

Our Journey of Authentic Conversion

The Sacrament of Penance

by Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

In 1945, a 19-year-old man made a woman pregnant. He told her to get an abortion, which she did. Then he dropped her. Ten years later he made another woman pregnant. This time he aborted the child himself, since he was now a doctor. He then proceeded to open an abortion clinic and performed or presided over 75,000 abortions. His name is Dr. Bernard Nathanson.

Two experiences caused him to change his mind about abortions and undergo an authentic moral conversion. In 1968, he was writing a magazine article about the morality of clinic blockades. He went out to get a firsthand experience of these demonstrations, meeting the people and taking notes.

In his autobiography, *The Hand of God*, he wrote, "It was only then that I apprehended the exaltation, the pure love on the faces of that shivering mass of people, surrounded as they were by hundreds of New York City policemen." For the first time he found himself wondering about his own beliefs and practices. It was the beginning of his conversion process, one that had a long road ahead.

Sixteen years later he encountered the second challenge to his position on abortion. This time, ultrasound was the defining reason. When this process showed him babies in the womb sucking their thumbs and doing other human-like things, he resolved to abandon abortions altogether. In 1984, he premiered *The Silent Scream*, a movie that displayed an ultrasound of a baby being aborted.

Now he became strictly a pro-life doctor. But he still had farther to go in

his walk toward authentic conversion. He felt his sinfulness, but what was he to do about it? "I was looking for a way to wash away my sins. I felt the burden of my sin growing heavier and more persistent. I have such heavy moral baggage to drag into the next world, that failing to believe would condemn me to an eternity more terrifying than anything Dante imagined in his *Inferno*."

He sought out Father John McCloskey, a priest based at Princeton University and known for his wisdom in helping intellectual seekers come to faith and truth. Nathanson struggled with his conversion process for nearly 10 more years. At age 69 he converted to the Roman Catholic Church. He stood before the baptismal font at St. Patrick's Cathedral and renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil forever.

"I am free from sin," he said. "For the first time in my life I feel the shelter and warmth of faith." This is authentic conversion.

Journey of Reconciliation

The year 2000 will be a Great Jubilee celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ and the start of the third millennium of the Church's mission to bring Christ's Gospel of salvation to the world. To prepare for this event, Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter on preparing for the Jubilee, has urged all Catholics to undertake a journey of authentic moral conversion aided by the Sacrament of Penance:

[T]he sense of being on a "journey to the Father" should encourage everyone to under-



take, by holding fast to Christ the Redeemer of man, a journey of authentic *conversion*. . . . This is the proper context for a renewed appreciation . . . of the *Sacrament of Penance* in its most profound meaning (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 50).

What is conversion? What is its link with the Sacrament of Penance? In real conversion, we turn away from sin and turn toward God. Real conversion is a grace from God. God generously pulls our hearts away from sin and toward His embrace, not by force but by love. All converts joyously testify that their conversion was due to God alone. They unanimously declare that God alone deserves the credit.

Nonetheless, the sinner must be open to the divine call. The sinful person must acknowledge sinfulness, believe there is such a reality as evil, and take responsibility for immoral behavior.

Jesus has provided the gift of the Sacrament of Penance, a celebration rich in divine mercy and designed to bring the converted sinner into grace and reconciliation with God, the Church, and his or her own conscience. Jesus willed that the Church should be the instrument of divine forgiveness. On Easter night, the risen Lord imparted to the Apostles His own power to forgive sins (cf. Jn. 20:21-23). Bishops, who are their successors, and priests, their collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry.

Taking Responsibility for Our Sins

The Sacrament of Penance has two essential elements: the acts of the penitent and God's action through the bishops and priests who are the ministers of the sacrament.

The penitent must perform three acts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction.

(1) *Contrition*. In speaking of conversion, St. Ambrose says there are two kinds in the Church. "There are water and tears: the water of baptism and the tears of repentance." Contrition—the tears of repentance—is another way of describing our conversion. We are appalled by our sin-

fulness and resolve to turn toward God. Hence our motives are based on faith. Contrition is more than mere self-disgust. We realize that our hope for inner cleansing depends on God.

We may speak of perfect contrition that flows from loving God above all else. Such loving sorrow remits all venial sins and even mortal sins provided we resolve to confess them as soon as we can. We may also speak of imperfect contrition that is motivated by fear of damnation and the ugliness of sin. It begins the process of pulling us away from sin that with God's grace will be effected in the Sacrament of Penance.

(2) *Confession*. Some mistakenly think that feeling sorry for sins is enough. Tears of sorrow should say it all. But contrition without confession is insufficient. God calls us to name our sins and take responsibility for them. This is not because God needs to hear the words. We need to hear them and say them. Part of the purification process includes our humble willingness to get the sins out of our system. We can all too easily hide from ourselves—even in the confessional.

After a diligent examination of our consciences we must confess our mortal sins, if there are any. Guides for examining our consciences can be found in the Ten Commandments and the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. We should probe for sins of commission and omission. The Church also recommends we confess our venial sins as well. Little faults in the beginning can become big sins in the end. Confession of sins is the second essential act of the penitent.

(3) *Satisfaction*. Our sins have a negative effect on our character. The priest's absolution takes away the sin, but does not completely repair the damage done to us by our evil acts. We need to work on recovering our full spiritual health. The priest will give us a small penance, usually some prayers, as an initial form of satisfaction. It is the first step in our moral self-improvement.

Satisfaction brings us back to the theme of conversion once more. What we do after confessing our sins is related to the process of the sacrament. The Fathers of the Church fre-

quently spoke of conversion and satisfaction in terms of prayer, fasting, and charitable giving. Spiritual writers give us a number of paths to conversion and satisfaction: Reconcile yourselves with your enemies. Take care of the poor. Defend what is just and right. Examine your conscience every day. Correct others in a humble and kindly manner. Seek spiritual direction. Accept pain and persecution for the sake of the Kingdom. Use the seasons of Advent and Lent for spiritual renewal. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow Jesus.

The Father of Mercies

In Confession, the acts of the penitent are followed by the act of the priest. After we have confessed our sins, the priest will give us some words of spiritual and moral encouragement. Then he gives us a penance and asks us to make an act of contrition. The priest then absolves us from our sins with these words:

God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of His Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

With the wisdom of a universal pastor, Pope John Paul II invites us to resume our lifelong commitment to real moral and spiritual conversion. He holds before us the treasure of the Sacrament of Penance as an incomparable source of the forgiveness of sins and the energy for renewal that comes to us from the Holy Spirit.

Begin today the only adventure that has eternal consequences. Hear the call to conversion and make a Jubilee Confession—indeed, many of them. ■

Fr. McBride has served as a consultant on the Catechism for the Archdiocese of Boston and is currently a professor of homiletics at Pope John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, MA.