

FREEDOM AND FORGIVENESS

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*A Fresh Look at the
Sacrament of Reconciliation*

Father Paul Farren

PREFACE BY SR. CATHERINE DOOLEY, OP



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Freedom and Forgiveness: A Fresh Look at the Sacrament of Reconciliation

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I dedicate this book to the memory of my mother.



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I thank The Columba Press for publishing the first edition of this book.

The book was long in coming! In truth it began back in 1997 in the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. There Sr. Catherine Dooley, OP, encouraged me to study the sacrament of Reconciliation. Through her enthusiasm I have developed a great love for the sacrament. I want to thank Sr. Kate for her guidance and her friendship and for helping me with this book.

I thank my colleagues at the Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre, who have supported me so much in this work. I also thank all those who read the book and made comments and corrections. They are greatly appreciated.

The sacrament of Reconciliation can be talked about endlessly but for it to be alive it needs to be celebrated. I am so grateful for the accompaniment I have in celebrating the sacrament that makes it such a joyful experience and for all the priests who have confessed God's forgiveness for me.

My greatest thanks go to my family. I thank my father and my mother, my sister, Marie, her husband Noel and their children Emmet, Kate and Eoghan, who have

taught me so much about love and forgiveness. I pray in thanksgiving for the gift of my mother and trust that she is now in the peace and joy of heaven.

PREFACE

IN 1997, ONE OF THE STUDENTS IN A GRADUATE CLASS I was teaching on sacramental theology at Catholic University in Washington, DC, was a young Irishman, Father Paul Farren. For his research paper, he wrote a fine exposition of the Sacrament of Penance. This was no small accomplishment since controversy about the sacrament had almost as many aspects then as it does now.

After reading the paper, my offhand comment to him at the time was something like, “You should write a book on this sacrament!” Now, nearly twenty years later, he has!

In *Freedom and Forgiveness: A Fresh Look at the Sacrament of Reconciliation*, readers are asked to think about their understanding of the sacrament of reconciliation because whatever they imagine that it means, and does, often also reveals their very image of God.

In the *Rite*, the Scriptures and prayers offer many images of God. The stories of the prodigal son, the woman taken in adultery, the forgiveness of Jesus on the cross are stories of the forgiving Father. Father Farren takes a close look at these, and then offers an image of God as the one who confesses. God confesses love, forgiveness, trust, and belief in the penitent. It is God’s love that transforms our lives and affects our relationships with

others. In other words, the sacrament of reconciliation is God's gift to us. Other chapters of this interesting book focus on forgiveness, sin, the sacrament, and celebrating the sacrament.

The commentary is insightful and provocative. Father Farren offers thoughtful examples. Altogether, this is an excellent resource for individual prayer and reflection, as well as for adult faith formation groups, teachers and preachers. I recommend it most highly!

*Sister Kate Dooley, OP
Dominican University
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INTRODUCTION

She was about the one age with Gran; she was well-to-do, lived in a big house on the Montenotte, wore a black cloak and bonnet, and came every day to school at three o'clock when we should have been going home, and talked to us of hell. She may have mentioned the other place as well, but that could only have been by accident, for hell had the first place in her heart.

(Frank O'Connor, My First Confession)

BETWEEN HISTORY AND FOLKLORE, the story of the sacrament of Confession seems to have been inextricably linked with hell. For this reason there was much fear and even, perhaps, superstition associated with the sacrament. Many people went to Confession simply to avoid going to hell were they to die suddenly. Priests in their sermons often increased the fear of the people by reiterating the connection between Confession and hell. I am told that there was a priest in my home parish years ago who had a great ability to mutter. Nobody could hear much of what he was saying, however, every so often he would raise his voice and shout, "You are all going to hell!"

Fear can be a powerful controlling mechanism. In the past, fear of hell was probably what motivated many to confess regularly and frequently. Was going to Confession no more than strict adherence to a law of the Church?

Over the last forty years there has been a dramatic change in the practice of Confession. Today it is probably the most talked about and yet the least celebrated sacrament of the Catholic Church. Some people have declared the death of the sacrament saying that it belongs to a different era and a different time. Others bemoan the fact that the same emphasis is not being placed on hell today, perhaps believing that a bit of fear is good and healthy and should be reclaimed. In the midst of all this discussion and debate, questions beg to be asked: does the sacrament have a future and, if it does, what is that future?

To answer these questions the sacrament of Reconciliation needs to be considered in the context of our relationship with God, with ourselves, with the Church, and in the world. However, in order to do this we need firstly to look to the past and consider how the sacrament evolved. It would be wrong to think that the sacrament of Reconciliation has remained the same down through history. In fact, it has had a long and complicated history.

THE TIME OF THE APOSTLES

The sacrament evolved from the earliest times when members of the new church tried to deal with people who committed sin after their Baptism. At the time of the Apostles, Baptism was understood as being reborn or dying to one's old self and rising with Christ (John 3:1–15 & Rom. 6:1–12). It was the sacrament of forgiveness.

If someone sinned after Baptism, forgiveness and reconciliation were obtained through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and works of mercy. The prayer was of the individual but also of the community, which, it was believed, could bring healing (Jas. 5:16). Some communities did not think that prayer was appropriate for certain sins (1 John 5:14–17). If the person’s sins were public or scandalous, exclusion from the life of the community for some period of time was necessary. The community had the authority to impose this exclusion (Mt. 18:17 & 1 Cor. 5:3–5). The exclusion was because the sin was an offense against God and “a contradiction to membership in the Church and a denial of the very nature of Church.”¹

Through this exclusion a person’s sin was recognized and after a period of conversion, which involved penance, they were reconciled with the community again.

CANONICAL PENANCE

This process became very formal over the early centuries of the Church and was known as a “second Baptism” because it was a once in a lifetime opportunity for sinners excluded from communion to be reconciled with the Church. This meant entering the order of

1. Catherine Dooley, “The Role of the Community in the Sacrament of Reconciliation,” *Louvain Studies* 14 (1989): 315.

penitents, which was a group of sinners who wanted back into communion with the Church. The penitent was a member of this order for a prescribed period of time, during which he/she underwent a conversion process, supported by prayer, rites, severe penances, acts of service, and making amends where necessary. This process was called Canonical Penance. The period of Canonical Penance came to an end in Lent, the designated period of final preparation for reconciliation and for the return to the Eucharistic table. A liturgy of reconciliation took place on Holy Thursday presided over by the bishop. During this liturgy the bishop laid hands on the sinners, who were known as penitents, as a gesture of reconciliation. After the liturgy those who were reconciled got ready for full participation in the Easter celebrations.

Through time this practice began to dissolve due mainly to the severity of the penance and the long-term exclusion from the sacraments that often took place. However, from about the fifth century in Rome many people chose to become “ceremonial penitents for the duration of Lent”² and by the tenth century all Christians were expected to become ceremonial penitents for Lent.

TARIFF PENANCE

2. James Dallen, “Sacrament of Reconciliation,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink SJ (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 1055.

Canonical Penance was replaced by different practices. One was deathbed reconciliation. This took place without prior penance and gradually became associated with anointing—Extreme Unction. Another emerging practice was Tariff Penance. This was introduced by Irish missionary monks to Europe. It involved private confession and specific penance. The penance appropriate for each sin was listed in penitential books. This concluded with private reconciliation. This allowed for forgiveness of sins more than once. Due to the tariff, it required a detailed confession so that the confessor could assign the determined penance. Practically, this became a very private procedure. As the role of the confessor developed at this time, the visible role of the community decreased. Sin was seen as a “contaminating stain which put the sinner in debt to God.”³ Reconciliation, then, was viewed not so much with the church community as repaying a debt to God.

Around this time there also developed devotional confession to a chosen confessor, joined with spiritual counsel, as a regular practice for growth in virtue and the eradication of sin. It was a form of spiritual direction.

THE FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL

At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, to overcome a laxity in the reception of Communion, legislation was introduced that required Confession and Communion at

3. Ibid.

Easter as an annual observance. The Confession was to be made to the parish priest and Communion was to be received in the parish church. After this Council the Religious Orders contributed to more frequent confession, without connection to Easter, through their preaching of penance and conversion.

Throughout this period, and since, there has been theological debate concerning how sins were forgiven. The discussion, of its nature, was very technical. While the role of the confessor continually developed, that of the visible community virtually disappeared. The sacrament seemed almost to become a private endeavor focused on one's sins.⁴

THE NEW RITE OF PENANCE

Up until 1973, when the *Rite of Penance* was published, this remained the case. The 1973 rite tried to regain a communal sense of the sacrament as well as the concept that the sacrament is concerned with one's future life of conversion as much as one's past life of sin.

It is evident from this brief outline of the history of the sacrament that the Church is continually growing into the true meaning of penance and reconciliation. She has expressed it in different ways through the centuries, often as a response to particular situations.

4. See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*.

Today the Church has arrived at a critical moment in the history of the sacrament. We have emerged from a period of apparent certainty when the focus of the sacrament was sin and hell to a time when a new focus is emerging. This in-between moment can be a time of great uncertainty. However, what remains consistent throughout the history of the sacrament is the power of God to forgive and our need to be forgiven. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized this when he wrote in his *Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*:

I encourage you to discover anew the sacrament of Reconciliation and to avail yourselves more frequently of the transforming power of its grace.⁵

Obviously Pope Benedict XVI believes that the sacrament of Reconciliation has a powerful role to play in the future of the Church. This power comes from what he describes as the grace of the sacrament. It is necessary to discover what that grace is and how it manifests itself. The source of the grace and indeed the manifestation of the grace can be described by the word reconciliation. Reconciliation captures the heart of the sacrament because reconciliation implies a restoration of positive relationship. In considering the sacrament of Reconciliation, we are looking at a particular expression of a relationship between two people: Jesus and me. The

5. Pope Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), 17.

sacrament of Reconciliation expresses something of the relationship that Jesus has with me. The sacrament situates this relationship in the context of the Church—the Body of Christ. We live our relationship with Jesus in his body.

FREEDOM AND FORGIVENESS

THE GIFT OF FREEDOM

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT THE SACRAMENT of Reconciliation our thoughts most often focus on ourselves and our sinfulness. The role of God in some sense might even appear secondary. However, the sacrament of Reconciliation is primarily that sacred place and moment when God confesses. The primary confessor in the sacrament is God. What does God confess? God confesses his love, his forgiveness, his gratitude, his confidence, his trust and his belief in us. It is God's confession that enables us to confess. God's attitude creates a safe and non-judgmental environment for us to be true to ourselves and to be true to the one who loves us most.

Our understanding of the sacrament reveals our image of God. If our image of God is one of an uncompromising judge, then the sacrament can fill us with dread. This is the God of the Big Book who writes down all our sins and forgets none of them. And when we die, God consults the Big Book to see if we have done enough to gain heaven or not! When we think of God in this uncompromising way we can believe that it is part of God's role in the ongoing story of creation to keep hell open by sending people to it! In fact we can believe that God takes pleasure in sending people to hell just to show them who is boss.

When hell is mentioned today a whole new discussion emerges. There are those who believe hell exists and those who don't. There are those who seem to take great pride in telling us that hell is probably full and there are those who say that the very presence of hell must be a denial of God's boundless forgiveness. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, when discussing hell, does so in the context of our relationship with God, with one another, and with ourselves. It very clearly describes this relationship as a relationship of love.

We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves.⁶

The consequence of positively and freely choosing not to love God means being separated from God. This is hell. The *Catechism* states:

This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."
(CCC, 1033)

The existence of hell respects the gift of free will that God gives to each one of us. If hell did not exist then we would have no choice but to be in relationship with God. We could not choose to be otherwise. God would be prohibiting our choices. God allowed hell to

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994), 1033. (Henceforth CCC.)

exist because to do otherwise would have been forcing himself into the lives of those who do not want him in their lives. Therefore, the existence of hell enables us to take responsibility for our lives and to make choices in our lives. The presence of hell allows God to respect the decisions we make in our lives even if those decisions bring tremendous pain to God. The existence of free choice does not mean that God does not care. Rather, God is the parent who desires that his children freely make positive, life-giving decisions in their lives. However, God does not force those decisions. He trusts. When, or if, that trust is betrayed he trusts again and again and again. God never stops trusting. God then, rather than being portrayed as an uncompromising judge, might be more accurately understood as the loving parent who never gives up on his/her child.

This image of God as the parent who continually trusts and respects seems to be at odds with the image of God as the uncompromising judge. The uncompromising judge is not the person that Jesus revealed. In John's gospel Jesus says:

For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. No one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he refused to believe in the name of God's only Son. On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light has

come in to the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil.

(John 3:17–19)

God does not judge. God does not need to judge. We judge ourselves. Ronald Rolheiser says:

When Jesus speaks of God, he never speaks of God as dealing both life and death, but only as dealing life. Death has its origins elsewhere, as does lying, rationalization, bitterness, hardness of heart, and hell. To say that God does not create hell or send anyone there does not downplay the existence of evil and sin or the danger of eternal punishment; it only pinpoints their origins and makes clear who it is who makes the judgment and who it is who does the sentencing. God does neither; he neither creates hell nor sends anyone to it. We do both.⁷

If God is not the uncompromising judge—the one to be feared—then who is God? Is God the loving parent? In other words, who is God who takes the initiative in the sacrament of Reconciliation?

7. Ronald Rolheiser, “God judges no one,” *The Catholic Herald* (25 September 2009).

WHO IS GOD?

JESUS USED STORIES TO ANSWER THE QUESTION “Who is God?” The Prodigal Son is one of these stories (Luke 15:11–32). Do we recognize the father in this story? Sometimes we can overlook the actions of the father and take them for granted as we focus on the two sons. Here is a man who has obviously worked very hard all his life. He has been successful in his work. He seemed to have quite a bit of property and money. We don’t hear about the man’s wife. Perhaps she has died. Perhaps this man has reared his two sons on his own. We know from the end of the story when he declares to his older son that all he has is his, that his sons were the center of his life and all that he did he did for them. So this is a loving, selfless, caring and competent man. He is a good father.

Imagine the pain this father felt when his younger son asked him for all that he would get when his father died. This son couldn’t wait for his father to die. In a sense, his father was taking too long to die and this is what his son told him when he asked for his inheritance. The son wished his father was dead and he let his father know that. This must have been a devastating blow for the father. He must have questioned himself: Where did I go wrong with this boy? What has happened? Yet, instead of arguing or questioning he gave his son

exactly what he asked for. This father did not even resort to self-pity. He didn't try emotional blackmail. He didn't ask his son how he could abandon his father in his old age after all that he had done for him. He did not condemn his son. Rather, he simply gave him what he asked for immediately with no strings attached and no threats either. He didn't say, "If you leave here now you will never be welcomed back." He seems to have said nothing. He let his son go. It must have been so difficult.

The son went. He did what he did. When times were good he never thought about going home. Then times got bad. He had nothing. In his poverty, he realized that he still had something. He had his father. This was a great testament to his father, that the son knew that he could go back home after all that he had done. Yet he didn't trust his father nearly as much as his father trusted him. This is obvious because the son did what so many do when they have got it wrong and have to face up to it. The son spent the whole journey home thinking about the story he was going to tell his father. It is such a natural thing to do. We think: *I will say this and then I will say that*. We try to get our story as convincing as possible. We try to work out our bargaining position. We even try to work out our defenses. It is a very natural reaction.

While all of this was going on and indeed from the moment his son left, the father did only one thing: wait. The very fact that he waited reveals that he never gave up

hope in his son. He continued to believe in his son, even after all he had done. He simply waited. This act of waiting reveals the tremendous humility of this father.

Then the waiting was over. The father saw his son coming home, destitute. He immediately felt compassion for his son. He experienced his son's pain. His love for his son drove him to share this pain. He ran to his son. This old man ran out to his son and he hugged him. He held him. This was a moment of complete tenderness and acceptance. This father was a mature man. His waiting for his younger son was over. This was a moment of utter joy. It didn't matter to the father how his son looked or what he had done. All that mattered to him was that his son had come home. In the embrace the father humbly communicated his love, his acceptance, his trust and his belief in his son. The son was overwhelmed. He wanted to explain. He wanted to open negotiations. The father wouldn't let him. He just wanted to celebrate. He wanted to have a party. He wanted to tell everybody that his son had come home. That is just what he did. He had the fattest calf killed and they celebrated.

We know that his older son was not impressed. He was offended by his father's actions. He probably thought that his father was a fool. Yet the father treated him with the same love and respect with which he treated his younger son. When he heard that his older son would not come in the father left the celebration and went out to him. He listened to him. He understood him. Then, in a

moment of deep tenderness and love, he revealed to his older son that they were one—that they shared completely in each other's lives. There was no distance between them. They were united. Their unity was so strong it could be open to including this son and brother who had left but now had come back home. This reveals the utter confidence that the father had in the relationship that he had with his older son.

This is an incredible father. This story is the representation of the Father who invites us to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation. This is the Father who takes the initiative in the sacrament of Reconciliation. It is into the loving embrace of this Father that we enter when we celebrate the sacrament. Therefore, the sacrament is a moment of deep tenderness and love between a parent and a child.

Maybe we struggle with this image of God just as much as we struggle with the image of God as the uncompromising judge. Maybe it is difficult to claim the profound reality that we are children of God. We like to grow up. We like to be adults. To be children is to be weak and dependent. To be adults is to be strong and independent. Perhaps too often we are taught that to be successful we need to be self-sufficient. It is a sign of weakness to have to rely on another. These concepts can affect our relationships. They can actually make it difficult to relate because we are always trying to prove something—to prove that we are adults and capable of living life on our

own. Yet the invitation of Jesus is to become like little children. He tells us:

In truth I tell you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.

(Mt. 18:3)

It is hard to become like a little child. It is hard to become aware of our dependence on our parents. This is something that we feel we have to grow out of not grow into. Little children are vulnerable and fragile. Often we want to leave those feelings behind. They are feelings that bring us insecurity. Yet in each one of us we know that there is a child. We know that there is vulnerability. We know that there is fragility. We know that there is a need for a parent—for love—for unconditional acceptance. Fr. Peter McVerry, a Jesuit priest who works with people who are homeless, says that every person who is homeless that he has met is looking primarily not for a home, but to be loved—to be accepted. It can be so hard to admit this need to be loved and accepted because admitting it seems to go against the powerful thrust to adulthood and self-sufficiency. Yet, to truly experience the gift of the sacrament of Reconciliation we need to listen and respond to the part of us that never grows old—the little child. Like the prodigal we need to be able to kneel, broken, before the Father, and allow his love and forgiveness to seep into us. In a sense that

is the sacrament of Reconciliation. It is the empowering, accepting embrace of God. It is in this embrace that God confesses. The amazing thing about God's confession is that it reveals that God believes in us far more than we will ever believe in God. God believes in us far more than we will ever believe in ourselves. This is the incredible reality of the sacrament and a reality that can often be lost because we are so focused on ourselves that we don't think about God or his feelings.

God has utter confidence in all of his creation. Each one of us is part of that creation. God has utter confidence in each one of us. This confidence is expressed in the sacrament of Confirmation. In that sacrament God trusts us with his life. This trust that God has in us is so dramatically portrayed in the story of the calming of the storm (Mk. 4:35–41). In this story Jesus gets into the boat prepared for sleep. He has a cushion with him for his head! Two things that are required for a good sleep are security and contentment. It is not easy to sleep when you don't feel secure. It is not easy to sleep when you are worried and lack contentment. Jesus slept well on the boat. Despite the great gale and the waves breaking into the boat, Jesus slept. This is evidence of the trust and the confidence that he had in his friends who were steering the boat. The problem, of course, was that the Apostles did not have confidence in themselves. They doubted the trust that Jesus had in them. They panicked and woke the sleeping, trusting Jesus. Jesus struggled to understand

why they did not have the faith that he had in them. They had faith in Jesus because they woke him to help them but they lacked faith in themselves.

Knowing us completely, God has utter trust in us. Therefore we don't need to prove ourselves to God. We are just called to trust in his confidence. It is this confidence that is so powerfully expressed in the sacrament of Reconciliation. It is the confidence that enabled the father to wait and wait for his son to return. It was the confidence that enabled the father to go out to his older son and declare that they were one—no competition between them—neither having anything to prove to the other. It was trust in this confidence that enabled the prodigal to fall on his knees in a childlike embrace with his father. It was insecurity in the face of this confidence that prohibited the older son from entering into an embrace with his father.

The confidence of the Father comes from his deep humility—a fruit of his profound love. This humility enabled him simply to wait on his young son to come home. Our experience of the sacrament of Reconciliation can be truly transformed when we focus on the humility of God. St. Teresa of Avila, in describing prayer, said:

In prayer God simply looks at me lovingly and humbly.

This humility of God is expressed so beautifully in another appropriate image of our relationship with God, celebrated in the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Yes, God is the patient, loving, humble father, waiting for us to come home but God is also the spouse whose love is forgiving and unshakable. We are called to be in a faithful relationship with God. At the heart of this faithful relationship is humility. It is God's humble heart that enables God to be in this faithful relationship with us. In the book of the prophet Isaiah we read:

Like a young man marrying a virgin, so will the one
 who built you wed you,
 and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will
 your God rejoice in you.

(Isa. 62:5)

Here we experience the young, pure and innocent love of a newly married couple that enables God to rejoice in the one to whom God is committed. This too is the heart of friendship, where one reveals what is most beautiful in the other and rejoices in that beauty.

However, even though our God is faithful to us, we have often failed to remain faithful to him. This has been the story of humanity from the beginning. We have been unfaithful to God. When that happens we damage our relationship with God. How does God react to this unfaithfulness? Does God abandon us? Does God separate from us?

The answer to these questions is no. Again in the book of the prophet Isaiah God says:

my love for you will never leave you
and my covenant of peace with you will never be
shaken. (*Isa. 54:10*)

In the book of the prophet Hosea God's awareness of our unfaithfulness is so obvious yet God does not abandon us. Our unfaithfulness wounds God but God does not give up on us. God's desire is to lure us into the wilderness and speak to our hearts (Hosea 2:16). When God speaks to our hearts, God is confident that we will respond as we did when we were young, when we were full of enthusiastic love. Perhaps the sacrament of Reconciliation is that moment when our lover God lures us into the wilderness of our lives and speaks to our hearts. In that moment the humble heart of God speaks to our own broken heart. The conversation is so sacred that our awareness is transformed from our own brokenness to the love that emits from the heart of God.

The sacrament of Reconciliation, then, is an intense moment of prayer—an intense moment of awareness that God is looking at me lovingly and humbly. This is an incredible reality about our God. It is a reality that is beautifully expressed in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord: 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.

(Isa. 66:1–2)

Our God has the power to do whatever God wills and yet with this power God chooses to be in relationship with us. God has no need to be dependent on us but he desires that we enter into relationship with him. God is drawn to us. God is attracted to us. God desires us and is willing to wait humbly on us, no matter how long that wait will be. One simple and beautiful way of celebrating the end of God's wait is when we celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation.