

## CELEBRATING RECONCILIATION

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### A Time to Review

The past three decades have seen a considerable change in our attitudes to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and in the frequency with which we celebrate it. The experience of those years puts us now in an unparalleled position to review at new depth the lessons we have learnt.

We have the opportunity to seek where the Spirit of God is breathing. Not everything was perfect in the old order, and the new order is still to be fashioned. The Spirit of God calls us ever onward. Pope Paul VI once wisely observed: "Civilizations are born, develop and die. But humanity is advancing along the path of history like the waves of a rising tide encroaching gradually on the shore" (*Populorum Progressio*, #17). The Church lives within that humanity and advances with it.

Jesus came that we might have life to the full, i.e., that we might increasingly get in touch with those dimensions of our present living that persist into eternity. Life is an unending journey; and we are called to take part in that journey. To stop journeying while further growth is still possible means that our experience of life remains incomplete, less rich, and possibly less helpful to others than it could be.

As we review our past, we seek to do so with discernment, trying to appreciate and preserve all that is good, and being free to let go of whatever is inadequate or no longer helpful on our pilgrim journey towards the Kingdom.

As we travel this path, we pass through a variety of different stages of maturity. At each of these stages we view and value things differently. As we mature we become better able to handle complexity.

### 1. Stage One - The Child's World

#### *Earliest attitudes*

Before most of us first experienced the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we had been thoroughly immersed in the little child's quite self-centered and spontaneous approach to life. Our understanding of what was good and what was bad meant quite simply what was good for us or bad for us. Our horizons did not really extend far beyond *our own self-interest*. Bad was what we were punished for; good was what we were rewarded for. We tended to approach life by keeping out of as much trouble as possible, and ensuring as many rewards as possible. (As we grew older, most of us also grew smart enough to sacrifice the short-term benefit for the long-term reward.)

Most of us had obviously been introduced to **God** at this age. Inevitably we conceived of God in the same categories as we conceived of everybody else, i.e., in terms of our own needs and security. God was the one who would be nice to us like a father when we were good, but would punish us when we were bad. The difficulty with this was that it was hard to know what God rewarded and punished, since we did not experience the rewards or punishments immediately.

Keeping in God's good books was important, but was also quite a strain, because everything seemed arbitrary.

### ***"First Confession" age.***

By the time we were approaching the age of eight or nine, we were developing a more sophisticated view of life. Other people were becoming more important to us. *Belonging to the community* was more important than simple rewards or punishments. We could do quite difficult things in order to be accepted by those we loved. Our understanding of what was right or wrong was now gauged by whether it would mean our being accepted and appreciated, or rejected or censured, by the group. Behaviour became less spontaneous and more calculating.

Our primary group was our family of parents and brothers and sisters. Parents mattered most; but teachers and authority figures in general also became important.

**God** was seen as an authority figure, but the relationship was more mellow and less self-interested than before. God was the loving Father, or Brother Jesus. Mary was important, too. Wrong behaviour, as well as being dangerous (the earlier attitudes to God had not changed), hurt God and hurt Jesus, and left us feeling on the outside, unloved and unaccepted. With our slowly maturing sensitivity, that feeling could be quite intolerable.

### ***Adolescence***

As we grew through our primary school years and into our early teens, the groups to which we belonged expanded. Peer groups replaced the family in importance from time to time. But the same mechanisms were working. Wrong was what led to our not being accepted by our group, whichever group was dominant at the time - family or peers.

### ***The Inner Voice - Conscience or Superego?***

Already in primary school we had been introduced to the idea of conscience. We were taught that conscience was the inner voice (indeed, the voice of God) that told us what was good or bad, and that made us feel ashamed when we behaved badly or feel virtuous when we behaved well. However, at this early stage of our growth, the demands of this inner voice were largely the messages we had learnt from authority figures around us.

It is important to notice the characteristics of this "inner voice" as it is experienced at this immature stage of life. It dealt with *concrete behaviour*, with specific actions or omissions, and was not attuned at that stage to the *meanings* of actions nor to the *values* underlying them. Nor was it in touch with degrees of *deliberateness*. It consisted simply in specific commands or prohibitions. Whether our behaviour was deliberate or not, we *felt* "guilty" if we did the wrong thing.

This inner voice learnt the *degrees* of wrongness largely from the presence or absence of any anxiety conveyed in the attitudes of the authority figures, especially from what they conveyed non-verbally. Wrongness was not seen as having a rational, objective basis. We felt that missing Mass was very wrong because we were told it was very wrong. We may have felt sex play to be even worse not only because of the firmness of our parents' teaching on the subject but especially, perhaps, because of the anxiety we sensed in them.

The distinction between rightness or wrongness was based simply on what we were taught to be such, subtly modified by what we saw brought punishment or reward (either physical punishment or the withdrawal of acceptance and affirmation). The criteria were felt as arbitrary with *no awareness of any reasoned or objective basis*.

Unlike conscience, this other inner voice operates purely in the area of our feelings and is not derived from our intelligence. It focuses on precise actions rather than on the meaning of our behaviour or on the values we are seeking. It is not guided by our intelligence but rather depends on our up-bringing. It needs to be seen as a *psychological*, not a moral, factor. Consequently, it should be distinguished from conscience. Some psychologists give it the name **superego**. Others call it negative conscience. It develops in us well before conscience does. And as a *psychological* factor it continues to operate and to exert pressure on us even after conscience has developed.

The call of **conscience** is not necessarily felt so clearly; it is "known". This can be more subtle. It is not experienced as an arbitrary imperative but rather as an insistent though gentle calling towards value or away from evil.

### **The Experience of Guilt**

When the call of conscience is violated, genuine guilt feelings are usually associated with it, but they derive their strength not from a self-centered fear of rejection or loss of face but from an appreciation of the values rejected. This in turn can lead to a sense of sadness and of genuine sorrow.

The same term, "guilt feeling", is sometimes loosely used to describe two distinct experiences - that of shame and that of genuine guilt. This can give rise to confusion.

A further confusion can arise from the fact that real guilt is not always strongly felt. Guilt more properly describes an objective situation. When guilt arises from a violation of personally appreciated and internalized values, it is quite clearly felt. However, when it arises from the violation of values or principles that are known to be such simply from the teaching of others or from rational recognition, but are not yet personally appreciated or truly internalized, the guilt may be owned but may not be felt very noticeably.

The superego is an important faculty in the young child since it directs its behaviour and helps it to live in harmony with others at a time when it is still too young to work these things out for itself. It is a valuable socializing faculty. In the mature adult, superego can still operate helpfully in that it serves to regulate some social behaviour automatically without the need for conscious reflection and decision. It is at the basis, for example, of our instinctively well-mannered interactions. **However, in the moral order, the superego is no longer a proper determinant of mature and personal adult behaviour. We need to learn to live with it, not to follow it blindly.**

In fact, a large number of adults have not developed their consciences very much, and still work from their superegos.

### ***Relief or Forgiveness?***

Superego-induced "guilt feelings" cry out for *relief*. The person wants to *feel* at peace again inside. Unfortunately the seeking of relief can figure more highly than the seeking of

forgiveness, or the righting of the wrong done. Experience shows that this feeling of relief can be achieved in a number of ways. Since superego-induced "guilt feelings" have no direct connection with reasonable and objective factors, their relief also has no necessary connection with reasonable and objective methods.

Relief can be obtained through *punishment*. Interestingly, even if the punishment is given for something else, it can still often bring a sense of relief after the guilt experience. There is nothing rational about this. There doesn't need to be. (For example: a little child hurts his little sister and feels guilty. If he gets a smack eventually from his mother, he does not feel guilty any more - even if the smack is for some other misdemeanour!)

Another source of relief is *confession* of the fault. This confession can be either to the one who was hurt or even, surprisingly, to an authority figure who has nothing to do with the fault in question.

A third source of relief is through some *ritual* action. The more striking the elements in the ritual, the more effectively do they relieve the guilt feelings. The process does not need to be reasonable.

## The Sacrament

It is interesting to see how much the experience of the Sacrament of Confession has unfortunately catered to the relief of these feelings of shame and fear associated with the superego (not conscience). The practice involved *confession* to an *authority figure*. There was a penance imposed that had an element of *punishment* or at least of inconvenience. (Sometimes the confession itself was seen as a humiliation, and was often in fact undertaken as the punishment). The *ritual* especially was powerful: darkness, a precise formula to be recited off-by-heart, and an authority figure dressed in long, black soutane, and giving absolution in an unknown language. In the ritual there was a scrupulous accent on accuracy, and any inaccuracy meant that the ritual was faulty, and forgiveness was consequently deemed to be withheld.

One reason why the sacrament is celebrated less frequently these days may well be because, for people who move beyond this stage of their growth, the ritual has lost its effective elements. The dark confessional, the formula and the Latin have all gone!

## Further Consequences

What is left for those who operate chiefly from their superego, now that the relief mechanisms associated with the former confessional practice have largely disappeared? How do they cope with their fears and shame?

A basic coping method is subconsciously to **deny** what they would otherwise perceive to be their guilt. That is a radical sort of remedy, but is a common psychological tactic. It is practised not only by those seeking relief from a persecuting superego but also by those whose guilt is real. For these latter it involves nothing less than a deadening of the sense of sin!

This denial of guilt can be achieved in two ways. One way is to unload the guilt - unconsciously - onto someone or something else, to lay the blame elsewhere, to **scapegoat**. I imagine that the blame in fact is laid in lots of places. One common tactic in recent years is to blame Vatican II, or the liberal tendencies in the Church. Personal confusion does not have to be owned so keenly if everything else can be blamed for the confusion.

Another way of coping with the feeling of guilt is to quieten its source by **changing allegiance** to a group who deny the rules. Even more commonly, others simply **drop out**. A number of people whose growth was arrested at this stage where their mature conscience had not yet formed have angrily chosen to leave the Church, rather than to face the pain so often involved in change and growth. They are no longer confronted with their feelings of guilt or fear and can more easily forget them.

For those people who still operate mainly from their superego and who remain in the Church, and who are honest enough not to find relief for their anxieties by laying the blame elsewhere or by dropping out, life must be very uncomfortable. The superego is a harsh judge. It can make life miserable with its unrelenting blame or compulsive rigidity.

Unfortunately, it can also tend to translate itself into a harsh and rigid pastoral attitude to others. This is particularly unfortunate when the ones concerned have a priestly or other pastoral ministry within the Church.

## **2. Stage Two - The Development of Conscience**

With a number of people, however, the complexities of life and their experience of others more mature than themselves lead them to a further, more adequate, more sophisticated and more adult approach to right and wrong. The change can begin in their late "teen" years - though not necessarily - and deepens and refines itself at least up to about middle age.

The conflicting answers given by differing groups to the problems of the age lead them to seek for a firmer basis to the questions of right and wrong than unquestioned acceptance. They begin to look for the reasons behind the rules, to search for the broader principles in a more rational and objective way.

### **Moral Conscience**

The *moral conscience* begins to form, as does a more general moral sensitivity. A rational order is seen in things and an openness to natural law.

Performance remains important. Whereas, in the former stage of growth, performance was seen as the condition for acceptance by the group and was the source of the sense of peace that came from belonging, now it is seen as the condition for self-acceptance and is the source of the sense of peace that comes from the appreciation of one's own integrity.

In the early stages of true conscience development the personal knowledge of principles and values necessary for proper moral behaviour is by no means always clear, and guidance by wiser persons and obedience to appropriate authority are recognized as important. But the appropriate authority is no longer the uncritically accepted parent or teacher or group leader, or even the parish-priest, but is now the more universal authority of the teaching Church or the civil law.

### **Experiencing Real Guilt**

In this stage of life, real guilt can be distinguished more easily from the recriminations of the non-rational superego. Real guilt can be known rationally. Whilst it is accompanied by genuine guilt feelings (which may not always be felt strongly), these guilt feelings can also be more

easily distinguished from the feelings of shame and fear generated by the superego. Because the superego does not cease to exist while conscience is developing, the feelings arising inevitably from the activity of the superego need still to be accepted and integrated, but they need not be believed. They can be ignored more or less successfully, and can eventually be lived with in reasonable peace.

In a situation of real guilt, the conscience does not seek the simple relief of feelings but urges *restitution* or *balance*. If someone has been hurt, that person is to be compensated. If the order has been disturbed, balance must somehow be restored. Ritual relief has little or no place in this situation, although punishment and the loss of rights is still seen as an appropriate way to compensate for the disturbance of order.

### **The Sense of God**

The image of **God** tends to change in emphasis, too. The image of arbitrary rewarder or punisher is certainly no longer adequate, nor is the image of the benevolent Father or Brother who, with care, may possibly be manipulated. God is seen more as a creating God who gives law and order to the world, as the judge who judges justly, and who rewards or punishes with justice and fairness. Jesus is above all the teacher, and possibly the victim of sacrifice who adequately atones for and absorbs the due punishment of the sins of the world.

### **The Sacrament**

Because people at this stage have primarily a rational approach to life, the sacrament of reconciliation - as all sacraments in some way - is not deeply appreciated. Sacraments are symbols, and symbols are not strictly rational things. What matters most for them is not the symbol, but the reality, the grace behind the symbol. Sacraments are received for their practical usefulness, for the grace that they give, and out of obedience to God who has disposed things this way (for reasons best known to God!).

If people at this stage of growth take part in the celebration of reconciliation, they tend to do it either out of obedience, or because they see it as a source of grace, a reasonable occasion of guidance and exhortation and even perhaps as a punishment they deserve.

The confessing of sins is for the sake of determining the sentence.

The way the sacrament is celebrated is not really important, though the more sense it makes and the more transparent the symbols, the better.

When the sacrament is seen in this light, it is understandable that the frequency has dropped. Obedience really requires only annual confession (and only when mortal sin is at stake); and the possible guidance given on the occasion of the confession is not constantly needed or helpful. Indeed, the kind of dialogue required for moral guidance or spiritual growth is often better conducted elsewhere than in the confessional.

Most of us are generally at home with John the Baptist's message of repentance. We take it as understood that repentance means bringing our life under control, a demand to "try harder". With a certain degree of self-righteousness we relate to John's vision of the axe being laid to the roots of the tree and the winnowing fan being poised to separate wheat from chaff, with fire in store for the chaff.

### 3. Stage Three - Maturity

Yet our on-going encounter with life leaves us at times still somewhat dissatisfied. In the complex and messy human situation even principles can seem to conflict. What seemed at first to be clear is no longer totally adequate or satisfactory. Life compels us to look beyond the principles at times to find the values on which they are based. We learn to live with apparent opposites, to accept the tensions, and to hold them in harmony without denying either one or the other.

This requires the development, beyond rationality, of a certain almost aesthetic sense, the sensitive appreciation of value, and the virtue of wisdom.

An uneasiness develops. This happens firstly at the level of ideas and understanding. Our idealism and our striving for perfection do not fit well with Jesus' warning that whoever exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be the ones to be exalted (*Luke 18,14*).

At the same time, on the experiential level, as we experience life more and grow in our knowledge of ourselves, we may begin to allow ourselves to see that all is not order in our lives. If anything, the chaos may seem to be increasing. Our life span is getting shorter, and all our energy and trying harder seem to get us nowhere. They perhaps change things on the surface a little, but our confused motivation and selfishness become clearer and evade our efforts at improvement. We may see that even our desires for improvement stem from our own need to be unimpeachable and to be in control. They come, in other words, from our pride.

It seems that as we continue our inner journey, the potential capacities that otherwise lie dormant within us become increasingly actualized. Among these is pride that becomes deeper, more sophisticated and more subtle. Our inner journey would not be a journey of growth were it not for the grace of God that gives us the potential still to grow equally in love and to forgive the sin that we see within ourselves.

As we face our powerlessness, we may even feel the temptation to despair. And this is the moment of grace! This is a precious time. It is an invitation to us to hear the Gospel, and really for the first time.

For Jesus preaches what some have called the **second conversion**. (*The first conversion involves the movement from disorder to order.*) This second conversion is based on the breaking into the world of the kingdom, of God's reign, of God's being in control, of God's action, above all of God's mercy. Jesus' call is that we believe the good news.

The "first conversion" attitude is symbolically expressed in the stance of the Pharisees, good men who kept the law, but who relied on their compliance with the law to save them. Jesus scandalized them by saying that sinners were making their way into the Kingdom. And it is not clear that He was referring exclusively to former sinners who were "making good". His parable about the tax-collector (*Luke 18,9-14*) made it clear that he also included actual sinners who could not get themselves out of their mess but were small enough to let God be big enough to forgive them. Jesus' God is a big God, whose forgiveness is not measured by our merit but is unlimited and can overwhelm any sin.

We need to feel the scandal of Jesus' story about that tax-collector. There we see no self-justification, but the experience of compassion. Jesus said that even the prostitutes were getting into the kingdom.

This can seem scandalous and look like the subverting of all morality, until in our despair we have confronted our own sinfulness and our utter powerlessness to change our hearts; and then his word becomes a message of hope and invitation to rejoice.

Jesus is not the one who came to tidy up the world, even to eliminate sin. He encountered sin, and felt its power dragging at his own heart. "He was tempted in every way that we are, though he was without sin" (Heb. 4.15). To experience temptation is to experience the power of evil.

*Especially in his passion and death even Jesus knew in all its starkness and power the deep temptation to disown his own chosen powerlessness (that followed from his decision to love and respect our freedom), and to want instead to live our lives for us. He felt the absence of God in the emptiness and the apparent futility of living authentically. He felt the bitterness and the temptation to see us as beyond hope and not worth dying for. And he felt deep hurt, anger and aggression, and struggled with the choice to forgive or to give in to some sort of crazed cursing of his persecutors.*

Jesus knew evil in all its power in the depths of his heart. And he overwhelmed it by an even deeper love. He chose to be his human self, to trust his God as a God of life, to commit himself to us in hope, and to forgive. His resurrection to life vindicated his choice.

## **A Maturing Sense of God**

At the same time our image of **God** changes. God is the God who forgives what we can't change; God is the compassionate, merciful, foolish father of the prodigal. It is God's Spirit that hovers over chaos. God is the one who alone can make our hearts of stone become hearts of flesh, but who still loves us even while they remain stone. Our God is not a 'Father Christmas' God who gifts us and leaves us to stay as we are, but a God who loves us and empowers us to live, to grow, to struggle, to fail, to try again, to surrender, to hope.

Nor does God seem to be a God who protects us from the consequences of our own choices and the choices of others, but rather one who is with us in the struggle, who weeps with us, is angry with us, rejoices with us, and in everything enables us to live, to love, and never be crushed.

Our trusting in God's goodness and our letting go of our own aspirations to "get it all together", and to surrender instead to the Paschal Mystery, give God room to move in our hearts and to heal the destructiveness and harshness that all our own efforts could only more subtly camouflage.

Repentance becomes the reversal of the sin of Adam who rejected his radical dependence and opted instead for self-reliance and independence. God offers security based not on our self-reliance but on our trust in God's mercy and love. Where our self-love and fear in the face of guilt previously led simply to remorse, the grace of God leads us now into the mystery of genuine sorrow.

Whereas before our one interest was to disown our sin, now we admit it. We do not want it, because it is destructive of life, but we see it as the point of entry of God's grace. Without it we



remain Pharisee, good and God-fearing, but outside the kingdom of grace, an "elder son"/daughter unable to join in the celebration and dancing within.

With Paul we somehow intuit that Jesus' strength is at its best in weakness. And we rejoice in our weakness so that his strength may be at work within us. It is now that our approach to the sacrament of reconciliation can truly come of age.

### **Celebrating Reconciliation Maturely**

With our second conversion our attitude to the world and to the Church deepens. We see the all-pervasiveness of sin. We recognize its power to blind whole cultures to its deeper roots and to hold them in ignorance. And we appreciate the need to be constantly reminded of God's mercy and to surrender again to Jesus' victory over evil. At this level of experience, the long penitential tradition of the pilgrim People of God comes into its own.

Our preoccupations with our own sense of relief and our need for performance are recognized for what they are. Our gaze is able now to broaden out beyond ourselves and we begin to see and to accept more clearly our solidarity with others in the mystery of sin and the mystery of grace.

### ***Awareness of Community***

We begin to accept with conviction, and no longer purely notionally, the simple truth that the Second Vatican Council had spelt out in its Constitution on the Church:

"It has pleased God ... to make [people] holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people..." (*Lumen Gentium*, #9).

We see the Church itself as a community of sinners. In this it is little different from the rest of the world. The difference lies in this that the Church is a community of sinners who are free to recognize and to admit their sin, who hope for change and the creation of the "new heart" within them, and who trust in the forgiving love and creative power of God.

### **The Place for Celebration and Symbol**

Communities need consciously to remember what they are. They need to affirm their identity, or in time they lose the fresh awareness of who and what they are. Communities that fail to remember and affirm their identity eventually disintegrate. This is true of families; it is true of nations. It is true, too, of the Church.

As **individuals** we see ourselves within this Church, the community of fellow pilgrims. We understand better our own identity as we situate ourselves within the Church community to which we belong. We know that without the community, we are in danger of forgetting who we are.

The clarity of the awareness that the **Church** has of itself as community likewise depends on its stepping back from the day to day tasks of proclaiming the Word of the Kingdom and helping God's love to become flesh so that it might symbolically celebrate its identity and thereby take a deeper hold on itself.

Symbols touch best the complexity and depth of life, beyond the reach of clear definitions and concepts, beyond the scope of order and rationality. Sin is mystery - the mystery of darkness. God's forgiveness is mystery - the mystery of light. They are best approached in symbol. They are best taken hold of in sacrament.

This is the background to the Church's *sacramental* celebrations. The sacraments are primarily actions of the community. The official **Introduction to the New Rites of Reconciliation** prepared by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship makes quite clear the fact that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is precisely an action of the Church community:

"The celebration of this sacrament is an action in which the Church proclaims her faith [in the merciful God] (and) gives thanks to God for the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free..." (#7c).

Through the sacraments the Church community identifies itself. In Reconciliation it professes itself to be a community of sinners struggling to live life more authentically, but still loved by God, redeemed by Christ and celebrating the freedom he has won for us.

The human dialogue of priest and penitent is more than it seems. Through the power of Christ, present where two or three gather in his name, it reverberates into eternity. The human dialogue symbolizes and engages the divine dialogue.

## Consequences

God's decision for forgiveness has already been made, and made irrevocably. We do not come to the sacrament, therefore, seeking a forgiveness that we somehow think God would withhold until we come. The power of the sacrament lies in its ability not to move God to forgiveness but to open us to it. We come to celebrate and, through the celebration, to accept God's forgiveness and to let it permeate our every cell and fibre.

St. Paul wrote: "It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God." (*II Cor.* 5:18-21)

That is why the priest, in the name of the Church, can pray in the sacrament:

"God the Father of mercies,  
through the death and resurrection of Jesus,  
has reconciled the whole world to himself;  
and sent the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins."

In the sacrament, we open ourselves more radically to God's forgiveness and take hold of it more intimately.

This forgiveness of God is a *dynamic* power. It sweeps into us and carries us along with itself. As we surrender to the flow of God's forgiveness of us, we are moved to forgive ourselves. We learn to love ourselves and to become reconciled to ourselves with all our sinfulness.

What is more, the flow of God's forgiveness reaches out beyond ourselves and embraces the whole of humanity. We are carried along in that flow, too, and learn to forgive those who have hurt us. We become reconciled with our world. We indeed need to do so, because our own readiness to forgive others and our ability to receive God's forgiveness are mutually dependent. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"!

When we celebrate the sacrament together as community, we are not alone in that flood of God's forgiveness. There are others, too, who are surrendering to it and being carried along in it. We know that we have contributed to the hurt and sin of the world. In God's love, those others in the community whom we have hurt directly or indirectly are reaching back to us in forgiveness and reconciliation, and reaching out beyond us to humanity.

As we are drawn into this sacrament, together we receive and extend forgiveness - God's forgiveness, our own forgiveness, the Church's forgiveness.

Our human dialogue of confession and absolution - penitent and priest proclaiming together the reality of sin and the forgiveness of God - initiates us into the cosmic mystery of forgiveness and universal reconciliation.

The Church's own formal **Introduction to the New Rites of Reconciliation** proclaims:

"Thus the penitent experiences the mercy of God in his [her] life. He [she] proclaims that mercy and, together with the priest, celebrates the liturgy of the Church which is being perpetually renewed". (*Introduction*, #11)

### **The Task that Awaits Us**

The Church needs to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation if it is to be perpetually renewed. As community we need to remember who and what we are so that we can take the appropriate steps to live in line with our identity. We are sinners, forgiven by our merciful God. We forget either at our peril. If we forget that we are sinners, we resort to the sterile approach to life of the Pharisee. We can do so only by closing our eyes to the truth and denying reality.

But we can truly know and own our sin only in the light of God's graciousness. Otherwise our recognition of sin would destroy us or lead us to despair.

We know that God's forgiveness is mediated, drawn on and celebrated in many ways. Sacramental reconciliation is only one of these. But it is a uniquely precious and special way. In the interests of our openness to truth and to life, we need to discover again the central importance of the Celebration of Reconciliation in the life of the Church and in our own lives as well.