

# Love is always having to say 'I'm sorry'.



*Sandra and David, in their mid thirties, look like any other happily married couple. Sitting side by side, they exchanged affectionate glances as they chatted about themselves. Only the raw honesty of their words exposed the stormy seas they had sailed in their twelve years of married life. "It's a miracle that we're still together" continued Sandra. "We've been through the works ... unwed pregnancy, affairs, you name it ... Most couples in our situation would have given up long ago. I've had a lot of growing up to do. There have been nights when I just didn't come home. And times when I wondered whether I would ever go home again. It's been Dave's extraordinary capacity to forgive that has enabled us to work through the things we have. But here we are with four beautiful children and still committed to each other. He is gold. Absolute gold. I am so lucky to have him."*

David and Sandra are ordinary people whose lives witness to an extraordinary quality: unconditional forgiveness. No matter what disillusionments they have been through, they are prepared to try again. Why? Because they are prepared to remember, again and again, the love that brought them together in the first place.

Their relationship gives us an insight into a Catholic understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You see, a Catholic concept of 'reconciliation' can only be understood against the backdrop of God's great love for us. Catholics believe in a loving God who has a marvellous vision for our lives. A God who sees us in a far more positive light than we could ever see ourselves. To God who sees us in a far more positive light than we could ever see ourselves. To God we are beautiful! Not just liked or tolerated, but passionately loved! Our God yearns for us to be the best we can be, a bit like a parent who has all sorts of hopes and dreams for her children, or a couple on their wedding day with

## Approaching the Topic

Have you ever lost something precious? A treasured possession, a relationship, a home, a dream? How did the story end? Did you find what had been lost? Did you become reconciled with the estranged person? Experiences like these are helpful in understanding the topic of this leaflet: the Sacrament of Reconciliation, 'confession' as it used to be called. Unfortunately, this practice has not always received favourable press in the public eye. There is a popular impression that Catholics have a hang-up about sin. But to allow such impressions to shape our thinking would be misleading indeed, for the Sacrament of Reconciliation holds out a positive and freeing message that we are loved, unconditionally, passionately, by a forgiving God.

# The Sacrament of Reconciliation

precious hopes and dreams for their life together.

Now, as every couple and every parent knows, having hopes and dreams are risky. As we saw in leaflet 6, as human beings we are prone to sin, to letting ourselves and others down and separating ourselves from God. Many a parent has suffered the pain of seeing a child waste a talent or reject their values. Many a married person has felt the sting of disillusionment, even heartbreak in the face of separation or divorce. Experiences like this can lead us to become cynical, critical, and to dispose of our dreams for a more "realistic" view of life. And understandable reaction. However, Catholics believe that God never stops believing in us; never gives up on us. And so, as Catholics, we take part in a special ceremony by which we can be renewed in our experience of being loved by God. It is an opportunity to start afresh, face the fact that we have sinned, lost sight of God's vision for us, and return to God's loving plan for our lives.

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## Through the ages...

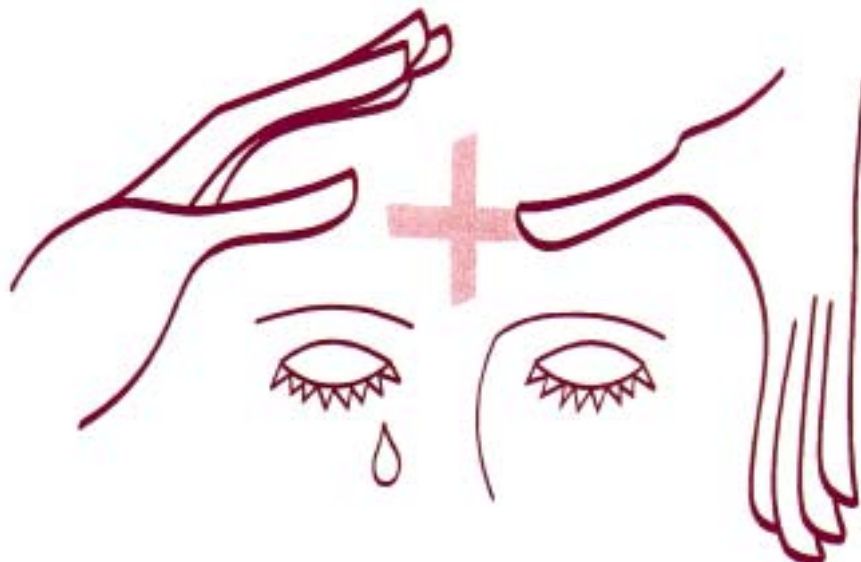
Where does our Catholic understanding of reconciliation come from? As we have seen in previous sessions, we can trace our deepest roots back to our Jewish ancestors. In the Old Testament we read again and again the story of an ever-faithful God summoning his people to return and be reconciled with him. Throughout the centuries, a theme of repentance was reiterated by the Jewish

prophets, right up to John the Baptist who, in Jesus' own day, was sent to prepare people's hearts for the coming of Jesus. Jesus himself took up this same message: 'Repent and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1.15). He told many parables about God's welcome to sinners. He loved people in a compassionate and yet challenging way. He mixed with tax collectors and prostitutes – people popularly considered beyond the mercy of God. He healed the sick as a sign of his power to forgive sins. He even went so far as to give up his life out of love for us, only to be raised to new life, and so revealed that God's forgiving love has the power to break through even the most hopeless of human situations.

As the early Christian community developed in the wake of these extraordinary events, it realised that Jesus' reconciling, healing love was entrusted to their own community. Christians understood that God wanted them to live a new life of peace, freedom, unity. This new life began with their baptism. However, a problem emerged. While people underwent dramatic conversions with baptism, they did continue to sin. Even the most committed of Christians struggled with their

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human weaknesses. The Christian community came to understand that, while God's new life to them was completely given, they would not experience the fullness of this new life while still on this earth. There had to be some way of reaffirming their baptismal promises without suggesting that there was something invalid about their original baptism. Thus, the Sacrament of Reconciliation emerged, a practice which allowed the Church to act as a mediator of God's forgiveness. This practice continued to develop over the centuries, taking on various shapes and forms while its essential purpose remained constant: to restore Christians to their rightful relationship with God and the Church community.



# Love is always having to say 'I'm sorry'

## Sin is never a private affair.

So you see, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is about restoring a relationship. A relationship with God, yes. But not a private 'spiritual' relationship that operates on a separate plane from our human lives. There is always a social dimension to sin. Common sense tells us this. For example, if we read in the news about a company director who embezzles the firm's funds, it is clear that this has a negative effect far beyond one man. The company's staff, clients, the perpetrator's family and personal life are all affected in one way or another, not only by what he has done, but also by what he hasn't done: a great deal of time, talent and energy has been channelled uselessly when it could have been spent creatively.

This social dimension of sin is key to understanding the Catholic practice of reconciliation. As we saw in leaflet 1, the Church is the Body of Christ, a

community of faith whose corporate life gives expression to God's presence on earth in our times. Because of this relationship, when one member hurts or is hurt, the whole Body suffers. One could liken it to a marriage: it is impossible for one partner to sin without affecting the whole marriage. In the Church, when we let each other down, we are in fact limiting the whole Body of Christ. We are not living up to the sign of unity which we profess to be. When we participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the act of sitting down with a priest, as a representative of Christ and his Church, is our way of acknowledging this public dimension of our sin and our desire to be reunited with the Body of Christ. Naturally, the practice of this sacrament presumes that we also seek forgiveness from one another in everyday life! Like all the sacraments, this must be situated in a life context. If we treat it like a magic black board eraser, we are

## What happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the priest absolves the penitent (the person seeking God's forgiveness) of all his/her sins. In doing so, the priest is acting in the person of Christ by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders. He is participating in the ministry of forgiveness which Christ himself carried out during his life on earth and commissioned his apostles to continue in his name (See John 20:21-23)

Nowadays there is great flexibility in the way the Sacrament of Reconciliation is celebrated. It is impossible to describe one form that is always followed. However, the following elements are fundamental to most.

**Preparation.** Through prayer and reflection, the penitent makes an examination of conscience and expresses sincere sorrow for the ways in which he/she has caused hurt to others.

**Greeting.** When the penitent enters the room where the sacrament is celebrated the priest gives a warm welcome and invites the penitent to sit or kneel.

**Opening words.** Priests and penitent make the sign of the cross together and the priest invites the penitent to trust in God's mercy.

**Introduction.** The penitent may tell the priest a few things about him/herself. E.g. if he is married or single; if she has been away from the Church for a time.

**Confession of sins.** The penitent names the areas of personal sin, simply and humbly. The priest may offer counsel or suggest someone else who can help the penitent in a particular area.

## Nick's Story

### The Prodigal Father

My father turned up when I was 18. I mean, he had left us when I was a little kid, and there he was one day, standing in the middle of the workshop where I was an apprentice panelbeater, nervously grinning at me. At first I didn't recognise him. I thought he was just a stray customer. Then, as the truth dawned, my jaw dropped and I just said, "Dad?". I had always thought that if I ever had the chance, I would really deck him for all the pain he'd caused us. But now the big moment had come, all my negative thoughts were forgotten. My dad had come back to see me! I just grabbed him and awkwardly

gave him a hug. We went for a beer and talked a bit. He asked my forgiveness for leaving me and mum. I didn't know what to say. Now we see each other every few weeks. There are two sides to every story. For the first time in my life, I've heard his side of the story. He said he had come to the workshop before, but was never brave enough to walk up to me. He was afraid that I hated him. In truth, I think I did for a while there. But he's still my dad. This is no fairy story. I know he can't be the kind of father I'd like him to be to me. But I've learned to forgive and just accept him for who he is (Nick)

### From the Gospel Story

#### Read

In Luke 15.11-32, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son to help his followers understand God as a forgiving Father. Read it for yourself and ask yourself: who do you most relate to in the story? Why?

# The Sacrament of Reconciliation

missing the point! Reconciliation is both a highpoint and power source for a forgiving lifestyle.

## Reconciliation gives us power to change

There is a well known line in the film "Love Story" which says: 'Love is never having to say you're sorry'. While the sentiment behind the author of those words might be well meaning, Catholics would take a different view: love is always having to say sorry! Sounds psychology would also affirm this. For example, psychiatrists like Dr Karl Menninger argue that to acknowledge our sinfulness brings psychological health because it declares that we are aware of the harm we do, responsible for it, and therefore can change. A healthy realisation and acceptance of our failings not only



puts us with the ability to change, grow and to apply the fitting remedy for our shortcomings. In short, it gives us power over our lives. Of course, what makes the Sacrament of Reconciliation special is that we are not dealing with a therapist, but Christ himself as the one who accepts us and gives us the power to change.

## Your Story

*You've heard a bit about our story as Catholics. What about your story? Where do you find yourself in your own life in the area of forgiveness and reconciliation? Below are a few suggestions for probing your own life's story.*

### Think About It

What experiences of separation/estrangement and reconciliation have been art of your own life?

### Talk It Over

If you could be on better terms with someone, who would that be? Tell a trusted friend a little bit about that person and why the relationship is important to you.

### Act On It

Is there someone you need to forgive? Make a decision in your heart to do just that.

Is there someone you need to ask for forgiveness? Find a simple, genuine way of saying 'I'm sorry' (eg. a short note, a gesture

of affection).

### Try It

A short daily prayer: 'Forgiving God, you never stop loving me. Help me to believe in my own goodness and to live your plan for my life. Day by day, fill my heart with your spirit of forgiveness'.

### Read

'Again Jesus said to (the apostles), "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you". After saying this he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit, for those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained."' (John 20.21-23)

## What happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

*continued from page 3*

**Penance.** The priest asks the penitent to perform some act of penance which will strengthen this area of his/her life. E.g. a prayer commitment, an action of service.

**Act of sorrow.** The penitent says a short prayer which expresses his/her sorrow for sin and a resolution to change.

**Absolution.** The priest extends his hand over the penitent and pronounces the words of absolution (forgiveness).

**Conclusion.** The priest says a short prayer expressing praise and thanks to God and tells the penitent to go in peace.



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