than yourselves. GIVE, NOT ONLY THE THINGS YOU CAN SPARE, BUT THE THINGS YOU PERHAPS NEED, in order to lend your generous support to the actions and projects of your local Church, especially to ensure a just future for children who are least protected.

"By so doing, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, your charity will shine forth, and people will "see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven" (Mt. 5:16).

### Traditional & valued Lenten Practices:

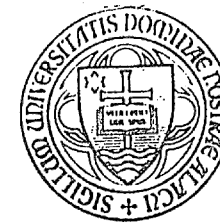
**Prayer, private, Eucharistic, scriptural---**to let our God in our lives and to listen to our God. Am I listening?

**Alms-giving---**to find and see my, our God in those who have so much less than we do. Am I finding Jesus in my neighbor, in those I least like?

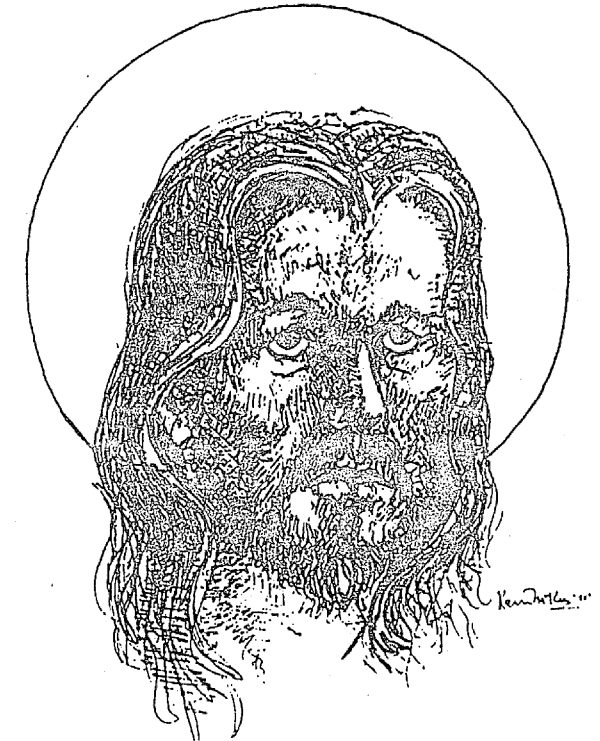
**Fasting---**to be less attached to eating, to the flesh, things, to make room for others. "Not alone on bread does man live." Am I subliming my sensual drives to allow for my God and for others? Is food, sex, drink too prominent in my life and excluding God?

**Acts of Justice, Charity, making peace---**to deliberately respond to the Gospel where Jesus calls each of us, all of us to reach out to serve another, first those close to us and then, to those beyond. Am I seeing Jesus in the least of others and responding?

**Prescription:** Mix a bit of each of the above during the next seven days and you will have a great Easter!



# Notre Dame Religious Bulletin



"This is my Son, the Beloved.  
Listen to Him."

LENTEN  
RECONCILIATION  
SUPPLEMENT

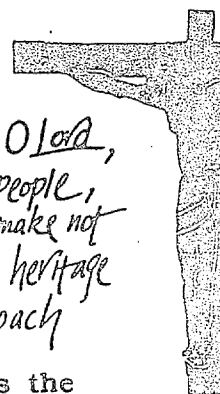
A RECAPITULATION OF THE RECONCILIATION  
SERIES ON PENANCE AND CONFESSION  
WRITTEN BY FR. MICHAEL HIMES,  
DEPT. OF THEOLOGY

## RECONCILIATION

1

### PENANCE CONFESSION

*spare, O Lord,  
your people,  
and make not  
your heritage  
a reproach*



The climax of the season of Lent is the renewal of our baptismal vows at the Easter Vigil and at the celebrations of the Eucharist on Easter. The six weeks of Lent are an opportunity to ready ourselves for that great renewal. During this time the whole Church reflects on the meaning of those vows and how we can live in accord with them. Necessarily this requires that, as individuals and as a community, we examine the ways in which we have been unfaithful to our baptismal commitments and attempt once again to search out the roots of that infidelity in the depths of our hearts. Lent is then a time of CONVERSION, a time for turning our lives around, an opportunity to turn back to the life into which we were introduced at Baptism. The result of such a conversion is reconciliation with God, with one another, with our past and with the future to which we have been called. And this, of course, raises the question of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as an expression of conversion.

Sometimes we speak of Sacraments of vocation, a term by which Marriage and Holy Orders are usually intended. But the ancient Church knew that Baptism too was a vocational sacrament. One of the early Fathers of the Church, Tertullian, described Christians as being like fish in that they cannot live out of water. He meant outside the context of Baptism Christians have no life. Baptism is therefore a life-long process, constantly growing, constantly being renewed and reaffirmed. I think that Reconciliation must also be understood as a sacrament of vocation: all of us are called to a life-long conversion.

CONVERSION IS NOT A ONCE-FOR-ALL-AND-FOREVER EVENT. Again and again we are converted, literally turned around, to God. Sometimes the conversion moment is so striking that we cannot fail to note the event; more often the conversion proceeds by less noticed acts of love and self-giving whose significance we may not attend to at the time. This on-going conversion needs to be celebrated again and again in the course of our lives. AND THESE CELEBRATIONS ARE THE SACRMENT OF RECONCILIATION. Indeed, just as baptism is celebrated once in a lifetime but is in fact as life-long event, so I suggest that Reconciliation may best be understood as a life-long vocation which is celebrated many times throughout our lives. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate who and what we are: A PEOPLE WHO INDIVIDUALLY AND COMMUNALLY ARE IN PROCESS OF CONVERSION.

## RECONCILIATION

2

A sacrament is an occasion to recognize what is always present and, by recognizing it, to allow it to become active and fruitful in our lives. The self-gift of God is constant. Indeed, that Absolute Love is the reason why anything is at all. Creation exists because God loves it. Sacraments are the opportunities to acknowledge that fact concretely and so accept the grace which lies at the roots of our being.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation, therefore, is not about restoring the love of God. The love of God needs no restoration, for it never ceases. I cannot make God not love me. Nothing, not even the most vicious sin, can keep God from loving me. I may refuse that love and fail to love God in return, but I cannot prevent God from loving me. In fact, if God did not love me, I would simply cease to be, for the ground of all existence is the Absolute Love which is God. Reconciliation does not change God; it changes me.

Conversion, the change which I experience in Reconciliation, is not a moral change. A moral change is, of course, presupposed in a true celebration of Reconciliation, but that is not what the sacrament is about primarily. CONVERSION IS A CHANGE OF HEART, a fundamental alteration of my way of understanding and relating to God, to others, and to myself. It is a recognition of the truth and a joyful celebration of the deepest reality of my existence. That truth is that the Absolute Love is the origin, the support, and the destiny of everything which exists, including me. That must be the center of every celebration of Reconciliation. The sacrament is not about MY sinfulness and MY repentance and MY moral development; IT IS ABOUT GOD'S LOVE. The two most important reasons to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation are to acknowledge the truth of who I am and who God is and to glorify the love of God.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, writing of the beauty of creation, has the lines, "These things, these things were here, and but the beholder/wanting." The Absolute Love which is God is always here. RECONCILIATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME A BEHOLDER.

## RECONCILIATION

3

No question is more frequently asked about the Sacrament of Reconciliation than, "Why do I need a priest?" And a very good question it is. After all, if God is the Absolute Love which the Christian tradition claims, then why can't I confess my sin to God directly and be certain that, so long as my repentance and determination to change my life are real, I am forgiven? The priest is another human being. Why do I need that intermediary between God and me?

The answer, quite bluntly, is that I don't. In one way or another, sin is the refusal to accept the love of God. When I am converted, i.e. when I turn again in grateful acceptance to that love, the Absolute Love which is God immediately fills me without any conditions whatsoever. Then why the priest?