



The Light of Forgiveness

**THE SACRAMENT OF
RECONCILIATION FOR TEENS**

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The Light of Forgiveness: The Sacrament of Reconciliation for Teens

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To my father,
who continues to teach me so much

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Introduction



Discussion about the sacrament of Reconciliation can cause many reactions. People can struggle with it. There can be many misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can lead to fear. In the past, preparation for celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation was often done in the context of the fear of hell! There is a wonderful short story written by Frank O'Connor, "My First Confession." In the story a young boy, Jackie, tells of how he prepared for and celebrated his First Confession. A lady who was called Miss Ryan prepared him. About her he said,

Hell had the first place in her heart. She lit a candle, took out a new half-crown, and offered it to the first boy who would hold one finger, only one finger!—in the flame for five minutes by the school clock. Being always very ambitious I was tempted to volunteer,

but I thought it might look greedy. Then she asked were we afraid of holding one finger—only one finger!—in a little candle flame for five minutes and not afraid of burning all over in roasting hot furnaces for all eternity. “All eternity! Just think of that! A whole lifetime goes by and it’s nothing, not even a drop in the ocean of your sufferings.”

This certainly was a dramatic way to introduce the sacrament, which we are told is a gift from God!

In this book I want reveal the true meaning of the sacrament and the gift and power it is in our lives. To do this I needed to hear the questions that young people had about the sacrament.

We are blessed in our parish of St. Eugene’s Cathedral in the diocese of Derry, Ireland, to have a youth community who live together, pray together, and do school retreats together. It is a sign of the vibrancy of the Church and the reality that people of all ages want to get to know Jesus better and share their faith with others.

I asked them what questions they had about the sacrament of Reconciliation. Their first question was, “Why is Confession so scary?” Obviously fear is

still associated with the sacrament. They also asked, “Why is the sacrament so formal?” They wanted to know what one actually had to say in the celebration of the sacrament. They asked about the role of the priest. “What about confessing straight to God?” Throughout the book their questions will pop up, and I will try to answer them.

I will answer them in the bigger context of how we live our lives and what role God desires to have in our lives. It is in this way that the gift and power of the sacrament will become obvious. I firmly believe that the sacrament of Reconciliation is one of the most powerful gifts that we can accept in our lives. The sacrament has the power to transform our lives and make us so full of joy. It can also transform the Church and society. If we really understand and accept the gift of the sacrament of Reconciliation from God, we will be changed.

When Pope Francis was speaking about the sacrament of Reconciliation, he said:

Confession should not be “torture,” but everyone should leave the confessional with happiness in their hearts, with their faces radiating hope, albeit at times—we know—

bathed in the tears of conversion and joy derived from it. It should be a liberating encounter, enriched with humanity, through which one can educate in mercy, which does not exclude but rather includes the just obligation to atone for, to the extent possible, the wrong committed. Thus the faithful will feel called to confess frequently, and will learn to do so in the best of ways, with that gentleness of soul that does so much good for the heart—also the heart of the confessor! In this way we priests enable the personal relationship with God to grow, so that his Kingdom of love and peace expands in hearts.

In the sacrament of Reconciliation we can find happiness and the powerful gift of hope. We are liberated—set free. We are enabled to come closer and closer to God. It is an amazing gift.

Using the Youth Team's questions and other questions, too, this book will uncover some aspects of the amazing gift that the sacrament is. No book could uncover all the aspects of the gift because the gift is as big as the one giving the gift—God!

How do we live our lives?



To enable us to uncover any aspects of a gift from God, we need to look at our own lives, because it is into the reality of our lives that God gives us his gifts. So we need to ask: How do we live our lives? In what context do we live our lives? As people of faith, in what context do we live our faith?

It is impossible to live life in isolation. It simply can't be done. Nobody is independent. We are all dependent on one another. Just take a moment to think about how many people are involved in your life right now. Your family? Your friends? Your teachers? But what about the people who made your clothes? What about those who transported them to the shop? What about those who sold them to you?

What about those who made the money or credit card you used? The list goes on and on. We need each other. These relationships of dependence can be great gifts or sources of abuse. However, in some ways they are the context in which we live our lives. We live our lives in the context of interdependent relationships. At times we are willing to acknowledge this reality, and at times we refuse to acknowledge it and we assert our imagined independence! At times like this we declare, "I don't need anybody—I am self-sufficient!" Really?

One problem with our need of others is that we can come to resent that need. We can see needing one another as something negative, and that can make us react to one another negatively. This is where God comes in.

God obviously doesn't see need and dependency as negative. How do we know this? We know it because God chooses need and dependency as ways in which to relate to us. This might sound surprising since God is all-powerful and all-knowing, and yet this is God's choice.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah there is a fascinating passage where God says:

With heaven my throne
and earth my footstool,
what house could you build for me,
what place could you make for my rest?
All of this was made by my hand
and all of this is mine—it is the Lord
 who speaks.
But my eyes are drawn to the person
of humble and contrite spirit
who trembles at my word.

God is telling us that he has everything. He is all-powerful. However, he is drawn to the person of humble and contrite spirit. His desire is to be in friendship—in relationship—with each one of us. You may object and say that doesn't prove that he needs us or is dependent on us. In ways you are right. God doesn't need us and is not dependent on us. However, he chooses to need us and be dependent on us in his relationship with us. He creates this dependency by giving us free will. When God desires to be in relationship with us, he makes himself vulnerable. We don't have to respond to his vulnerability, but the fulfillment of God's desire is dependent on our response. God needs us to respond

to enable him to be in relationship with us. God will never force himself into our lives. He waits for us to welcome him into our lives: a beautiful illustration of Divine Humility.

Since God chooses to need us and be dependent on us, he obviously doesn't see either need or dependency as negative but, instead, as beautiful and positive.

Jesus takes this one step further—this relationship of need and dependency that can be so positive and so powerful. When Jesus came into the world he introduced a completely new way of living. He wanted us all to live as brothers and sisters. However, more than that, he wanted us all to live as members of his body. What does that mean?

What does it mean to be the body of Christ? It means that Jesus wants us to be his presence in the world today. He is depending on us. St. Teresa of Avila says,

Christ has no body now but yours—no
hands—no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which he looks with
compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands with which he blesses all
the world.

Yours are the hands—yours are the feet—
yours are the eyes—
you are his Body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

This is the incredible trust and dependence that Jesus has in us. He wants us to allow him to be present through our lives. This can change the whole structure of society.

We live in a society that is structured like a pyramid: a hierarchical shape sloping upward from a massive but relatively powerless base to a narrow top where all the power resides. The journey upward is all about winning and getting to the top. In order to get to the top you have to knock people down because the space as you forge your way to the top gets narrower and narrower. It's all about competition. But if you step out of the pyramid and into Jesus's way of life, you step into a body. There is no room for competition in a body. The hand is not in competition with the foot. The eye is not exerting its superiority over the mouth. For the body to work, competition must be banished, and every part has

to do its own unique thing. Competition would kill the body, but cooperation allows it to flourish and grow. When we cooperate and realize we need one another, we live as brothers and sisters. This is the vision of Jesus. Yet we can move far from that vision, and we can do it without even noticing.

We can move very quickly from living a relationship of brothers and sisters to living a relationship of competitiveness. Competition enters into many of the relationships that we have, and it can start at a very early age. I don't know if they still have the dreadful Bonny Baby Show, a competition in which innocent babies are paraded and judged in terms of their looks. It beggars belief.

We often use competition to motivate people. We use competition to increase people's self esteem—if they win! Competition often becomes the way we relate to others. You might go home and tell your parents that you got a B on your test, and your parents might say, "Very good." But then your parents might try to find out what the rest of the class got so they can decide if the B was really good or not! Competition drives so much. It defines so many relationships.

It is a very small step from seeing the other person as a fellow competitor to seeing him as a threat. If that person beats me, I won't get what I want, so that person is a threat to me. The world has a way of making us view others as threats. We saw that in a very literal way with the Swine Flu scare. I don't wish to undermine the real need there is to be careful about spreading disease, but the Swine Flu reaction made everybody a threat to everybody else. Don't touch me, because you could contaminate me! There is a true story about a meeting that happened during the Swine Flu period. The meeting included people with learning disabilities. At the beginning of the meeting an announcement was made that due to the Swine Flu all had to refrain from hugging that morning. At about 12:10 PM a boy with Down's syndrome went around the room hugging people. When he was asked to stop he said, "Why? The morning is over!" We can become threats to one another, threats to one another's position, threats to one another's career path.

It is a very short step to go from seeing the other as a threat to seeing the other as an enemy. Then war breaks out. It is our natural instinct to defend

our territory and fight our enemy. In some ways it is a very understandable journey to go from being a brother or a sister to becoming a competitor, to becoming a threat, to becoming an enemy. This journey has nothing to do with God. It has nothing to do with Jesus. It is a journey that Jesus desires us to reject. He never wants us to move away from being each other's brothers and sisters. This is a profound challenge that we have to face to remain brothers and sisters in a world that promotes competition. How do we remain as brothers and sisters? How do we remain as the body of Christ?

This can be difficult. Often it seems easier to be competitors rather than each other's brothers and sisters, dependent on each other. When we are brothers and sisters we relate to each other as equals with beautiful and unique gifts. St. Paul speaks about this very directly in his letter to the Philippians. He says,

There must be no competition among you.

Paul's vision is for us to be united in love with a common purpose and a common mind: to become

the body of Christ and to become one with the mind of Jesus. He goes on to say,

Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus.

This can be difficult. It is about living in holy communion with one another. This is what the Eucharist is about—the Mass. We receive the body of Christ so that we can go out and be the body of Christ. We receive Holy Communion so that we can live in holy communion. That can be tough. Once I realized that very forcefully.

In October 2006 I visited a prison outside Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. It was the most hopeless place I have ever been in. It was simply a field with a few mud huts. In the field there were about 280 young men walking about purposelessly. Their spirits were so broken that they didn't even try to escape. They no longer dreamed of freedom. As part of our visit we were brought into a mud hut that

served as their kitchen. It had no light except that coming from the open door. In primitive and less than hygienic conditions, people were baking bread for the prisoners. It was unleavened bread exactly like Holy Communion at Mass, only bigger. The chaplain, who was showing us around, lifted a piece of the bread and broke it and offered me a bit to try. I refused. I refused to share their bread because I could not cope with their circumstances. I could not enter fully into the dreadful reality of their lives. I refused to be in communion with them. Afterward I felt ashamed. I wanted to fix their reality, but I didn't want to stand with them in their reality—united with them as their brother. In many ways that day I sinned. Not eating the bread wasn't a sin, but the attitude it revealed was a sin.

So in what context do we live our lives? We live them in the context of relationships—relationships of dependency and need that can be so positive and so powerful that we are led by them to love itself. In many ways the relationships we live throughout our lives never change, from the moment of our conception to the moment of our death. While we live in the womb we need our mother to nourish