"THE UNTOUCHABLES OF TRENT": A "HANDS-ON" APPROACH

Reflections on the Sacrament of Penance

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is commonly agreed that the most extraordinary developments in the liturgical life of the Church in the aftermath of Vatican II were certainly very challenging and exciting. Surely they contributed in no small way to the *aggiornamento* that Pope John XXIII envisioned when he had the inspiration of convoking the Council, — an inspiration of dubious origin, some of the so-called "prophets of doom" would say. It is most unfortunate, however, that in the liturgical renewal that subsequently took root and blossomed, the Sacrament of Penance appeared to have been given short shrift.

While the much needed renewal so necessary for this sacrament in the pastoral life of the Church got off to a very slow start, more recently the pace has quickened, and the substance of the renewal and reform has been most encouraging. Significant progress has certainly been made in the past few years. Still, it may be said that what has already been accomplished is merely an indication of how much further we can and should go in deepening and expanding the theological understanding of this sacrament in order to promote its pastoral practice in a much more effective and fruitful way.

One of the frequently noted "signs of the times," which very urgently presses this demand for on-going theological and pastoral renewal upon us is that which is generally referred to as a widespread "loss of the sense of sin." In his Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, Pope John Paul II referred to this problem in very clear terms, both as regards the reasons for its existence, and the problems that it presents for our careful con-
sideration. That this is by no means an altogether new problem, he clearly affirms by referring to the words of Pope Pius XII, which, he says, "have almost become proverbial": "the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin."¹¹ Until a clear sense of the reality and meaning of sin is more universally re-discovered and personally acknowledged in the life of every Christian, one simply cannot properly comprehend the initial response that one must make to Christ's own proclamation of the Good News of Salvation: "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel!" (Mk 1:15)² Until we acknowledge our sinfulness and accept the challenge of conversion, we can not yet enter into the salvific dialogue to which the Lord invites us, — an interpersonal dialogue with God which ultimately leads to eternal salvation.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION IN VATICAN II

Specific references to the Sacrament of Penance in the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, were sparse indeed. There is no need to summarize them, for the total content is contained in just one brief sentence: "The rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they give more luminous expression to both the nature and effect of the sacrament."¹³ Sacrosanctum Concilium, the very first Constitution completed by Vatican II, was promulgated on December 4, 1963. It was ten years later, almost to the day, that the mandate of the Council was fulfilled, when the New Rite of Penance was published by the Congregation for Divine Worship on December 2, 1973.

Happily, from that time on, much greater attention has been given to the Sacrament of Penance, more commonly referred to now as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The most notable step in its development is found in the serious study and reflection

2. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture citations are from The New American Bible.
devoted to it in the Synod of Bishops of 1983. Furthermore, the revised Code of Canon Law of 1983 has also presented us not only with some long awaited and forward looking revised legislation, but also with a basis for our on-going reflection in regard to this sacrament and some of its theological presuppositions. I would submit that the Synod, along with the new Code, provides us not only with many challenging questions about the “nature and effect of the sacrament,” but also suggests new lines of reflection and inquiry that we must ourselves take in order to further deepen our understanding of the sacrament, and to firmly establish its, rightful place in the liturgical life of the Church.

GOALS OF THIS PAPER

This paper represents an attempt to raise some of these questions and suggest some directions towards which we may turn our attention in our striving for pastoral renewal. The many encouraging developments and growing interest that have already taken place provide an optimistic prognosis for all that will henceforth follow, especially from a pastoral point of view.

First to be taken up is a consideration of some of the theological presuppositions about the Sacrament itself. This will be based on certain of its essential notes included in the teaching of Trent, which in turn will require a brief presentation of the historical context and development of the Sacrament, in both its doctrinal and pastoral aspects. This will be done with a view to clarifying what Sacrosanctum Concilium referred to as “the nature and effect” of the Sacrament. This is most basically a doctrinal matter, but since correct doctrinal expression and authentic pastoral development should, perhaps, mutually re-enforce each other, — each giving direction and impetus to the other, — it is hoped that this will prove to be the case with reference to both aspects under consideration here. Since the pastoral development has been under certain “restrictions,” due to the doctrinal definitions of Trent, as clearly implied in the position paper of the Philippine Bishops prior to the Synod of 1983, the focus will be on indicating the problematic areas which gave rise to such a situation.

Specifically, one of the difficulties stems from the prominent place attributed to “mortal sin” as “necessary matter” in the sacrament in the teaching of Trent. It is this teaching which seems
to be the root cause of the "restrictions" referred to above. Therefore, an attempt will be made to come to a correct understanding of the concept of mortal sin, which hopefully will show that the "mortal sin" of Trent is, in fact, quite different from the "mortal sin" of the ordinary moral manuals. Consequently, a re-reading of the Council of Trent's teaching on the essential elements of the Sacrament of Penance should then provide the grounds for a much more effective pastoral approach to the sacramental ministry of reconciliation in response to the needs of the Church in the present time. Finally, some particular pastoral applications will be suggested.

II. THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS AND ALLIED QUESTIONS

A. CONCERNING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION ITSELF

In their position paper prepared for the Synod of 1983 on Reconciliation, the Philippine Bishops, as indicated above, made a statement which very openly expresses one of the most serious problems which has always seemed to plague any discussion of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and hinder or seriously curtail any theological or pastoral development in its regard. They said: "In fact for quite a time this topic had been held practically untouchable, since the particulars of the sacrament of reconciliation were considered as having already been determined by Trent in all its details and variables." In view of this remarkable statement, it can be said with all due reverence and with a very high degree of truth that the declarations of the Council of Trent, which effectively dealt with the particular challenges encountered with its own historical situation, have in fact stood as something of a deterrent in the further development of the theology of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as well as with regard to its meeting the demands of contemporary pastoral needs. For fear that this may sound harsh, or even irreverent, the observation should be placed in a larger perspective.

When Pope John XXIII, at the opening of the Council, made a reference to the "development of theology," his remark was met

with a great deal of surprise and even consternation on the part of many. The weight attached to the highest form of a *nota theologica*, as understood by those trained in the preceding generations, tended perhaps to establish the conviction that what had been already *defined* was definitively *closed*, in such a way that it was no longer open to further *discussion*, much less *development*. Today, however, it is almost a truism to say that any theological research and reflection, even that which probes into defined doctrine, must necessarily be open-ended, in that it is dealing with *mysteries* which can never be adequately and comprehensively expressed. This is certainly not to deny anything of our tradition, but to remind us that since we are living in the present, we cannot satisfy our contemporary needs or adequately reply to current questions simply by relying on that point of theological progress which was achieved in the past by previous generations.

Furthermore, on-going theological research and reflection also continue to open up very challenging *new questions*, both doctrinal and pastoral, some of which have never even occurred to the inquiring minds of earlier generations. So in dealing with the mysteries of our faith, and the implications that they have in our daily living of it, we shall constantly be faced with critical contemporary questions which can never be fully and definitively resolved, once and for all.

In view of all this, therefore, the point in the statement of the Philippine Bishops with reference to an apparent final determination of those questions touching the Sacrament of Reconciliation is very well taken. It would be good, then, to reflect for a moment on some of these particular areas, — heretofore considered "untouchable," — and try to see how we can expand our horizons a bit, so that we can deal with our own contemporary problems concerning liturgical reconciliation in a way that manifests "*progressive fidelity*" to the doctrinal teaching of Trent. In other words, we wish to see how the present situation in the Church demands that we not merely repeat what was said in the past, but, by asking some different and difficult contemporary questions, carry our faith to new depths of perception and understanding, and thereby discover newer and more effective possibilities in its pastoral application.
B. THE "UNTOUCHABLES" OF TRENT

We may summarize the main doctrinal statements of Trent in order to see which particular areas have become effectively "untouchable," to use the term of the Bishops’ position paper. First of all, Trent expressed that its teaching on the sacrament reflected that *which the universal Church has always understood* — "universal Ecclesia semper intellexit," — namely, that integral confession of sins (*integram peccatorum confessionem*) was instituted by the Lord, that its necessity for all who have sinned after baptism *originates in divine law* (*iure divino necessarium*), and that it includes the confession of all mortal sins by species and number (*omnia mortalia crimina . . . in specie ac singillatim*). These doctrinal statements, already present in the pre-Tridentine sacramental discipline, became more firmly fixed in the post-Tridentine sacramental discipline and practice, due to the *doctrinal definition* which now ever more firmly established their premises.

In succeeding generations, these doctrinal statements were strongly reaffirmed by way of the 1917 codification of the laws which prescribe the obligations of the penitent in the reception of the sacrament. The provision of the Code of 1917, in can. 901, states that all *mortal sins* must be confessed specifically, while the Code of 1983, in can. 988, reaffirms this obligation by saying that "The faithful are bound to confess, in kind and in number, *all grave sins* committed after baptism." In the Latin texts of the two Codes defining the sins which must be specifically submitted by the penitent, there is a change from *omnia mortalia* of the Old Code to *omnia peccata gravia* in the Code of 1983. In a moment, the significance of this change of terminology will be considered, with a view to trying to determine whether it is most basically an expression of the demands of *dogmatic definition* or of the positive ecclesiastical legislation in the *sacramental discipline* of the Church. The purpose of understanding the distinction is to help provide guidelines for a number of serious pastoral concerns.

Let us take some of the doctrinal assertions of Trent in order.

First of all, if we consider the statement of Trent concerning

"what the universal Church has always understood" regarding the sacrament of penance, we immediately encounter the difficulty of reconciling with this affirmation the two traditions which represent not only minor or external differences, but completely conflicting views of the sacrament, — certainly in its pastoral dimensions, if not in its essential "nature and effect." This is clearly brought out in the observation of Fr. Ladislas Orsy, who says with reference to these two traditions, namely, the Mediterranean and the Irish:

External conflict became inevitable. It lasted for some five centuries, with varying intensity. The two systems were too different to coexist peacefully side by side. Two conciliar texts, in clear contrast with each other, can be quoted to illustrate the opposing minds and practices.6

The first conciliar text he cites is from the Third Council of Toledo held in 589, which was seriously committed to "safeguarding the purity of faith." To this purpose, with regard to the sacrament of penance, it issued the following disciplinary chapter:

We have learned that, throughout some churches of Spain, the faithful are doing penance not according to the canonical rule but in another detestable way. That is, as many times as it pleases them to sin, they ask a presbyter to grant them pardon.

We want to put an end to such an abominable presumption. [Therefore,] this sacred council orders that penances be given according to the rite prescribed by the ancient canons: that is, that the person who repents of his evil deeds be excluded temporarily from Eucharistic communion and, along with other penitents, ask often for the imposition of hands; and that, when the time of his satisfaction is completed according to the judgment of the bishop, he be readmitted to communion.

Those who relapse into their sins, either while doing penance or after they have been reconciled, must be condemned according to the severity of the ancient canons.7

The "ancient canons" referred to provided for the public canonical penance, which, as it was considered akin to a "second bap-

tism,” could be entered upon only once in a lifetime. Certainly, such a strong condemnation allows no room for the practice of private confessions followed by private absolutions. In fact, what was a “detestable abomination” to the minds of the Fathers of the Council of Toledo, will eventually be canonized much later in the Fourth Lateran Council, and will henceforth remain entrenched as the Church’s ordinary sacramental discipline down through Trent to this very day.

The contrary penitential discipline referred to so disparagingly in the Council of Toledo, reflecting that with which we are familiar today, is alluded to in another council held almost one hundred years later, between 647 and 653, at Chalon-sur-Saone in the province of Lyons, France. One of the canons of the council not only acknowledges the acceptability of this other practice, the so-called Irish system, but positively recommends and encourages it. It is expressed in this way:

We judge that penance for sins is a medicine for the soul; it is good for all. All priests agree that once the penitent has confessed his sins to the priest, he should be given his penance. 8

Fr. Orsy concludes from this:

Two synods; two minds. One rigidly upholding the old idea and discipline; the other firmly recommending the new understanding and practice. Certainly, they both tried to fulfill the evangelical mandate: go and proclaim God’s mercy. But, they differed over the way of doing it.

Gradually, the tide turned in favor of the Irish system. The faithful abandoned the practice of public penance; people flocked to those priests who gave them absolution privately. 9

Eventually, of course, it was the private confesson, with private absolution and penance, which prevailed over the much older practice of the single, public penance. This was firmly fixed in the determination of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 which “defined” the obligations of penitential practice in a way which confirms the “Irish” system, virtually abandoning the older

8. Ibid. 40.
9. Ibid.
"Mediterranean" one, together with its "ancient canons," in the process. To this effect, the Lateran Council decreed: "Each and every one of the faithful of both sexes, once they have reached the age of reason, is individually to confess all of his or her sins at least once a year to his or her own priest."¹⁰

Without going further into the distinctions raised here, and presuming a basic familiarity with the general historical development of the sacrament, we should be able to look at the "untouchable" teaching of Trent with more of a "hands on" attitude. In our serious concern to plumb the depths more fully in our pastoral concern to promote a more effective celebration of the liturgy of reconciliation, we may, then, very reverently ask: Precisely what, in fact, has the Church always understood with regard to the sacrament of penance?

TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHABLES

Without a doubt, as our historical survey shows, the Church has understood different things in different ways at different times and in different places. And this can be said not only of the discipline, but of the doctrine of the sacrament as well. For example: Is there not a real change in the understanding of the requirement of Lateran IV for the confession of all sins to that of Trent which requires the specific confession only of all mortal sins? Is the reason for this change doctrinal, or merely disciplinary? If disciplinary, does Trent recognize and assert a lesser obligation on the part of the penitent, in its demands for an integral confession, than that imposed by Lateran IV? This would seem to be the case, since Lateran requires the confession of all sins, while Trent demands the specific confession only of all mortal sins.

Similarly, can we not legitimately ask if, on further reflection, in the theological development between the Council of Trent and Vatican II, the teaching authority of the Church came to another level of understanding of the necessary demands of the sacrament, saying that instead of the requirement of confessing all mortal sins, this necessity is now expressed in terms of confessing all serious or grave sins? In all of this, what is doctrinal and what is

¹⁰ DS, no. 812. This is the famous Omnis utriusque sexus precept of Lateran IV.
disciplinary? What requirements are based on divine law, and which derive from ecclesiastical law? Let us try to sort out this bewildering array of questions. But first, we must look to a very basic question which underlies the whole problem. What is a mortal sin?

As a speculative question, this has engaged the highest skills of many of the most outstanding moralists of both past and present, and will remain, perhaps, as something of an insoluble part of the mystery of sin which we confront in the world around us as well as within our own lives. Having spoken of the many dimensions of sin in general, and summarizing all that it means in its ultimate analysis, Bernard Häring speaks of "mortal sin" in this way:

Everything we have said . . . about sin is fully verified in mortal sin, that fundamental option for evil which, by necessity, is an implicit option for sin-solidarity, an option to fight with the evil powers against saving justice and solidarity in Christ.11

Mortal sin explained in this sense indicates a totality of commitment reminiscent of the way it is presented by St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises, most notably in his Meditation on The Two Standards. As interesting and challenging as this whole question is, however, we shall limit our present discussion of mortal sin to the proper understanding we must try to have of it with reference to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and its pastoral practice.

DO MORTAL AND VENIAL EXHAUST THE CATEGORIES OF SIN?

In the various workshops which formed an integral part of the 1983 Synod of Bishops on Reconciliation, one of the questions which occurred most frequently was that concerning the tradition-

11. Bernard Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ (New York: Seabury Press, 1978) 1:387. In a number of places throughout this paper, the term "fundamental option," which Fr. Häring employs in the citation given here, will be encountered. Most notably, we shall meet it again below with reference to Pope John Paul II's comments in Reconciliation et Paenitentia, where the Holy Father clearly cautions against reducing the notion of "mortal sin" to that of "fundamental option." The formulation itself is of rather recent vintage, and is understood by various authors in a variety of ways. An adequate discussion of it would take us far beyond the parameters of this paper, so we shall refer to it only insofar as it is necessary in the immediate context of our presentation.
al distinction between "mortal" and "venial" sin, — the intriguing question just referred to above. As a result of this lack of clarity, it would seem that there has been, in this regard, a vast difference between theological theory and pastoral practice. In the "theoretical" view, mortal sin carries connotations of totality, finality, irrevocability, definitive rejection of God, spiritual death, and eternal damnation. The concept itself is horrifying, — and rightly so. It is a sobering thought to realize that mortal sin, as such an ultimate reality, is a possibility. At the same time, it is absolutely unquestionable in the "pastoral" domain that many sins so easily labelled as such certainly are not treated as such, if we consider the ordinary manner in which these have been dealt with in the confessional.

In contrast to the theoretical notion of mortal sin, venial sin has been effectively portrayed as something trivial, as when one typical moral author says, "Lying is never allowed. It is in itself, however, only a venial sin." To categorize anything which is considered to be a deliberate moral wrong as only a venial sin raises a further challenging and important question regarding personal sin with respect to the way one normally experiences it: Should we take venial sin seriously?

In effect, in accordance with the "traditional" methodology of the Manuals, where the categories of sin are exhausted by the inclusive oppositions of "mortal" and "venial," wrong moral choices would appear to be between those acts which were considered not only death-defying but death-dealing, and those which are so trivial as to be without any lasting, to say nothing of ultimate consequence. We need not delay on the problems this raises with regard to the whole moral methodology which has prevailed in our theological institutions of learning until the recent past, for this is an area which is receiving very careful attention on the contemporary scene.

In this regard, the questions raised in the Synod concerning sin were not merely on the theoretical distinction between mortal and venial sin. One may well gather the general impression from reading the workshop reports that there was recognized by the various groups the very practical urgency of determining a more theologi-
cally acceptable and pastorally realistic way of speaking about sin. One group expressed "... the need for continued theological research regarding the inclusion of a third category between 'mortal' and 'venial' sin, namely 'grave sin.'" In fact, for practical purposes, this third category has already gained formal and official acceptance in can. 988 referred to above, but without the authentic clarification of its doctrinal meaning that is so badly needed.

Another workshop group faced the issue of the oversimplification that the Manual definitions are prone to, dealing as they do with the "objective gravity" of specific acts which, given the requisite subjective involvement, eventuate into "mortal sin." They acknowledged the necessity that is generally recognized among moralists today of taking a more subject-oriented, person-centered approach to the pastoral ministry of reconciliation. This is reflected in their comment that: "The clarity that we encounter in the manuals when they refer to sin considered objectively as mortal or serious, and venial, is not always seen in life because there we do not encounter sin but the sinner. In serious sin there is a total refusal of God because the sinner places himself outside of God through what is called a fundamental option." It should be noted that, in this particular statement, the terms "mortal" and "serious" are used interchangeably, which expresses part of the problem which should be resolved. A further note of complication is added here, since their mode of expression seems to presume that every serious sin is, in fact and in effect, a fundamental option, — a presumption about which the present Pope has very clearly cautioned.

That the traditional categories of "mortal" and "venial" sin are inadequate for expressing the realities of one's personal relationship with God should be all too obvious when they are stated in terms of the actual consequences which are experienced in one's life, as well as in the Sacrament of Penance. In a word, they either seem to say too much, as regards mortal sin, or too little, as regards venial sin, relative to one's own experience and perception of his or her sinfulness. We have only to reflect on the "clarity that we encounter in the manuals" as compared with the reality of experience in the confessional, either as confessor or penitent, to bring

13. Cf. de Achútegui, Reconciliation, 133. English Workshop: Group B. Emphasis has been added.
this point home. Such a comparison will show why some of the Bishops of the Synod referred to the "deceptive clarity" of the manuals in their presentation of objectively grave matter.

Several examples taken from the once popular compendium of Jone-Adelman, which was frequently used as a moral vade mecum because of its brevity, simplicity and compact size, may serve to illustrate the actual distance between the "objective clarity" of the manualist tradition, and the "subjective state" of the ordinary penitent. These examples from this one source sufficiently represent "the manuals," for they did not differ much from one to another anyway. One runs the risk of drawing a caricature in presenting such examples, but still they do serve to emphasize the difference between the language of sin and its reality when trying to express the actual life experience of a repentant sinner. Such a harmony of language and life is necessary for a more effective pastoral ministry of sacramental reconciliation, that is, where a more suitable and accurate "language of sin" is available for the sinner to express his or her own perception of how far he or she may have strayed from the demands of love.

The manual focus on the objective order usually is concerned with acts which in themselves were considered to constitute grave matter, and of obligations which are imposed, or are presumed to be, sub gravi, that is, binding under pain of mortal sin.

First of all, the obligation of attending Mass on Sunday and receiving Holy Communion during the Easter Season is presented in this way: "A mortal sin is committed by missing an important part [of the Mass] voluntarily, e.g., that which precedes the Gospel together with what follows Holy Communion..." Concerning the grave obligation of the Easter Communion, it is said that this "... extends also to children who have not yet reached their seventh year, provided they have the use of their reason." 15

Regarding the obligation of priests to say Mass, Jone remarks: "Every priest is gravely obliged to say Mass several times a year." 16 This is the moral conclusion drawn from the canonical requirement stated in can. 803, which simply says that every priest is "obliged" to say Mass several times a year. The moralists have added the grave to the obligation, thus making it a deadly sin.

16. Ibid. no. 543, p. 382.
Another area of positive legislation which is imposed sub gravi is that concerned with the requirements of the penitential fast in the Old Code. Commenting on this, the same author notes: “The laws of fasting and abstinence in themselves oblige gravely. Slight violations of them are only venial sins. One would certainly not sin mortally by eating about two ounces of food outside the meals allowed on a fast day; but it would be seriously sinful to take more than four ounces no matter whether taken at once or at different times during the day.”

Regarding sexual morality, there is no such thing in the manualist tradition, objectively speaking, as a venial sin, as shown in the extraordinary statement that: “All directly voluntary sexual pleasure is mortally sinful outside of matrimony. This is true even if the pleasure be ever so brief and insignificant. Here there is no lightness of matter.” It is difficult to see how something “ever so brief and insignificant” can be the vehicle by which one expresses something as significant as a mortal sin.

A comparison may help at this point. Just recently the following item appeared in a Manila paper, headlined: BOY, 6, CHAINED, BEATEN UP BY PA. The account continues: “For being stubborn and wanting to run away from home, a six-year-old boy received a decidedly cruel punishment from his father. Mateo Juego of Sampaloc was tied to a bed with a dog chain around his neck and an electric wire wound around his belly for three days. Mateo also told the police that his father . . . beat him up, burned portions of his body, and fed him only rice. Police said the boy had burns in his genitals and contusions and bruises all over the body.” This account is terribly shocking, and undoubtedly meets with universal disapproval and condemnation by right thinking people. Without in any way condoning the boy’s recalcitrance, we cannot fail to ask: “What kind of a father would do a thing like that?”

Similarly, it must be admitted that our perception of the meaning and consequences of sin inevitably influences us to a certain extent in formulating something of our perception of God. We must, therefore, be very careful not to speak of sin “in sinful ways,” as Fr. Häring says, for such talk might tend to create a

17. Ibid. no. 390, p. 264.
18. Ibid. no. 223, p. 146. Bold-faced italics are in the original.
terribly false idea about God. A more accurate way of talking about sin would be along the lines taken by Fr. Lyonnnet who says that God, having revealed Himself as a Creator who is omnipotent, transcendent, munificent, absolutely liberal, good and loving, in Gen 1 and 2, then reveals another awesome aspect of Himself through the account of the first sin in Gen 3: that he is merciful.

The language of the manualists would seem to imply that mortal sin, — any mortal sin, since death does not allow of greater or lesser degrees, — technically means, in effect, that one has removed himself totally and eternally from the order of salvation. In the examples given, it could be theoretically implied that one could be deliberately damned for four ounces of forbidden food or four seconds of forbidden pleasure. It is precisely here where we can appreciate, especially from a pastoral perspective, the extreme dichotomy between “the deceptive clarity” of the manuals regarding “objectively grave matter,” and the pastoral understanding and kind affirmation and acceptance which one would most certainly meet in a confessor, who, as the Synod Fathers inferred, patiently and lovingly encounters a repentant sinner in the name of their merciful Lord. In one’s actual experience of forgiveness in the sacrament, certainly the emphasis is on experiencing God’s loving mercy, and not of being snatched from the brink of Hell.

NEED FOR NEW CATECHESIS

These examples should make it all the more urgent for us to accept the challenge of resolving “the ambiguities regarding the notion of venial and mortal sin on the part of both ministers and the faithful,” as another group of Bishops urged in the Synod. We must make our categories conform more closely with the reality of the experiences of a sinful people, who, while aware of their weaknesses and their inability to conform fully to the demands of their faith, and while acknowledging that they do, in fact, fall into sin, — perhaps even frequently and more or less seriously, — still find themselves struggling on in their effort to live in accordance

20. Cf. Härting, Free and Faithful, 378-81, in a very enlightening section titled “How to Speak of Sin,” wherein he cautions against “Sinful talk about sin.”
22. De Achtétegui, Reconciliation, 145. Spanish-Portuguese: Group B.
with the demands of their loving relationship with the Lord.

One important element in this whole puzzle that must be clearly recognized is that the saving grace of the redemptive act of Christ is much more powerful than the sinful inclinations and weaknesses that make it difficult for us to respond to this grace as fully and as perfectly as we should. In hearing this, many react with a fear that it may be opening the way to permissiveness or laxity, but that is certainly not the case. We are emphasizing the positive realities of God’s saving grace, which give us hope of salvation, despite our sinfulness. St. Paul made it very clear in his letter to the Romans that “all men are undeservedly justified by the gift of God, through the redemption wrought in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24). We do not so easily nor so simply, nor so frequently, it might be added, totally undo this redemptive work of the Lord, which has been fulfilled within us.

There is a danger that, due to various historical circumstances and other influential factors in the development of moral and pastoral theology, especially with reference to the emphases and approaches which have prevailed in its methodology since the Council of Trent, there may possibly result in one’s thinking what amounts to a trivialization of the meaning and efficacy of the redemptive act of Christ. One must avoid giving even the slightest impression that it has a truly salvific effect in our lives only to the extent that we, through our own efforts and in our own resistance to the power of sin which is in us, make room for it, as it were, to remain within us. Such a danger seems to be recognized by B. Haring as well, in describing some of the various “sinful ways” of talking of sin, when he says, for example:

We can speak of sin in a way that increases guilt complexes in others and in ourselves. This kind of talk brings sadness whenever it is alienated from its true context of redemption and healing forgiveness. If we are reconciled people, truly Christian people, we speak of sin by praising God’s mercy, acting as ambassadors of reconciliation, and healing the wounds of those who are afflicted by their sins or the sins of others.

Our talk of sin is most sinful if we talk as if the sin of Adam and Eve were greater than the grace of Jesus Christ. It is my conviction that we are sinning against our heavenly Father, who truly wants the salvation of all, if,
in our talk, we condemn to everlasting alienation the innocent children who, without fault, have not received baptism.\textsuperscript{23}

Another problem in the language of sin is that it is often defined in terms of a transgression of law. Unfortunately, conformity to the law seems to have regained an unwarranted predominance of place in a great deal of moral reflection, despite the unmistakable teaching by which St. Paul proclaimed so clearly the proper attitude towards law which is demanded in the New Dispensation.

When we read his ringing declarations of freedom from the law in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, wherein he so optimistically announced that our freedom and salvation are conferred, safeguarded and guaranteed by the Lord, it is remarkable that we could have slipped back into such an overly legalistic view of the demands of Christian life that have been portrayed in so many of our moral theology textbooks of recent generations. St. Paul gives us great encouragement in words such as these:

Now that we have been justified by faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have gained access by faith to the grace in which we now stand, and we boast of our hope for the glory of God. But not only that — we even boast of our afflictions! We know that affliction makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, and tested virtue for hope. And this hope will not leave us disappointed because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. At the appointed time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for us godless men. It is rare that anyone should lay down his life for a just man, though it is barely possible that for a good man someone may have the courage to die. It is precisely in this that God proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Now that we have been justified by his blood, it is all the more certain that we shall be saved by him from God’s wrath. For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him by the death of his Son, it is all the more certain that we who have been reconciled will be saved by his life. Not only that; we go so far as to make God our boast through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom 5:1-11).

This freedom from the law, which he urges so strongly, is in no

\textsuperscript{23} Haring, Free and Faithful, 379.
way intended to imply that there is no place at all for external law in the present dispensation. This whole question is masterfully dealt with by Fr. Lyonnet in his monograph, *St. Paul: Liberty and Law*. In this work, beyond his excellent presentation of the positive meaning of St. Paul’s declaration, he also very wisely guards against a totally false conclusion which one may be tempted to draw, namely that all external law is not only unnecessary, but even “unChristian.” Drawing on the Pauline principle expressed in 1 Tim 1:8-9, where we read: “We know that the law is good, provided one uses it in the way law is supposed to be used — that is, with the understanding that it is aimed, not at good men but at the lawless and unruly . . . ,” Lyonnet gives an example which may well serve for our own reflections on all “sacramental law”:

... If all Christians were just, there would be no need to restrain them by laws. Law as a rule, does not enter upon the scene except to repress an existing disorder. For example, as long as Christians received Communion frequently, the Church never thought of obligating them under pain of mortal sin to do so at least once a year.24

Such law remains, then, a necessary and an important element in the life of the Pilgrim Church. As such, it must certainly be given its due respect, yet at the same time be understood within the context of the proper role it has to fulfill. Fr. Lyonnet has formulated the principle of St. Thomas in this regard as follows: “The external law may only be the expression of the interior law.” He proposes this by way of summarizing his own position on the question:

Until the Christian acquires full spiritualization in heaven, his liberty will remain imperfect, inchoative; alongside the chief element of spiritualization, grace, alone able to justify, there will be a secondary element, no more able to justify than was the Old Law, but still indispensable for sinners, and by no means superfluous for the imperfectly just that we all are.

Still it is necessary that this secondary element remain secondary, and that it not imperceptibly tend to assume the role of the principal element, which is what happened to the Jewish Law in St. Paul’s time.25

25. Ibid. 246-47.
III. A NEW LOOK AT THE NATURE AND EFFECT OF THE SACRAMENT

In view of this most remarkable statement of Paul, together with his allied teaching on the freedom that is ours through the redemptive act of Christ, we should come to realize more clearly that the reconciliation of the sacrament which we are discussing in this paper is not so much something that we receive anew each time we approach the sacrament. Rather it is so much more often the reality of Christ’s salvific grace already within us that we celebrate, renew, revitalize and deepen, especially at those times when we discern our own failures, more or less serious, in living in accordance with the demands of our relationship with the Lord. It is this very same grace, by which we have been radically transformed in baptism, which assists us in confronting our own sinfulness in our efforts to remain more and more faithful to Christ. Clearly, such a radical transformation from the darkness and slavery of sin to the light and freedom that is ours as children of God and heirs of the Kingdom of the Father is not something that is as easily and even casually lost as an inadequate language of sin would seem to imply. Nor is it possessed in such a fragile way that, again in the words of St. Paul, it is totally eradicated on those all too frequent occasions when “I do not do what I want to do but what I hate” (Rom 7:15). It is precisely at these times, when we confront our own sinfulness, that we are encouraged to celebrate the sign of Christ’s continuing salvific love for us and still surviving within us, despite our sinfulness. This is what the ordinary Christian, striving and struggling to live a life of fidelity in Christian freedom, does every time he or she approaches the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

ANOTHER LOOK AT TRENT

This rather lengthy digression was deemed necessary to situate a very key element in our efforts to properly understand the teaching of Trent: mortal sin as necessary matter in the Sacrament of Penance. Returning now to that point, mindful that its necessity is further defined as derived from divine law, we must try to determine exactly what this means in our pastoral practice regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
A. "NECESSARY MATTER" AND THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

First of all, what is meant by mortal sin in this context? Certainly there are many areas of morality which are serious, some of them more or less serious, which, however, do not result in a total and comprehensive alienation from divine grace. There is no clear definition of what Trent intended to express in its use of the term "mortal sin" in the context of the necessity of its confession in the sacrament, although it does refer to mortal sin as that which renders us "sons of wrath" (Eph 2:3) and "enemies of God." This is certainly strong language, and it depicts the horror that mortal sin truly is. The expression "sons of wrath" which the Council uses is taken from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he writes:

You were dead because of your sins and offenses, as you gave allegiance to the present age and to the prince of the air, that spirit who is even now at work among the rebellious. All of us were once of their company; we lived at the level of the flesh, following every whim and fancy, and so by nature deserved God's wrath like the rest (Eph 2:1-3).

Undoubtedly, in the final analysis, grace means life, and sin means death. It is precisely the "ultimate importance of these realities," grace/life and sin/death, that John W. Glaser addresses in an excellent article concerning the radical significance that such a transition from one to the other must always imply in the life of an individual person. "In current Catholic consciousness," he says, "the transition between grace and serious sin can be and often is . . . an occurrence which repeats itself with relative frequency." The problem this proposes he states as follows:

. . . The dissatisfaction presently felt by laity and clergy need not be due to a failure to take sin and grace seriously. It can well stem from a desire to take the ultimate importance of these realities quite seriously; for the question of grace and its loss involves love, commitment, decision, life—and these in the profoundest, richest, most meaningful degree conceivable. One can seek in vain an example of genuine, mature, personal love, life, and commitment which allows for a weekly or even daily transition from

fullness of affirmation to complete rejection. 27

The radical transformation that takes place in one who is graced with new life in Christ should urge us to try to grasp its ultimate meaning with an ever deepening faith awareness. One’s reading of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians cited above must not stop at v. 3, as it were, but continue beyond it to those wonderfully encouraging words of hope which follow:

But God is rich in mercy; because of his great love for us he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead to sin. By this favor you were saved. Both with and in Christ Jesus he raised us up and gave us a place in the heavens, that in the ages to come he might display the great wealth of his favor, manifested by his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. I repeat, it is owing to his favor that salvation is yours through faith. This is not your own doing, it is God’s gift; neither is it a reward for anything you have accomplished, so let no one pride himself on it. We are truly his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to lead the life of good deeds which God prepared for us in advance (Eph. 2:4-10).

B. “NECESSARY MATTER”: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

A further consideration may now be proposed concerning what this doctrine of Trent might mean relative to the divinely decreed necessity of specific confession of all mortal sins.

First of all, there can be no doubt but that what the “universal Church has always understood” is at least the revealed truth that, in the Church, there is, and always has been, a ministry of forgiveness of sin, which is achieved through the Sacrament of Penance. Certainly, as a sacrament, by definition, it is of divine origin, together with its most essential intent, namely, the reconciliation of sinners with God and with the Church. If we look back to the most fundamental celebration of this sacrament in the Early Church, we see it referred to as a “second Baptism.” Like the first Baptism, it was available only once, to reinstate the public sinner, who had totally placed himself outside the Christian community, into “communion” again with the believing Church, as this is sym-

27. John W. Glaser, “Transition Between Sin and Grace: Fresh Perspectives,” Theological Studies 29 (1968) 260. This article, which develops this particular point at much greater length than this present paper allows, is highly recommended.
bolized by his being readmitted once more to the Eucharist. It is this sort of total separation from the Church that more fully expresses and symbolizes the significance of mortal sin, in a meaningfully, for such a sinner, having been baptized into the salvific community of the People of God, has effectively removed himself or herself from further participation in that community within which one's salvation is possessed and is to be perfected, — that is, the Church, the community of the People of God redeemed by Christ. Since such a one has deliberately strayed from the most basic demands of the life assumed in baptism, he must begin again, as it were, through a "second baptism," the Sacrament of Penance, which is neither lightly conferred, nor, once given, available again, should there be another "definitive break" from the Christian community.

Just as the necessity of baptism itself is expressly proclaimed by the Lord's own words, so it might be said that the extension of this requirement is in evidence in the understanding and practice of the early Church in its ministry of penance and reconciliation. I submit, therefore, that at least this much is what Trent meant by saying that the Church has always understood the necessity, by divine law, of the confession of all mortal sins, — that is, that one who has totally removed himself from participation in the life of the Christian community is required to submit to a public acknowledgment of his deliberate infidelity, and to profess, through his acts of prescribed penance, that he is now prepared to submit once again to the demands of living his Christian faith.

Beyond this necessity which participates in something of the same necessity as baptism, however, we have witnessed in the various traditional practices of the Church in different places, vastly differing disciplinary requirements for the sacrament of penance. In general, viewed in terms of the most solemn, authoritative and authentic expressions of the requirements of the sacrament, we can see the development from the strict demands of Lateran IV, requiring the annual confession of all sins (omnia peccata), to the less strict, — surprising to say? — demands of Trent for the confession of all mortal sins (omnia mortalia crimina), with its subsequent inclusion in the Code of 1917, and in our own day to a somewhat stricter demand for the specific and numeric confession of all grave sins, as provided for in can. 988 of the new

It may seem strange to suggest that the provisions of the new Code of 1983 are stricter than the provisions of Trent concerning necessary matter with regard to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. However, this assertion is made after much reflection, and also with a firm conviction that this interpretation may go a long way towards pointing us in the proper direction for solving some of the pastoral problems that were raised in the Synod of 1983, and which have been, as has already been mentioned, hindered by the untouchable teaching that has been presumed to be that of Trent, but which is more likely due to the excesses and/or inadequacies of the manualist methodology. It gives us the opportunity of breaking out of the intellectual straitjacket which has for so long confined our thinking in this matter. The basic reason for making this assertion is the conviction that there are many serious sins, which are not, in the strict sense, mortal sins, at least in the Johannine sense of being "sins unto death." The provisions of the present law on the sacrament certainly demand that we take all such sins "seriously," for they indicate those precise areas in the life of the Christian where the struggle for on-going conversion and continuing fidelity is taking place. Furthermore, one's confessing in conformity with the law guarantees that such sins will be specifically presented for the grace and strength which the sacrament assures in the life of the repentant sinner precisely in those areas of greatest personal need.

JOHN PAUL II ON "MORTAL" AND "SERIOUS" SIN

It seems good to introduce at this point an element that may anticipate, perhaps, a question that may very likely be raised in the minds of some readers. It concerns the teaching of our present Holy Father on the matter at hand. Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliatio et Paenitentia issued a year after the conclusion of the Synod of 1983, makes a statement to the effect that "in the Church's doctrine and pastoral action, grave sin is in practice identified with mortal sin."28 I submit that this does not nullify the assertions that have already been made concerning the real distinction, as opposed to their being identified in

practice. Without going into detail at the moment, I would assert that the Holy Father himself implies as much, for he had already stated that "The Church has a teaching on this matter which she reaffirms in its essential elements, while recognizing that it is not always easy in concrete situations to define clear and exact limits." Then, in a later part of the same document, he speaks of mortal sin as a form of disobedience to God which "destroys the bond that unites him with his life-principle." _Mortal Sin_, he says, is "an act which gravely offends God and ends in turning against man himself with a dark and powerful force of destruction." Comments such as these are certainly more discriminating in the "language of sin" than that ordinarily found in the manualists.

Acknowledging the discussion which took place in the Synod on a proposed threefold distinction of sins into _venial, grave and mortal_, he makes explicit reference to _degrees of gravity_, which, especially in pastoral practice, everyone admits, but for which the strictly literal _language_ of "mortal sin" does not provide. He says:

... This threefold distinction might illustrate the fact that _there is a scale of seriousness among grave sins_. But it still remains true that the _essential and decisive distinction is between sin which destroys charity, and sin which does not kill the supernatural life_: there is no middle way between life and death.

In effect, this could clearly be construed as confirming the distinction which has been carefully drawn in this paper, together with the implications that flow from it. In other words, the manualist formulation, by which the term "mortal sin" is indiscriminately applied to moral wrongs which are so obviously of such widely differing gravity, cannot be taken as the norm for determining the "necessary matter for the sacrament" defined in Trent. Simply stating this, however, is by no means intended to indicate that the whole problem on the "categories" and "language" of sin is solved. In view of the Holy Father's caution, stated above, about "reducing" mortal sin "to an act of 'fundamental option'," together with all the other questions about the issue raised in the Synod.

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. 63.
31. Ibid. Emphasis added.
of 1983, it seems quite obvious that the whole meaning of these "new" categories of sin, and their interrelationship, must be submitted to further research and analysis in their own right.

It is further suggested that the stricter requirement of specific confession of all serious sins, as reflected in the New Code, is based not so much on the divine law referred to in Trent, but rather is a disciplinary provision of ecclesiastical law which looks essentially to the spiritual good of the penitent. As such, it is a requirement representing not so much the constraint of an external law, — from which, as Paul says, we have been freed, — but from the inner demands of responsibly seeking all the effective means of remedying whatever it is within us which stands in any way as a serious obstacle to the fulfillment of the demands of our loving relationship with the Lord, as well as with each other. This provision of law, properly understood, may then be called one of ecclesiastical discipline, rather than one carrying the weight of being iure divino. This is not to say that it is therefore unimportant, or even unnecessary. Rather, similar to that which insists on annual reception of the Eucharist, it stands not as the source of the obligation attaching to confession, but rather as a forceful reminder of the interiorized demands of Christian faith that we should be aware of and strive to fulfill whenever we approach the sacrament to seek personal reconciliation with the Lord and with the community of the People of God.

Any sin which does, in fact, go to the extent of expressing a "fundamental option" so totally contrary to the demands of one's relationship with God that it places such a person by direct intent outside communion with the holy people of God, does demand specific confession in the Tridentine sense, and this iure divino. This would seem to coincide with the understanding of the meaning of the sacramental practice of Penance in the Early Church, and can be taken to represent something that has always been of universal understanding and pastoral practice in the whole Church.

IV. AREAS OF PASTORAL APPLICATION

Some suggestions may now be proposed for some practical pastoral applications regarding the ministry of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, based on the doctrinal reflections expressed in the
previous part of this paper. These suggestions are intended to encourage further reflection on the questions that have been raised, with the hope that this may contribute to a more effective pastoral practice of this sacrament. It is to be hoped that such continuing reflection would in turn provide the opportunity of clarifying, questioning, or even challenging the assertions which have been made here, for such may well contribute to a more fruitful ministry of reconciliation, geared towards meeting the spiritual needs of the People of God in our own areas of apostolic ministry.

A. THE CASE FOR GENERAL ABSOLUTION

The first area to be considered is that regarding the third form of the rite of reconciliation in the New Rite of Penance, namely, that of General Absolution. This was a topic of great concern in the Synod of 1983, especially regarding pastoral situations such as we have here in the Philippines, where the shortage of priests, especially in many of our rural areas, is so acute. Even in our urban parishes, the number of priests available to the people in many places is shockingly inadequate. For example, we note that in one parish in the Archdiocese of Manila there is one priest entrusted with the full time care of the 574,218 Catholics in the parish.\(^{32}\) This, of course, is an extreme example, but it is certainly not necessary in a forum such as this to amplify the parish statistics illustrating our point, for they are all too familiar to anyone who is likely to be reading this in a Philippine context.

In accordance with the present legislation regarding General Absolution, the requirement is stated in can. 963 that “a person whose grave sins are forgiven by a general absolution, is as soon as possible, when the opportunity occurs, to make an individual confession before receiving another general absolution, unless a just reason intervenes.” This proviso, already contained in no. 60 of the New Rite of Penance, raised many questions among the Fathers of the Synod of 1983. One group asked whether the legislation “favoring” individual absolution was based on purely pastoral

grounds, "or whether doctrinal issues were also at stake."33 This is a question which deserves very careful attention, for it recognizes the very serious issues involved.

Another group promoted the pastoral necessity of this form, saying explicitly that "In missionary countries the necessity of general absolution is clear."34 In connection with this point, the group remarked on the need for clarifying Trent's teaching concerning the requirements of divine law in this regard. In fact, the common interpretation of the teaching of Trent has indeed been the sticking point, from which the additional requirement of individual confession of serious sins after General Absolution has been held to be necessary, — even iure divino. It was proposed that we not be satisfied merely with restating the "traditional" position, "but the question of a future broadening of these conditions must also be raised."35

And again another group stated: "Regarding individual confession and general absolution, the group believes that one must keep in mind the needs of the particular Churches, which must be reflected on within the episcopal conferences."36 I believe the kind of reflection that must be done in response to this suggestion is not merely how to implement the present provisions of the law, with all the constraints that it contains, but rather to further explore the doctrinal issues, such as those we have already raised, to see how much further the possibilities may be opened for a more satisfactory and pastorally necessary celebration of reconciliation, given the severe limitations of ministerial personnel, as well as of pastoral opportunity, with which we must cope.

It is good to indicate here the way our own Philippine Bishops have responded to the situation in the local Church. Can. 961 leaves it to the local Bishops to establish the supplementary norms for allowing General Absolution to provide for the sacramental needs of the faithful. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines has defined these requisite conditions as follows:

a) When priests go once a year or very seldom during the year, to remote barrios or islets, or to other places where there is a serious difficulty in the

33. De Achútegui, Loyola Papers 13, p. 133. English: Group B.
34. Ibid. 134. English: Group C.
35. Ibid. 136. French: Group A.
36. Ibid. 137. French: Group B.
access to the Sacrament of Confession on the part of the faithful on account of distance, or for geographical and climatological reasons.
b) On Christmas, Paschal Triduum, local religious fiestas, popular missions and school graduations, wherever the conditions set above exist.37

The first steps have already been taken, in both the universal and the local Church. A continuing catechesis on every level will contribute a great deal to developing a more meaningful and effective renewal of this sacrament, which, most unfortunately, has become sorely neglected in so many ways, not only on the part of the faithful but, sad to say, on that of its ministers as well. One note of encouragement may be mentioned here. It has been observed by some that the communal celebration of General Absolution, with the proper instruction given, has had the effect of bringing people back to individual confession, — the fruit of their having experienced the inner peace and joy that the sacrament so often brings. There is reason to believe that such experiences may well renew interest in and revitalize the practice of individual confession for many of our people.

At present, the impression may be given that the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in this third form is something of a second class citizen in the family of sacraments. It is, in fact, a true sacramental celebration of reconciliation, wherein the full effects and fruits of the sacrament are brought about. From a theological point of view, therefore, it is not altogether clear precisely what the necessity of the subsequent individual confession rests on, — whether on doctrinal or disciplinary grounds. This question was explicitly raised by some members of the Synod. Since the clear presumption is that the extraordinary form is a fully valid sacramental absolution, this may be said to provide serious reason to assert that the requirement is based on disciplinary grounds, — essentially to meet the needs of the penitent, rather than to fulfill the requirements of the essence of the sacrament. This interpretation should not be seen as diminishing the value of individual confession, but rather as enhancing it, and of manifesting the complementarity of the individual and communal aspects of all liturgical celebration. This is brought about by making provision, through

the law, to urge such a penitent to participate more fully in the sacrament by individual confession. Furthermore, granting that there is an ever increasing degree of gravity of sin of which one may be aware in one's conscience, it can be urged that the greater the gravity, the greater the responsibility to confess such sins individually. Again, the obligation thus stems from the spiritual needs of the repentant sinner, rather than being based merely on the formal requirements of the law. Obviously, this is much more difficult to apply in concrete situations, but that is a pastoral and catechetical challenge which should engage the creativity of those concerned with teaching the people how to approach the gift of this sacrament in the most beneficial way.

Consequently, for the good of our people, for a more fruitful and meaningful celebration of the sacrament, and for providing a more effective means of meeting the apostolic responsibilities of those entrusted with the spiritual care of our people, we should continue to explore all the possibilities of bringing to them a much fuller experience and appreciation of the communitarian aspect of the Lord's grace of reconciliation through the communal liturgical celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

While there was recognized in the Synod a very widespread need for developing ever more broadly the understanding and pastoral use of General Absolution, a parallel reservation in this regard was expressed by many. It was tantamount to a fear that a more generally acceptable use of this form of the sacrament would lead to a diminution in the appreciation and practice of individual or auricular confession. Given the normal human tendency to look for the easy route, this is a point well taken, for many, no doubt, would prefer to avoid the difficulties and shame of revealing their sins in a specific confession. This could possibly indicate their unwillingness, subconscious though it may be, to confront themselves with the reality of their own sins, and thus fall short of achieving the depth of conversion that the sacrament should bring about. If we contrast the present discipline of General Absolution with the practice of public penance in the Early Church, we find that the latter is certainly far more demanding than the former, and it is unlikely that anyone would encourage a return to the rigors of that. Perhaps, in this regard, it could be said that the fears expressed in the Third Council of Toledo, referred to earlier, were
perhaps based not merely on an awareness that the so-called "abominable practice" of individual confession and absolution were easier, but rather on the premise that something essential for the proper pastoral care of repentant sinners was in danger of being lost. That is a very salutary fear, and one which must engage our own serious concern, for certainly it is wholly undesirable that General Absolution be urged in such a way that the enormous benefits which unquestionably derive from individual confession may be in any way diminished, — or, due to the demands of excessive pastoral responsibilities or human frailty on the part of its ministers, made practically unavailable. We must certainly be on guard against this possible eventuality.

B. PASTORAL RESPONSE TO "PRUDENT" FEARS

Basically, it is proposed that the answer to this should be found in better catechesis and general instruction on the place of this sacrament in the life of the ordinary Christian. Just as we need common liturgical celebration precisely as members of the community of God's people, so, too, do we need individual guidance and direction, as well as sacramental assistance, in our own personal efforts to live the demands of our Christian life faithfully and generously. This involves encountering our own sinfulness, which is at the same time individual or personal, as well as communitarian in its reality and its implications. Therefore, the means for dealing with it effectively in both these dimensions, individually and socially, should be not only explained to our people, but also provided for them. Where the necessity of religious practice arises out of the revealed truth of the mysteries of our Christian faith, access to this necessary means must be assured by the proper instruction of our people. It cannot be adequately provided merely by external legislation, but perhaps the goal might be achieved more effectively by way of the mutual reenforcement between legislation and catechesis which, ideally, pastoral care should aim at. With efforts thus extended in the direction of more adequate instruction and catechesis, not only on the meaning of the sacrament itself but also on the purpose of sacramental legislation, then it is to be hoped that the Holy Spirit will work more efficaciously in the minds and hearts of those who are disposed to listen to Him.
C. CONFESSION OF LIFE, RATHER THAN LISTING OF SINS

One notable benefit that we may look for as a result of a better catechesis regarding the "nature and effects" of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, is the opportunity for assisting the faithful to make much more meaningful confessions, with a greater insight into what this sacramental encounter really signifies in their own personal relationship with the Lord. It should be possible to present this in such a way that the reception of the sacrament truly becomes a celebration on the part of the penitent, and an occasion for reviewing as well as renewing one's personal relationship with the Lord. Some suggestions are proposed here for the reader's consideration which have been borrowed mainly from the notes of Cardinal Carlo Martini, in a retreat which he gave based on the Gospel of John.\(^{38}\)

Cardinal Martini was looking for ways in which we might make our confession more effective; how we might give it new life. He acknowledged that in recent years, for many people, priests and religious included, "confession has become a rare event at ever longer intervals," noting also that many have experienced that it is "very difficult to find again that joy in confession that many people have lost." To remedy the problem, and to rediscover what has been lost in both our appreciation and practice of the sacrament, he suggests that we concentrate not so much on the confession of sins, simply giving our "shopping list" of past transgressions and having the record wiped clean. Rather, our approach to the sacrament should involve a twofold aspect of confession, the first of which he refers to as confessio laudis, — the celebration part of it, wherein we praise God for his loving kindness and continuing mercy to us. In fact, this very clearly follows the pattern provided in the New Rite of Penance, which urges that we begin with a song, greeting, and "celebration of the Word of God."\(^{39}\)

The second confession, rather than listing down one's sins, is what he calls confessio vitae, or confession of life. This, he says,

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“is not a calibrating inquiry of sins, mortal, venial, and so on, but the simple manifestation of what is not going right in me — of things about which in the presence of God I feel dissatisfied with myself, in an atmosphere of prayer. This actual confession can very well be in the form of prayers, taking St. Augustine’s confessions as a model, that is, not necessarily in the form of positive statement but as a petition for pardon, of indeed a petition for grace; and then it all becomes a prayer.”

To illustrate the type of confessio vitae that presumably Cardinal Martini is referring to, we might compare two sample confessions, — one a list of sins, and the other a humble confession of sinfulness. One penitent may confess in this way:

Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been four weeks since my last confession. I said my penance and went to Holy Communion. These are my sins:

I was angry three times; I gossiped twice; I lied four times; I lost my patience three times; I missed Mass once due to my own fault, and once because I was sick; and I entertained impure thoughts and desires three times.

I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life. I ask pardon of God, and penance and absolution from you, Father, please.

Another penitent may present himself in the confessional in this fashion:

Father, I am a married man with three children. I work as an executive for a large computer firm.

Today I come to confess in God’s presence and before you that over the past month I have been responsible for allowing love to grow cold in my home and at the office. I have done this by making it difficult for some of our junior executives to have all the data they need to design a new program for the company. I am just so envious of their talents. They represent for me all that I have hoped to become. I resent their accomplishments. I have been so preoccupied with this that I have been inattentive to simple needs of my wife and children at home. I know I am generally a very caring person and I value what my family needs. I regret that I have become so self-centered this month.

40. Ibid. 63.
I want to be able to give my junior partners the encouragement they need, and to give my family more time and attention. This week I am going to spend a full day with my family and will be sure to affirm my junior partners in the work they are doing. In this way I hope to be able to show in my relations with them my love for God and my gratitude for all that He has given to me.  

There are many things that could be said about these two contrasting ways of confessing. It may suffice, however, to point out just one main area for consideration. That is the fact that the second confession more clearly recognizes the "nature and effect" of the sacrament which the Constitution on the Liturgy of Vatican II commissioned us to express more fully through the rites. The penitent is not merely asking to have the slate wiped clean, and his misdeeds no longer recorded, to be thereby secure from any future punishment for them, as it were. Rather, he is looking for what the sacrament truly effects, — personal reconciliation with the Church, that is, even more particularly, with the immediate community in which he lives his Christian life, — his family and his fellow workers, above all. What he is looking for, is what the sacrament actually, directly and immediately conveys, namely: reconciliation of the sinner, rather than merely forgiveness for the sinful acts he has committed.

The formula of the sacramental rite itself may be said to confirm this emphasis, for while certainly one's sins are forgiven, the words of forgiveness are directed to the penitent who is absolved: "I absolve you from your sins." This would seem to reflect the Lord's own ministry of forgiveness, where He directs his pastoral concern immediately to repentant sinners, rather than dwelling on their specific sins. The most notable effect of this ministry is that the sinner, freed now from the burden of sin, joyfully rediscovers his or her place in community. One notable instance of this is where the Lord says to the paralytic: "My friend, your sins are forgiven you." The paralytic, once forgiven, takes up his mat and returns home on his own (cf. Lk 5:17-26). A similar example can be seen in the extraordinary gentleness and kindness with which

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41. These two "sample confessions" have been taken from Richard M. Gula, To Walk Together Again. The Sacrament of Reconciliation (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 92, 131-32.
the Lord spoke to the woman accused of adultery: ‘‘Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, avoid this sin’’ (Jn 8: 11).

D. FORGIVENESS OF SINS OR RECONCILIATION OF THE SINNER?

An important part of our catechesis to our people should be to help them to understand that, beyond seeking merely the forgiveness of sins, they are, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, given the opportunity of obtaining a deeper interior healing, that is, a healing of the roots of sinfulness in their own lives. This is an essential element in the life-long process of conversion, which, together with faith, is the initial response which we make to the Lord’s salvific invitation to us in His proclamation of the Good News that the Kingdom of God is at hand. It is by conversion that we enter into a dialogue of loving relationship with the Lord, and through the sacraments that we are able to continually meet Him in those intimate sacramental encounters where we are given the help we need to overcome our sinfulness more fully and reply ever more lovingly to the salvific invitation which He has spoken to us.

Christ called us, and redeemed us, ‘‘while we were yet sinners,’’ and even ‘‘despite our sinfulness,’’ as St. Paul states so categorically. Furthermore, He continues to keep us within His loving embrace, despite our many failures along the way, most often out of carelessness and weakness — and even possibly, — but very rarely, I would submit, — out of malice, hatred or total rejection of a loving and merciful God. We are all sinners, and as such we present ourselves in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, — not as those who have definitively rejected God’s love, but rather with an awareness that despite our good efforts and sincere desires to remain faithful to the Lord, we often fail, sometimes in small things, and perhaps often in things that are much more serious. But through it all, I am sure, the bond of love remains although where damaged or strained, it remains at the same time in need of reaffirmation, strengthening and renewal.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging examples of human failing in the face of God’s fidelity in love is that which is portrayed in the Gospel account concerning the intimate, yet often stormy,
relationship between Peter and Jesus. There can be no doubt whatsoever but that Peter and Jesus loved each other very deeply. Nor can there be any doubt but that Peter failed in the demands of his relationship with the Lord and sinned against Him, — sinned seriously. After this terrible experience of Peter, we read in Luke’s account, he and Jesus encountered one another. "The Lord turned," the Gospel says, "and looked at Peter, and Peter remembered the word that the Lord has spoken to him: ‘Before the cock crows today you will deny me three times.’ Peter went out and wept bitterly’ (Lk 22:61-62).

It can be argued with absolute certainty that Peter, who loved the Lord so deeply, never stopped loving Him, despite the terrible sin he committed against Him. Much less could it be doubted that the Lord ever stopped loving Peter. Surely the look which He gave him in that most dramatic encounter was one of hurt and disappointment perhaps, but even more so of mercy and forgiveness, — and unfailing love. "Poor Peter!" it must have said. "But don't worry, my friend. I have never stopped loving you, and I never will. And to prove it, I am going to continue on this journey I have begun to the summit of Calvary. There I shall pay the price of your sin and of all sin in the world. And in three days I shall be back again to share with you the joy that no one will ever be able to take away from you again." When He did return, he spoke a joyful word: "Peace be with you!" And then commissioned them to speak that same word to others (cf. Jn 20:19-23).

The Lord has assured all of us, poor sinners that we are, of his continuing love for us as well. St. Paul says it so eloquently:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Trial, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword? As Scripture says: "For your sake we are being slain all the day long; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered." Yet in all this we are more than conquerors because of him who has loved us. For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord (Rom 8:35-39).

This is what the Sacrament of Reconciliation is all about, and this is the optimistic note with which we should teach it to our
people, and urge them to participate more joyfully in it as a celebration of the Lord's love and mercy. If we succeed in communicating to our people the wonderful gift that this sacrament is, we might just hope that those who have been staying away in droves may come trooping back in numbers that will gratify our expectations, even while it challenges the willingness of the ministers of this sacrament to dedicate themselves more generously, — and, I might add, more competently, — to this magnificent service of the People of God.