

A Sign that Heals: Getting the “Big Picture” of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

We live in a world filled with signs. First, there are the obvious ones like road signs and the signs that tell us a store’s hours. Then there are the more subtle signs like a warm smile or a sharpened tone of voice. But whatever type of sign we’re talking about, they all have one limitation: They can only tell us something. It’s up to us to interpret them and then choose how we will respond.

That’s what makes sacraments so different. Sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace” (Catechism, 1131). The signs of a sacrament—the bread of communion, the oil of confirmation, the water of baptism—have the power to bring about the very thing they signify. They do not only tell us something about God, they bring God and his grace to our lives.

...The sacrament of Reconciliation has as its own signs: among them, our words of sorrow and the priest’s words of absolution. The church teaches that when we perform these outward signs, our sins are washed away, and we are made right with God once more.

The Crystal and the Tar

One way to look at Reconciliation is to see how closely linked it is with the Sacrament of



Baptism. As Catholics, we believe that baptism washes us clean of original sin. St. Gregory of Nazianzus once called baptism “a gift, a grace, an anointing, an enlightenment, a garment of immortality, a bath of rebirth, a seal, and a most precious gift” (Oratia 40, 3-4) Such a piling-on of images shows that baptism is a powerful work of God that makes us shine with his own glory, splendor, and beauty.

In a similar way, St. Teresa of Avila once compared a baptized soul to a pure crystal, radiant in beauty, reflecting the glory of God. But she also said that every time we sin, it is as if a thin layer of tar covers the crystal. The more we sin, the thicker the tar becomes. Unless something is done to remove this tar, the light of God’s glory will become completely

obscured, and the beauty and splendor of the soul will no longer be visible. It’s not that we lose the “indelible spiritual mark” that God places on us in baptism (Catechism, 1272). But the “tar” of our sins makes it hard for us to experience the grace and power of our baptism.

This is exactly why God gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For every time we confess our sins and receive absolution, the tar



is stripped away. We are made just as clean and pure and sparkling as the day we were baptized. All the grace God gave us when we were baptized is free to flow in us once more, bringing with it a flood tide of divine love, inspiration, power, and joy. This sacrament “brings about a true spiritual resurrection, restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God.” (Catechism, 1468)

Isn't it amazing? God has given us such a simple, hopeful answer for our fallen nature. He has made it possible for us to live in union with him—and for us to restore that union every time we confess our sins!

“Unless I Wash You ...”

We can see Jesus teaching about this wonderful grace of Reconciliation when he washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper (John 13:1-20). We typically link this story to the call to serve one another, and that is a valid interpretation. Jesus really does call us to wash each other's feet.

But there is something else in this story, something that Pope John Paul II pointed out in his Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday, 2001. John Paul admitted that “Jesus of course was not referring directly to the Sacrament of Reconciliation” when he washed the disciples' feet. Still, the pope wrote, Jesus “was alluding to that process of purification which would begin with his redeeming death, and to its sacramental application.”



At the Last Supper, Jesus told the twelve: “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” He also told them: “Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over.” Finally, he told them: “What I am doing, you do not understand now, but later you will understand” (John 13:7-10).

Based on these verses, the connection that the Holy Father makes between Jesus' words and the eternal inheritance that his washing brings includes much more than the call to serve one another. We know that only God can forgive sins, and that only God can grant eternal salvation: When Jesus said that the twelve would eventually understand what he was doing as he washed their feet, he was pointing to his cross and to the way Reconciliation brings the freedom of that cross to bear upon our lives every time we confess our sins.

This connection is critical because we all need to be washed over and over again in the course of our lives. And the way John's Gospel expresses this truth through a simple image is priceless.

A Transforming Sacrament

Every day we face situations that call for a response. In these situations, we can be honest or deceptive. We can be generous or selfish. We can be patient or quick-tempered. St. Paul tells us that we are engaged in a battle between spirit and flesh, between virtue and vice (2 Corinthians

10:3-4). According to Paul, our call in this battle is to put off our former way of life and put on the new creation that God gave us at baptism (Ephesians 4:22-24). It's a process of ongoing conversion, a process of saying "no" to sin and "yes" to God. It's also a process of transformation, where we become more and more like Jesus.

Now if it were up to us to engage this battle for holiness alone, even with the gift of baptism at work in us, the news would be grim. We wouldn't make much progress. Despite all that we received at baptism, our nature is still weak and we still have an "inclination to sin" (Catechism, 1426).

But Jesus didn't leave us alone. He gave us many wonderful gifts to help us say "yes" to grace and "no" to sin. He gave us the Scriptures, the Eucharist, the church, the Holy Spirit, each other—and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

That foot-washing tells us that cleansing comes before communion, that Reconciliation paves the way for Eucharist.

We often think of Reconciliation only in terms of forgiveness. But this is also a sacrament of healing, empowerment, and transformation. Every time we confess our sins, we are reconciled with God. We are united with our heavenly Father. Our hearts are softened, and we are more open to God's grace and love. We are more open to the Spirit's work in our hearts, and we are more willing to yield to him.

Reconciliation and Eucharist

In addition to being closely linked to baptism, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is also closely linked to the Eucharist. If we return to the Last Supper, we see that Jesus washed his disciples' feet just before he celebrated the first Eucharist with them. He cleansed them so that they would be ready to receive his body and blood. That foot-washing told them—and it tells us—that cleansing comes before communion, that Reconciliation paves the way for Eucharist. One cleans, while the other feeds. One makes us right with God, while the other fills us with the presence of God.



Again, Pope John Paul II tells us: "Peter was wrong to reject Christ's gesture. But he was right to feel unworthy of it." Reconciliation with God is a precious gift that flows from the merciful heart of our Father. We can't earn God's mercy. He doesn't owe it to us. But at the same time, he never ever refuses us. He will never turn us away!

One Last Thing ...

When Jesus initially tried to wash Peter's feet at the Last Supper, Peter began to resist him. But when he heard that he needed to be washed if he wanted to share in Jesus' inheritance, he eagerly submitted. Surely Peter was cleansed. Surely he received the body of Christ with an open heart!

Still, only a few hours afterward, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Clearly, Peter needed more than just a one-time washing and feeding! And that's just what happened. After he rose from the dead, Jesus did not condemn Peter. He didn't make him feel ashamed. On the contrary, he reinstated Peter as head of the church. He even acted as if nothing had happened at all (John 21: 13-17). Peter's tears of repentance had unlocked God's overflowing mercy, and he was brought back into Jesus' embrace (Luke 22:61-62).



Brothers and sisters, we are all like Peter, wanting to do what is right, but not always finding the strength and courage to resist temptation. We can all take comfort in the fact that Jesus knows this and he still accepts us. Isn't it wonderful to know that he will always forgive us when we confess to him? Isn't it amazing to know that Jesus immediately forgives us, forgets our sins, and reinstates us, even when we think we are complete failures? This is the love that is available to us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Why would we ever stay away?

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